

## **A plea for philosophical and theological attention to those who lead contemporary organizations**

**By Andre L. Delbecq**

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Organizations may seem an alien topic for a seminary commencement. Likewise, leaders may seem less in need pastorally than other members of our church. Yet I believe it is time for a missionary outreach to leaders. Why?

In modern societies, 80 percent of the people of God spend their working hours within organizations. This is not an abstract “God in all things” argument. It is an empiric reality. Hewlett-Packard, Monsanto, AT&T, Sutter Health — these *are* the stages on which the majority of the baptized gather each day. There God will be present or absent; there God will suffer or be affirmed.

I often find seminaries doubtful of organizations as a locus of religious energy. Given the scandals associated with leadership in churches, charitable organizations, and government organizations, to say nothing of product-producing and service organizations, it is an understandable temptation to cynicism. But informed by the Resurrection, I believe our tradition must examine organizations at their best.

From a positive vantage point we can quickly affirm the modern organization’s potential for nobility. Let me use business — arguably perceived as the most “secular” organizational form — as an example. Business provides the products and services that feed, clothe, house, transport, and heal. (“I was hungry and you fed me, naked and you clothed me, without shelter and you housed me.”) It is business that links individuals into collaborative networks to provide for our needs. Spiritually such organizations should be loci of love.

But organizations do more. Sociologists have long documented that it is within the primary work group that we experience acceptance or rejection, compassion or alienation. For most adults, this happens at work within their department, laboratory, production group, surgical team, etc. It is here that the neighbor that scripture enjoins us to love is most frequently encountered.

Organizations enable the expression of our talents and unleash the dignity of co-creation. A modern surgeon without a hospital, professor of theology

without a college, bioscientist without a pharmaceutical firm — all contemporary technical and knowledge workers find their gifts only latent without an organizational sponsor.

Organizations are stewards of resources and the environment. The budgets — let alone control over energies and competencies — of the global corporation are larger than those of kingdoms in prior times, sometimes even exceeding the wealth of contemporary third-world nations. Stewardship matters! As one example, the waste and inefficiency in healthcare is estimated to be 28 percent of an industry increasingly inaccessible to the poor. Imagine if these savings were transferred to the uninsured.

Finally there is the multiplier wealth generated through organizations. Business taxes and philanthropy are essential to support government, arts, education (including seminaries), and environmental protection. When one reflects on the thousands of individuals who found dignity producing important products — the cancer hospitals and art centers in Palo Alto, the Monterey Bay Aquarium, the preservation of the Northern California seacoast, etc. — one can only be grateful for the wealth-creation charisma of Bill Hewlett and David Packard and be thankful they were not violin players.

To have a vocation as a leader of the modern organization must be seen as an important spiritual calling.

### **Areas for concern**

Of course there are challenges and a dark side to contemporary organizational life.

There is work that does not provide dignity. There is mal-distribution of income. There are distortions of hubris and greed on display in the present legal actions against CEOs. There are destructive consequences of globalization and hyper-competition. There is environmental degradation and there are out right ethical violations.

But we need to understand that wrestling against negative “principalities and powers” and transforming organizations *is* exactly the spiritual journey of organizational leaders. I know executives serving on compensation committees taking specific steps to modify excessive executive pay and to assure fair wages for the lowest echelons of the workforce. I know two leaders heading teams creating “green” corporate architecture. I know a chemical firm’s CEO who championed the effort to convert all the firm’s products to earth-friendly and sustainable formulations. I know executives undertaking difficult negotiations to assure that health care, education, and just wages are available to workers where manufacturing is sourced offshore. I have seen numerous challenges by accounting and financial executives to

disclose unethical financial dealing.

The baptized people of God *are* at work in contemporary organizations. This is why spiritual support is so necessary. It is a lay leader's role is to bring Christ to the City of Man. Catholic social teaching can portray just outcomes. It is only through organizational leadership that justice becomes reality. Just as leaders of religious organizations are deeply saddened by distortions and scandals in churches, so too these business leaders are deeply saddened by all that is wrong in their setting.

Let me summarize with a metaphor and then turn to what these leaders seek from philosophy and theology.

### **Freeway as a liturgical parade**

I commute on the Nimitz Freeway from Alameda to Santa Clara. There is ample time to meditate during rush hours while staring at lug nuts on sitting Peterbilt trucks. I have come to see the freeway as a liturgical parade.

Here is a biotech executive on his way to the Oakland airport. He will travel to New York seeking another round of financial support for his firm's search for remediation of Type-2 diabetes. He is a mendicant every bit as much as a Franciscan on behalf of the sick, a medical missionary every bit as much as are the Médecins sans Frontières. ("I was sick and you healed me.")

Over here is an educational administrator on her way to Cal State University East Bay. She will advocate in a curriculum-planning meeting for a remedial course for students for whom English is not the first language. ("I was a stranger and you welcomed me.")

There is the owner of Fred's Wrench House. Fred's auto repair shop keeps commuters' cars going. Without Fred, many individuals of modest economic means would not have transportation to work, since they must live in affordable housing far from their place of employment. ("I was poor and your supported me.")

### **What then do these leaders seek from philosophy and theology?**

Let me mention just six of their hopes.

- *Leaders search for a deepened understanding of the lay vocation.* Leaders want to go beyond "servant leadership" as a cliché. They want to explore a christology and ecclesiology that will inform their calling as a spiritual path.

- *Leaders search for insight into how organizations can be fully human settings.* They hope for a theological and philosophical anthropology that begins to integrate how the Holy Spirit has already been present in the evolution of the modern organization. However, they know they must go further and bring to bear the implications of contemporary ethics and Catholic social teaching.
- *Leaders search for an understanding of the spiritual journey and spiritual disciplines suitable to their active and turbulent lives.* They still find most literature dealing with the spiritual journey modeled on clerical and religious life, or the person outside of professional roles and demands. Leaders want to understand how to incorporate prayer, meditation, and contemplation while active in the world. They want to understand cycles of the spiritual journey and seek help with the “mystery of suffering,” because leadership is a role in which suffering is amplified.
- *Since a central role of the leader is to guide strategic decision-making, leaders want to understand how the spiritual discipline of discernment can be applied to group decision processes.* Problem and solution complexity require pooled judgments and collaborative efforts in order to overcome patterns of injustice and to provide organizational outcomes that serve the common good.
- *Leaders seek to understand what an organization would be like if they could move beyond instrumental teamwork toward true spiritual community.* Understanding sins against community and preconditions for *agape* are needed to realize spiritual community. As our current Pope Benedict has written, this can take place only through the Holy Spirit, who is the power of communion.
- *Finally, leaders seek to understand how they can speak about all of this in a religiously differentiated world.* Religious diversity characterizes both organizational membership and “clienteles.” Leaders want greater clarity regarding how to witness their Christian heritage and simultaneously be open to the way God acts in the lives of diverse religious (and non-religious) colleagues.

## **Conclusion**

Let me conclude by suggesting an approach to meeting the challenge of bringing theology and philosophy to these leaders.

The topics these leaders seek to explore are not unfamiliar. Still, as a newly

minted philosopher or theologian (or a senior faculty member) at a seminary, you may be thinking: “Yes but I specialize in Hebrew scriptures” (or systematic theology or ethics). “I am not familiar with the world of corporate leaders. I prepare church ministers. You need to speak with someone else!”

During my lifetime, this *has* been the response. Meanwhile, the gap between contemporary leaders and your disciplines has increased. Most leaders no longer turn to their religious tradition for insight beyond matters of personal piety. However, I see a new possibility to bridge the gap and allow a confluence of thinking.

The stimulus is the emergent “spirituality at work movement.” In response to this manifestation of the Holy Spirit, two groups on the organizational side of the river of misunderstanding are ready to reach out to theology and philosophy. The first is composed of teacher-scholars in colleges of business, public, health care, and social administration. The second is the new profession of executive coaches. Both groups are aware that without solid educational study, it is easy to fall prey to the superficial and bogus surrounding the spirituality movement.

These two groups, who largely control leadership education in North America, are not asking that philosophers and theologians become solo translators for organizational leaders. Rather, they seek a partnership. In return for guidance into your primary literatures and joint dialogue, they will assume the burden to incorporate new understanding into instruction for organizational leaders. We are speaking here of education for educators.

So among your many worthy ministries, I hope you will consider this new need. Unless this bridge is built, the lay members of the people of God who must transform the most powerful institutions in our modern world, the settings where the majority of the people of God gather daily, will continue to lack access to the truth and wisdom you shepherd.