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## Maintaining Our Ethical Standards in a Market-Driven Economy

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by Rev. Lawrence G. Dunklee, M.Div., M.A.

*"Mr. Businessman went to Mass, he never missed a Sunday.  
Mr. Businessman went to hell for what he did on Monday."*

This well-known poetic ditty is often cited by people who work in Catholic social justice as a clever way of reminding us of the importance of maintaining high ethical standards when carrying out our day-to-day business practices. With apologies for the gender bias of the author, this old poem does drive home a critical point. The values we profess as people of faith in our worship on Sundays ought to be reflected in our choices and behaviors in the public marketplace. This has become increasingly difficult when we remember that the Catholic-Christian standards, which have evolved over the past 2,000 years, were developed in an era before the current market-driven societal pressures of our 21st century.

We live in an age, particularly in light of the recent economic pressures facing individuals and businesses, fraught with the temptation of bending, if not out-and-out breaking, those ethical traditions and rules while chasing the ever-elusive profit margin. As Catholics, we are reminded by the social teachings of the Church, summarized so well most recently in Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, that we are called to higher standards in giving witness to our values to a culture that is in desperate need of that witness. At the heart of this is our commitment to do all things in a manner which respects the dignity and value of the human person.

### *Do our business choices reflect our mission as Catholics?*

The question, then, is how can we carry out this mandate and mission in very concrete and pragmatic ways. I would suggest the following as an essential, but not exhaustive list, of possibilities.

- 1. We must set the principles and ethical standards of our own business practices at a higher level**, in the treatment of our customers as well as our employees. This would mean that we constantly evaluate our practices to ensure they are just, honest, and avoid the temptation of being self-serving.
- 2. When hiring individuals for our places of business**, do we merely look at the candidate's technical competencies and skills, or **do we also look to see that their personal philosophies and standards of behavior are going to be consistent with our business's mission and standards?** This is important since we know that everything our employees are doing, and how they are treating those whom we serve, will reflect back upon us.
- 3. We have a responsibility to be good stewards of our resources.** In an age of environmental crisis, we have to look at the effects of our productions and services on the society as a whole. In particular this means looking at how we can become better stewards of our environment. This, the Church reminds us, is a moral and ethical mandate for all.
- 4. When we deal with our competitors, do we do so in a way that is respectful and consistent with an integrity of spirit**, or do we give into the temptation to do whatever it takes to get the upper hand, to cut the corners, or to close the deal?
- 5. Finally, in these and all other aspects of our business life, we recognize the fact that we are called to follow the principle of beneficence.** Our concern must not only be for ourselves and our own family's welfare, but also that of our employees, our customers, and the human community as a whole. The common good is not simply a nice phrase, but rather the standard that we use in evaluating how we carry out all of the activities in our day-to-day life of business.

### *Honor your word*

My father used to remind me, with some sadness in his voice, that he remembered a day and time when a business person was as good as his or her word. As Catholic business people, in whatever area we find ourselves, industry, banking, healthcare, etc., are called to be as good as our word, and even more importantly, as good as our actions. This is essential not only for the good of our own souls, but also for those whom we serve and those with whom we work. It is also a critical, prophetic witness, which we will give to the generations that will follow. Therefore, we must always remember that in looking out for the welfare of all, and in maintaining fidelity to the Gospel, it really does matter "what we do on Monday."

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