

opusdei.org

Christian Humanism in Business and Management

The full text of the address delivered by Bishop Javier Echevarría to inaugurate the 15th International Symposium on Ethics, Business and Society held May 16, 2008, at the campus of IESE in Barcelona.

07/22/2008

**Christian Humanism in Business
and Management**

I am delighted to be at IESE once again for the celebration of the school's 50th anniversary. I personally witnessed Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer's interest and perseverance in fostering its first steps and development. I give thanks to God for its achievements thus far and ask him to continue to bless IESE as it carries out the mission entrusted to it by Saint Josemaría.

I have been requested to address the topic of Christian Humanism in this International Symposium on Ethics, Business and Society, which focuses on the quest for more human business management models at every level. Actually, this topic is very relevant. Christian Humanism has much to contribute, so that business does not forget that "man is the source, the center, and the purpose of all economic and social life,"¹ in the words of the Second Vatican Council, which added that

"economic activity is to be carried out according to its own methods and laws within the limits of the moral order, so that God's plan for mankind may be realized."²

All forms of humanism underscore the centrality of man and encourage people to improve their own existence. However, many different types of humanism have emerged throughout the centuries, and although the regard for the human component could be considered a loose common denominator, not all of these approaches are identical or equivalent from a moral and social standpoint. Some of them lead to extreme individualism. Others nullify or significantly dilute the individual's freedom within the collective.

Christian Humanism, in contrast, as it is presented in the social teachings of the Church,³ offers a complete

vision of the person. It is a vision that takes into account simultaneously the individual and social dimensions of the person. Man is not reduced to a merely intra-mundane being, with no other horizons than those deriving from utilitarianism and hedonism. Christian Humanism is opposed to relativistic ideologies as well as theories presented as "neutral" but which, at their core, contain values that quickly reduce people to mere units of production or consumers, valued almost exclusively as potential income generators for the company.

Christian Humanism provides a solid foundation for changing the tendency, which — as Pope Benedict XVI has pointed out — being "deeply marked by a subjectivity which tends to result in extreme individualism or relativism, drives people to become the sole measure of themselves. Losing sight of objectives that are not

centered on the self, this becomes their only criterion for evaluating reality and their own opinions."⁴

Christ, the measure of true humanism

As Christians, we have a clear point of reference for acting justly and building human relationships. It is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, *the way, the truth, and the life* (John 14:6), *the light of the world* (John 8:12), *the image of the invisible God* (Col 1:15), who being in the form of God, *made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men* (Phil. 2:6-7). He is "perfect God and perfect man," according to a first-century creed that Saint Josemaría liked to recall.⁵

Christ, while still being God, also became a man of flesh and bones through the Incarnation, and "he worked with the hands of a man, he

thought with the intelligence of a man, he worked with the will of a man and he loved with the heart of a man."6

But following Christ, it should be noted, goes beyond simple "humanism". Jesus Christ came to bring salvation from sin, to reconcile mankind to friendship with God, to open the gates of eternal life for all. The current Supreme Pontiff has explained it precisely when, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, he formulates a question on the lips of many non-Christians. "What has the Messiah brought to the world?" he asks, "He has not brought world peace and he has not conquered the world's misery." The Pope's reply is simple yet conclusive. "He has brought the God of Israel to the nations,... the word of the living God. He has brought the gift of universality, which was the one great definitive promise to Israel and the

world. This universality, this faith in the one God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, extended now in Jesus' new family to all nations over and above the bonds of descent according to the flesh — is the fruit of Jesus' work."7

There are other humanisms, however, that are not only unfamiliar with Christ, but shut one off from God and transcendence. At times, these philosophies even come to think of any reference to God as a constraint on the affirmation of man's dignity or the attainment of human potential. In fact, the exact opposite occurs. Not only does God not deprive man of dignity, but he bestows on man his most solid foundation and his complete and real fulfillment. By the same token, Christian revelation sheds new light on understanding the most profound aspects of the rational creature.

When faced with "humanisms" closed off to God and the spirit, conveyed through ideologies that end up enslaving the world's citizens to the power of others, we, as Christians, present Christ himself. We do so convinced without a shadow of doubt that He is the perfect model of humanity, a bright light for humanizing all society and, therefore, also the world of business and management.

The day prior to his appointment as Supreme Pontiff, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger gave a memorable homily in which he mentioned the temptation of fundamentalism. At the same time he warned of another danger, that of "the dictatorship of relativism, which recognizes nothing as absolute and leaves as the ultimate measure only the measure of each person and his desires. Christians, however, have another measure, which is the Son of God,

true Man. He is the measure of true humanism."8 A few days later, this time as Peter's successor, he pointed again to Christ as "the measure of true humanism."9 And in his encyclical *Spe salvi* he has expressed the same idea from a different perspective. He considers the issue from the starting point of Jesus as he is depicted in certain ancient sarcophagi, as the true "philosopher". 10 The first Christian intellectuals chose this image to relate Jesus Christ to the great thinkers of antiquity whose teachings centered on man and the art of living with dignity. "Christ is the true philosopher," declares the Pope. He adds that "He [Christ] tells us who man truly is and what a man must do in order to be truly human."11

The Christian message, therefore, is not unrelated to the daily life of creatures on Earth. Through his presence in the world and through

his teachings, Jesus "fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear."¹² He presents us with a new way of understanding personhood and humanity. He brings us an appealing humanity which illuminates the various spheres of our existence for the advantage of everyone else. It is humanism with a universal reach.

We might be inclined to ask ourselves whether taking Jesus Christ as the measure of true humanism is not stepping back into the past. Would it not be an anachronism in what some describe as a post-Christian society? The clear and joyous answer is a resounding "no". "No! *Christ is alive*. This is the great truth which fills our faith with meaning," proclaimed Saint Josemaría.¹³ And referring to the Epistle to the Hebrews, he added: "Christ is not a figure that has come and gone. He is not a memory lost in

history. Christ lives and he shall live forever: *yesterday, today and for ever*" (Heb 13:8).¹⁴ Far from being a figure from the past, Jesus Christ is truly relevant in every age. As Christians we know, by the grace of God, that he lives and serves as the clear measure of true humanism for all.

Christian Humanism in business

Let us now consider humanism in business administration. As in any human activity of governance, in this field there is a certain underlying vision of the person, of the company itself and of its mission in society. By offering an elevated concept of human beings, Christian Humanism, beyond being a good fit with business administration, lends a truly humanizing perspective that is intent on serving others and broadening horizons. This perspective includes specific principles and moral norms, but

ultimately the main point of reference is the works and teachings of Jesus Christ. He stands before us as our living, permanent example, as the essential norm of moral conduct. This is reflected very concretely in the commandment to love our neighbors, for which Jesus himself serves as example and measure (cf. John 15:12).

True *philanthropy* (love for other men, as the original Greek term suggests, a meaning sometimes deformed by the use and abuse of the word) leads us to value people for who they are, beyond any consideration of what they may produce or contribute to society. Nowadays, the prevalent trend in many cultures, and also in international forums and conventions, is to acknowledge that each individual deserves recognition and respect. This is a very deeply rooted conviction — at least in

theory — and it stems in large measure from the influence of Christianity. The Supreme Pontiff alluded to this fact in his recent speech at the United Nations, at the event celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁵

The declaration of the dignity of every individual acquires a special resonance and finds its most concrete expression in the Christian faith. As Saint Josemaría pointed out, that is the great odyssey of the Christian faith, to preach the value and dignity of human nature and proclaim that, by means of the grace which elevates us to a supernatural level, we have been created to achieve dignity as children of God. An unbelievable odyssey, were it not based on the saving decree of God the Father, and were it not confirmed by the blood of Christ and reaffirmed

and made possible by the constant empowerment of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶

Christian Humanism therefore requires us to overthrow the barrier of selfishness, or utilitarianism, and replace it with reciprocity and generosity. It is true that the logic of the market and strictly contractual relationships are based on exchange, but these business dealings must lead to reciprocity, with advantages for both parties. In a company, which is made up of people who work together in a common task, business leaders and workers form a community in which reciprocal relations will naturally emerge. But — as is true in any human relationship — these can and should be channels for mutual generosity, for service in the best sense of the term, as we see in the life of Jesus Christ.

From the vantage point of the Church's social doctrine, companies are above all communities made up of free and responsible people who interact to perform a common task. In these companies people work, contribute resources, develop their humanity and contribute efficiently to the production of goods and services. As Pope John Paul II wrote, "A business cannot be considered only as a 'society of capital goods'; it is also a 'society of persons' in which people participate in different ways and with specific responsibilities, whether they supply the necessary capital for the company's activities or take part in such activities through their labor."¹⁷

By focusing in this way on the multiple social functions of business, we come to discover the instrumental value of business profits, which become a catalyst for higher aims. His Holiness John Paul

II himself did not hesitate to recognize "the legitimate *role of profit* as an indication that a business is functioning well." But he immediately adds that the purpose of a business firm is not simply to make a profit, but is to be found in its very existence as a *community of persons* who in various ways are endeavoring to satisfy their basic needs, and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society."¹⁸

Saint Josemaría stood up energetically for the importance of human work, which, though it has an economic value, goes far beyond that. "It is time for us Christians to shout from the rooftops — he said — that work is a gift from God and that it makes no sense to classify men differently, according to their occupation, as if some jobs were nobler than others. Work, all work, bears witness to the dignity of man,

to his dominion over creation. It is an opportunity to develop one's personality. It is a bond of union with others, the way to support one's family, a means of aiding in the improvement of the society in which we live and in the progress of all humanity."19

So high and complete a regard for every professional task requires an adequate business structure and specific labor conditions. It calls for executives to organize the company in such a way as to respect and support the dignity of people and human rights. It also calls for the proper participation of those involved in the business, and the implementation of systems that would enhance their personal development. This is what may be considered the structural framework of the managerial mission. It is a real ethical obligation which should in no way interfere with the efficiency of

products or the bottom line. Quite the contrary. Many experts claim that paying attention to people and their integral development is the key to the proper operation of a company.

Christian Humanism in the business leader

Christian Humanism goes beyond this structural dimension in management. It must, above all, make an impact on people. I am referring now to those who create and manage companies. Their task requires education, experience, technical skills and — last but not least — the exercise of virtue.

The Christian faith teaches everyone the path to these good operational habits and their exercise. In all honesty, it can be said to teach especially those who hold managerial positions. The virtues enrich them not only as persons but also as managers. In this context the

exercise of these human virtues (which in Christians are all guided by charity) takes on great importance. I will limit myself to a brief consideration of the need to love and serve others.

Caring for people, each and every person, and giving them the respect they deserve requires finding each person's individuality: his or her needs, personality, skills and circumstances. They must never be thought of as mere resources, statistics or cogs in the design of a particular strategy.

For example, when entrusted with a task or mission, they always deserve respect and regard for their intelligence and initiative. No matter what their status—workers, clients, shareholders or suppliers—they should all be treated with kindness and understanding. We must follow the Lord's golden rule with all men:

all that you wish men to do to you, even so do you also to them (Matthew 7:12).

In this context, it is necessary to make room for individual concern and personal conversation. In this as well, business life affords constant opportunities for imitating Jesus Christ. He was always available for those who came to him in search of help. That personal touch, a channel for help and service, plays an important role in true humanism.

In the footsteps of the Son of Man, who came not to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28), Christian Humanism has high regard for the spirit of service, the desire to work towards the good of others.

This spirit of service begins with solid career preparation in order to discover and do everything possible to meet the real needs of others and care for them. The company, as any

organization or community, offers continual opportunities to serve others. Not everything should be controlled—that would be inhuman—nor can the environment and proper function of the business be boiled down to a detailed list of rights and responsibilities.

As is the case of any society established for the good of others, the corporation grows and develops thanks to people who are happily and generously committed, empowered by a spirit of service. This should translate into collaboration with others by being available for mutual solidarity and interest, for timely advice, for sharing experiences, and, in short, for engaging everyone.

Another important feature of Christian Humanism that Saint Josemaría Escrivá loved and cultivated is personal coherence. He

explained it as "a strong and simple unity into which all our actions converge."²⁰ This unity of life opposes any attempt to have one's relationship with God on one side and on the other—independently—one's professional, family and social life. The business leader's Christian conduct should be evident in his executive role. He cannot fall prey to materialistic attitudes or counterfeit forms of spirituality.

From the outset of his pastoral ministry, St. Josemaría told those who approached him as a priest that they "should learn to materialize their spiritual life."²¹ He asserted this, above all, from the standpoint of the Christian faith, which teaches the Incarnation of the Word of God. As he reflected on this great demonstration of our Lord's love for his creatures, he insisted on the possibility of filling the entire material universe with spiritual

significance. For this reason he did not hesitate in maintaining the need for proposing, with all coherence, a *Christian materialism* in bold contrast to those forms of materialism which negate the spirit.

22

Through its educational efforts, IESE is called to contribute towards making this beautiful ideal a reality for many men and women. Saint Josemaría's priestly zeal resonated with these ambitions 50 years ago when he guided IESE's first steps. As Chancellor of the University of Navarra, I thank God that the Lord has seen fit to use our efforts throughout these decades, carried out in a spirit of service and professional aptitude, and the efforts carried out by those who came before us and who now look down on us from Heaven, to instill these ideals into many people. And since "God doesn't let himself be outdone

in generosity," as Saint Josemaría was fond of saying, the Lord has multiplied these fruits in the souls of many people in many different places.

I know full well that at IESE you feel strongly and you do not shy from this challenge of being committed to God in service to others. The organization of this symposium is ample proof of that. You make every effort to transmit this spiritual richness and have an influence on the improvement and humanization of large sectors of society through your various programs.

At the same time, full of optimism, we should consider that there is still much to do. The horizon for expressing a profound interest in others is broad and highly appealing. There is still much to do. We must go further. It is therefore crucial that, first and foremost, you lead the way

in the practice of this Christian Humanism, which has inexhaustible possibilities.

One of Saint Josemaría's most striking teachings may serve to sum up what I have tried to say to you: "I measure the efficacy of an apostolic activity" — including IESE's — "by the degree of holiness of the people who work there." There should be no doubt that also IESE, in its quest for human and Christian perfection in its sector, can and should be a school of holiness. In his 1972 visit to IESE, St. Josemaría, with Gospel in hand (literally), very correctly reminded you that the Master praises and sets as an example the steward—the manager—who is faithful.

I commend IESE's professors, directors, employees, students and alumni, together with their families, to the Blessed Virgin, through the intercession of Saint Josemaría.

NOTES

1. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 63.
2. Ibid.
3. See, e.g., Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, (Rome, 2004).
4. Benedict XVI, *Message to the Pontifical Academies*, November 5, 2005.
5. Cf. Athanasian Creed (*Quicumque*).
6. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 22.
7. Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth* (London, 2007), pp. 116-17.
8. Card. Joseph Ratzinger, Homily in the Mass *Pro eligendo Pontifice*, April 18, 2005.
9. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Clergy of Rome*, May 13, 2005.

10. Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, n. 6.
11. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 22.
12. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, n. 102.
13. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, n. 584.
14. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Conversations*, n. 72.
15. Benedict XVI, *Address to the UN General Assembly*, April 18, 2008.
16. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, n. 133.
17. John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*, n. 43.
18. *Ibid.*, n. 35.
19. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, n. 47.
20. *Ibid.*, n. 126.

21. St. Josemaría Escrivá,
Passionately Loving the World in
Conversations, n. 114.

22. Ibid., n. 115.

University of Navarra-IESE

pdf | document generated
automatically from [https://opusdei.org/
en-za/article/christian-humanism-in-
business-and-management/](https://opusdei.org/en-za/article/christian-humanism-in-business-and-management/) (08/09/2025)