

FIRST THINGS

Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas*

Michael Novak
August 8, 2009

It is no secret that in U.S. Catholicism these last twenty or so years there has been an increasingly bitter split between two large factions on matters of political economy. Some tilt left, some right. Some favor a Reaganomic approach to political economy and rejoiced in the boom that lasted thirty-some years. Others favor Clintonomics (which in practice looked a lot like Reaganomics), while others favor something more robustly state-run and state-centered on the order of Obamanomics.

In his new Encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI stressed that the Church should be understood neither as holding a particular ideology about political economy nor as imposing specific practical solutions on individual countries or regions. He does not intend to pronounce upon the disagreements in political economy among Catholics or others. On the contrary, his aim is to put questions of political economy in a larger context, theological and philosophical, dealing with such questions as the role of *caritas* in theology, and in philosophy sound concepts of the common good, the human person, and human community.

Moreover, in his concrete discussions about current affairs, almost every time Benedict seems to give a point to the left, rooted usually in *Populorum Progressio* (1967), he takes it back or qualifies it by drawing on lessons learned in between 1967 and 1991, as recorded in *Centesimus Annus*. His practice follows his intention. He lets both horses run, and does not himself choose to side with either one.

In some ways, this openness seems to be baffling many readers, and making this particular piece of Benedict XVI's writing come across as uncharacteristically waffly and opaque. It often seems to go in two directions at once. Some sentences are almost impossible to parse in practical terms: What on earth does *that* mean in practice?

This refusal to indulge in ideology has a great strength that compensates for the above-mentioned weakness. Its strength is that it raises the mind to other dimensions of the truth, and avoids squabbles that belong more to the City of Man than to the City of God.

For instance, this higher perspective enables the pope to link the gospel of life to the social gospel, so to speak. That makes immense practical sense. For instance, in the United States about fifty million children have been aborted since 1973. If those girls and boys had been allowed to live, millions of them would now be in the workforce, helping by their social security taxes to close the deficits in our programs for the elderly. Policies regarding the beginning of life profoundly affect the welfare state as the population ages.

Europe, with its failure to keep population at a level of growth, or even bare replacement is condemning its welfare state to accelerating death.

Here is one of my favorite practical passages in this encyclical. The sentences read more like bureaucratic jargon than like Benedict's usually profound and warm pastoral way of putting things. Still, they reinforce some of the most important gains for Catholic social thought over the past 115 years:

By considering reciprocity as the heart of what it is to be a human being, subsidiarity is the most effective antidote against any form of all-encompassing welfare state. It is able to take account both of the manifold articulation of plans - and therefore of the plurality of subjects - as well as the coordination of those plans. Hence the principle of subsidiarity is particularly well-suited to managing globalization and directing it

towards authentic human development. In order not to produce a dangerous universal power of a tyrannical nature, *the governance of globalization must be marked by subsidiarity*, articulated into several layers and involving different levels that can work together. Globalization certainly requires authority, insofar as it poses the problem of a global common good that needs to be pursued. This authority, however, must be organized in a subsidiary and stratified way, if it is not to infringe upon freedom and if it is to yield effective results in practice. (57)

Within this section, and several other places in the encyclical, a pattern begins to emerge whereby Benedict XVI makes a point important to the political economic left, and then qualifies it in terms important to the political economic center and center-right.

For example, regarding his concern to help *the welfare state*, the pope first advises that "... more economically developed nations should do all they can to allocate larger portions of their gross domestic product to development aid, thus respecting the obligations that the international community has undertaken in this regard." He then immediately frames this suggestion within the limits of subsidiarity and personal accountability: "One way of doing so is by reviewing their internal social assistance and welfare policies, applying the principle of subsidiarity and creating better integrated welfare systems, with the active participation of private individuals and civil society." (60)

As for *global government*, we see Benedict XVI again call for a true world political authority:

To manage the global economy; to revive economies hit by the crisis; to avoid any deterioration of the present crisis and the greater imbalances that would result; to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace; to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration: for all this, there is urgent need of a true world political authority, as my predecessor Blessed John XXIII indicated some years ago.

But he is quick to define this authority in terms of restraint and of adherence to the core principles of Catholic social thought:

Such an authority would need to be regulated by law, to observe consistently the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, to seek to establish the common good, and to *make a commitment to securing authentic integral human development inspired by the values of charity in truth.* (67)

For myself, though, I love best the starting point in *caritas*. When I was a young man, I wanted to write a book about the centrality of God's unique form of love, called *caritas* rather than the more common, down-to-earth *amor*, in the architecture of the theology of Thomas Aquinas. I loved his little treatise on charity (the poor English translation of *caritas*), and often taught seminars on it. And in recent years, prompted in part by challenges from my friend and sometime sparring partner David Schindler of the John Paul II Institute in Washington, I have been developing the *caritas* underpinnings of my own understanding of democracy, capitalism, and a Republic of Virtue.

The free society is differentiated into three interdependent systems, the polity, the economy, and the moral/cultural institutions of human life. Each of these different types of freedom (political, cultural, and religious) is needed by the other two, in order to be held to the protection of true freedom. You can find essays of mine on this point beginning from at least 1995 at [my website](#).

I have been trying to steer Catholic social teaching in this direction—beginning with my own thinking—for a long time. So watching Benedict XVI write about *caritas* so beautifully brings me

immense satisfaction.

In all candor, however, if we hold each sentence of *Caritas in Veritate* up to analysis in the light of empirical truth about events in the field of political economy since 1967, we will find that it is not nearly so full in its *veritas* as in its *caritas*.

For instance, the benefits for the poor achieved through the spread of economic enterprise and markets (capitalism is for some too unpleasant a word to use) should be more resoundingly attended to. In 1970, for instance, the mortality age of men and women in Bangladesh was 44.6 years old, but by 2005 it had risen to 63. Think what a joy and what vigor such increased longevity means to individual families.

Similarly, infant mortality rate (deaths per 1000 live births) in Bangladesh in 1970 was 152, or 15.2 percent. By 2005 this average had been brought down to just 57.2, or a little less than 6 percent. Again, what pain this lifts from ordinary mothers and fathers, and what joy it brings. There is surely more to do to raise health standards for Bangladeshi. But the progress just in this past thirty years is unprecedented in world history.

There are many more omissions of fact, questionable insinuations, and unintentional errors strewn through this encyclical. The staff work has been rather poor.

Every deficiency of *veritas* injures *caritas*. That is the beautiful and powerful linkage in this encyclical.

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