Reaffirming the Need for Structural Justice

Pope Benedict XVI’s Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*

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Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical fits into an already established framework within the Vatican. While his perspective, forged in the midst of the most serious economic crisis on a global level since the Great Depression, has its unique features and breaks some new ground, it also builds upon the solid foundation of economic teaching laid down by the Second Vatican Council and in particular by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II.

Pope Benedict XVI’s first social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth) picks up on a concern central to Catholic consciousness since the Second Vatican Council and its effort in the conciliar document *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World) to situate the church within the context of human history and its structures. Though the council reaffirmed the church’s transcendental dimension it also insisted that any full understanding of the church must include its relationship with the central social structures in which it finds itself at any given moment of history. Such a vision also emphasized that any ecclesial spirituality necessarily involves a commitment to structural justice in the human community. Pope Paul VI gave a decisive stamp of approval to this conciliar thrust in his

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encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) in 1968, a statement that most commentators see as the most radical social vision ever to emerge from official Vatican circles. This new fusion within Catholicism of spirituality and the quest for justice was advanced by the 1971 Synod of Bishops in Rome. In their final declaration from that Synod, a declaration approved by Pope Paul VI, the bishops unequivocally linked the authentic preaching of the Gospel with the struggle for just social structures.

This new social vision in the Catholic Church met with considerable opposition in certain quarters within the church. Hence, when John Paul II entered the papacy, some Catholics hoped that this pope who had endured the trials of Marxist rule would quietly bury this new thrust of seeing social justice as integral to the church’s self-understanding and spirituality. But Pope John Paul II seriously disappointed those who had such expectations. In his many speeches throughout the world and in three social encyclicals John Paul II solidified the church’s renewed commitment to social justice, especially in the economic sphere.

*John Paul II’s Approach to Global Economic Justice*

John Paul II’s interest in economic matters is visible in the very first years of his papacy, particularly in addresses given during his early foreign trips, including in Canada where in Newfoundland and Edmonton he gave strong support to a stringent critique of the current global economic system by the Canadian Bishops’ Conference and in his speech at Yankee Stadium in New York (see Byers) during his initial visit to the United States. His 1979 address to the United States set the basic tone for his pontificate in this area: “People must become aware,” he argued, “that economic tensions within countries and the relationship between states and even between entire continents contain within themselves substantial elements that restrict or violate human rights.”

To many the crescendo of John Paul II’s teachings on global economic justice was reached in his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* celebrating the one hundredth anniversary of the first papal social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* that provided church support for unionization efforts among workers in Europe and North America. While some commentators interpreted *Centesimus Annus* as providing a ringing endorsement of the capitalist economic system, John Paul II in major statements at the Vatican and at the University of Latvia (1993, 257; 1997, 43) clearly argued that such interpretations were far from what he actually intended. If by capitalism we mean an economic system that acknowledges the importance of business, the market, and private property, then the pope judges the capitalistic framework to be the best currently available. He is no supporter of a heavily socialist framework. But if capitalism operates in a framework in which there is a lack of any juridical framework that directs the market economy toward the genuine
service of the community and of total human freedom (which would include freedom from political oppression and freedom from poverty), then the papal response is negative. For John Paul II an unbridled market economy is clearly unacceptable. Governmental authority has to provide the juridical framework within which the market economy operates. He remains convinced that the market economy, by itself, cannot satisfy fundamental human needs. The profit motive is integral to a successful economy. But other human and moral factors must be brought into play.

In the latter years of his papacy, John Paul II promoted the notion of a “juridical framework” for the global economy without specifying the exact nature of such a framework. He saw such a framework as vital if the market economy was to become a force for the common good rather than one that fostered individual and national greed at the expense of millions of people in poverty. He continued to reiterate his conviction that the market economy would never attain such an orientation through its own internal dynamics. John Paul II was not alone in his advocacy of such a framework. A number of prominent economic experts such as Peter D. Sutherland, Paul Krugman, Lester Thurow, and George Soros in addition to former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan have spoken in the same vein in recent years.

In an April 25, 1997, address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, John Paul II clearly stated that the church in no way condemns the deregulation of the market economy. “History amply demonstrates,” he insisted, that “the failure of regimes characterized by planning that is harmful to civil and economic freedoms.” But he went on to add that to promote economic models diametrically opposed to a planned economy cannot be justified. “Experience shows,” he underlined, “that a market economy left to unconditional freedom is far from bringing the greatest possible advantages to individuals and societies.” In the papal perspective, political activity is critical for a balanced market that incorporates the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity. He likewise acknowledged that such political activity cannot be restricted to nation-states today in view of the global dimensions of the economy, but must involve regional and global institutions with juridical authority (1997, 43).

While visiting Mexico in January 1999, John Paul II took on the “neo-liberal” economic model that has dominated the global economic system for the past number of years with strong words of condemnation for the immense poverty that has marked this system: “No more exploitation of the weak . . . never again!” (Cassel, 2). And again in April 2002, once more to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, John Paul II insisted that it “corresponds to the political sphere to regulate

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the markets, to subject market laws to solidarity, so that individuals and societies are not sacrificed by economic changes at all levels, and are protected from impulses linked to the deregulation of the markets.” He went on to encourage the “agents of social, political and economic life to go further in the way of cooperation among people, businesses and nations so that the management of our earth will be at the service of persons and peoples, not just of profit.” In order to achieve this objective, John Paul II proposed “collective decisions” at the “planetary level” directed “to implementing (these decisions) through a press that favors the responsible participation of all . . . called to build the future together” (Zenit 2002).

Kenneth Himes is quite correct in underlining that Pope John Paul II was drawing our attention to the current void in the international economic system. Himes sees John Paul II telling us that “there is no agency or organization at the international level comparable to the state at the domestic level. For this reason Catholic social teaching is supportive of various regimes and treaties that bring a measure of governance to the developing global order. In this, the church’s teaching will be at odds with those who equate globalization with an unfettered market system of economics” (Himes 2002).

I have included this brief overview of previous pontificates in order to emphasize that Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical fits into an already established framework within the Vatican. While his perspective, forged in the midst of the most serious economic crisis on a global level since the Great Depression, has its unique features and breaks some new ground, it also builds upon the solid foundation of economic teaching laid down by the Second Vatican Council and in particular by Popes Paul VI and John Paul II.

**Overview of the Encyclical**

*Caritas in Veritate* begins with a strong emphasis on the centrality of love and of the common good in Catholic social ethics. The pope then turns his attention to the most penetrating critique of the contemporary global economic system found in any encyclical, the analysis offered by Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio*. This in itself is somewhat striking. For *Populorum Progressio* has seen a torrent of criticism from Catholic conservatives who had held out hope that John Paul II would put this encyclical into ecclesial limbo. In fact John Paul II substantially reaffirmed *Populorum Progressio* when he wrote *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* to commemorate the former’s twentieth anniversary. But for a pope who represents a fundamentally conservative outlook on matters Catholic and who had little if any track record on social justice issues prior to his coming to the papacy, his strong embrace of *Populorum Progressio* that in fact gives it new visibility is indeed striking.
I have heard it said by some on the Catholic left that the manner of Benedict XVI’s embrace of the encyclical actually serves to undercut its radicality. I respectfully disagree with such an analysis. While it is true that Benedict XVI, much as John Paul II in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, did not specifically endorse the notions of land seizures by governments and their blocking of the transfer of funds to foreign bank accounts, he raises up the two most critical elements in *Populorum Progressio*, i.e., that the economic system will never achieve a significant commitment to the common good through its own mechanisms and that, consequently, governmental intervention in the system is an ongoing requirement. In actual fact the establishment of a permanent central role for government in the achievement of economic justice goes back to Pope John XXIII’s encyclical *Mater et Magistra* where John XXIII highlighted the ongoing role of government in contrast to the timid, “only in the last resort” approach to governmental intervention in the first two papal social encyclicals. Though Hispanic theologians, for example, have a point in raising up *Caritas in Veritate*’s lack of reference to the notion of preferential option for the poor (see Nanko-Fernández, 150–152), there is no question that the pope has come down on the side of major structural reform of the global economy as integral to the creation of a just global society. Such integration is not dependent solely on a change in personal morality, as important as that remains.

In various sections of *Caritas in Veritate* Benedict XVI makes clear his commitment to the need for structural reform. The current global economic crisis has made that patently clear to the pope, who delayed the publication of this encyclical so that the implications of the current crisis could be properly accounted for in the document. No economic system that lacks solidarity and mutual trust, qualities that are glaringly absent from the prevailing approach to the current market model that requires a significant measure of poverty and underdevelopment as a condition of its functioning, can achieve the ultimate goal of a just economic approach that must have human emancipation, dignity and equality at its heart.

On several occasions in his encyclical, Benedict XVI underscores the central role for government in directing the market economy. For him political action must insure justice through redistribution of wealth within the economic system. Economic action cannot be regarded as merely an engine for wealth creation. Such a mentality inevitably results in grave injustices. Distribution cannot be seen as a secondary concern in an authentic economic system. Rather it must assume co-equal status with wealth creation. When the market and government are kept

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In the eyes of Benedict XVI the contemporary global economic scene demands a profoundly new way of understanding business enterprise.

Such a view results in short-term thinking that focuses too exclusively on a drive to raise capital and often produces the outsourcing of production, resulting in the destabilization of local regions and the neglect of the genuine interests of stakeholders beyond the realm of the investors. According to the pope, outsourcing production and jobs simply to gain economic advantage in the competition of the marketplace and to exploit local resources without making a genuine contribution to the overall well-being of the local community violates basic moral standards.

Pope Benedict takes up some other questions in *Caritas in Veritate* that I shall discuss in a moment. But without question the primary thrust of this encyclical
is the need to return to the vision of structural justice as presented previously by 
Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio*. This papal reemphasis could not be more timely 
as we struggle to overcome the serious undermining of the global economic system 
by years of stress on governmental deregulation.

**Particular Themes**

It is necessary to highlight the centrality of structural justice in this encyclical, 
but not everyone has really understood it. A recent example is a speech given 
to the Knights of Columbus at their 2009 annual convention in Phoenix by Cardinal 
Francis George of Chicago in his capacity as president of the National Conference 
of Catholic Bishops (George 2009).

In this address the cardinal scantly mentions the central structural thrust of 
the encyclical and never alludes to its reaffirmation of the perspective of *Populorum 
Progressio* that did not receive a warm reception among many, if not most, of the 
members of the organization that in recent years strongly supported the previous 
White House in its dedication to neo-liberal economics, support that caused some 
protest among a minority of the knights. Cardinal George thereby missed an im­
portant opportunity to truly implement Pope Benedict’s clarion call for structural 
economic justice among a group that has members with significant connections 
to the current global economic system. In giving uncritical support to the previous 
presidential administration, the leadership of the knights was contributing to the 
economic outlook that fueled the current world economic crisis.

There is also a broader significance theologically and spiritually to Pope Bene­
dict XVI’s renewed call for structural justice in *Caritas in Veritate*. Some of us work­
ing in the area of Holocaust studies, myself included, have expressed concern about 
his approach to Christian responsibility during this dark period in human history. 
In several of his speeches on the topic he has appeared to convey an understanding 
of the church as an institution apart from history. In a presentation at the Christ 
and the Jewish People Consultation at the Swedish Theological Institute in Jeru­
salem in June 2009, Professor Hans Joachim Sander of the University of Salzburg 
contrasted the ecclesiologies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. John Paul II, Sander 
insisted, relied considerably on the ecclesiological vision of *Gaudium et Spes* where 
the church is seen as both impacting and being impacted by the flow of history. 
Benedict XVI, by contrast, rarely uses *Gaudium et Spes* as a resource for his 
perspective on ecclesiology. *Caritas in Veritate* seems therefore to represent some 
modification of the current papal outlook on the church. For in this encyclical the 
church is clearly involved in a profound way with the basic structures of human 
history at a given moment. And clearly for the Benedict XVI of *Caritas in Veritate* 
one cannot speak of authentic Catholic spirituality without directly relating that 
spirituality to the concrete social challenges of the present moment. So this new
The ecology issue has attained such prominence in Benedict XVI’s overall perspective that some are now calling him the “green pope.”

Caritas in Veritate devotes important space to the ecological challenge, directly relating it to its central concern about structural economic justice. The encyclical strongly asserts that the church bears a responsibility for creation and must act on that responsibility. Respect for life and respect for the environment go hand in hand according to Benedict XVI. The way humanity treats the environment profoundly influences the way it treats itself and vice versa. There is need to safeguard the use of precious natural resources by the human community so that wealthy countries do not make excessive demands on these resources at the expense of poorer countries. Authorities must ensure that the economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources are recognized with transparency and borne fully by those who incur them, not by others or by future generations.

Benedict XVI condemns the hoarding of energy resources. He urges the international community to find institutional ways to regulate the use of non-renewable resources, working in solidarity with poorer countries to plan together for the future. So Benedict XVI expands his commitment to the need for a juridical framework to insure the orientation of the market economy toward the common good to the ecological realm, arguing for a similar international institutional framework to manage precious natural resources for the well-being of all peoples, not merely the rich nations. So he continues on the path begun by John XXIII and enhanced by Paul VI and John Paul II where state bodies, national and international, are regarded as essential partners in the struggle for economic justice and environmental protection. Governmental involvement should not be at
the expense of local peoples. Benedict XVI does reaffirm the continuing validity of the classical Catholic encyclical stress on subsidiarity. But he remains convinced that justice in either area will not be achieved without the direct, ongoing participation by governmental bodies. For Benedict XVI there is no way the principle of subsidiarity can be interpreted in a simplistic “anti-governmental” way.

If there is one drawback to the language of Caritas in Veritate, it has to do with the repeated emphasis on truth. The use of the term seems excessive and somewhat blocks our appreciation of the radicality of the encyclical within a papal context. Without question Benedict XVI is correct in insisting that the church’s commitment to structural economic justice and ecological responsibility must be rooted in a solid foundation. And in both areas there are statements that convey an openness to structural innovation in human society. It seems Benedict XVI felt he had to interject his well-known emphasis on uncompromising truth in dogmatic areas to his perspectives on economic justice and ecology. But I am not convinced he has brought them together in a really coherent way. Pope Paul VI, for example, expressed a somewhat more open attitude toward Catholic social teaching and institutional structures, saying the church was not wedded to any one particular structural vision and insisting that human creativity was necessary in the design of new, effective ones. Benedict XVI, on the other hand, tends to leave the impression in many parts of the encyclical that the ideal structures already exist, imbedded in nature itself, and only need to be discovered by the human community.

All in all, Caritas in Veritate represents a significant commitment to the tradition of Catholic social teaching. It clearly positions its perspective within the concrete realities of the present global and economic challenges. Its eventual impact will depend on whether church leaders truly understand its radical call for structural transformation set within a spirituality centrality implanted within history and committed to the preservation of all of creation.

References


