

FAITH MATTERS

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THE VOCATION OF BUSINESS

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Pope Francis, in his *Evangelii gaudium*, wrote: “Business is a vocation, and a noble vocation, provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life; this will enable them truly to serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all.”

The business vocation is the main hope of the one billion human beings around the world still locked in poverty. The business vocation is the main support of the multitude of institutions of civil society – the main support of private universities, cancer clinics, soup kitchens, symphonies, hospitals for the poor, sports activities both in neighborhoods and in major cities, service organizations such as Lions Clubs, the Rotary, Kiwanis, the Elks, the support of religious activities without number. Without business corporations, there would be no great power standing between associations of citizens and the Leviathan of the administrative state. Without business, there would be only a very weak private sector indeed.

Think about this for a moment: What was the vocation that from all eternity the Lord God Creator chose for his only son, born of humankind? The Lord God Creator called the Christ, the Redeemer, to shoulder the vocation of small business: a creative vocation, a vocation of humble service to nearly every human household.

Jesus was helping run a small business. There on a hillside in Nazareth, he found the freedom to be creative, to measure exactly, and to make beautiful wood-pieces. Here he was able to serve others, even to please them by the quality of his work. Here he helped his family earn its own way. Creativity, exactitude, quality, beauty, service to others, independence – this was the substance of his daily life. In preparation for all that was to come.

Like Christ, each of you, too, has been given a calling. “Before time was, the Lord knew thee by name and called you.” The problem now is to recognize your calling, and do what you have been made to do.

But why choose business as a vocation? Business is perhaps the most common vocation of Christians around the world. And it is desperately needed. After the human race was born naked and poor, for millennia there were no industries, settled farms, cities, established businesses in which to seek employment and earn a modest income. Two centuries ago, there were fewer than one billion human beings in the entire human population. Nearly all of them were poor.

Today, there are just over seven billion people on earth. Since World War II, enormous strides have been taken in liberating billions of them from dire poverty. But there are still just over one billion humans living at primitive levels of income, under \$2 per day, \$700 per year. Almost all are unemployed or underemployed. Their only real hope of getting out of poverty is the launching of about 200 million small businesses.

CAPITALISM IS LIFTING THE WORLD OUT OF POVERTY

Until recently, the poorest regions of the world were Asia, Africa, and some parts of Latin America. Since 1980, however, China and India have been transforming their economies from socialist to capitalist, have raised more than a half billion persons out of poverty, and prodded them into a steady upward movement of income and (FOR THEM) striking prosperity. Thus, Asia has jumped ahead of Africa in economic

advancement, and now Africa is the poorest region in the world. In these areas, large swathes of the planet are not yet favorable to large industries or corporations. In such regions, the only hope of full employment lies in the formation of small businesses.

Even in developed nations, most jobs are found in small business. In Italy, over 80 percent of the working population works in small businesses. In the U.S., the proportion is just about 50 percent, but some 65 percent of new employment is in small businesses.

During the great economic expansion of 1981-1989, the U.S. added to its economy the equivalent of the whole economic activity of West Germany at that time. Sixteen million new jobs were created in the U.S., the vast number of them in small businesses. Startups peaked as new businesses came into being at a rate of 13 percent (AS A PORTION OF ALL BUSINESSES) — an all-time high. Much the same happened under Clinton in 1993-2001, but even better — 23 million new jobs were created.

In the creation of small businesses, four factors are necessary. First, ease and low cost of incorporation; second, access to inexpensive credit; third, institutions of instruction and technical help (SUCH AS THE SYSTEM OF LOCAL CREDIT UNIONS IN THE U.S.), and the steady assistance of the extension services of the A&M universities; and, fourth, throughout the population habits of creativity, enterprise, and skills such as



bookkeeping and the organization of work. Economic development is propelled, as John Paul II said, by know-how, technology, and skill (CENTESIMUS ANNUS 32). Therein, perhaps, lie the greatest entry-points for Americans and others who wish to help poor nations by proffering assistance in economic development from the bottom up.

We must keep reminding ourselves that the point of assisting entrepreneurs to open new businesses is to generate a culture of entrepreneurship and new wealth. For economic growth it is necessary to stimulate scores of thousands of women and men to look around their countries to assess economic needs. What small manufacturers, businesses, and services need to be created to

improve the lives of their fellow citizens? Then they must begin creating such businesses.

Think what a great vocation it would be to place oneself in solidarity with the poor of the world by setting up networks of assistance to small business formations in this or that poor country or region, in order to help lift its peoples from unemployment and its resulting poverty. Such poor persons need small amounts of start-up money, technical and practical support, instruction in many bookkeeping or other business skills, and links to the wider world. What a great work a new generation of young Americans could produce, speeding up the move of the last billion human beings to break free from poverty.

BREAKING THE CHAINS OF POVERTY IN THE UNITED STATES

Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty is now 50 years old, and the 80-some different government programs which constitute it have spent more than \$20 trillion (ADJUSTED FOR INFLATION) since the 1960s. Today, however, the percentage of the poor (ABOUT 16 PERCENT) remains almost the same as in Johnson's day, and the raw number of the poor (MORE THAN 50 MILLION PEOPLE) is even greater because of the growth of our population.

In addition, government programs for the poor have contributed to an immense tide of births out of wedlock and the non-formation of families. The fastest growing segment of the poor in America consists in unmarried women and the children they have borne out of wedlock, often by more than one man. Whatever you think of the morality of such behavior, the social costs for the children are both measurable and immense.

During the last six years, the formation of new small businesses has drastically slowed. This, despite the fact that a vast pool of capital is waiting to be invested. A few million young people want to start businesses, but have found economic conditions for starting a business much too

unfavorable. The very activity even seems looked down upon. Meanwhile, many people oriented toward state programs do not grasp the fact that in order to have more employees, we must have many more employers. We must encourage the "high spirits" of entrepreneurs who will, despite the risks, plunge into the founding of new businesses.

The important thing is to call to the attention of those who enter business the great social role they are playing in building up a free society, conscious of it or not. They are not working only for themselves. They are raising the material and moral condition of the whole society. It is important for Christians, especially, to take responsibility for the whole of the world's population, and to make their own personal contribution to raising the level of all.

A practical conclusion: All of you, each of you – go out and start new businesses. You will greatly benefit the common good. And it is wise for a society to promote handsome rewards for those who do benefit the common good so fundamentally and so richly. The point of such rewards is not selfish. It is, rather, to draw millions of others into launching the full 300 million new small businesses, that the one billion remaining poor persons on earth need, if they are to have any chance at all of escaping from poverty.



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