

# QUESTIONS ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS POSE TO THEOLOGIANS REGARDING “*THE GOOD COMPANY*”

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## Introduction

In seminars I am in continuous contact with corporate executives. Many have had some exposure to the literature on Catholic Social Teaching and business ethics, but few in any depth. Listening to homilies and reading commentary on business in church related publications they report that they do not feel “embraced” by contemporary theology. They perceive much that is written and much that they hear is accusatory rather than inspiring. These executives called to efficiently provide goods and services to humankind and struggling to do so in a just fashion feel there is little support for their vocation within their churches.

I alerted them to the forthcoming conference on “*The Good Company*” and asked them what questions they would pose if *they* were attending the conference. In this “prelude” to conference dialog I thought it might be useful to reflect on their questions. Perhaps by holding in our minds what is on *their* minds it will be easier to bridge the gap between their felt needs as organizational leaders and *our* conversations.

## Regarding Theological Discourse Focused on Their Companies They Ask:

*How will an emergent theology build from their human experience as leaders?*

These organizational leaders search for an inclusion of a rich theological anthropology that will integrate how the Holy Spirit has already been present in the lives of contemporary leaders, has already been reflected in best practices within their organizations and is already manifest in their professional and social science literatures.

As baptized members of the Church they know God has acted in modern history. They want to avoid a false dualism between the secular and the theological and they long for affirmation of what is noble and good in contemporary organization life avoiding simply a recitation of a litany of problems they are well aware of and about which they share concern.

They therefore find the focus of this conference on “*The Good Organization*” a consolation.

## **Regarding the Calling of Organizational Leadership They Ask:**

*How can theology enrich their understanding of the particular charism that that is embodied in the call to leadership?*

They search for an integration of contemporary leadership literature in the social sciences with how leadership has been understood in the Church's traditions and experiences.

They want to deepen the concept of "servant leadership" beyond a cliché. They search for a Christology and Ecclesiology that will inform their role. Again they clearly want to juxtapose what is "of light" in existent and familiar social science conceptualizations that their associates are familiar with. They feel it is important to build a bridge between theology and models of transformational leadership in order to make theological insight more accessible to colleagues.

They want to affirm how leadership within secular organizations can be a pivotal spiritual calling, a spiritual path, and itself a form of prayer. They want to understand the paradox of how to occupy the leadership role with the "gravitas" it requires but with full humility. Might the treasure trove of experiences and spiritual writings of abbots, bishops and religious leaders be useful here?

## **Regarding the Spiritual Journey They Ask?**

*What is the spirituality appropriate to those who lead complex organizations in the secular world?*

Despite the universal call to holiness from Vatican II, they find most spirituality literature still focused on those in religious life or individual piety separated from the context and the demands they face as leaders.

What are forms and rhythms of personal prayer that are congruent with the "busyness" of an active leadership calling (inclusive of meditation/reflection/contemplation)? Where will they find support as opposed to stereotyping criticism in community worship?

How are the cycles/stages of the spiritual journey experienced in the life of an organizational leader? The classic stages of purgation, illumination and unification must unfold within the day to day of each person's vocation and duties. How can these stages be illustrated within the context of organizational challenges? (For example, how might the rhythms of organizational innovation and change be interpreted as a Pascal experience?).

They want to understand the mystery of suffering. Leadership is not a place where suffering is diminished but rather a place where it is amplified. How can an

understanding of this mystery help in dealing with leadership suffering such as superstitious blame, stepping down/being removed from office and organizational trials such as corporate failures, work force adjustments, etc. They are searching for an understanding of sin and the mystery of grace in these vocational struggles.

### **Regarding Moral Theology/Ethics, Social Justice They Ask?**

*How is the foundation for human happiness as revealed in the Christian tradition expressed in organizational contexts?*

Leaders are interested in organizational expressions of justice and ethics. They want to understand what the structure, processes, norms and values are that form the preconditions to enhance human goodness and avoid structural evil. They find much discussion of ethics is focused on an “individual” level of analysis. As leaders they want to explore organizational conditions that reinforce goodness as opposed to those that reinforce injustice. Thus, *they* feel the theme of this conference – The Good Organization – is exactly on target as a level of analysis. They seek normative models and case examples.

*Since a central role of the leader is guiding strategic decision making, how does the spiritual discipline of discernment inform group decision processes in moving toward greater justice?*

What are models for group discernment that can provide a platform for commencing organizational transformation in light of institutionalized injustice within organizational life? Here attention to group discernment protocols must be underlined, since problem and solution complexity in the contemporary organization requires pooled judgment and pooled effort. By contrast the discernment literature they have been exposed to tends to focus on individual decisions. Their vocation as leaders requires the facilitation of group processes and few models of group discernment are available.

They are hopeful that the analysis developed at the conference will include case illustrations of remediation efforts whose foundation has been collaborative processes. Summarizing desired end states without exemplification of how leadership groups have addressed difficult challenges are less useful. Indeed, these leaders feel they are already aware of preferred outcomes associated with a just order. However, they are less sure how to engage group discernment within their organizations in order to progress toward those outcomes.

### **Regarding Building Community (communion) Within Organizations They Ask?**

*What would relationships within an organization be if we moved beyond instrumental effectiveness toward true spiritual community?*

The social science literature they are familiar with contains many models of normative “teamwork” and desirable “organizational culture”. However, spiritual insights regarding sins against community and conditions for *agape* in the context of community are needed. They understand that to realize normative models of community they must embrace the imperfectability of the human condition. Much of the management literature they read is utopian. It is based on very competitive models associated with idealized high performers. They seek models that facilitate a contributive/collaborative ethos where imperfect individuals are inspired in trust to share their gifts and be accepting of the natural weakness of the human condition. They recognize the bogus nature of individualist and competitive models where associates prey on each other’s failures. Yet there is not a human anthropology that is hope filled but realistic that they can easily articulate. Here again they are hungry for exemplification.

They also seek to comprehend the spiritual formation that is the precondition for “communion” in organization in which there is no pretense of individuals becoming “little gods” of super-perfection.

*What are exemplary spiritual practices that support governance structures and processes within organizations that embrace subsidiarity?*

Decentralization, empowerment, and loose-coupling are well understood by these executives. Indeed, norms and structural preconditions for subsidiarity are often already well developed within their organizations (in contrast to many religious and social organizations). However, if subsidiarity is to work, leaders and members must function at a higher level of psychological and spiritual maturity. They must become responsible for strategy, cost, quality, and service at the subsidiary level. This means that unit leaders, not simply senior executives, must also be capable of transcending ego, ambition, greed, and fear. What would be development programs that would include spiritual disciplines so that leaders at all levels would have sufficient spiritual maturity to listen to and embrace the gifts of others? What are appropriate organizational norms supportive of shared discernment so that non-confirming feedback can be embraced by a unit leader, be listened to, and become part of shared discernment?

Therefore they ask theologians and spiritual directors to help them understand the character of both cultures and programs of formation that could lead to greater spiritual maturity on the part of leaders throughout an organization that embraces a distributed leadership model as part of subsidiarity.

Finally, they inquire what are the classic sins against community that leaders need to be especially alert to? What are the implications for organizations that truly embrace “communion”?

## **Regarding Religious Pluralism They Ask:**

*How can we speak about all of this within contemporary organizations which are inherently inter-religious?*

We have moved into an historical period of inter-religious organizational composition. Likewise, the “clienteles” organizations serve are also no longer represented by a single religious tradition.

Leaders feel a need a contemporary spiritual understanding that witnesses our Catholic vision and heritage, but which is not restricted by a parochial Catholic identity. They hope for an organizational spirituality rooted in a radical acceptance of how God works through diverse religions traditions among their work place associates and the people being served by their organizations. This will require a deep theology of inter-religious freedom. It will also require a foundational understanding of perspectives embraced by the great religious traditions. There is no possibility of sharing matters of spirit unless a comfort in doing so in these diverse setting evolves in a fashion that avoids the historical pitfalls associated with inter-religious abrasion.

## **Conclusion**

What are we to make of these perspectives and requests from executives? Is there a meta-message?

For me conversations with leaders always contain surprises. I am trained as an organizational sociologist and macro-economist. I tend to expect emphasis on structures and processes. To be sure the executives I have been conversing with include the macro level of analysis. They are quite clear regarding the:

.need for organizations to possess a deep sense of mission surrounding how their product or service benefits humankind.

.concern with the common good, justice and sensitivity to the needs of the poor.

.the importance of subsidiarity and the value of an organizational community sensitive to human dignity.

.necessity of stewardship of resources that understands efficiency and effectiveness as spiritual values, not simply market imperatives.

They look forward to the contributions from this conference regarding the just organization and a just economic order. At the same time they will be put off by any treatment that exclusively emphasizes examples of injustice. They feel the Holy Spirit has been at work in guiding their

efforts to conceptualize and implement more fully human organizational structures. So they want to learn from laudable efforts as well, not simply from documentation of evil and injustice.

However, while they are welcoming of continued insights from theology and philosophy that will deepen this understanding of just organizational structure and process, it is not the configuration of, or outcome associated with just organizations that they consider as the *most* needed immediate contribution.

Instead, *their* felt priority is for a grounding of their own personal calling as a leader within a deep spirituality contextualized to the leadership role. They feel they lack spiritual formation that allows them to live out the challenges and bring about the changes associated with models of “*The Good Organization*.” (In this they echo the dominant themes of the Spirit at Work movement that is more centered on the leader’s journey into Be-coming as a necessary precondition to DO-ing). It is clear they do not feel supported within their contemporary churches, temples or synagogues in their journey toward a higher level of psychological and spiritual maturity required to respond to these challenges. They report that most of the experience within their formal religious affiliation is directed toward personal piety, and does not help them prepare for the spiritual journey that unfolds within the complexities of their leadership role.

So I would conclude emphasizing two insights. The first is the need to couple structure and ethics to spirituality and conversion. The second is the need for contextualization.

Let me first speak to the juxtaposition of structure and ethics with spirituality. If any of our models of “*The Good Organization*” are to become more generally implanted, we will need to depend on actions by leaders willing to embrace the spiritual journey (conversion) in order that our models of justice become institutionalized within the day to day actions of contemporary organizational life. Therefore, I hope we will be conscious of and return to the challenges associated with deepening the spirituality of leaders in all of our discussions of structures, processes and norms for “*The Good Organization*.”

Let me return to one example: Subsidiarity. I would posit that the majority of executives of good will in North America can describe the normative structure and behavior associated with this feature of “*The Good Organization*.” They are familiar with both the social science models of decentralization, empowerment, and distributed leadership and with the spiritual insights into human behavior and freedom that are corollaries. If at this conference we elaborate on structure and behavior associated with subsidiarity, we will also need to also elaborate on leadership conversion associated with these structures:

*How can leaders develop the spiritual capacity for deep listening when involving the voices of stakeholders and associates?*

*How can leaders guide executive teams through discernment processes that are based on a capacity to listen deeply and be guided by grace?*

*Understanding the models for governance and decision processing associated with such structures, what are the “sins” against community that diminish capacity for organizational associates to operate within the paradigm. What would be off-setting “virtues” that are required? How are these virtues developed within a cadre of leaders from differentiated religious/secular backgrounds?*

*How is such behavior codified into performance reviews and what (spiritual) guidance is appropriate when the norms are violated?*

*What would be the attributes of corporate culture necessary for reinforcement of the practice of subsidiarity?*

*What spiritual supports are available in our tradition for leaders struggling with all of this?*

Finally, regarding contextualization, these leaders do not expect theologians, ethicists and management scholars to fill in the contextualization they seek. Indeed, they know they must be the ones to integrate the insights from philosophy, theology and ethics into the contemporary organization settings. They also understand that they must be responsible to institutionalize solutions because that is the challenge of their calling as organizational leaders. Still, they are looking for conceptualization, guides and cases that are contextualized and here we face a huge gap.

On the one side of the “river of limited understanding” are philosophers, theologians and scholars. They do not live in the complex world of the contemporary organization. Their rich insights must necessarily be offered “ceteris paribus” in a manner that will need translation into the day to day realities of contemporary organizational leaders.

On the other side of the “river of limited understanding” are the executives whose education by and large is not up to date in terms of contemporary theology and philosophy. Their training is primarily in technical disciplines and social science. By contrast their foundation in theology and philosophy is remedial. So while this conference will be providing an important contribution, the “river of limited understanding” will continue to flow.

If we can’t expect executives to become theologians or philosophers, or theologians and philosophers to become executives, then who will build the bridge?

I think it will largely be faculty in schools of business, public and social administration, executive coaches, OD specialists and corporate trainers who must become the translators bridging this gap. Yet their presence is quite limited at this conference made up largely of scholars. So while this meeting is an important step, it is only a first step. Until the concepts and models that come from this and other similar conferences are contextualized the gap will remain. Bridging the gap can only happen through dialog with those who “translate” to executive audiences, and the translation will have to be tested and improved by including executive informants. This is not a criticism of our present effort, but an anticipation of how we must proceed in the future in sharing the fruits of this and similar important efforts.