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Feature Article

Fraternity and the modern age

Caritas in Veritate: the Pope's social encyclical

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Released on the eve of the G8 Summit, the Pope's encyclical calls for a new world financial order guided by ethics, with a concern for humanity and a focus on justice. It emphatically unites the Church's roles of spreading the Gospel with working for social justice

Benedict XVI has made a habit of refuting his own stereotype. None of his three encyclicals, least of all the third published this week, confirms the image of "Ratzinger the conservative autocrat" that he gained as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under John Paul II. The left-right, progressive-conservative polarity which many commentators apply to modern Catholicism breaks down completely in the case of *Caritas in Veritate*, his first social encyclical. And that may be its greatest achievement.

Conservative Catholics traditionally drew a clear line between the Church's promotion of religion and its concern for poverty and social justice. The former was "evangelisation", the spreading of the Gospel. The latter was an adjunct – optional, even marginal, to the Church's main business – and should not be allowed to get in the way of it. The ironic description "the Church's best kept secret" often applied to Catholic social teaching conveyed how tangential it was thought to be. Thus the Church should in general "stay out of politics", and concern itself with the salvation of souls. Its proper business was not advocating a decent minimum wage but proclaiming Christ as the Son of God.

Benedict, Cardinal-Ratzinger-that-was, emerges here as the exact opposite of this sort of conservative. Ever since the Second Vatican Council, and most notably in Paul VI's 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, the envelope of evangelisation has been pushed to bring the social-justice dimension more within the scope of the Church's main business. But this gradual development still left a gap between the spiritual and the practical (in all but name, political) sides of the Church's role. "Preaching the Gospel" and "working for social justice" still seemed to be apart, even sometimes at odds. *Caritas in Veritate* now brings the two halves emphatically together to make one whole. The device he uses so effectively is Paul VI's concept in *Populorum Progressio* of "integral human development". And he could not overstate its importance. "I express my conviction that *Populorum Progressio* deserves to be considered 'the *Rerum Novarum* of the present age', shedding light upon humanity's journey towards unity," he declares. And *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII's 1891 masterpiece, was the very foundation stone of the Catholic social teaching tradition.

"The whole Church, in all her being and acting – when she proclaims, when she celebrates, when she performs works of charity – is engaged in promoting integral human development," says Benedict, adding that "authentic human development concerns the whole of the person in every single dimension." And the Gospel is fundamental to this development; indeed, it is there that Christ reveals humanity to itself, as the fulfilment of human development. So there is no separate spiritual pathway that bypasses integral human development, for it is only that which leads us to Christ. It is the very essence of the Catholic faith.

This central idea, this fusion of spirituality and social action under the banner of integral human development, is his encyclical's theological keynote. It enables him to turn to a series of contemporary crises that were unknown to Paul VI – the current financial crisis, the crisis of globalisation and mass migration, the crisis of the environment, even the crisis of sexuality and bioethics – to judge the impact of each one on integral human development. It hands him a common tool to dissect diverse problems, thus giving *Caritas in Veritate* a striking intellectual coherence. It is not just a list of suggestions for making the world a better place. It is no less than the measurement of the present state of human civilisation – what it has failed to achieve, what it has achieved – against what it could achieve. And this is indeed evangelisation in the true sense, for the criterion for these measurements in every case is the ultimate model of integral human development, Christ himself.

Of course a list of suggestions for making the world a better place is not lacking from this encyclical, though they ultimately make sense only within this intellectual framework. At least three important innovations in Catholic social teaching occur in the course of it. Discussing modern finance, Benedict introduces a distinction between a "market economy" and a "capitalist economy", a distinction which, had it occurred to Pope John Paul II in writing his 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, would have avoided the impression that he was unduly sympathetic to the American model of free-market capitalism. A capitalist economy is a type of market economy, but there are other types such as the civil market economy. The latter is aimed at achieving the common good, the former simply the "total good" – the maximisation of wealth. The civil market economy includes the concept of "gift", that which is not orientated solely towards profit; and it encourages "fraternity", a generalised sort of friendship between equals that respects diversity (as between brothers and sisters).

These papal ideas are not purely hypothetical, but engage with the crucial contemporary debate about what economic reforms are needed to prevent a repetition of the recent global financial meltdown. They have the advantage that integral human development, which a civil market promotes, is something for which people already possess an instinct. They do not just want profit; they need and want to be able to "give". Instead they have experienced the "financialisation" not just of every aspect of the economy but of life itself. And the human spirit eventually rebels. "Man is not a lost atom in a random universe" (no. 29).

Even sweeter music to the ears of Gordon Brown, and possibly to Barack Obama, will be the Pope's rationalisation of the case for global economic governance, one of the chief topics of the latest G8 summit in Italy. Because it is not realistic to expect market forces to regulate themselves as the world has learnt to its cost, some overall supervisory agency for the global economy is needed, he says. But it must still embody the principle of subsidiarity: it is too soon to say that the nation state has been finished off by globalisation. His hopes are on the United Nations. "There is urgent need of a true world political authority," he writes. It should work "to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace, to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration".

This Pope already has a reputation for being green, and he puts his whole rhetorical weight behind it. For him natural ecology and human ecology are radically the same: "Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment, just as environmental deterioration in turn upsets relations in society. Nature, especially in our time, is so integrated into the dynamics of society and culture that by now it hardly constitutes an independent variable." He calls for a reform of lifestyles and the re-education of consumer choices, part of a "covenant between human beings and the environment". This too is the Church's business for the sake of integral human development. The Church, he says, "must above all protect mankind from self-destruction ...".

Benedict XVI's first two encyclicals were generally well received, although alarm bells were set ringing by his failure to refer to recent encyclicals by other popes or to the documents of Vatican II, especially the one he was supposed to favour least, *Gaudium et Spes* ("The Church in the Modern World"). As if to confound his critics, Benedict's third encyclical is heavily footnoted with references to past teachings, above all *Gaudium et Spes*, which he praises.

This remarkable and intelligent man, now in his eighties, seems to have regained the originality of mind that once made him one of the most innovative voices at Vatican II. Half a century later he still has new things to say, well worth hearing, well worth waiting for. And no stereotype could even begin to describe him.