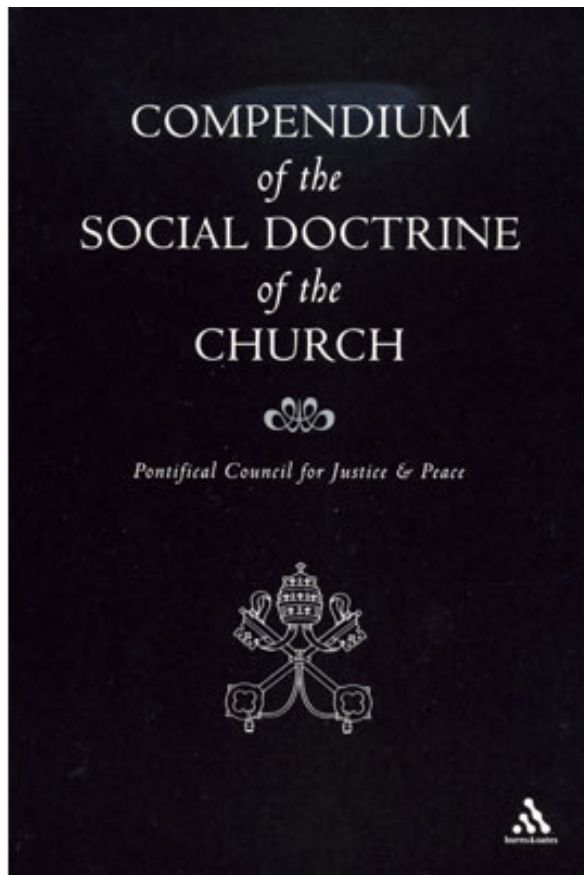


Free Enterprise and the Catholic Church - The Morality of Business and Work



A recent contribution to this subject came with the publication a short time ago in Australia of the book "Entrepreneurship in the Catholic Tradition," (Connor Court, previously published in the U.S. by Lexington Books).

Authored by Father Anthony G. Percy, rector of the Good Shepherd seminary in Sydney, Australia, the book examines the development of Church thinking on work and business. Starting from the evident need to work seen in the Book of Genesis, through the Church Fathers and up to the social encyclicals of the last century or so, the book summarizes the development of theological reflection on these issues.

The book focuses specifically on the figure of the entrepreneur, and in his introduction Percy affirmed that the Church has long held a deep appreciation for this role. Scripture does indeed condemn avarice and the love of money, but not money itself, he pointed out.

Both the Old and the New Testament contain a number of references to work and to man's participation with God in making fruitful the created world.

A number of parables taught by Jesus reflect on entrepreneurial activity. The man who searches for treasure in the field, the merchant in search of fine pearls, the parable of the talents and that of the honest and dishonest stewards are just some of them.

The book admits that obviously the fundamental meaning of these parables is spiritual, but at the same time there is an appreciation for the human work involved in these activities.

Talents

In the parable of the talents the two stewards who multiplied what they were given are praised for their energy and perseverance in making a significant profit. The lazy steward who hid the talent wanted to avoid the risks and obstacles that are part of entrepreneurial work.

Entrepreneurship did not figure much in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, but it is clear that they do not consider commercial activity to be incompatible with Christianity, the book explained. The entrepreneur is called upon, like all, to use the natural resources of the world and to contribute to the common good.

A part of the book is dedicated to a brief examination of what Thomas Aquinas and other theologians had to say about the entrepreneur. In general the Catholic theological tradition views this figure as possessing a number of virtues, someone who is creative and enjoys working with others, as well as being moderate in his love of money.

More detailed consideration is given to the social encyclicals, starting with Leo XIII's 1891 publication of "Rerum Novarum." The encyclical rejected socialism and defended the right to private property.

Rerum Novarum also insisted that the state should not absorb the individual or the family, but that both should be left free to act with private initiative in the economy.

In "Quadragesimo Anno," Pius XI faced a more difficult world situation in 1931 following World War I and in the midst of the Great Depression. He defended private property, while maintaining the traditional teaching that it is to be put to use for the good of all.

While defending free markets, Pius XI also criticized an excessive individualism that ignores the social and moral dimension of economic activity.

Freedom

In a radio message to mark the 10th anniversary of "Quadragesimo Anno," Pius XII said that people have a fundamental right to make use of material goods and to engage in commerce by means of interchange.

In an address to bankers in 1950, Pius XII described work as being both necessary and social, saying it should be directed toward the common good. Carried out properly work can be both a way of serving God and achieving personal sanctification.

In another talk, this time to representatives of Chambers of Commerce, Pius XII took up the theme of the vocation of businessmen. He defended the importance of private initiative and its role in creating material well-being. He also called upon them to have before them the ideal of service and not to betray their vocation by focusing solely on profit.

In a number of other speeches, Pius XII repeated the idea that business should serve the common good. Freedom of economic activity is justified on the condition that it serves a higher freedom, he explained.

Two of the book's chapters deal with the contributions of John Paul II to the Church's social teaching. In the first of these, dedicated to the theme of human work, Percy explained that in the Pontiff's first encyclical on economic themes, "Laborem Exercens," he left three fundamental ideas: Work has an objective meaning, a subjective meaning and a spiritual meaning.

Work has an external objective sense that involves the labor to create something. John Paul II placed this within the context of the gift of creation. Thus, Percy commented, the entrepreneur's creativity is also a gift and subject to the order intended by God and not something completely autonomous.

In the subjective dimension a person works to build his humanity as he is fulfilled in human action.

Speaking to businessmen in Buenos Aires in 1987, John Paul II said that the entrepreneur performs a vital task in society by producing goods and services. In this activity they should see their role as one of service to others and to work to create a society that is more just and peaceful, he added.

Salvific

Regarding the third major theme of "Laborem Exercens," Percy commented that our personal work is a way of sharing in Christ's redemptive work. For that reason it is an activity that is both creative and salvific.

Turning to John Paul II's encyclical "Centesimus Annus," the book noted that it contains an extensive consideration of the market economy.

The Pope recognized that the human factor has become more predominant in the economy with the development of skills and technology that play a decisive role in the creation of wealth. So entrepreneurial work is a source of wealth.

Entrepreneurs work with others and cooperate freely to satisfy needs. John Paul II emphasized the importance of this orientation to the needs of others. Work takes an individual and places him within a community, through which others are served.

Percy judged that "Centesimus Annus" is an extension and development of Catholic teaching, and not the radical change that some have considered it to be. The Pope approved of a free economy, but in no way endorsed a libertarian viewpoint.

There are some innovative concepts in the encyclical, Percy noted, such as considering a business to be foremost a communion of persons.

Concluding, the book states that the Church holds both private initiative and entrepreneurial work in high regard. This activity, however, is called upon to recognize the dignity of the human person and to be put at the service of others.

If more people and businesses were indeed to work in this manner then we would probably not be in the current crisis.

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