

Teaching Note for
Seeing Things Whole
Developing a Community of Persons within the Catholic Social Tradition

Michael Naughton
University of St. Thomas
(mjnaughton@stthomas.edu)

It is characteristic of work that it first and foremost unites people. In this consists its social power: the power to build a community. In the final analysis, both those who work and those who manage the means of production or who own them must in some way be united in this community.

John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*

I do not believe that the urgently needed fundamental reconstruction of our vast and pervasive structure of institutions can take place, prudently and effectively, without a strong supporting influence from the churches. And I doubt that churches as they now stand, with only a theology of persons to guide them, can wield the needed influence. I deem it imperative that a new and compelling *theology of institutions* come into being. It is my hope that contemporary churches will take the lead to produce it. Our times are crying out for such leadership.

Robert Greenleaf, from “The Need for a Theology of Institutions”

As a culture, we rarely speak of our institutions having any connection to theological categories. We tend to see them in purely secular terms. Business institutions, for example, are often described as a “society of shares” where the primary goal is to maximize shareholder wealth. There is also a stakeholder view within business that sees the organization as a “society of interests” where the manager principally balances the interests of various competing parties.

Within the Catholic social tradition, however, institutional life should be aimed at becoming a community of persons.¹ An organization as a community of persons is where people share *goods in common* with others (common good) that bind them together in such a way that helps each person to flourish (human dignity). When organizations are at their best, they connect people in such a way that they become *communities of persons* and not just societies of individuals.²

When the common good and human dignity are operating within an institution, they begin to create and deepen an authentic *community of persons*. This community establishes relationships that are real communions and not merely contracts or mutually self-serving exchanges. These

¹ At the theological heart of the Catholic social tradition is a Trinitarian and incarnational understanding of the world, which sees in analogous way institutions as a “community of persons.” As the Trinity is a community of persons, we who image this Trinitarian God, reflect, however imperfectly, this community in the institutions in which we operate, principally and primarily in the family and church, but also in work, politics, volunteering, etc.

² An individual grows into a person in relation and in communion with others and the Other (see *The Great Divorce* and the artist (79)). My fulfillment as a person is inextricably related to your fulfillment. My good as a person can only be achieved in service to your good as a person. This insight turns on our understanding of *gift*. My gifts as a person only develop me as a person when they are used for others.

relationships are forms of *communications*' aimed at developing communions which establishes bonds on connections that are not easily severed.

These bonds of communions or relationships are principally expressed and strengthen through the virtues of individual persons that reach out to others, virtues such as wisdom, justice, courage, moderation, loyalty, trust, patience, compassion, etc. These relationships are also mediated through mission statements, architecture, policies, programs, systems, practices, etc. of the institution. Work institutions, for example, are very different places when people are bonded together over a moral and spiritual mission, where just wages are paid, where layoffs are seen as a last alternative *versus* a company that is instrumentally motivated by profit maximization, that pays only market wages, that layoffs employees at the slightest downturn in revenue, etc. The relationships are different because the nature and practice of the good that they have bonded over is different.

Thinking Institutionally

Where is the *wisdom* we have lost in *knowledge*?
Where is the *knowledge* we have lost in *information*?

T.S. Eliot

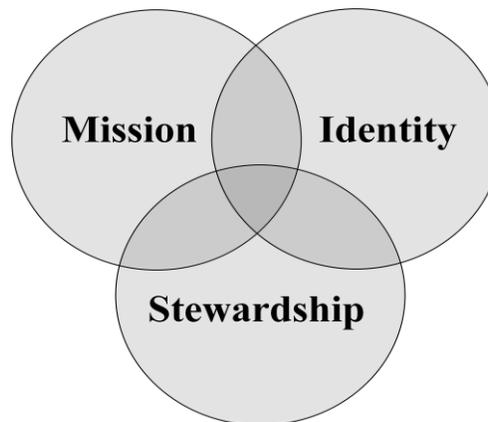
This challenge to become a community of persons is particularly pertinent to leaders in business as well as in any work organization. With the increasing larger organizations, some are expressing concern that modern work institutions have become too large, too impersonal, too bureaucratic to claim itself as a community. There is legitimate concern that employees and particularly leaders in such large institutions can get lost in what T. S. Eliot calls the knowledge and information of the day-to-day. Leaders in particular can lose track of the importance of relationships and community because of the predominant pressures of achieving other goods such as efficiency, margins, career interests, productivity, regulations, etc. While they may called knowledgeable, they may lack the virtue of wisdom.

What may, for example, look like a straightforward economic decision, such as a layoff or an investment, will often have significant cultural implications that can't be shoehorned into an equation or program. Many of us are so often pressured for time that we easily fall into formulaic decision processes that fail to see the significance of the whole decision. This causes us to see only parts at the expense of the whole. Many of our worse decisions are often fixated on one element of the situation and we ignore other factors and considerations, which tend to be not as pressing at the time, but have great institutional significance in the long term.

So how we see the institution is of critical importance to seeing things whole, to being wise, to fostering a community of persons. One way to more specifically speak of an institution is to see it in terms of three interdependent dimensions, each with its own concerns, preoccupations, and stakeholders. This model of institutional life is described in three interlocking areas of *mission*, *identity*, and *stewardship*. These three dimensions represent the underlying structure of institutions

as well as what we call the “three bottom lines” of organizational life.³ These three dimensions help us to describe the institutional parts with more specificity and concreteness. It also helps us to articulate how these different parts are ordered together to create a community of persons.

Seeing Things Whole



1. Mission (Who do we serve?): The dimension of *mission* is externally focused on how the organization impacts the world, especially in its relationship with customers, clients, patients, or students, but also including the poor and marginalized, the larger community as well as suppliers and competitors. An organization’s mission is revealed by how it offers a “good” or service needed by others. In order for an organization to identify and deliver a client or customer’s need, a high degree of creativity, insight, coordination, effort, and ongoing development marshaled on a sustained basis toward understanding the client or customer and the market is necessary. Core to this mission dimension is a deep and active commitment to genuinely understand the needs of the world, and a commitment to move responsively to this understanding. Institutional identity, which we will speak to next, is only authentic when it *serves* the needs of those outside it, which is the basis of *developing* those within it.

Some mission principles from the Catholic social tradition would be:

- **In Service to the Customer (in light of Integral Human Development):** For many employers, the impulse to create a product or service often comes from a deep desire to serve someone. Products and services bring organizations in relationship with people they call clients, customers, patients, students, etc. It is a major means of connecting their work in service to the larger society. It defines in part their value to society. Their products and services bind the employees with the customers for whom the products are produced. The fundamental sense of mission for businesses will be in service to

³ See David L. Specht & Richard R. Broholm, <http://www.seeingthingswhole.org/images/3foldModel.pdf>.

customers. This does not mean that customers are king. Organizations serve customers, but they are not enslaved to them.

- **In Solidarity with the Community:** While the principal relationship of businesses in the world will be with customers, businesses need to be clear on how this service to customers contributes to the good of the community. Edmund Burke once stated that society is not only a partnership among those who are living today, but also with "those who are dead, and those who are to be born." The products and services produced from work are instrumental to the development of today's civilization and tomorrow's. Thus it is very important in assessing the social costs of production. This assessment considers not only the economic costs, but also the human and environmental costs. Unfortunately, markets seldom encompass the total cost of the product and service. Some resources used to produce the products today are not correctly priced in respect to their future scarcity, nor is the total cost of its collateral pollution adequately considered.
- **In Solidarity with the Poor:** Scripture tells us that the poor and the vulnerable always have been the object of God's special concern (Dt. 15:11; Ps. 12: 5); indeed, Jesus identified himself with those who are in need (Mt. 25: 31-46). Solidarity implies that we share most deeply with the poor and marginalized when we are "with" them in their plight and not merely doing things "for" them. Philanthropy, corporate giving, tithing, volunteering, etc. have become important expressions to business to connect and give back to the society that has allowed them to be successful.

2. Identity (Who are we?): Norman Maclean once said, "The problem of self-identity is not just a problem for the young. It is a problem all the time. Perhaps the problem. It should haunt old age, and when it no longer does it should tell you that you are dead." In the dimension of institutional *identity*, the primary focus is internal and concerned largely with the experience of those who work in the organization. It is how the organization arranges the character, culture, and quality of its life, including a host of issues such as hiring, firing, job design, compensation, evaluation, promotion, training/development, and how these issues model commitment to its fundamental principles and purpose. The identity and culture of a company is often related to the identity of its employees, especially its leaders and particularly its founders. The identity of an organization is influenced by the larger culture as well (family, religion, education, media, location, etc.), which influences the members of the organization. Some of those identity principles within the Catholic social tradition are the following:

- **Dignity of Work and the Growth of Coworkers:** The "highest reward [or punishment] for man's toil is not what he gets from it, but what he becomes by it" (John Ruskin). Through work people change or develop products and services. Yet work has more than this *objective* capacity. It concerns *more* than goods and services. It also changes people, especially those within the firm. The employee, the *subject* of work, is affected by his or her work; whether manager, assembler, secretary, or engineer, the work changes the world *and* the worker. Employees, because they are made in the image of God, are uniquely different from all other aspects of work. A person has innate value, unlike machines, cell phones, products, etc. An employee's identity as well as the institutional identity is always in development, the question is whether the development is enhancing or suppressing human dignity.
- **Participation:** Key to one's development at work is whether the person participates in his or her work. People develop in their work when they use the intelligence and

freedom to creatively achieve shared goals and to create and sustain right relationships with one another and with those served by the company. The more participatory the workplace, the more likely employees will develop. They should have a voice in the work they do, especially in the work that they do on a day-to-day basis.

- **Subsidiarity:** Subsidiarity guides the distribution of authority, responsibility and accountability. While higher-level authorities carry responsibility for decisions and actions which affect an entire organization, people can usually solve their own problems better at a local level and that such action moreover gives them a direct sense of participation in their own destinies. The general expression of subsidiarity within organizations is the following: *Give as much individual responsibility and accountability to employees as possible, and as much help and training as necessary.* To this end, the firm should seek to push decision-making to the lowest appropriate and competent level and to provide the support needed for this responsibility to be exercised effectively, including training and development.

3. Stewardship (Are we viable?): “No margin, no mission” and no identity. While slogans such as these can distort reality (a sequential logic—first margin then mission), they do point out to us an important insight: as important as mission and identity are, they do not exist without a sound economic foundation of the institution. The dimension of *stewardship* focuses on how the organization secures and utilizes its resources (human, financial, and material) so that it becomes stronger and healthier and better able to serve its mission and build its identity. Without adequate margins, efficient systems, and productive processes organizations become weaker over time, failing to renew themselves and adapt to a changing environment. Essential elements to stewardship are sustainable profitability and use of resources, continuous performance and productivity improvements, increased marketability for services and products, etc. Some stewardship principles would be:

- **Sustainability: Effective Generation.** Good stewards are productive with the goods that have been placed in their care (Mt. 25:14-30). Instead of merely taking from creation’s abundance, they must use their talents and skills to produce more from what has been given to them. Business leaders must use resources effectively, as indicated by reasonable levels of revenue, margin, market share, productivity, efficiency, etc., in order to effectively advance a viable organization into the future. It demands constantly reducing waste within the various operations of the business. If wealth is not created, it cannot be distributed and organizations cannot be sustained, thus limiting the potential suggested in the principle of the universal destination of goods state below.
- **The Universal Destination of Material Goods: Just Distribution.** The principle of “the universal destination of goods and the right to common use of them,”⁴ holds that organizations and their leaders must account for the distributive effect of goods and services in the way they set prices, pay wages, charge suppliers, manage payables/receivables, distribute community benefit, and so on. Their decisions should aim not at an *equal* but at a *just* distribution of wealth, which meets people’s needs, rewards their contributions, and preserves and promotes the organization’s financial health.

⁴ John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, 14.

- **Social Nature of Property: Fiduciary to Owners.** Needs development.

What does this threefold model tell us about institutional life? First, an institution has multiple bottom lines. We should not define success of an institution the performance of a single bottom line. Second, while each of these three dimensions is essential to an institution's health, these dimensions and the needs they represent are in an ongoing dynamic *tension* with one another. At times this tension will demand tradeoffs, at other times it will demand creative synthesis and at other times it will demand simply holding the tension together. Third, there is a moral ecology at work in organizations, what happens in one area will affect another (see overlapping areas of the model). Fourth, organizations tend to disorder their life by overvaluing one or two of the three dimensions at the expense of the other dimensions. This disordering makes it difficult for organizations to harness their full potential (we will talk about this in more detail).

Thinking Theologically

But what does this have to do with theology? Robert Greenleaf has argued that while “[t]he social sciences make their contribution by illuminating problems and suggesting procedures, . . . they do not supply the faith one must have to risk and venture, which is what institution building requires. Science helps calculate the odds on a decision, but belief sustains one in the inevitable uncertainties and anxieties which the initiator of regenerative action must bear. Science deals with what is experimentally demonstrable. Theology arises from experience, meditation, and inspiration and is made practical by ventures of faith. We have much *science* of institutions, but little *theology* of institutions.” Or in the words of T.S. Eliot, we have much knowledge and information, but little wisdom.

To think theologically about institutions, then, is to explore more intentionally our deepest *purpose* for why institutions exist: To what end and for what purpose do we work as a community of persons? For many people this purpose will have a moral character to it. They will speak of making the world a better place. They will speak of principles such as human dignity and the common good. They will describe their purpose in terms of the good of the individual and good of the organization and community.

Yet, people of faith seek a deeper integration beyond moral categories. As spiritual and religious people, they know that the moral is always in danger of falling into a cold duty, and legal compliance to uninspiring codes of conduct. While one may come to obedience of the commandments in duty, if one does begin to move to love, such obedience leads to rigidity, minimalism, and legalism. Simply obeying laws and codes easily turn into duties, which turn into a love grown cold. Ultimately, our purpose for our work and our institutions seek a love that inquires not “how far it *must* go, but how far it *may* go.”⁵ People will then speak of a spiritual purpose that connects their lives to a transcendent reality. For some this will be described in terms of a collaboration with God's ongoing creation, to build the kingdom of God on earth, to do God's will, not one's own, etc.

⁵ von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 48.

Seeing Holy



This moral and spiritual purpose serves as a *centering* function that helps us define more clearly what we stand for and also to resist the disorder or drifts within organizations. Purpose helps us to order the three dimensions of organization life that includes but transcends the good of all. It avoids the fixations to one of the three bottom lines of the organization. Wise leaders, those people who are rooted in this deep purpose, see that there is more at stake in decisions than just a peaceful coexistence or the immediacy of efficiency or profitability.

Leaders who are wise see more deeply because they recognize that something enduring is at stake in the actions they are performing, both in terms of their own character and of institutional life. They recognize the insight that our actions are the prime indicators of our destiny. Their “[w]isdom ensures that at the end of life we do not stand with empty hands. It relies on the gift of being able to distinguish between what is worthwhile and what is valueless, between what lasts forever and what passes away, what is genuine and what is phoney” (Romano Guardini).

Such leaders see in the concrete decisions of today, whether they are dealing with demands from clients or customers, addressing employee conflicts, or allocating resources, that something lasting is occurring in these actions and they lead with such an end and purpose in mind.

Reflection Questions:

1. Where have you tended to see just parts and not the whole? Where have you seen the whole and not just the parts?
2. Do a gap analysis of the institution you serve in. How would you describe its drifts or disorders according the organizational model above?