Wealth and the Practice of Care

Sociologist Schervish delves once again into dilemma of wealth and spirituality

03/03/11

By PATRICIA DELANEY | DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF NEWS & PUBLIC AFFAIRS
Published: Mar. 3, 2011

Anyone who has ever bought a lottery ticket understands the appeal of financial good fortune. Its accompanying freedom and empowerment seem especially attractive in difficult economic times. But for those who seek to live lives of moral and spiritual fulfillment, significant wealth also brings great challenge. How best to use riches as a tool for deeper purposes?

There is no easy answer, according to Sociology Professor Paul G. Schervish, director of the Center on Wealth and Philanthropy.

“There’s no formula,” he said. “We are living in an era that has never existed before – where whole classes and groups of people have, for all intents and purposes, overcome the problems of financial scarcity; in which those whose resources far surpass economic necessity are ‘hyperagents’ capable of shaping the world rather than just living in it. How can people of faith best connect their financial capacity to their spiritual aspirations?

“We don’t have a fresh or deep enough answer for that yet, and sotend to emphasize a distributional rather than a productive morality of wealth.”

One thing, however, is clear, Schervish says: the need for a process of reflection that can help wealth holders discern, for the time and circumstances in which they exist, what to do with their material resources. Wealth and the Will of God: Discerning the Use of Riches in the Service of Ultimate Purpose – his latest book, written with center research fellow Keith Whitaker — is designed to help meet that need.

Through the lens of six theologians, philosophers and spiritual leaders – Aristotle, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Ignatius Loyola, Martin Luther, John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards – the book explores central topics including the ultimate goal of human life, the penultimate purposes of love, charity, friendship, and care, and, finally, the process of deliberation by which individuals clarify how best to use the riches of this life.

“We ask these six teachers what they have to offer to shape spiritual vocations of wealth for our time,” Schervish said. “We’re not suggesting

“The highest calling for one person may be to give money away,” says Paul Schervish. “For another, a better use of money might be to start a business that would employ people. Discernment means that decisions are made in an atmosphere of liberty and inspiration; people find their duty not in the hardest thing to do and not what others tell them to do.” (Photo by Gary Waye Gilbert)
that their answers will be the same as those of contemporary wealth holders, but the key questions and starting points for answers are similar."

Schervish and Whitaker are well-positioned to advance a process of reflection to wealth holders. The author of numerous publications including *Gospels of Wealth: How the Rich Portray Their Lives*, Schervish has made a life-long study of the intersection of wealth and spirituality.

Whitaker, widely published on philosophical, political and literary topics, is director of family dynamics for Wells Fargo Bank. Though the views of the six thinkers in *Wealth and the Will of God* vary greatly, they agree that no particular action is written in stone.

"The only absolute obligation we find in any of their views is that we are to practice care as a worldly activity that brings about the unity of love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self," Schervish said. "The same is true when it comes to allocating money — there are no absolutes. What is to be done is not found by looking over our shoulders at rules. It is discovered by discerning how well our distinctive capacities and aspirations coincide with our experience of God.

"The highest calling for one person may be to give money away. For another, a better use of money might be to start a business that would employ people," Schervish said. "Discernment means that decisions are made in an atmosphere of liberty and inspiration; people find their duty not in the hardest thing to do and not what others tell them to do. Duty is found, as Howard Gray, SJ, advised in a talk at Boston College a few years ago, in that which is most inspiring."

In addition to providing guidance for wealth holders, the book offers insights for fundraisers and other members of the philanthropic community. For instance, wealthy donors, said Schervish, "are less and less inclined to see themselves as tools or instruments to enable an organization to do good. Rather, they look on organizations as the means for them to implement their financial vocation."

Charities and fundraisers should not see this as a problem, but "as an opportunity," he said, "to invite donors to identify with those being served and to be co-creators of that care."