CATHOLIC SCHOOL EDUCATION, CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING, AND AMERICAN BUSINESS: IS THERE A LINK IN PRACTICE?

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The American ethos has its foundation in the individualism advanced by John Locke and expressed in the free market system defined by Adam Smith. The "American Dream" is usually connected with economic success. It's the Horatio Alger rags to riches belief that with a little virtue, luck and pluck anyone can achieve financial success. Economic freedom is a primary value in America; without economic freedom, access to all other freedoms defined in the Bill of Rights is limited.

Milton Friedman, in Capitalism and Freedom (Friedman, 1982), states that democracy is impossible without a capitalist economic system. He believes that when left alone, the market will take care of society's needs. Mature, rational people will usually make decisions that will allocate resources so as to maximize utility. Government's primary economic role should be to ensure that the market is left to function under its own natural laws. Like Smith, Friedman believes that in the long run, through competitive capitalism, all of society will benefit, even though winners and losers are produced in the short run.

This belief in the necessity of the free market system has been, for the most part, accepted by American society in general and the business community in particular (Melloan, 1988). Yet, Roman Catholics, who make up about one-third of the United States population, have been confronted with the argument that uncontrolled capitalism does, perhaps, more evil than it does good. The Roman Catholic Church does not promote either extreme of capitalism or collectivism as an acceptable socio-economic system. Papal encyclicals on social teaching state very clearly that any system that is based on maximizing profits without concern for the welfare of the workers is morally wrong.

American Catholics are faced with a conflict. The dominant secular culture has defined and strengthened a belief that capitalism and limited government are the best of all possible systems. Yet the religious culture of the Roman Catholic Church confronts the ideal of unrestricted capitalism as morally wrong.

American bishops, in concurrence with the Catholic tradition, have challenged the U.S. business community with the publication of their position on the economy, Economic Justice For All: Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy. This letter, a critique of the economic system practiced in America, was issued by the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops in 1986. The
bishops observe that there are massive failures of the U.S. economy. For example, "harsh poverty plagues our country despite its great wealth." (Economic, p. 8) They develop many recommendations to correct the moral injustices of the U.S. economy that would place restrictions on the free market system.

How have people reacted to this challenge? Do they agree with the bishops' assessment of the economy and with their recommendations? Are trustees of Catholic higher education institutions familiar with the pastoral letter? Do trustees agree with Catholic economic teaching? Does Catholic education have an impact on their opinions? The objective of this paper is to explore these questions in light of relevant empirical data.

The search for answers begins with a research project developed from the economic issues explored in the bishops' pastoral letter. Their recommendations were used in a survey to discover the relationship between Catholic economic teaching and American business, including those with Catholic school education.

The Bishops' Letter on the Economy

The bishops' letter builds on the social justice issues raised in papal encyclicals. Four of these encyclicals on economic teaching have been disseminated in the past 100 years. These include: Rerum Novarum, on the condition of labor, issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1981; Quadragesimo Anno, Pius XI's encyclical, on reconstruction of the social order, issued on the fortieth anniversary of Rerum Novarum in 1931; Laborem Exercens, by John Paul II on human labor, written in 1981 when the world had experienced a radical transformation in the technological aspects of work production; and, Centesimus Annus, again written by Pope John Paul II, to commemorate the centennial of Rerum Novarum, in 1991 (Baum, 1982, Michel, 1937, "Pope John Paul II's Encyclical, 'Centesimus Annus'," 1991).

The U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops wrote Economic Justice For All because --

Our faith calls us to measure this economy, not only by what it produces, but also by how it touches human life and whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person. Economic decisions have human consequences and moral content; they help or hurt people...advance or diminish the quality of justice in our land (Economic, p. v.)

With the help of statistics from the U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Census Bureau, the bishops concluded that there were several areas of U.S. economic life that demand special attention. They admit that they are not experts in the realm of economic