

## Maintaining Christian Values and Ethics in the Workplace

St. Jude Parish – 2009 – Rev. Robert Couto

Before one can address how a Christian can maintain Christian values and ethics in the workplace, it is essential to take a cursory look at a broader question: What is the relationship of Christian theology to democratic capitalism?

The corporation is an invention of democratic capitalism - an invention of law that made democratic capitalism possible and the Corporation is an expression of the social nature of humanity. And, unfortunately, some believe that the business of business is to make a profit and ignore human sociality, human needs and human conditions.

Ironically, the corporation originated in the need of religious Communities for independence and self-subsistence. Their motive was profit, so that they could have time for prayer, honoring the dead, etc., and subsistence. Evidence of this can be found around 1,300 BC in pre-Christian religious communities and later in the Benedictine monasteries in the 14th and 15th centuries as monasteries provided economic models for lay guilds.

These economic examples were then initiated by merchants in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, who later developed the joint stock company to raise capital and share risks. When the Benedictine order spread to international stature along with other religious communities, we find that these self-sufficient congregations subsidized the time needed for prayer and other religious obligations with the profits of their own excess productivity.

So then, can a Christian work for a corporation or other profit making business entities? After all, being a Christian is a high vocation - a vocation to grow in the holiness of Jesus Christ - to be true to his Gospel of social justice and social responsiveness.

Jesus worked as a carpenter in a small business. His disciples were apparently small businessmen working as fishermen and probably hired others to work for them. You see, to be an economic participant is as much a part of our human nature as to be a political activist or a religious person. We need to create shelter, gather food, build roads and establish markets. But, at the same time, we must respond to Jesus' call to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, give shelter to the poor, visit the prisoner, love the unloved.

One of the fruits of responsible capitalism is that many of its participants seek satisfaction from their work that are for monetary, selfish or materialistic motives - giving rise to philanthropy, the arts, education, medical and technological research - all designed to benefit society.

In the United States, corporations can be traced to the early British companies which developed new markets in a New World. Today, there are more than 2 million corporations reporting to the IRS and 13 million unincorporated smaller businesses. Those working for these economic institutions are able to meet the

basics - clothing, food and shelter for themselves and their families.

Expendable incomes are used to purchase commodities which fuel the economy, create new jobs and provide opportunity for others. And, these workers provide funds for the poor and homeless, albeit, it never seems to be enough.

When we think of corporate leaders, we think of "fat cat" money hoarders, who care little about social justice or social needs. Yet, few ever use the phrase "fat cat" when describing professors, journalists, athletes, actors, surgeons, lawyers or others whose incomes are equal to or higher than the most successful corporate mogul. Why is that?

We often fail to recognize that many corporations pay good wages, have excellent pension benefits and medical benefits, vacation plans and other socially responsible plans that reach out to those in need. Many corporations are transnational, providing much needed resources and employment in nations struggling to pull themselves out of poverty. Those who exploit foreign workers or thrive on social injustice fail in the responsibility to meet the challenge placed at their feet by Jesus.

One of the most distinctive contributions of Judaism and Christianity to social justice is the identification of the individual conscience as a major source of social energy and social justice - these individuals, because of their deep faith

in God, can and must be an ongoing source of insight, decision and action.

Ethics and social justice, in part, depend on a fair economic abundance used for the good of all and not derived from the exploitation of the weak, the poor and the impoverished. To serve human needs and rational interests is to serve human liberty, conscience and God in His desire to provide essential basic life-sustaining needs for His children.

When we labor for corporations, we need to view our labors as an expression of the high spiritual vocation our work serves, to view our efforts as an articulation of the ideals of democratic capitalism so that we can judge and improve on the system for the common good of humanity and, we have an opportunity to provide concrete guidance, at a variety of levels, in the many decisions made by the corporations.

We need to fight against the moral dangers of selfishness, immorality, greed and corruption often found in the economic and political systems - and we can begin in the workplace by holding fast to the tenets of our faith! If we are truly to serve the cause of the Kingdom of God all around the world, we must be ready to challenge corporate policies and practices which destroy the environment, discriminates, exploit the helpless, or control economic environments for self-serving purposes. We must be aware of price fixing, tax law violation, bribery, deceptive advertising and general dishonesty. We must refuse to be a party to these violations of legal codes, any policy which seeks to

eliminate the opportunity for the poor to seek and create better living conditions and policies designed to take advantage of world poverty and hunger.

It is the ethical and moral responsibility of all Christians who enter the business corporation to recognize that their way of life has a two-fold importance for the entire world: the spiritual importance of a set of ideas and the material importance of showing all nations a way out of famine and misery. Famine and misery spring not from the will of God, but from the will of man.

As Christians we need to recognize that God calls His followers to bring His Presence to our work. And it is perfectly proper for Christians to hold corporations accountable, to hold them to the highest moral standards, to accuse them when they fail, to be vigilant about every form of abuse. Corporations are human institutions designed to stimulate economic activism and thus to provide the economic base for social justice and high moral/cultural ideals. When they fall short of these purposes, their failure injures all! They are a means, an instrument, and a world agency. We need to help develop corporations as instruments of God for humane purposes and values.

As individuals in the workplace you must never compromise your faith or your beliefs - the example given by Jesus. Reject the temptation to cast aside the meaning of the Beatitudes and the law expressed in the Ten Commandments. It is essential to eliminate the temptations which lead to jealousy, anger, pride, unfairness, cheating, stealing, false accusations, gossip,

idleness and every sin against the moral standards established by Christ and reinforced by your faith.

You must foster fairness, equality, truth and justice. And, always recognize that all of us are stewards of the world and the life God has blessed us with.

As you achieve and succeed, you must caution yourselves against the sins which are in the world and you must help foster policies which are beneficial to all rather than a select few. St. Paul, writing in I Timothy 6: 7-10 reminds us, "we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it, but as long as we have food and clothing, let us be content with that. People who long to be rich are a prey to temptation; they get trapped into all sorts of foolish and dangerous ambitions which eventually plunge them into ruin and destruction.

The love of money is the root of all evils and these are some who, pursuing it, have wandered away from the faith and so given their souls any number of fatal wounds. "

You see, by riches a person acquires the means of committing any kind of sin and of satisfying his desire for any kind of pleasure. Money gives power to the rich man, and power breeds pride. This inordinate love of temporal things - money and all that it buys - can act as a primary motive to commission all types of sin. It causes us to sin against co-workers, employees, family, friends and, yes, even the corporation.

There is nothing a man will not do, whose master passion is the desire for riches. Covetousness grows into avarice and avarice

turns to greed. Our hearts grow hard towards the poor: we worry about the possible loss of wealth or the impossibility of getting it: we become deceitful, dishonest in business practices and ethics: we create unjust trade methods and we develop and violate inconvenient contracts.

Built into our nature is the desire to possess material things. This is part of our humanity, as creatures with a body that requires support and sustenance from the visible world in which we live. So, what do we do to prevent conflict and contradictions with our Christian beliefs:

- 1) foster a good prayer life;
- 2) check self-indulgence in the use of material things;
- 3) examine our conscience daily;
- 4) check ourselves on the habit of hoarding things;
- 5) be generous in support of our Church and the poor;
- 6) meditate on the poverty practices by Jesus;
- 7) be compassionate and understanding;
- B) be truthful;
- 9) check our pride;
- 10) do not compromise Christian values;
- I2) determine motives for all action
- 13) respect life, recognize Christ in all people;
- 14) be productive;

And in all decisions and circumstances ask yourselves what Jesus would do in your place. Retaining your Christian values in the corporate and economic environment is not easy, but possible. We are called to obey the Ten Commandments, to hold fast to the meanings of the Beatitudes and to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are to follow the examples of Jesus and to be Holy as God our Father is holy.

- Personal Integrity: Tell nothing but the truth and keep your word. If you lie, you are through.
- Mind your own business. Don't snoop
- Don't make critical comments about matters that are outside your area of responsibility. You become known as a busybody and nobody will trust you.
- Don't talk negatively about people behind their backs. If you gossip, people will not confide in you.
- Don't turn legitimate discussion into character assassination or badmouthing.
- Keep your promises.
- If you deal with professionals socially, don't talk shop.
- Don't use foul language in the workplace.
- Don't allow sexual harassment or discrimination.

- Don't let other people's problems become your problem unless you intend on offering real help.
- Take care of company resources as if they were your own.
- Don't participate in questionable tactics.
- Conduct yourself with the standards of right and wrong – never compromise your Christian ethics or morals.
- Always be prepared to seek alternative employment if you are employed by a company which operates with questionable practices, which operates with illegal methods or which puts you in a position of violating the moral and ethical standards of your faith.

We are called to do our very best and to defend the Gospel message - to evangelize by example - to bring truth to the world. Understand the spirituality of work. A job is more than putting bread on the table. Doing a good, competent job, fulfilling a necessary duty for society, serving other people and participating in Gods ongoing creation are all spiritual values that can be found in work.

Let no one steal the opportunity. Remember always that without God, we can do nothing - we are doomed to fall. Let no one and no thing stand between you and God and His Love for you and all of creation. Stand fast! Be true to your faith and let God work in you and through you.

Every day we face challenges to our faith. Every day we have decisions to make which not only impact our lives, our beliefs, our values and our future – but impact those we work with, but also those around us. God meets us where we are – we are called to meet others where they are. Is it easy? No – is it possible? Yes!

Let your faith guide all that you say and do. Live the Gospel. Seek God in the trenches of everyday work. It isn't enough to be just and honest. Our work must be a path to God – a work with right intention, and offering to God – to sanctify our work.

Good luck and God bless you.

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