

7

Comments on David Specht's "Four Premises Shaping a Theology of Institutions"

ROBERT G. KENNEDY

*University of St. Thomas
Department of Catholic Studies*

I. Organization (institutions) are part of God's order.

Specht quotes Walter Wink on social institutions but does not himself elaborate in this premise. Perhaps though we may say that organizations, in principal, are not contrary to the order of things intended by God.

This might mean that organizations are not an unfortunate consequence of the fall and original sin (Locke?) but are instead as natural for human persons to form as the family.

What is an organization?

An organization is a specialized association of human persons defined by the goals (potential common goods) it pursues through the collaborative efforts of its members.

Organizations are human artifacts, created by the intelligence and imagination of the persons who first constitute them, and shaped over time by the choices and actions of the persons whose membership composes them.

Organizations exist because it follows on the social nature of human persons that there is a normal inclination to pursue many goals in collaboration with others.

Organizations do not exist apart from the persons whose membership composes them.

II. God loves organizations

Love is a word with many meanings and in some sense perhaps it is true that God loves organizations. Still, it would be better to understand this statement as a metaphor. God “loves” organizations in the sense that, and to the degree that, they contribute to the genuine flourishing of the creatures he has made in his own image and who are the real object of his love.

Furthermore, properly speaking God loves persons more to the degree that they conform themselves to him. The Trinity is a society of perfect intimacy and collaboration. Therefore, God “loves” organizations to the extent that they permit human persons to model the social life of the Trinity.

SESSION III: CONSIDERING A THEOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

But I do not think it is correct theologically to say that organizations are actually *quasi-persons* which can be the object of God's love in separation from the persons whose membership composes them.

To put it another way, organizations have instrumental value only. It is a mistake to value them as final goods—a mistake which has led to a great deal of wickedness and human suffering in the past.

III. Organizations are living systems.

Another metaphor. Organizations are not living things but they are composed of living things and therefore we sometimes assign, by extension, the characteristics of the members to the association as a whole.

However, organizations certainly are systems. And implied by this statement are the further observations that the parts of an organization can often affect one another and that organizations affect and are affected by elements of their environment. They are not sealed off from the rest of the world but are shaped by it and may shape it in turn.

IV. Organizations are gifted and called, they are fallen, and they are capable of being redeemed.

The most aggressive metaphor of all.

The *gifts of an organization* are in reality either the gifts possessed by the member of the organization or the opportunities presented to those persons.

Organizations are not called but persons may certainly be called to join with others to form a community to serve God's purposes (e.g., religious orders).

SESSION III: CONSIDERING A THEOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

Organizations are not fallen but they inevitably betray the faults and flaws of the persons who compose them. These persons make mistakes through weakness, confusion and every other character defect to which men and women are prone. Leaders misdirect organizations in order to satisfy their own greed and egotism. Members abuse organizations in order to make them vehicles to achieve any number of individual, private goals. And in some cases, persons form organizations to pursue goals that are wicked in themselves.

Finally, *organizations cannot be redeemed* because only something of intrinsic (and not instrumental) value can be worth redeeming. Theologically, persons are objects of redemption but not the artifacts of persons. Nothing created by man is redeemed by Christ but persons who are redeemed may create a society and a culture which are suitable vehicles for preparing persons for their supernatural destiny.

In some rough sense, though, we can speak metaphorically of the redemption of organizations, but only in the sense that, and to the extent that, their flaws can be repaired.

Organizations need “redemption” for two general reasons: they have embraced perverse means to ends or they have focused on perverse ends. (Generally, the two will go together. Organizations that focus on perverse ends are unlikely to avoid for long means that undermine the dignity of their members. And organizations they choose bad means find it difficult to remain committed to sound goals.)

Not all organizations are redeemable (and we should not be disturbed by this). We know that the Internet and other modern technologies make it possible to produce and distribute pornography and related products in large amounts. Any number of organizations have been formed with precisely these goals in mind. They cannot be redeemed, though perhaps the persons who compose these organizations can be re-organized into another association that would have sound goals and means.

SESSION III: CONSIDERING A THEOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

In other cases, the means commonly employed by the members of an organization can be mended; people can be taught to use other, better means. In still other cases, the goals of an organization can be changed, but if the change of goals is too great the organization is not redeemed, it is re-made.

Why trouble about all of this?

First, we can too easily assign intrinsic value to organizations and lose sight of the fact that their only value is instrumental (and that instruments that no longer serve their purpose need not be preserved).

Second, (and a related point) we need to remember that organizations must be managed for the common good and not for the sake of the survival or “flourishing” of the organization in conflict with the common good.

Third, we should keep in mind the social character of human persons, which requires that persons participate in organizations for more than private goals.