

COLUMNISTS

Dialogue would benefit business and religion

There is a Latin saying that has been beautifully carved into a hearth at the divinity school where I work. Loosely translated, it means, "I am a human being, and nothing human is foreign to me." I like the saying very much. It implies that all human enterprises are worthy of our consideration. Following our Christian spirituality of incarnation, we might go one step deeper and advance the idea that all things human are capable of being spiritually significant. Relying on our Catholic sacramental spirituality, we might go one step deeper than that, even, and call on all things human to invite us to encounter the living God.

At times I encounter attitudes among my Christian associates — and within me as well — that seem to hold something quite opposite from this kind of openness to the human. At times some Christian ethicists seem to conclude that there are some human activities or occupations that are "beyond the pale": somehow unworthy of consideration as spiritually significant or as an arena of divine activity. This sometimes happens when church professionals or religious ethicists deal with occupations from the field of business.

I have one friend, a prosperous businessman and a wonderful Catholic, who has complained to me on more than one occasion that he could take offense at what might appear to be the church's attitude toward his profession. He repeats often, in



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

a joking but pointed fashion: "Oh, yeah, the principles of good business lead to corruption and social ruination, except when the church wants money from me!" Because I spend considerable time myself engaged in fundraising, I naturally take heed of his words.

I think some dialogue between business professionals and ethicists could be of help here. For that reason I have decided that my summer project will be to read in the field of business ethics. I began this past weekend by taking up a book edited by Oliver F. Williams and John W. Houck called *A Virtuous Life in Business: Stories of Courage and Integrity in the Corporate World*. I'm quite enthused about my summer program, and have learned a few important things already.

For one thing, it turns out that Samuel Calian, president of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary has suggested "Ten Commandments" for business people. They

are:

Treat individuals as sacred; people are more than means to another's end.

Be generous; the benefits will exceed the cost in the long term.

Practice moderation; obsession with winning is dehumanizing and idolatrous.

Disclose mistakes; confession and restitution are necessary means to restoring ethical character.

Arrange priorities; have long-range goals and principles in mind.

Keep promises; trust, confidence and authenticity are built over a period of time.

Tell the truth; falsifying information destroys credibility.

Exercise a more inclusive sense of stewardship; charity does not stop at home but extends throughout our global-oriented society.

Insist on being well informed; judgment without knowledge is dangerous.

Be profitable without losing your soul in the process; evaluate your Profit and Loss Statement in light of your trade-offs — a business audit is much more than an accounting of dollars and cents.

Calian's list provides some interesting food for thought, and is cited in several of the articles included in the book. I appreciate his contribution, and think it helps to address the underlying presupposition of the work, which is that we can indeed be profitable, religious and competitive at the same time. His list also serves to counter

some of the pressures we all experience in our society which condition us to make decisions based in self-interest and a kind of paranoia advanced in many realms beyond the field of business.

Some of the ways in which these pressures affect us are in the conditioning that contributes to our tendency to: 1) look out for number one, 2) break promises when expedient, 3) trust no one, 4) hide personal errors, 5) win and retain power by any means, 6) subvert the law, 7) suppress generosity, 8) affix a price on everyone and everything, and 9) stress loyalty over truth.

I am convinced that my summer reading project will be informative for me. I am even more convinced that a fuller dialogue between business professionals and religious ethicists needs to take place so that these two groups can learn from each other. Too often, I think, we assume that church leaders are not learners themselves. In the case of appreciating the kinds of decisions that business professionals face each day and helping to bring religious insight to those, church professionals do indeed need to assume the posture of the learner. I hope to include more in future columns about a forum where this kind of conversation will be able to take place. Stay tuned.

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