

CHALLENGES BRINGING CST TO A CATHOLIC BUSINESS SCHOOL

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Why Catholic Mission of Catholic Business Schools Matters

The goal of bringing Catholic social thought to business education is based on the dual goals of promoting the “Catholic” mission of the university and improving the quality of business education as business education. The goal of promoting universities Catholic mission, as religiously affiliated schools, is legitimate in itself, yet it is not apparent that this has to necessarily affect the content of business education per se. One can argue that merely providing the students with theological education and religious services is enough to fulfill the religious mission of the university. For many years this seems to have been the attitude of many Catholic and almost all Protestant colleges and universities. Yet this is based on a superficial and incomplete understanding of Catholicism, its purpose and its theology. As our current pontiff once noted: “Christian faith is not based on poetry and politics, the two great sources of religion; it is based on knowledge” (Ratzinger, 2003, p. 170). Its purpose is not to make people feel better nor to support the political structures of a society. It is based on the historical event of the incarnation and is thus grounded in truth. From the beginning it combined faith and reason and it necessarily rejects the enlightenment’s claim that faith and reason are in opposition. Faith without reason is fundamentalism and leads to fanaticism, reason without faith eventually leads to science without morals, which creates a different form of fanaticism. Catholicism has always supported advancing education and the search for knowledge for understanding creation leads us to better appreciate the Creator.

The value added by a university’s Catholic mission to higher education in general, and business education in particular, comes from the knowledge created by Christianity. The quintessentially human questions of: Why am I here? What is my purpose? How should I live my life? Will not be answered by modern science and cannot be addressed by the scientific model. Yet they are essential questions that humans have always asked and will always ask. To answer them you have to go to the nature of the human person, and it is here that Christianity makes a great contribution to human knowledge. Thus by grounding one’s intellectual efforts is a correct perception of the nature of the human person, the Catholic intellectual tradition is able to create important insights into those aspects of human activity and social life which the arts and sciences, and the business disciplines, investigate. Thus our goal is ultimately to help our universities be better universities, as we help them be better Catholic institutions.

My purpose today is to look at some of the challenges we face in trying to bring Catholic social thought to business schools, and to touch upon some of the benefits. One cannot impose CST on a business school, for this is not how a community of scholars works or should work. As with everything else in Catholicism, it is a matter of evangelization and formation, what we have been doing since Pentecost.

No effort to bring CST to higher education will be successful if it does not center on changing the minds and hearts of those who teach the students. Convincing administrators is important, but we all know that administrators have very little impact on what actually goes on in the classroom. Thus much of my talk will be on barriers to bringing CST to the faculty.

Barrier 1: The Silo Mentality

One of the biggest challenges facing business schools is the silo perspective adopted by the departments within the business schools. This silo perspective is the result of the allegiance of individual faculty members to their discipline over everything else, even their school. This allegiance is understandable as the socialization process of academics is long and intensive. This process causes individual faculty members to adopt a very narrow perspective, particularly if their discipline adopts the science model over the professional school model. The specialized education, and the process of writing a dissertation to demonstrate expertise within the discipline, generally encourages excluding other disciplines. When such faculty are grouped together into departments defined by academic discipline the silo perspective becomes solidified into defending the departments interests. This can have the effect of creating curriculums and programs that look more like full employment policies for tenured faculty than what is necessary to educate future business leaders. Occasionally this tendency will become fully dysfunctional as programs stagnate and become obsolete, ignoring the increasingly changing needs of a modern business education.

Yet even when the silo approach doesn't go to its extremes, it still naturally fights curriculum integration and program change. Good willed academics doing what they feel is best for their discipline are the major reason business leaders often feel that business schools are not doing an effective job in training future business leaders. The science model emphasizes technical skills rather than integration. This situation is worse in some disciplines than in others, yet even if it only prevails in a few departments it is often enough to prevent cooperation.

Addressing Barrier 1: Integration.

Catholic social thought is necessarily interdisciplinary, and a Catholic business education calls not only for integrating all the business disciplines, but even more of a challenge to the silo view, it calls for integration of a business education with the liberal arts, and especially the most un-business like liberal art - theology. Integrating the Catholic mission into a business school becomes an effective means for breaking down the barriers.

Barrier 2: Faculty Perspectives of "Catholicism"

The narrow perspective which gives us the limits of the silo mentality also is at the heart of the second faculty challenge to providing a Catholic based business education. Few business professors (in fact few college professors regardless of discipline) have a sophisticated knowledge of the social teachings of the Church. Even among practicing Catholics Catholic social thought is admittedly the Church's "best kept secret." In fact professors usually do not know the mission of their school much less the Catholic aspects of that mission. Knowledge of Catholicism by non-Catholics and ex-Catholics is worse than non-existent; for they often think they know a lot about the Church and Catholic theology, but most of what they think they know is wrong. Integrating CST into a business education has to fight against the rising secularism in

the academy (theological knowledge is not on par with other forms of knowledge), and it has to confront the long standing anti-Catholicism which has been a constant force in American history, and which many have noted, is “the last acceptable prejudice.” At least 75% of what I have heard represented as Catholic views or Catholic history at academic conferences has been either completely wrong or greatly distorted (often, I might add, by practicing Catholics, and occasionally by theologians and priests).

Addressing Barrier 2: Formation

To successfully integrate Catholic social thought into a business education will require closing the gap between the knowledge business professors have of their discipline and their knowledge of the liberal arts and Catholic social thought. The common ground for this dialogue is reason and the search for the truth. In the academy as a whole “reason and the truth” are suspect terms, thanks to the influence of post modernism. Yet the influence of post modernism is less powerful in the business disciplines than it is in the Liberal Arts and Humanities, giving us some hope.

Formation is the first step towards bringing CST to a business school, engaging business professors as a community of scholars on the common base of reason. Getting business scholars to engage the questions of the nature of the human person, the purpose of the firm, the meta-norms that underlie business ethics, the nature of private property, and many other questions that get to the essence of business. Catholic social thought offers great insights into these issues, insights that not only help in the more successful integration of business within a unified life, but also which improve our knowledge of business as business.

At the Tobin College of Business we have started this process with a series of Vincentian Business Education Seminars (VBES). Our starting point is the Vincentian Mission of St. John’s University, yet this mission of service to the poor is superficial if it is not based on Catholic social thought. The mission of a university has to be based on its primary function, the formation of people, and for a business school it is the formation of future business men and women. Our goal is to have an impact through what our students accomplish. Thus service is good and important, but it is not what is most important. What is most important is the transformation that takes place in our students and in the people our students are serving. Unless our service is grounded in a solid theological foundations it will merely be volunteerism, and we run the risk of our theology and spirituality becoming reduced to action, without any meaning. Such a view quickly becomes empty rituals, which will fail to positively impact both our students and the outside world.

VBES is a meeting of scholars, not a series of classes or lectures. The format is a series of discussion centering on 2-3 readings, over a two days. The topics are: The nature of business education; Faith and Business; Catholic Social Thought and Business; Is there a Vincentian Approach to Business and Business and the Poor.

VBES starts with a discussion of the nature of business education, contrasting the professional and scientific models. This naturally leads to a discussion on integration and the role of the liberal arts in a business education. The session on Faith and CST are designed to lay the grounding for a Vincentian approach to Business Education. The argument being that one cannot understand the Vincentian call to service unless one understands Christian Anthropology and all that flows from that view of the human person. In order to carry out that discussion at a

scholarly level, fully understanding the meaning of Vincentian beyond the mere commitment to service, they have to understand and engage Catholic social thought. CST is the intellectual bridge that allows faith and reason to come together.

Barrier 3: The Challenge of CST to Business Disciplines

CST is based on the values of the Gospels. The Business Disciplines are based on secular values, often materialism, and occasionally on the delusion that they are “positive” and “value free”, thus we should expect that CST will challenge many strongly held views of the faculty. CST is not icing on the cake, it is a change in the ingredients of the cake, leading to a different cake. Even the most devote Catholic will find some aspect of their intellectual heritage that will be strongly challenged by CST. Often it will be a critical assumption, doctrine or conclusion. If it is a matter in the realm of prudential judgment than the challenge is not too difficult to deal with, but more often than not it is at the core of a theory. CST challenges at the deepest level because it centers on the nature of the human person and their most important relationships: between the person and God and between the person and the community. Most theories in the business disciplines are based on anthropologies Christians cannot accept. Adopting the “rational economic man” model of human nature is a violation of everything the Church teaches. It is a negation of free will and reason, individual and social responsibility. You cannot hold to the Sermon on the Mount and Jeremy Bentham. However, on a positive note, the secular views of human nature are so distorted from reality that leaving them behind leads to better business theory. Empirically, Bentham is wrong and John Paul II and Jacques Maritain were right.

Thus in economics we have to question the above mentioned “rational economic man” model and their view of rationality. In Finance we have to question the “shareholder model” of corporate decision making, which is unthinkable to finance professors (who haven’t figured out that it is totally unworkable). In Management CST means that there are meta-norms and the CST emphasis on being over having is no doubt a challenge to Marketing.

Addressing Barrier 3: Seeking the Truth

We should not be surprised by these challenges to the intellectual disciplines of modern business education, for such education reflects a world that has fallen away from the sacred and the human and CST is an attempt to bring these back into the discussion. Our only strategy is to get business faculty to do what they are supposed to do, seek the truth. We need to engage them as scholars and let them discover the weaknesses in their overly secular disciplines and come to discover the truths underlying CST. These truths are discoverable to all, as they come from the nature law, which is written in the hearts of all (Romans 2:14). CST builds of the classical/Christian philosophical tradition, a tradition that engaged the deeper human questions mention above. These questions have not gone away. Modern philosophy ignores metaphysics not because it has answered its questions, and not because it has successfully shown that these questions aren’t worth answering, but because they didn’t like the answers. Recognizing that we are created beings means asking the purpose of creation, which then implies obligations. The extreme individuals of modernism and post modernism cannot allow such limitations on “freedom”. Yet their view of freedom doesn’t satisfy the natural quest for meaning and authentic happiness, thus there is usually a nagging feeling in the back of the mind of today’s scholars that something is missing. There is a natural desire for the truth. Our job is to get them to start the quest, and make available the Good News of the Jesus, who is the Truth.