

OUR COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE IN THE LIGHT OF POPE BENEDICT XVI'S ENCYCLICAL LETTER, *CARITAS IN VERITATE*

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Introduction

Caritas in Veritate (CV) was published on the 7th of July, 2009. It is the first social encyclical of the present Pope, and also the first social encyclical of the third millennium. It is a long letter (30,000 words), composed of 6 chapters, an introduction and a conclusion. This makes it more than tripple the length of Benedict's two previous encyclicals. While Benedict is usually noted for his lucid writing style, this document is quite dense and even turgid at times – certainly not easy reading. It is for this reason, perhaps, that George Weigel has termed it 'a duck-billed platypus', containing 'strong and compelling statements', coming from the pen of Benedict, and 'other statements that are incomprehensible, clotted and muddled ... written by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace.'¹ This judgement – reflecting a very *a la carte* approach to the encyclical, says more about George Weigel than it does about the teaching of the Pope. It is important to remember that this encyclical – and indeed most encyclical letters - irrespective of how many people were involved in the writing of it, is a document signed by the Pope, after several revisions, and must be read integrally as the respesenting his teaching on social matters.

Positive Responses

The encyclical has received a number of very positive responses, some of them from rather surprising quarters. Lord Brian Giffiths, Vice-Chairman of Goldman Sachs International, and a former economics advisor to Dame Margaret Thatcher when she was Prime Minister is generous in his praise of the encyclical:

Despite heavy competition from some of the world's finest minds, it [*Caritas in Veritate*] is without doubt the most articulate, comprehensive and thoughtful response to the

¹ "Caritas in Veritate in Gold and Red" at <http://article.nationalreview.com/399362/icaritas-in-veritatei-in-gold-and-red/george-weigel>. Accessed on 5 January 2010.

financial crisis that has yet appeared. It should strike a chord with all who wish to see capitalism serving broader human ends.²

Jack Mahoney, writing for *The Tablet*, describes the encyclical as ‘a comprehensive reflection on contemporary development thinking ... presenting a refreshing, sobering, yet inspiring look at international society through the lens of God’s creative love.’³ Ben Andradi praises it for providing ‘an inspiring moral framework for how we should conduct economic and business affairs.’⁴ Donal Dorr, the author of several books on the Social teaching of the Church, and a perceptive critic of Vatican statements, regards *Caritas in Veritate* as ‘a remarkably insightful and comprehensive presentation of the Catholic approach to economic activity, to business, and to social justice at the national and international levels.’⁵ At the end of his review, Dorr states that ‘if taken seriously and acted upon, it could change the world.’⁶

In this talk I will examine the contribution of the new encyclical under two headings, its presentation of the core principles of Catholic Social Teaching and its identification of the major new problems and challenges that need to be addressed. I will end with a more personal reflection, outlining briefly a spirituality for our commitment to social and ecological justice.

A. Core Principles of the Church’s Social Teaching

Caritas in Veritate begins by situating the Church’s teaching on social justice in the context of what Donal Dorr terms ‘a rich and satisfying theology of human development and of social justice – one which grounds our commitment to build a more just world in the love which God, through the Spirit, has poured into our hearts.’⁷ This statement signals the first core principle on which the Church’s Social teaching is based, namely, the complementarity of love and justice.

1. The Complementarity of Love and Justice

‘The dynamic of charity received and given is what gives rise to the Church’s social teaching which is *caritas in veritate in re sociali*: the proclamation of the truth of Christ’s love in

² “Pope Benedict is the Man on the Money” at http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/columnists/guest_contributors/article6695104.ece. Accessed on 5 January, 2010.

³ “When Fist Meets Nose” in *The Tablet*, 25 July, ’09.

⁴ “So the Last must be First and the First be Last” in *The Tablet*, 1 August, 2010, p. 4.

⁵ “The New Social Encyclical” in *The Furrow*, September ’09, p. 463.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 470.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 463.

society' (CV 5). While emotions such as anger, when we see people being treated unjustly, or guilt over the growing disparity between the living conditions of the rich and the poor, may propel us to act so as to redress injustices and promote justice, a deep and lasting commitment to social justice requires a stronger motivation, one which arises from our experience of being loved and accepted by God.

Earlier social encyclicals made it clear that the Church's response to issues of poverty, oppression, and the violation of human rights, should be seen as based on justice rather than charity (understood in the narrow sense of giving alms). Benedict, however, is at pains to point out that charity, as God's greatest gift to humanity, 'is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine' because 'everything has its origin in God's love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it' (CV 2). Though not identical, the virtues of justice and charity are intimately related: 'On the one hand, charity demands justice - recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the earthly city according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving. The earthly city is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an ever greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion' (CV 6).

Donal Dorr regards this spelling out of the relationship between love and justice 'as one of the most valuable elements in the encyclical.'⁸ The Pope's insistence on the need for mercy and gratuitousness in our commitment to social and ecological justice in no way waters down or softens that commitment. To the contrary, it renders it more solid and enduring. A fanatical or 'single track' quest for justice, for defending or securing one's rights at whatever cost, can prove counterproductive, as Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* dramatically illustrates. It is only when the struggle for justice is motivated and guided by love, and moderated by virtues such as compassion and mercy, that it is worthy of the name Christian. However, there is nothing soft or sentimental about this love which underpins the Christian commitment to justice, for it is a love grounded in and directed towards truth. This brings us to the second core principle of the encyclical.

⁸ *Art. cit.*, p. 464.

2. *The Love that does Justice is the Love that seeks Truth*

A second core principle of the encyclical is its linking of the love-justice dynamic with truth. It is love's orientation to truth which saves it from drifting into sentimentality and ensures its social and public relevance. In other words, it is truth that gives charity its bite.

Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity. ... Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. In a culture without truth, this is the fatal risk facing love. It falls prey to contingent subjective emotions and opinions; the word "love" is abused and distorted to the point where it comes to mean the opposite. Truth frees charity from the constraints of an emotionalism that deprives it of relational and social content, and of a fideism that deprives it of human and universal breathing-space (CV 3).

One might express the point the Pope is making here in more familiar moral categories by saying that good intentions are not enough. It is not sufficient to mean well. We must strive to find out, by using all possible means at our disposal, what is objectively good for individuals and for society as a whole.⁹

3. *The Seamless Garment of Integral Human Development*

A third core principle of Catholic Social Teaching, according to the encyclical, is the concept of integral human development. While this concept is far from new,¹⁰ Benedict's understanding of it contains some new elements, notably the inclusion of bioethical and sexual concerns along with socio-economic and political issues (cf. CV 28 and 75). 'Openness to life is at the centre of true development. When a society moves towards the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man's (sic) true good. If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of a new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away' (CV 28). In the Pope's vision of human development, respect for all aspects of human life is tied in with concern for creation. 'The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment, but also life, sexuality, marriage and family, social relations: in a word integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself (sic) and in relation to others' (CV 51).

⁹ Cf. Dorr, *art. cit.*, p. 464-465.

¹⁰ It was the key concept at the heart of Pope Paul VI's famous social encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, published in 1967.

Furthermore, integral human development clearly embraces the spiritual as well as the material dimensions of human life. As one might expect, Benedict, without denying the importance of material development, gives priority to the spiritual realm. ‘Only if we are aware of our calling, as individuals and as a community, to be part of God’s family as his sons and daughters, will we be able to generate a new vision and muster new energy in the service of a truly integral humanism. ... Openness to God makes us open towards our brothers and sisters and towards an understanding of life as a joyful task to be accomplished in solidarity.’ (CV 78). Therefore, attention to the spiritual is a *sine qua non* of all authentic human development.

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 transformed into “hearts of flesh” (Ez 36:26), rendering life on earth “divine” and thus more worthy of humanity (CV 79).

B. New Problems and Challenges arising from Globalisation

Caritas in Veritate addresses a number of new problems arising from what it calls ‘the explosion of worldwide interdependence, commonly known as globalisation’ (CV 33). The Pope rightly points out that globalisation should not be viewed in fatalistic terms ‘as if it were the product of anonymous impersonal forces or structures independent of the human will’ (CV 42). In itself, globalisation is neither good nor bad. It is a dynamic process that is within our power to shape and direct. We are its protagonists, not its victims. For example, globalisation can be harnessed to extend the benefits of a socially responsible capitalism and a humanised science and technology to all peoples. Such a globalisation of solidarity would be eminently desirable. The encyclical argues that it is possible to ‘steer the globalisation of humanity in relational terms, in terms of communion and the sharing of goods’ (CV 42)

Unfortunately, the process of globalisation, as we experience it today, is being used to promote a liberalism capitalism (or what Pope John Paul II termed “savage capitalism”) which benefits the rich at the expense of the poor, and a materialistic technology, which exploits and destroys nature. This is what is problematic and deeply disquieting, according to the encyclical. The dominant actor on the world stage today is the free market. The globe is conceived as one great market place directed by the profit motivations of private enterprises that know neither national boundaries nor local allegiances.

Michael Amaladoss, the well-known Indian theologian, paints a grim picture of the abuses being perpetrated by this form of globalisation:

The rich capitalists have now a global market-field to play in. The facilities of mass and rapid communications are made use of for increasing profits by looking for cheap labour in poor countries. The international markets are weighed in favour of the richer nations who control them. The commercial and service sectors are favoured while primary goods attract increasingly lower prices. People who wax eloquent about intellectual property rights ignore natural and human rights. The multi-national companies are more powerful than many nations. Politicians everywhere are at the service of business interests. The richer nations use their political and military power, even across their borders, to favour and protect their own economic interests. ... What we have therefore is not the globalisation of well-being and abundance, but the globalisation of poverty and injustice.¹¹

The picture painted by Amaladoss finds an echo in *Caritas in Veritate*, which draws attention to the problems and consequent challenges arising from the unchecked globalisation of liberal capitalism. I will highlight eight of these problems and challenges.

1. ***New Forms of Poverty and Social Inequality.*** While, as a consequence of globalization, ‘the world’s wealth is growing in absolute terms, inequalities are [also] on the increase’ (CV 22). In rich countries ‘new forms of poverty are emerging’ while, in poorer areas, there is an unacceptable contrast between the enormous wealth of the few alongside the ‘dehumanising privation’ of the many. The ‘systemic increase of social inequality’ (CV 32) creates ‘new divisions between peoples and within peoples’ and ‘could even trigger a global crisis’ (CV 42). The challenge inherent in this situation is to correct these malfunctions by appropriating ‘the underlying anthropological and ethical spirit that drives globalisation towards the humanising goal of solidarity’ (ibid.).
2. ***The Financial Crisis.*** The encyclical points out that today’s international economic scene, ‘marked by grave deviations and failures’, is rooted in the ‘speculative use of financial resources that yields to the temptation of seeking only short-term profit, without regard for the long-term sustainability of the enterprise, its benefit to the real economy and attention to the advancement, in suitable and appropriate ways, of

¹¹ “Global Homogenization: Can Local Cultures Survive,” on website www.sedos.org.

further economic initiatives in countries in need of development' (CV 40). Following its misuse, 'which wreaked such havoc on the real economy', the financial system needs to be redesigned, with new structures and operating methods, and directed 'in an ethical way so as to create suitable conditions for human development and for the development of peoples' (ibid.).

3. ***The outsourcing of production*** to poor countries where labour is cheap. Today's global market of has stimulated 'on the part of rich countries, a search for areas in which to outsource production at low cost with a view to reducing the prices of many goods, increasing purchasing power and thus accelerating the rate of development in terms of greater availability of goods for the domestic market' (CV 25). This, in turn, often leads to 'a downsizing of social security systems ..., with consequent grave danger for the rights of workers, for fundamental human rights and for the solidarity associated with the traditional forms of the social State' (Ibid.). The challenge here is to safeguard the 'primary capital' of the human person in his or her integrity.

4. ***The Commercialisation of Cultural Exchange***. This, according to the encyclical leads to a twofold danger. On the one hand, it gives rise to a cultural relativism where diverse cultural groups 'coexist side by side, but remain separate, with no authentic dialogue and no true integration' (CV 26). On the other hand, 'the opposite danger exists, that of cultural levelling and indiscriminate acceptance of types of conduct and life-styles' which undermine the values of traditional cultures (ibid.). A related phenomenon, perhaps a reaction to the impact of globalisation on local culture, is the recent explosion of 'terrorism motivated by fundamentalism, which generates grief, destruction and death, obstructs dialogue between nations and diverts extensive resources from their peaceful and civil uses' (CV 29). The challenge here is to promote authentic intercultural dialogue: a dialogue respectful of 'the profound significance of the culture of different nations, of the traditions of the various peoples, by which the individual defines himself in relation to life's fundamental questions' (CV 26).

5. ***The Exploitation of Nature***. The encyclical rejects equally the unscrupulous manipulation of nature for our own pleasure and the apotheosis of nature, treating it as more important than the human person (cf. CV 48). The created world is 'God's gift

to everyone' – a gift over which human beings 'legitimately exercise a responsible stewardship ..., in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways, with the assistance of advanced technologies, so that it can worthily accommodate and feed the world's population' (CV 50). Responsible stewardship requires not only 'regulating the exploitation of non-renewal resources, involving poor countries in the process, in order to plan together for the future' (CV 49). It also "invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style, which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences' (CV 51).

6. *The Promethean Illusion.* While acknowledging the enormous benefits to human life resulting from the technological advances of recent times, the encyclical highlights the danger of viewing technological progress as an end in itself. For Pope Benedict, it is in the manipulation of human life that we see the clearest and most pernicious expression of technology's supremacy. 'In vitro fertilisation, embryo research, the possibility of manufacturing clones and human hybrids: all this is now emerging and being promoted in today's highly disillusioned culture, which believes it has mastered every mystery, because the origin of life is now within our grasp' (CV 75). The consequences of this deification of technology are too horrific to contemplate: 'the systematic eugenic programming of births' and, 'at the other end of the spectrum, a pro-euthanasia mindset', asserting 'control over life that under certain circumstances is deemed no longer worth living' (ibid.). What is required to meet these challenges is 'formation in an ethically responsible use of technology' (CV 70).

7. *International Tourism, including Sex Tourism.*

While acknowledging that international tourism 'can be a major factor in economic development and cultural growth', the encyclical also points out its negative impact 'both for the tourist and the local populace.' 'The latter are often exposed to immoral or even perverted forms of conduct, as in the case of so-called sex tourism, to which many human beings are sacrificed even at a tender age' (CV 61). Apart from sex tourism there exists a more general kind of international tourism 'as a form of escapism planned in a manner typical of the countries of origin [of the tourist], and therefore not conducive to authentic encounter between persons and cultures' (ibid.).

The kind of tourism we need, according to encyclical, is a tourism which combines genuine intercultural encounter and enrichment with the elements of rest and healthy recreation.

8. *Migration: A Social Phenomenon of Epoch-making Proportions*

What is new about this topic is not the problem itself, but rather the scale of it – ‘the sheer numbers of people involved, the social, economic, political, cultural and religious problems it raises, and the dramatic challenges it poses to nations and the international community’ (CV 62). Addressing these problems, according to the encyclical, will require ‘bold, forward-looking policies of international collaboration’ involving ‘close collaboration between the migrants’ countries of origin and their countries of destination’ (ibid.).

TOWARDS A NEW MODEL OF DEVELOPMENT

In the light of the above problems and challenges, *Caritas in Veritate* calls for ‘a profound and far-sighted revision of the current model of development’ (CV 32) and ‘a profoundly new way of understanding business enterprise’ (CV 40). This will involve bringing ‘the traditional principles of social ethics like transparency, honesty and responsibility’ to bear on economic activity (CV 36). It will also mean moving from the dominant ‘binary model of market-plus-State’ approach to doing business to a broader understanding of economic activity – one that ‘favours cross-fertilisation between different types of business activity, with shifting of competences from the “non-profit” world to the “profit” world and vice versa, from the public world to that of civil society, from advanced economies to developing countries’ (CV 41).

In the new model of development, ‘the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift ... must find their place within normal economic activity’ (CV 36). Justice alone is insufficient. It needs to be accompanied, not merely complemented, by gratuitousness. This will mean that ‘alongside profit-oriented private enterprise and the various types of public enterprise [run by the State], there must be room for commercial entities based on mutualist principles and pursuing social ends to take root and express themselves’ (CV 38). Donal Dorr argues that, when the Pope refers to ‘commercial entities based on mutualist principles’, he is thinking of an initiative taken by the Focolare movement in recent years in which it brought together

over 700 companies worldwide committed to pursuing higher goals than just profit.¹² It is important to add that, in the last century, there were several initiatives of this kind, involving an integration of economic and social goals.

In constructing a new model of development, *Caritas in Veritate* acknowledges that we do not have to start from scratch. There are some signs that this new model is already emerging. For example, some banks are proposing “ethical” accounts and investment funds and offering micro-credit to people in developing countries (CV 45). Governments are taking action to regulate the financial sector ‘so as to safeguard weaker parties and discourage scandalous speculation’ (CV 65). We also see ‘the emergence of a new political power, that of consumers and their associations’ (CV 66). Consumer co-operatives and fair trade initiatives ensure that producers from deprived areas of the world get a decent return for their labour (ibid.). Micro-finance and micro-credit schemes give practical assistance to the weaker elements in society or to those adversely affected by the current financial crisis (CV 65). All these initiatives should be supported, further developed and fine-tuned. The role of trade unions in protecting the rights of workers is also mentioned by the encyclical. Today these unions should not restrict themselves to defending the interests of their registered members but should also take up the cause of workers “in developing countries where social rights are often violated” (CV 64).

In the search for a model of socio-economic development appropriate for humanity today, the Church does not have all the answers, but it has a unique and indispensable contribution to make, based upon its integral humanism, which is open to transcendence and motivated by its faith in God’s love for humanity:

Awareness of God’s undying love sustains us in our laborious and stimulating work for justice and the development of peoples, amid successes and failures, in the ceaseless pursuit of a just ordering of human affairs. God’s love calls us to move beyond the limited and the ephemeral, it gives us the courage to continue seeking and working for the benefit of all, even if this cannot be achieved immediately and if what we are able to achieve, alongside political authorities and those working in the field of economics, is always less than we might wish. God gives us the strength to fight and suffer for love of the common good, because he is our All, our greatest hope (CV 78).

¹² Art. cit., p. 468.

C. A Spirituality for the Journey: Combining Prayer, Discernment and Action for Change

The Church's commitment to the promotion of social and ecological justice, as *Caritas in Veritate* makes clear, is no mere humanist agenda. It arises from its commitment to Christ and to the continuation of his kingdom mission. That commitment is fuelled by a love which incarnates itself in action for justice, and by a concern for justice which will settle for nothing less than a civilisation of love. Thus, it will avoid, on the one hand, an inept moralism which would reduce Christian love to mere sentimentality, and, on the other hand, a fanatical concern for the righting of wrongs that can so easily degenerate into a loveless pragmatism, blind to any standard other than sheer political success.

Directed towards the kingdom of God and shaped by the paschal mystery of Christ, our commitment to justice leads us to confront, challenge and strive to change those institutionalised forms of greed and selfishness that we call 'sinful structures.' However, as paschal missionaries, we are not naïve about the inevitable ambiguity of all ethico-political commitments. We realise that the voices of liberating grace and sinful self-assertion are co-mingled in all such commitments, and that a profound spiritual discernment is required if we are to distinguish between God's liberating plans for us and our own selfish interests. The soil of such discernment is prayer. Prayer need not be a retreat from the real world and its problems. If it is genuine listening to God, it will lead to a deep and enduring commitment to the world – a commitment that truly transforms the world because it obeys the logic of the cross rather than the logic of Marx or Adam Smith.

Furthermore, we know that in our commitment we never start 'from scratch'. God's Spirit, as *Redemptoris Missio* reminds us, already present and active in the world, far beyond the frontiers of the Church, building up the kingdom. We are challenged to discover where the seeds of God's kingdom are already present. We are called to discern and nourish these seeds and place our resources and energies there. In discerning and nourishing these seeds of the kingdom, contemplative prayer and presence will have to balance active social and political involvement.

John Fuellenbach reminds us that the words 'success' and 'optimism' are not part of our tool kit as witnesses, signs, and instruments of God's kingdom: "Our faith tells us that it is hope

against hope that keeps us going and gives us the necessary courage and even the audacity to believe that the kingdom will win.”¹³ Jürgen Moltmann expresses this profound conviction of our faith in these words: “Where people suffer because they love, God suffers in them and they suffer in God... Where God suffers the death of Jesus and thereby demonstrates the power of his love, these people also find the power to remain in love despite pain and death, becoming neither bitter nor superficial.”¹⁴ The way of suffering love, then, is profoundly hope-filled. For its hope is grounded in the experience of God’s power made perfect in the utter vulnerability of compassionate loving, releasing men and women from apathy and despair to live new purposeful lives – lives that are compassionate, joyful and free.

It is easy to get discouraged when we look at the world around us. The tide of human suffering continues to rise, inducing in us a sense of helplessness. In Africa especially vicious conflicts continue to reap a cruel harvest of death and destruction in many countries. Hundreds of thousands are killed in acts of wanton violence. Millions are rendered homeless or displaced. The gap between the rich and poor continues to widen. Basic human rights are suppressed at the whim of dictators. Global warming and the exploitation of nature are endangering human existence on this earth and depriving future generations of their rightful inheritance.

In such a context we might wonder if anything we can do will make a difference. Our deepest Christian resources of faith, hope and love provide the answer. The God of Jesus Christ is an ever faithful God, who is to be found even at the heart of human destruction and failure. Human beings are never abandoned by God. In Christ, God has taken unto himself the sufferings of the world and embraced both victims and victimisers. The God who is always with us, continuing to transform death into life and chaos into new creation, calls us to become his co-workers in the re-creation of the world.

As members of religious and missionary institutes who strive to witness to the total Gospel of Christ who liberates and unifies, we must extend and deepen our commitment to social and ecological justice. We must be artisans of hope for the suffering and marginalised peoples of our world: a practical and effective hope that combines faith and justice, that challenges the unjust *status quo* and identifies with the poor and oppressed in society; a hope that finds

¹³ “Be Compassionate!” in *Religious Life Review*, November/December 2008, p. 360. 368.

¹⁴ *The Experiment Hope*, SCM Press, London, 1975, p. 80.

expression in concerted programmes of action for the creation of an alternative future and struggles for the structural changes required if such an alternative future is to emerge.

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