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BUSINESS AS A CALLING

Overcoming the Divided Life

[M]an is split within himself.
Gaudium et spes, 13

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS A PERSONAL CALLING TO BUSINESS AS A VOCATION? If so, what is the nature of this calling? What is the person being called to be or to do? Who or what is calling? What is the relationship between the specific task of business and the general call to holiness and love? Or is the life of a businessperson merely a necessary means, a sequential step, to pursue their real vocation somewhere else? What insights from scripture and the Catholic and Protestant traditions contribute to the idea of business as a calling? What are the attitudinal, moral, and spiritual differences between one who sees business as a career and one who has a sense of calling in business?

If we are to look to the deeper causes of the recent revelations of corporate corruption, we must look into these questions, which help us to understand how the businessperson constructs as well as fails to construct meaningful work. As Denis de Rougemont once wrote, “The great social and cultural maladies of the modern age all have this one common characteristic: they deny personal vocation.” This denial of vocation, which ultimately denies meaningful work, creates what the Vatican II document *Gaudium et spes* called one of the greatest errors of our age, a “split between the faith which many profess and their daily lives.” This divided life represses any reflection on the spiritual and moral purpose of one’s gifts, abilities, and motivations at work, leaving one with few resources to integrate her deepest beliefs with her day-to-day life. Absent this reflection, even people with excellent professional or technical educations can find themselves driven by an ethic of self-interest that ignores the meaningful and rich concept of vocation and focuses solely on the limited and ultimately meaningless concept of career.

While this divided life is a particular mark of our human condition, our original sin, *Gaudium et spes* sees this divide as being particularly pervasive in modern culture. The authors of this document seem to think that something about our age has made this division worse, that this split or division is a “more serious error of our age,” than in other ages. What is it about this age that fosters rather than resists this split? An immediate response can be seen in the language and categories we use to describe our lives. We live in an age where our categories are no longer distinctions but separations or walls: public/private, faith/work, spirit/matter, body/soul, church/state, spirituality/religion, faith/work, and so forth. Alasdair MacIntyre describes this particular modern division as “compartmentalization.” He defines this term in the following way:

By compartmentalization I mean that division of contemporary social life into distinct spheres, each with its own highly specific standards of success and failure, each presenting to those initiated into its particular activities its own highly specific normative expectations, each requiring the inculcation of habits designed to make one effective in satisfying those particular expectations and conforming to those particular standards. So what is accounted effectiveness in the roles of the home is not at all the same as what is so accounted in the roles of the workplace. What is accounted effectiveness in the role of a consumer is not so accounted in the role of a citizen. The detailed specificity in the multiplicity of roles is matched by the lack of anything remotely like adequate prescriptions for the self which is required to inhabit each of these roles in turn, but which is itself to be fully identified

with none of them. Yet it is this now attenuated core self, which in the compartmentalization of the distinctively modern self has become a ghost . . .¹

As Nathaniel Hawthorne put it “No man, for any period, can wear one face to himself and another to the multitude without finally getting bewildered as to which may be true.” Both MacIntyre and *Gaudium et spes*² make clear that our culture not only fails to challenge this compartmentalization, but that it works particularly hard at avoiding its confrontation and thus fosters its inclination that is already in us.

What is necessary to resist this divided life, particularly in business, is to see one’s life as called. In the Catholic tradition, our first call is to be fully human, to be who we were created to be. While our work belongs to our vocation, work does not exhaust this vocation. Thus, when we speak of vocation, unlike a career, our first thought is to the whole of our humanity, not just our work. This vocation to be human, what *Lumen gentium* calls “the universal call to holiness,” is fundamentally expressed in how we give of ourselves. Quoting *Gaudium et spes*, John Paul writes in *Centesimus annus* that “it is through the free gift of self that man truly finds himself. This gift is made possible by the human person’s essential ‘capacity for transcendence.’”² This universal call to be a gift provides the basis to the unity of our humanity. Everything in our life, our work, our family life, our sexuality, our politics, etc. must be seen in terms of a call to give.

Even though work does not exhaust this vocation, it does constitute one of its fundamental dimensions,³ precisely because our work allows us to exercise our gifts in serving others. This is why the term “gift” is a key to understanding what our vocation in business, the trades, medicine, law, etc. should be. We often hear in the common parlance of the culture that “We can be whoever we want.” While on one hand such a statement is an attempt to move a young person to see potentialities that he has not yet seen in himself; on the other hand, it deludes a person into thinking that he is the source of his own gifts and talents. This statement can be not only bad theology, but tends to contradict experience. We each have been given certain talents and natural endowments that come to us through our genes, family, society and our individual history. As Juan Hinojosa writes in his essay, “we each have a particular “take” on life that informs who we are.”

In a deeper way, the notion of gift reveals to us that a core dimension of our identity as individuals is found in our relationships and in our gift of ourselves to others in the work we do. This is not a reality we can deny, unless we want to deny ourselves. One of the more powerful stories that reveal this fact of nature is found in the story Lewis Hyde tells in his

book *The Gift* where he speaks of the “gift economy.” Hyde explains that when Native Americans encountered Puritans in their first set of gift encounters, they were baffled by their possessiveness over gifts given them. Native Americans expected their English visitors to give back their gifts in order to keep them moving. This idea of setting gifts in motion equally baffled the Europeans, who negatively characterized Native Americans as “Indian givers.”⁴ Yet, what Native Americans understood, and what we should take heed of, is that when a gift is not shared, it corrupts the holder. The one who makes the gift an occasion for selfish hoarding, who fails to put the gift in motion, becomes corrupted by the gift itself. Or in more Christian eschatological terms “We actually become, eternally, what we have given ourselves to.”⁵

The problem of the divided life does not belong exclusively to disparities between our “private” and “working” selves. In moments of clarity, most of us can recall from many areas of our lives reasons to regret the gap between who we ought to be and who we actually are. We struggle in seeing whether our political, social, family and sexual lives are “bathed in the gospel” or whether the gospel just stands on the side.

Nevertheless, our working life is a powerful source of fragmentation, of the estrangement of self from self or as Augustine puts it will from will, and not merely because work occupies so many of our hours. Work is central to the practical life of goal-setting and decision-making, of personal and interpersonal achievement, from which springs our well-being as creatures who are, above all, doers. We rightly fear, therefore, that if our working lives spawn inner division and conflict, our search for a happiness beyond the transitory satisfactions of “success” must fail. The measure of our need for personal integrity or wholeness is, then, our overriding desire for personal happiness. But unless we confront this serious error of the divided life in our culture, and see business as a calling and vocation, we will have little chance to resist the instrumental and economic forces in the various professions.

The following essays take on this charge and examine what it means to understand business as a calling. The theological depth of the writers and their sensitivity to the complexities of the business world provides for the reader a high degree of integration and nuance that will enrich a topic that has been too often ignored.

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¹ MacIntyre explains that people in the modern West, “tend to live betwixt and between, accepting usually unquestioningly the assumptions of the dominant liberal individualist forms of public life, but drawing in different areas of their lives upon a variety of tradition-generated resources of thought and action, transmitted from a variety of familial, religious, educational, and other social and cultural sources. This type of self which has too many half-convictions and too few settled coherent convictions, too many partly formulated alternatives and too few opportunities to evaluate them systematically, brings to its encounters with the claims of rival traditions a fundamental incoherence which is too disturbing to be admitted to self-conscious awareness except on the rarest of occasions (Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice Which Rationality* [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998], 397-8).

² *Centesimus annus*, 41; *Gaudium et spes*, 24

³ *Laborem exercens*, 11

⁴ See Lewis Hyde, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 3-4.

⁵ John Kavanaugh, S.J., “Last Words” *America* (January 21-28, 2002), 23.