

The Church, The Economy and Social Justice:

Reflections on *Caritas in Veritate*

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Caritas in Veritate addresses the de-moralization of our world, expressed in various kinds of dualisms and antagonisms such as the separation of charity from truth, instrumental rationality from moral purposes, economics and public policy from moral reason (#31), etc.

Benedict proposes as a corrective an affirmation of authentic humanism based on a synthetic approach to the human good that integrates charity and justice (charity “strives to build up the earthly city,” #6, and also helps to build up the “eternal city”), reason and faith, knowledge and love (#30), temporal progress and eternal life, science and love (#30), economics and ethics (#34), person and community (#34), etc. Authentic humanism has its roots and inspiration in a religious vision grounded in faith, hope and charity. Its theological basis lies in the following claims: (1) the world has a moral order given to it by God, (2) God has a redemptive will and plan for the world, (3) the human person is made in God’s image, is not “a lost atom in a random universe” (#29), and was created to cooperate with God’s redemptive plan, (4) God sent Jesus Christ and continues to inspire the Church to serve the redemptive plan, which can be described as integral human development, (5) the church serves this purpose by its public as well as by its specifically religious and charitable activities, (6) the Church’s public responsibility is focused on promoting charity and justice in the world, (7) all Christians, and all people of good will, have a responsibility to promote charity and justice in the world.

Justice in *Caritas in Veritate* operates at multiple dimensions of human experience: (1) the theological-mystical, (2) the ethical-cultural, (3) the legal-political, and (4) the socio-economic. Benedict concentrates on the first level and tends in general to give less attention to specifics as we descend the scale (he does make numerous specific suggestions, e.g. regarding the world political authority, but with little conceptual explanation). Transcendent humanism regards the first, theological-mystical level, as permeating all other levels, and as the source of their proper coordination and integration. Theologically, love of God is the only true basis and guarantee of human dignity and authentic integral development (i.e., a development that includes spiritual growth toward our supernatural end) (#29). This development is both individual and communal, vertical and horizontal, and embraces fraternity, generosity, and the “logic of the gift” rather than enlightened egoism or even exploitation of others. Ethically, charity is the basis for sustainable moral development (#29). Moral globalization and global responsibility must be expanded to match technical, cultural, and economic globalization (#9). Economics,

political decisions, and technological innovations must be subjected to moral as well as instrumental assessment.

Caritas in Veritate has a number of strengths but also certain weaknesses. Its strength lies in the theological grounding of its vision of authentic humanity. Its general weakness lies in its attempt to cover so many topics that it becomes often overly general, abstract, and even question begging. Its high level of generality allows Benedict to affirm as united together values that in concrete circumstances sometimes stand in tension or even conflict with one another. It follows the general tendency of Roman Catholic social teachings to avoid facing trade-offs among conflicting goods, for example, between a particular economic development project and environmental conservation, or between the rights of workers and the economic advantage to a company of hiring non-union labor. Both pairs constitute goods; sometimes they converge and at other times they conflict.

Consider the virtue of solidarity, which the pope defines as “first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone” (#38). He endorses this virtue without qualification, and without dealing with the ethical fact that none of us can be responsible for everyone else and that our responsibilities are not infinite. Parents who care for their children are to that extent not caring for others; even adoptive parents who assume responsibility for one set of orphans are unable to care for others. This is not to say, as some libertarians do, that we “owe nothing to anyone” (#43), but only that, as Thomas Aquinas put it, love and charity have to be wisely ordered. This ordering is an ethical matter rather than primarily a theological matter, and takes into account a host of trade-offs that have to be assessed in light of the virtues of justice and prudence as well as charity.

This leads to two other concerns: one about charity’s relation to faith and another with regard to charity’s relation to justice. *Caritas in Veritate* holds that “*Only* in charity, illumined by the light of reason and faith, is it possible to pursue development goals that possess a more humane and humanizing value” (#9; emphasis added). The pope claims that development goals are *only* pursued in “more humane and humanizing value” when they are pursued by those moved by charity illumined by faith as well as reason. He earlier made a crucially important claim that “Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity.” (#3) If truth comes from the light of faith and reason, then only the person of faith, it seems, can exercise authentic charity. If “faith” means “faith in Christ,” then are we to think that non-Christians will always be inferior in their love of neighbor? This seems hard to square with the practice of the secular altruist. Yet perhaps Pope Benedict would say that a secular altruist loves authentically to the extent that he or she is open to the truth as it presents itself in his or her life. Dr. Rieux of Camus’ *The Plague* attempts in good conscience to practice compassion in truth, but does not of course adhere to the “values of Christianity”, as Benedict puts it, yet he is anything but wallowing in “a pool of good sentiments.”

The question is sharpened by Pope Benedict’s insistence that truth is in some sense more fundamental than charity. Charity gives rise to CST but its “locus is truth” (#5). Whereas our pragmatic society gives priority to compassion and tends to treat claims to truth as dispensable opinions to be tolerated, Pope Benedict holds that love is an authentic and trustworthy guide only when it is rooted in faith as well as reason. He claims that it is

“*only* through an encounter with God [that we] are able to see in the other something more than just another creature, to recognize the divine image in the other, thus truly coming to discover him or her and to mature in a love that ‘becomes concern and care for the other’” (#11; emphasis added).

Cardinal Ratzinger in *Dominus Iesus* acknowledged “the salvific grace of God — which is always given by means of Christ in the Spirit and has a mysterious relationship to the Church — comes to individual non-Christians.” How this happens, he wrote, is accomplished by God ‘in ways known to himself.’” This seems to leave us with an ambiguity: charity in truth is rooted in explicit faith, and non-Christians cannot have authentic charity, or charity in truth is rooted in implicit faith, and non-Christians can have authentic charity. In the former case, the agent has an implicit and unknown encounter with God; in the latter, the agent has (in some sense) an explicit encounter with God. The former has the advantage of acknowledging the goodness of the secular altruist, but is hard to square with the claim that, “*only* in charity, illumined by the light of reason and faith, is it possible to pursue development goals that possess a more humane and humanizing value” (#9; emphasis added). The latter, more distinctively Christian, position has the advantage of supporting Pope Benedict’s agenda, but verges on sectarianism in suggesting that true charity is only possible for those who possess an explicit Christian faith. It is hard to see how *Caritas in Veritate* might resolve this conundrum without either dismissing the secular altruist or downgrading the need for faith.

A second ambiguity concerns the relation between charity and justice. Perhaps in response to criticisms of his first encyclical, Pope Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate* insists on the importance of justice and its harmony with charity. Justice is described as the minimum measure of charity, which goes beyond justice but never against it (#6). Yet at times charity, in the form of forgiveness, does conflict with justice. A recent case exemplifies this point. On August 20, 2009, Abdelbaset Ali al-Megrahi, the man convicted for the Lockerbie bombing that took 281 lives in 1988, was released from prison and returned to Libya. Megrahi was suffering from terminal prostate cancer and expected to live for three months. Though he continued to maintain his innocence, the Scottish Justice Secretary, who claimed to be acting on grounds of compassion, freed Megrahi. The point is not whether this man should have been given mercy or justice, but that in this case there is a conflict between the two. It is not sufficient to offer the generalization that mercy transcends justice. At times, mercy violates justice, and when it does so, it is not clear that mercy always has the high moral ground. This is especially the case when it comes to the Lockerbie bombing families, who regard themselves as having been denied both justice and mercy.

Well-meaning Christians have at times appealed to charity in their attempts to legitimate what were grossly unjust policies and actions. Between 1910 and 1970, for example, the Australian government took approximately one in three indigenous children from their families and placed in Christian orphanages so that they could be “civilized” as good Christians. This was a subjectively charitable thing to do given the conventional paternalist assumptions of that era, but it was unjust as well as objectively uncharitable. This is why in November of 2001 Pope John Paul II apologized for the harm done by the

church, and what he called the “shameful injustices done to indigenous peoples in Oceania, especially where children were forcibly separated from their families” (<http://www.eniar.org/news/pope1.html>, accessed October 8, 2009).

Something similar could be said about the church’s practice of protecting sexually abusive priests and transferring them from one assignment to another after they had engaged in criminal misconduct. Bishops did this out of misplaced loyalty to fellow clerics and a desire to avoid public scandal, but also out of misplaced mercy for the perpetrators. The presupposition that charity is more important than justice had very palpably negative consequences for thousands of victims of clerical sexual abuse. The subsequent reforms of the church now recognize the primacy of justice as a norm of conduct, albeit one that is motivated by charity.