

The Church, The Economy and Social Justice: Reflections on *Caritas in Veritate*

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In his generally appreciative comments in *Commonweal Magazine* on Pope Benedict's encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Professor Finn remarks, "The encyclical reminds us, once again, that Benedict is first and foremost a systematic theologian" (August 14, 2009, p. 10). I am not quite sure whether Professor Finn means that as a compliment – but I will take it as such. On the basis of that recognition, I will highlight three features of *Caritas in Veritate* that I believe pose challenges for the development of the Church's social teaching and for Catholic theology more generally.

Though I shall not focus directly upon the strictly economic implications of the encyclical, it seems clear that, in the pope's view, economic considerations cannot ultimately be divorced from God's economy of salvation.

The first feature of the encyclical that I propose may seem self-evident. However, I think it crucial to underline: the Church's social teaching is **ecclesial** — its basis and matrix is the Good News of Jesus Christ entrusted to and proclaimed by the Church.

Pope Benedict writes "social doctrine is built upon the foundation handed on by the apostles to the Fathers of the Church and further explored by the great Christian doctors. This doctrine points definitively "to the New Man, to the 'last Adam who became life-giving spirit' (1 Cor. 15:35), the principle of the charity that 'never ends' (1 Cor. 13:8)" (#12).

Pope Benedict's conviction is indeed clearly enunciated in the very first section of the encyclical where he writes: "All people feel the interior impulse to love authentically: Love and truth never abandon them completely because these are the vocation implanted by God in the heart and mind of every human person. The search for love and truth is purified and liberated by Jesus Christ from the impoverishment that our humanity brings to it, and he reveals to us in all its fullness the initiative of love and the plan for true life that God has prepared for us. In Christ, *charity in truth* becomes the face of his person, a vocation for us to love our brothers and sisters in the truth of his plan" (#1).

Now an implication I would draw from this orientation is that the Church's social teaching is rooted ultimately in the Gospel, not in "natural law." In saying this, I do not mean to rule out all appeal to "natural law" reasoning which is certainly a characteristic aspect of Catholic reflection on social issues. There are contexts in which such appeal is appropriate. However, the well-intentioned desire to find common ground with all people of good will can uproot the Catholic appeal to natural law from its rich theological soil which alone can nourish and sustain it. In other words, natural law discourse is an "abstraction" from a far thicker and more comprehensive Catholic language that

articulates a vision for humankind and the world: an integral humanism. Indeed, unless that richer Catholic language is invoked and drawn upon, as the Pope does throughout the encyclical, one risks reducing religion to ethics, and personal relationships and fraternity to the promotion of a cause (however just and desirable).

A second feature of the Encyclical is the need, precisely in order to foster authentic development, to have recourse to an **integral vision of the human**, one whose concern embraces “the good of every man and of the whole man” (#18, quoting Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #14). This “truly **integral humanism**” (#78) weaves into a seamless garment the individual and the social, the body and soul, effective concern for the earthly city and fervent hope for the heavenly city. It is noteworthy that Pope Benedict XVI brings together in one over-arching vision aspects of the magisterium of Pope Paul VI that are too often kept apart in Catholic circles, contributing, in no small part, to our present fragmentation and polarization: namely, *Populorum Progressio*, *Humanae Vitae*, and *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Together, they bear powerful witness to a vision of the human being and destiny that is awe-inspiring in the horizon of hope that it proclaims and the scope of transformation to which it summons.

This vision of the human that the pope sets before us, the theological anthropology (if you will) of the Catholic tradition, is ultimately rooted in Christology. Pope Benedict’s persuasion faithfully reflects the teaching of Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, which affirms that “the truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light ... Christ, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear (*GS*, #22; cf. “*Caritas in Veritate*,” #18).

Let me suggest a challenge this poses. I think there is a pressing need in contemporary Catholic life and theology to promote an integral reception of Vatican II. In this effort, we must seek to appropriate the four conciliar constitutions, for each illuminates the other and each must be accorded “due diligence.” We cannot afford to be cafeteria conciliarists. Thus the advocates of *Gaudium et Spes* and its social concern must develop its Christological underpinnings in the light of the Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. The supporters of the liturgical reform, initiated by *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, must in turn see the Church’s worship to be intimately conjoined with the witness demanded of it by *Lumen Gentium*’s teaching regarding the Church as “sacrament of salvation” for the whole world.

I will begin my final consideration by quoting, not Pope Benedict, but President Obama. In a speech on Wall Street to mark the anniversary of the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the president attributed the financial crisis to “reckless behavior, unchecked excess, and an appetite for quick kills and bloated bonuses.” Then he added, “This was not merely a failure of regulation or legislation; not merely a failure of oversight. It was a failure of responsibility!” Of course, the President could not use the “C-word” on Wall Street -- the word “conversion.” But popes can proclaim what presidents can only whisper. Structural change, however necessary, can never substitute for authentic conversion of hearts and minds.

In the concluding section of *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict writes, “Development requires attention to the spiritual life, a serious consideration of the experiences of trust in God, spiritual fellowship in Christ, reliance upon God’s providence and mercy, love and forgiveness, self-denial, acceptance of others, justice and peace. All this is essential if ‘hearts of stone’ are to be converted into ‘hearts of flesh’ (Ez. 36:26), rendering life on earth ‘divine’ and thus more worthy of humanity” (#79). Since conversion is not a once and for all affair, but rather an ongoing imperative, the Church’s social teaching is only complete when embodied in a **spirituality** that nourishes and sustains its commitment to charity in truth. Such a spirituality will daily “place man before the astonishing experience of gift” and foster the realization of “the gratuitousness present in our lives in many different forms that often go unrecognized because of a purely consumerist and utilitarian view of life” (#34). For Catholics, such spirituality is always rooted and centered in the **Eucharist** in which the body of Christ is received for the nourishment of the Church and the well-being and salvation of the world.

If my remarks this evening suggest to you that Catholic social teaching derives from and depends upon the Catholic tradition’s ecclesial and liturgical matrix and its dogmatic affirmations, then I have been rightly understood. You may wonder: does this reading of the encyclical impede dialogue with other traditions, perspectives and stances? Does it bespeak a narrowly sectarian attitude? I think not. It may, however, spur those who share certain of the concrete values and proposals set forth in *Caritas in Veritate* to consider the basis for their own claims and convictions. In this way real dialogue and discernment can only be deepened (cf. #55).