

Item #66 (Catholic Social Doctrine As a Healing Element)

In the run-up to the recent presidential election in the United States the following incident occurred:

Person #1 to Person #2 (a neighbor): “For whom will you vote in the coming presidential election?”

Person #2: “I will vote for X”.

Person #1: “I hate you and I will never talk to you again”.

Fortunately this is still an abnormal occurrence in the United States. But it is something that would have been unthinkable a generation ago.

Unfortunately this is not the only type of political hatred in the United States today, as a cursory view of the American political scene makes evident. And hatred is only one aspect of the divisions that currently afflict the country.

On February 6, 2021, the Vatican correspondent of the *Wall Street Journal*, Francis X. Rocca, published an article in the Review section of the newspaper with the title “Can Catholic Social Doctrine Unite a Divided America?” A week later the newspaper published a selection of letters sent to the editor commenting on Rocca’s article. All the letters, including Rocca’s article, are well worth reading. But one letter in particular, by William H. Bowman, a former dean of the Busch School of Business of the Catholic University of America, I found particularly rewarding. I have not asked permission of Mr. Bowman or of the *Wall Street Journal* to quote the letter on my website, presuming that once it is published its contents are in the public domain. The *Wall Street Journal* published Mr. Bowman’s letter with the other letters commenting on Mr. Rocca’s article under the heading “Catholic Social Teaching and Social Healing”. The letter follows exactly as it appeared in the *Wall Street Journal*:

In addition to political applications, Catholic social teaching is highly useful to business owners, and companies with cultures grounded in these principles can improve their performance. The four pillars of that teaching and how a business might respond to it include:

1) The dignity of the human person. Realizing that each employee is a child of God requires us to recognize the dignity of all stakeholders.

2) Solidarity. Strategies designed to increase the value of all stakeholders will benefit a business. For instance, taking time to explore how a company might change its policies toward its suppliers to increase supplier profitability may make economic sense.

3) Subsidiarity. This principle requires that decisions should be made at the lowest level in an organization where the competence exists. Businesses pursuing this principle can cut layers out of their organizations, and often find that as employees are trusted to make and implement decisions, innovation thrives.

4) Common good. This principle stipulates that excess wealth created by a business belongs to all. What's left after running the business, investing in growth and giving the owners a good return belongs to everyone, not just the shareholders.

None of this is particularly "Catholic." Business leaders who implement these principles should see their operations improve.

WILLIAM H. BOWMAN
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Note that Mr. Bowman begins his letter by affirming its political relevance. In his letter Mr. Bowman makes use of a document published by the Vatican in 2004 with the title "Catholic Social Doctrine". I have discussed this document above in Item

#3 (God and Caesar), with reference to Mark 12,13-17. In addition to the structural principles used by Mr. Bowman there is an additional segment called “values” which are needed to complete the doctrine: Truth, Justice, Freedom. All of these structural principles and values should issue in the supreme norm of Love. Thus the complete outline of Catholic Social Doctrine is as follows:

- 1) The dignity of the human person.
- 2) Solidarity.
- 3) Subsidiarity.
- 4) Common Good.
- 5) Truth.
- 6) Justice.
- 7) Freedom.
- 8) LOVE.

The document in which all of this is explained is based on Scripture and Tradition as understood by the Roman Catholic Church and illustrated by Saint John Paul II in his writings. The document says that these 8 elements can be applied to any organization, not necessarily to Catholic ones, as Mr. Bowman notes with regard to a business, and the organization will function well to the extent that the elements are operative.

Mr. Bowman’s letter in favor of the use of the four organizational principles begins with the dignity of the human person. If this is missing it is difficult to see how the other principles can function as they should. This is true also of the world of politics. If respect for the dignity of the human person is not

present on a large scale in the world of national United States politics, as is true of national United States politics today, the inevitability of the hatred that is unfortunately a part of these politics is evident.

The four values were not mentioned by Mr. Bowman in his letter but he must be aware of them for they are essential to the functioning of the organizational principles. To take one example: the importance of the right understanding of Freedom.

On June 29, 1992, a plurality of the United States Supreme Court solemnly declared in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* that “at the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life”. If this interpretation of Freedom were fully operative in United States society it would be impossible for any but an arbitrarily worded “common good” to function.

When all of the seven elements function as they should in the political society of the United States they should issue in Love. This does not mean that there will be total agreement about the problems that face a country of well over three hundred million persons. But it does mean that all the seven elements listed above are functioning harmoniously. Thus will be fulfilled the supreme law of both the Old and New Covenants between God and Man, though this does not necessarily mean that all those participating will necessarily have the gift of faith like those of the Old and New Covenants who self-consciously shared in that love to varying degrees. **James Swetnam, S.J. (24 February 2021)**

