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COVID-19 and the Noble Vocation of Business

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By Rolando Medeiros, President of UNIAPAC International
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CRISIS = DANGER & OPPORTUNITY: "Weiji" or "Pinyin" is the Chinese Word for crisis. These are the traditional Chinese characters for crisis: 危機



One translation of these two Chinese characters, which linguistically isn't strictly correct but metaphorically is quite powerful, is that the first one means "danger" and the second, "opportunity."

Although the original interpretation is "danger in dilemma," the reinterpretation as danger + opportunity has been so widely used by politicians, business leaders and in popular culture that this interpretation has become universally accepted, even in China.



Without a doubt, a crisis can destabilize and plunge us into unexpected change. However, it can also represent a great opportunity to grow and refocus our lives. Life always surprises us with unexpected situations; it can hit us hard, crushing our plans and expectations. Nevertheless, we have it in us, innately, to turn each crisis into an opportunity to grow and reinvent ourselves. A crisis can signify the end of an era, of an important stage...and, given that we human beings have the tendency to hold on to the known, to what forms our identity, the blow may be very hard, terrifying and paralyzing. However, all we need to do is open our mind and adopt a different perspective that allows us to extract something positive from a crisis. In reality, the word crisis comes from the Greek "separate, scrutinize" that signifies to judge, to keep only that which is worthwhile. In every crisis there is opportunity; the more extreme the crisis, the more opportunity. But some people are unable to see this.

This current massive crisis, which some see as the "perfect storm," should at least help us to see things more clearly and to shift our focus outside of our own individual problems.



DESOLATION AND HOPE: On March 27, Pope Francis held an historic homily in St. Peter's Square—which for the first time was completely empty due to the quarantine brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic—and gave an extraordinary blessing, *Urbi et Orbi* (to the city and the world). A very significant ceremony profoundly moved me, as I am sure it did for many of those who saw it. For those who didn't, whether Christian or not, I would highly recommend it. You can find it

on YouTube!

It underlined both the desolation and hope with which this global crisis has filled us. Desolation because this pandemic is taking many lives, and creating unprecedented levels of unemployment and business failures, while affecting social and economic exchange. In other words, COVID-19 kills and threatens our human nature, which is essentially social.

But Pope Francis' address also brought hope. Faced with the “storm” of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Pope called upon humanity to “row together,” as “we are all on the same boat.” He invited us to “put into practice that solidarity and hope capable of giving strength, support and meaning to these hours when everything seems to be floundering.”

IT'S TIME TO CHOOSE WHAT REALLY MATTERS. For this reason, for being so relevant to



our theme, allow me to go over some of the statements made in this homily that illuminate my address:

“The Lord asks us from his cross to rediscover the life that awaits us, to look towards those who look to us, to strengthen, recognize and foster the grace that lives within us.”

“The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily

schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities...”

“In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away.”

“It is not the time of your judgement, but of our judgement: a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others.”

It's time to choose what really matters. It's time to avoid danger and embrace opportunity.

COVID-19 AND BUSINESS AS A NOBLE VOCATION



And the title of my talk “COVID-19 and Business as a Noble Vocation” precisely reflects those two sides of the same coin: desolation and hope, danger and opportunity.

The great disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in society has generated several considerations regarding changes going forward. Some, based on what has happened throughout humanity (for example, the period between World Wars I and II), have predicted that the emotional impact caused initially by the pandemic will continue to wane as its intensity lowers and that people will go back to their old routines of work, study and recreation.



I believe it is possible to avoid this disappointment. I think that people’s cooperative spirit will increase and they will change their current habits of consumerism and ambition into a more modest version while increasing their social and planetary consciousness. I believe that, as business leaders, the great dangers of COVID-19 and our efforts to stop it can lead us to be driven by a deeper meaning of our business roles and help us to more decisively transform our businesses into noble vocations.

The COVID-19 crisis can help us be aware of a reality that we sense is true but that we have not explored more deeply.



Science, technology, and especially the free market and democracy have resulted in unparalleled achievements for humanity. However, technology gives us power, but it does not guide us on how to use this power. The market provides us with options but leaves us ignorant as to how to choose. The liberal democratic state gives us the freedom to live as we choose, but it refuses—in principle—to guide us as to how to exercise this freedom. Businesses provide us with work, but not always the opportunity to prosper, in this job and with this work, as human beings.

As a result, the 21st century presents us with maximum options and minimum meaning and significance. This has resulted in confusion between means and ends and an emphasis on rights while forgoing subsequent obligations, a focus on selfish individualism and unbridled consumerism. In short, a crisis of solidarity.

In an emergency, such as the Coronavirus, the first weapon of attack is the antibodies of solidarity. This affirmation can help us to combat decisively this other more persistent and silent crisis:

THE GLOBALIZATION OF INDIFFERENCE. The COVID-19 crisis may help us to defeat not only the pandemic but also the “globalization of indifference” as Pope Francis characterizes our incapacity to empathize with those who are suffering or, to care for them, as if that were someone else’s responsibility.



More than anything else, the Coronavirus outbreak is a human tragedy that affects hundreds of thousands, millions, of people. It also has an impact on the global economy to a degree and magnitude that is still unknown. The pandemic forces us to weigh difficult decisions

and to prioritize potentially conflicting ethical values due to severe time restrictions and a shortage of available resources. This presents great challenges including, the rationing of limited sanitary resources, applying restrictions on the movement of people and individual freedoms, and balancing health needs with economics so that the economy does not cause more damage than the epidemic itself.

Notwithstanding, for humanitarian reasons we must also prioritize the most vulnerable, poor and defenceless segments of society; those who are losing their source of income and their livelihoods; the informal workers who are not covered by employment protection policies and/or social security. All of this necessitates a globalization of solidarity while overcoming—along with the pandemic—the globalization of indifference.



The dominant perspective related to globalization needs to shift its limited focus on markets to encompass a wider concern related to people. Globalization must come down from the elevated pedestal of company boardrooms and high-level governmental meetings to meet the concrete needs of people in the communities where they live. The social aspect of globalization refers to employment, health and education, but it extends much further. It relates to the aspect of globalization that people experience in their daily lives and work: the totality of their aspirations for a broader participatory democracy and material prosperity.



Greater globalization is the key to achieving a better and safer standard of living for all people around the world. The COVID-19 crisis could help to raise our awareness in this respect and to motivate decisively us in this direction.



THE NEW NORMAL. The corporate pillars that existed before the crisis still exist. The strong companies from before are still strong today, but they are challenged by the sudden drop-off in their revenues due to the almost complete stoppage of the global economy. These companies will return to profitability once the economy is re-established and returns to a new normal.

Many say, “When we return to normalcy,” nevertheless, we will never return to the old normalcy. We are approaching a new “normal.” But, what will normal be? At present, nobody really knows. Every business will find its own post-COVID normal. Every industry, uniquely affected by the crisis and changed by its new priorities, will have to adapt according to how the new normal takes shape.

However, without a doubt, in the post-COVID era success will be determined by corporate resilience, innovation, a new level of preparedness and an insatiable focus on sustainability. Cooperation, empathy and adaptability will all become critical components of the DNA that makes up a business. Nevertheless, despite fear of the unknown, the pandemic and the challenging economic aftermath represent a decisive moment. Our businesses have the opportunity to come out stronger and with deeper relationships with our employees, suppliers, clients, communities and other interest groups. Once we have emerged from the crisis, the best businesses will be those who have treated their different interest groups with generosity and benevolence.

CAPITALISM: ABOLITION OR REDEFINITION? Hopefully, the necessary state intervention to contain the pandemic will not result in increased social property and the democratization of economic



power; in other words, the nationalization of the means of production. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, this state intervention should not extend or prolong more than what is strictly required since it is only justified by the extraordinary nature of this situation.

In addition, there is speculation as to the cause of the rapid spread of the virus. Whether it is due to the high level of international connectivity and the elevated dependence on labor markets inherent in economic globalization or, rather, due to the weakness of the state in areas where it should be strong; namely, protection against disasters and preparatory measures against the pandemic.



Despite the recency of these debates, there is no doubt that the COVID-19 crisis will redefine what is understood by progress and the role of capitalism to generate it. It will certainly involve a redefinition of prosperity. However, there has been little debate on the kind of growth that is best, the meaning of “wealth” and its implications for our lives. Currently, we measure success in terms of GDP and business profits. What would happen if, instead of confusing means with ends, we measure success as the capacity to create novel solutions to human problems? What would happen if we judged economic activity in terms of the social value of the problems it solved? What would happen if we were to transform business activities into a noble vocation?

BUSINESS AS A NOBLE VOCATION

Traditional economic orthodoxy assumes that markets are naturally efficient, people are rational and the economy moves towards an optimal state. We now bitterly understand that markets can be far from efficient, that people are not always rational and that the economy is a very complex, dynamic and evolutionary system that solves problems. COVID-19 has clearly highlighted this.



Looking at capitalism from this angle, it can be understood as an evolutionary system used to solve problems. This allows us to evaluate whether the solutions created by capitalism are really those that create genuine prosperity in people’s lives, by assessing whether the rate at which these solutions are created reflect true

economic growth. This also allows us to identify morally which options create genuine prosperity so that we can become truly successful by opting for them.

When the main goal of a business is to create prosperity for all who directly and indirectly participate in and with it, then business activities become a vocation. Moreover, business is a noble vocation to the extent in which those who participate in it are challenged by deeper meaning of life. This will allow them to lead the business to truly serve the common good while striving to increase the goods in this world and making them accessible to all.

CORPORATE METAMORPHOSYS. All business leaders have the option of transforming their business into a noble vocation. All of us can initiate this path towards excellence.



The COVID-19 crisis is an opportunity, a source of motivation, to change our business into a source of genuine prosperity for all those who interact in and with the business.

To transform business operations into a noble vocation the following imperatives are essential for business leaders:

1. personal transformation,
2. the leadership to create more humane organizational cultures, and
3. the guidance to lead their companies to serve the common good.

Let’s take a closer look at these three essential elements and how this dramatic pandemic time can serve to drive forward these changes that this transformation entails.



1.- PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION. The first imperative —the personal transformation of the business leader— represents a change of attitude. A change that will enable him to guide the transformation of their company by taking a wider perspective of their role in society thus transcending the company focus on short term profit at any cost and becoming a builder and promoter of common good and a new humanism of work.



The most prestigious business consultants and leaders have identified elements of this personal transformation when analyzing how to deal with the crisis. Recent articles in the Harvard Business Review and Chief Executive journals show how the greatest leaders, when operating in crisis mode, are able to rise rapidly above the tendency to control and are at their best:

- To manage fear and lead intuitively through the unknown.
- To combat uncertainty with humility, transparency, commitment, focus and patience.
- To be resilient since efficiency rules in a stable world devoid of surprises.
- To be skilled at alleviating stress and anxiety and protect the privacy of people.
- Unprecedented times demand unprecedented compassion, they argue.

All these characteristics are necessary to lead the company’s metamorphosis; putting them into practice leads to a better management of the COVID-19 crisis too. At the same time, it allows the leader to progress in their personal transformation if they are set on it.

Notwithstanding, this personal transformation goes even deeper.

BEING CHALLENGED BY A DEEPER MEANING OF LIFE. This personal transformation requires the business leader to commit entirely to being driven by a deeper meaning of life and of their role as leader of a company. They must take on their business responsibilities as a vocation, as a call to contribute to build a more prosperous, humane and just world. As a result, they endow their business activity with a sense of transcendent mission.



The leader must undertake this personal transformation in order to successfully carryout this reconfiguration of the organizational culture of a company in a way that guarantees an unrestricted respect for the dignity of all those who directly or indirectly interact in the company and with the company. This respect without conditions is what provides an ethical foundation for all decisions and allows the leader to become a model of change in their company.

For the Christian business leader, the needed energy and vitality should not only arise from their respect and adherence to moral precepts but also from their daily encounter with Christ. A Christian leader would transform undoubtedly their business into a noble vocation if, in front of any critical business decision, would follow the precepts of the Chilean Jesuit Saint, San Alberto Hurtado, by asking what Christ would do if He were in my place.

However, a business leader who is not Christian can assume a servant leadership mindset that fosters the transformation of their business into a noble vocation.



SERVANT LEADERSHIP. Servant leadership is a philosophy of life followed by those who decide to serve others as their primary goal and only afterwards aspire to lead as a way to enlarge their capacity to serve individuals and institutions. The servant leader encourages collaboration, mutual trust, prudence, a willingness to listen and the ethical use of power and empowerment. Above all they are servants, which radically differs from those who want to lead first who may be motivated by greater power and position rather than to serve others.



The greatest achievement for a servant leader is for their followers to flourish as human beings, to develop integrally, to prosper. The other type of leader strives to have their followers aligned with them and supporting the organization's objectives.

The servant leader has well defined characteristics: empathetic, healers (of themselves and others), conscious and aware, persuasive, conceptualizers (that is they dream big), forward thinkers (they understand the lessons from the past, the realities of the present and the probable outcomes in the future of a decision), stewards, committed to people's growth and builders of community.

For the Christian business leader, the challenge is to recognize first that their position or ownership in the business, their business expertise, talents, abilities, and knowledge are all gifts from God and, in gratitude, strive to place them all at the service of others.

2.- A MORE HUMANE ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE. The second imperative is that business leaders use their capacities to build a more humane organization by installing a culture based on the unconditional respect for the human dignity. This effort changes the work place. It allows —or at least does not obstacle — that everybody in the organization be also challenged by a deeper meaning in their lives and realize themselves as human beings by contributing to a long term project that seeks to create wealth that is more accessible to all and more justly and widely distributed between all who create it.



The COVID-19 crisis is a human tragedy that puts at test the depth of the organizational commitment in regard to human dignity. In order to respond rapidly to ever evolving problems we need to be flexible; nevertheless, we can never compromise our unconditional respect for the dignity of everyone who interacts with and in our organizations.

Our first priority as business leaders should always be to take care of people; whether in response to a crisis like COVID-19 or in general. This begins with our own families and ourselves, but extends to our employees, clients, suppliers, owners, the communities where we work, etc. In these times, our priority must be to ensure that all of them have what they need. They are the ones who will pull our business out of the crisis created by this invisible threat and by this stressful period.

SOLIDARITY. Solidarity —an essential component of a more humane organization— must be a guiding social principle of institutions. Also, a truly moral virtue: a firm and persevering determination to commit to the common good; that is, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all responsible for all.



As such, social distancing is an act of solidarity that begins with taking care of oneself so as not to infect others. However, while encouraging this social distancing the company needs to find the balance to maintain its viability and capacity to keep employing. This balance is an ethical dilemma that must be resolved as such: as an ethical dilemma.

Notwithstanding the fact that social distancing measures are moral imperatives and also essential not only to protect those who find themselves working and supporting the company but also for the leader to serve as an example and be enabled to continue to serve others, we must find creative ways for people to remain connected. As humans, we feel the urgent need to console and comfort ourselves and to be comforted, especially during such hard times as these.

On the other hand, the crisis may distort priorities leading to the instrumentalization of people; for example, laying people off as a way just to lessen the economic impact on the company rather than as a last recourse. Workers' dismissals need to be implemented only when all other options have been exhausted to keep the firm afloat.

SUBSIDIARITY

Laying people off as a last resort requires a deep respect for those who are affected and must be carried out with tact, benevolence and a genuine interest to protect the most vulnerable and poor.

The COVID-19 crisis and its severe economic consequences could also disrupt supportive relationships with other stakeholders: suppliers (with abusive payment terms), clients (with higher speculative prices), communities (hoarding basic necessities), etc.

Under these conditions, solidarity and subsidiarity must work hand in hand. Solidarity means that everyone plays their part, according to their abilities. Subsidiarity means interacting with others in a way that helps them carry out what they need to do.



Subsidiary and solidarity must coexist in order to help others without oppressing them. Subsidiarity requires an act of solidarity that is not assistentialism (unilateral) or charity, but rather involves the practice of taking on and implementing a shared responsibility between both parties to reach a common good.

As commonly occurs in adverse situations, the COVID-19 crisis can bring out the best in people. As such, the business leader and their organization have an opportunity for their followers—all its stakeholders—to show that they measure up to the task at hand and that they can make extraordinary contributions if they are empowered to do so and have the tools to carry this out successfully. And acting in this way, they will flourish as human beings.

STAKEHOLDERS. To create a more humane organizational culture it is important to view first the company as a community of people who voluntarily contribute to the business project. By doing so, members grow as human beings with a more comprehensive development, while prospering in and with their work. Nevertheless, it also means considering all the various interest groups (the stakeholders) as human beings with needs and reasonable expectations that the company must consider when making decisions and not as merely means to maximize company profits.





From this perspective, business success is a result of the efficient and effective use of company's to satisfy, while respecting people's dignity and being environmentally aware, in the best possible way, human needs and expectations.

In order to reconcile the often-conflicting interests of the different stakeholders, the company should be considered as a long-term project. The company must achieve social legitimization and measure its success according to its contribution to the common good; to the quality, quantity and availability of solutions to human problems; to the positive economic effects they generate; and to their contribution to the prosperity of the greatest number of people possible. Therefore, profits shouldn't be an end in itself but rather a result, a consequence.

This is how a company can genuinely serve the common good.

3.- BUSINESS ORIENTED TOWARDS THE COMMON GOOD

The third imperative to transform business activity is its orientation towards the common good. Common good is more than just the simple sum of the specific goods of each member of society. It is understood as the set of conditions of social life that enable associations and each of their members to achieve perfection in the most comprehensive and simplest way.



The demands of the common good are dependant on the social conditions of each historical period and strictly linked to respect for and the integral promotion of the person and his fundamental rights. Common good requires to be served in its complete entirety without reductive views that subordinate it to the advantages that everyone may obtain. Rather, it needs to be based on a rationale that fully includes correlative responsibilities.

More than anything, a business is a community of people. To enable a business to create common good every interaction between all actors, direct or indirect, must be carried out with a respect of human dignity and in a way that allows common good to come forth from the reciprocity between subsidiarity and solidarity.

These concepts can be summarized by the 3 'Gs' through which business contributes to the common good: (1) Good Work, (2) Good Goods and (3) Good Wealth. Let's take a closer look at these three aspects below.

GOOD GOODS! Good Goods refers to producing and distributing goods that are truly good and services that really serve. The principle of the universal destination of goods and the right to their common use underlie this concept. A humanistic approach towards those who require a product: a person who seeks to fulfill their needs and reasonable expectations to contribute to their integral human development without interfering or inhibiting it; without distorting or corrupting it. And with a spirit of solidarity, to give preference to the most needy, vulnerable and poor.



Just as adversity often brings out the best in people, the same can happen in institutions, including businesses. Several examples of this can be seen in efforts to contain the pandemic during this COVID-19 crisis.

Many businesses have been reconverted or have been able to take advantage of their infrastructures to



help meet urgent needs such as producing mechanic ventilators, masks, hand sanitizer, health facilities, hospital beds, etc. Also, many research and development centres along with universities and institutions have come together to collaborate in an unprecedented way to try to quickly develop a vaccine or effective treatments for COVID-19.

The whole of humanity are expectant of the successes of these hopeful and synergetic collaborative efforts. And, these examples highlight some of the excellent lessons to be learned.

GOOD WORK! The efforts to create Good Goods cannot be made at the expense of good work or the integral development of the workers. Human work has two dimensions: objective and subjective. The objective component consists of the set of activities, resources, tools and techniques that humans use in the production process. While the subjective one encompasses human acts in terms of its nature of a being dynamic and resourceful, of its ability to carry out diverse acts that are part of the work process but that correspond to its personal vocation.



Good work brings together both elements but prioritizes the subjective dimension over the objective one. It is a humanistic focus on who produces Good Goods and is guided by the principle of subsidiarity so that who works develops himself by contributing with gifts and talents and is always considered an end in himself and not as a means or instrumentalized.

The COVID-19 virus poses enormous ethical challenges to Good Work. The incertitude regarding how long it will last exacerbates the predicament between social distancing and future employment. The answer is to be flexible, but in a way that always respects human dignity as the guiding principle underlying all decisions.

COVID-19 could also result in significant changes to the labor market for which we must be prepared: virtual meetings will become more frequent, which will affect transportation while lowering, as a side effect, the use of fossil fuels; online shopping will increase, and this and other changes will result in an ever greater reduced reliance on infrastructure; etc.

GOOD WEALTH! This pillar refers to creating sustainable wealth and distributing it fairly. Wealth is sustainable when it is created with respect for human dignity and with environmental awareness. It is fairly distributed when it builds ‘appropriate relationships’ with those who, directly or indirectly, participated in its creation.



Wealth cannot be distributed if it is not created first; nor can wealth be created sustainably without fairly distributing it among those who created it. These two components, often seen at odds, need to be considered together: they are two sides of the same coin.

But, what wealth? A profitable business contributes to the common good of society helping people reach their potential when wealth is generated and prosperity is promoted. That is, when the creation of wealth is not limited to financial profit, but rather refers to a wider notion of wealth: the physical, mental, psychological, moral and spiritual wellbeing of others. The economic value of wealth is linked to this wider understanding of wellbeing, for everyone in our common home.

The COVID-19 crisis can help us to better understand this concept. The development and distribution of a vaccine for the Coronavirus will generate a type of wealth which will not move the needle in terms



of the GDP growth of the countries where it is developed and much less the world's GDP; but it will, nevertheless, be a creation of immeasurable wealth...the creation of Good Wealth!

A BETTER WORLD! When a business is able to properly manage these three goods, these three 'Gs', it becomes an economic engine of society, creating sustainable development at the service of humanity. By doing so, businesses play an indispensable role in creating material prosperity for a greater number of people. As such, the undertaking of business leaders is transformed into a noble vocation by achieving the fourth 'G': the 'G' of Common Good. When one or more of these three 'Gs' are disordered, then businesses cease to alleviate poverty to the extent that they could and, more specifically, more people are precluded from prosperity. If a business is to serve the Common Good then it must copulatively achieve these three goods.



The primary goal of a business in the 21st century is to obtain long-term social legitimacy and sustainability. This can only be achieved if a business behaves in a spotless ethical manner. Ethics teaches us how to correctly deliberate in order to make good choices. But it is not only about making good choices in a specific case, but rather throughout life: we must forge a good character. Here the concept of future is indispensable, because

for a business to forge a character requires time; it needs to set long-term goals and targets: a future vision that provides meaning to intermediate goals.

When making decisions a long term vision is essential in order to transform business activities into a noble vocation...This is also true for making sound decisions to confront the COVID-19 crisis without panic.

CRISIS → COVID-19 OPPORTUNITY → BUSINESS AS A NOBLE VOCATION.



To gain social legitimacy in today's world, businesses need to play a much more significant role in addressing socioeconomic changes in order to face the great challenges that affect the world today and to support the implementation of more intelligent, sustainable and comprehensive growth plans. This can be accomplished by creating more quality jobs and by making the economy more inclusive, with better labor markets, greater environmental

awareness and through the ethical use of technology.

Business should be at the service of people and aimed towards their common good, while helping to shape a better society. At the same time, ethics should be the compass that guides the actions and activities of business leaders.

Today's society demands high business standards of conduct and a vision that incorporates more humane business practices. A moral ethic that does not subordinate its principles to the narrow confines of short-term profit maximization. In the midst of the uncertainty of the COVID-19 crisis it's easy to fall into the temptation of subordinating human dignity, rights and growth in order to achieve immediate economic results.

The promotion of this business ethics —the transformation of the business into a noble vocation— cannot be advanced without a future view that goes beyond the current contingencies. COVID-19 brings forth both dangers and opportunities. Let's not lose the opportunity to decisively progress towards



business as a noble vocation.