

## It's a Wunnerful Life—Lawrence Welk and Catholic Business Ethics

*Lawrence Welk was not only a musical and financial success, but he was a man of profound faith who never missed a chance to go to daily Mass. Long after his death, Welk's business and faith legacy continue through the many enterprises he founded.*

BY LANCE RICHEY | Legatus Magazine

Television legend. Chart-topping recording artist. Best-selling author. Real estate tycoon. From self-taught musician to self-made millionaire, Welk's career spanned seven decades and would be the envy of anyone in business or entertainment today.

A generation after his death in 1992, The Lawrence Welk Show remains a staple on public television, the family-owned Welk Music Group is one of the largest independent record companies in the world, and Welk Resorts manages properties stretching from Palm Springs to Branson, Mo.

Welk's private life was even more successful. Happily married for 61 years to his wife Fern, he was the beloved father of three children and grandfather (or great-grandfather) to many more. And his family did not end there. He called his employees the "Welk musical family" and treated them as such, encouraging their personal and spiritual growth as much as their professional advancement. To them, he became not only an employer but a mentor and role model as well, a father-figure in the fullest sense of the word.

Maestro, CEO, husband, father and friend. Lawrence Welk was known by many titles throughout his life. Less well known, though, is the title which meant the most to him and made everything else in his life possible: Catholic. Born into a devout farm family in 1903, faith and music were inseparably linked in Welk's childhood. His earliest musical memories were of the parish choir at Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Strasburg, N.D. Welk admitted the music was "part of the reason I loved to go to church, but even if there had been no music, nothing could have kept any of us from attending Mass every Sunday."

Indeed, his father's faith was the main reason he objected to Lawrence



Lawrence Welk

leaving the farm to pursue a career in music, telling him, "I don't want you to lose your faith and fall into a life of sin."

These concerns were proven baseless. Welk's early career, a seemingly endless string of one-night stands, frequently found his band members sleeping in the automobile while Lawrence attended early morning Mass in some small church along the route to his next gig. When his professional life became more stable, he was a daily communicant who could often be found in prayer before the tabernacle. At every point in his career, Welk looked to God for comfort and guidance with his personal and professional difficulties.

Perhaps the lowest point was when his band quit in 1931, telling him bluntly that he would never be a success in music. Searching out a nearby church, he recalled, "I had a sudden flash of insight. I realized that we are all vulnerable human beings, and whenever we put our love and faith into another human being, we are open to hurts and disappointments." Given this, "the only one to trust completely is God, and once you can understand that, and learn not to bear any malice or bitterness in your heart, your life will be much happier."

The next 40 years certainly proved his doubters wrong, as he rose from small-time bandleader to television star. By the early 1970s, he was not only a national icon but also a business executive upon whom dozens of employees relied for their livelihood. In building his entertainment empire, though, he had always placed people first, pioneering a profit-sharing system and incentive plan which encouraged employees to work together to realize their fullest potential. The continued success of his many businesses shows how sound his system is.

But for Lawrence Welk, it was never only about money: It was about people and the God in whose image they are made. Looking back on his career, he reflected: "Our system had given us material advantages and extra benefits certainly, but more than that, it had given us those intangibles of good will and mutual helpfulness." In the balance sheet of eternity, he saw the true measure of success in his business, namely, "that feeling of love, the feeling that we truly cared for each other. Our system was an extension of the Christian philosophy of love-in-action."

Business as Christian love in action? Not what one usually hears today, either from the Church or society. But in a corporate world overflowing with mission statements and human resource specialists, Lawrence Welk embodied (both in word and deed) the essence of a true Catholic businessperson. No mean feat for a North Dakota farm boy — or, one might add, for a saint.

This article is reprinted with permission of *Legatus Magazine*. Dr. Lance Richey is Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the university of Saint Francis in Fort Wayne, IN. He is currently writing a biography of Lawrence Welk.



### PUBLISHER'S NOTE

For those of us who don't worry about who's trending at Hollywood's Me-First Awards or if the mucho Mocha Latte Kim Kardashian just purchased at her favorite Starbucks on Rodeo Drive was a Grande (14 oz.) or a Vinti (24 oz.), The Lawrence Welk Show provided fans such as myself a safe place. For that one hour on TV, it was perpetually 1952. (FYI: Rodeo Drive is pronounced ro-DAY-oh—not ro-dee-oh.)

The show did try to change somewhat with the times. They updated rock songs and folk hits in the big-band style, though it sanded any edges off the product, making everything from The Beatles to Burt Bacharach sound like The Lawrence Welk Band.

Sadly, many of my longtime favorite cast members, including Mr. Welk himself, have passed away. Pictured below are six of them and the year of their passing.

Thank you Mr. Welk, for making the music of your life the music of my life. —Bruce Menzies

