



An Economy of Faith

By JONATHAN CURRIE

Since the publication in July of *Caritas in Veritate*, the third encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI and the first social encyclical of the century, commentators from the left and the right, Catholics and non-Catholics who recognize the Pope's wide-reaching influence, have hurried to claim the document as their own. But *Caritas in Veritate* is proving elusive because of its tremendous scope and because its theological language tends to avoid the ideological commonplaces of American politics. Progressives and conservatives will be alternately elated and annoyed by the observations of the encyclical. Nevertheless, *Caritas in Veritate* is an ambitious critique of the moral implications of the modern global economy for what Benedict calls "integral human development," and much of this critique is not likely to sit well with many Catholics who place a great deal of faith in the virtues of the free market. The encyclical is a significant addition to Catholic social teaching, a tradition that has consistently objected to the excesses of an unrestrained market economy and the real human costs of these excesses ever since the publication of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891.

This latest addition in that line of thought is not simply a necessary restatement of this sentiment in light of the present global economic crisis. Many commentators have suggested that the publication of *Caritas in Veritate* was delayed so that its release would coincide with the recent G8 summit in Italy and President Obama's subsequent visit to the Vatican for his first official meeting with the Pope. As the leaders of the largest economies in the world continue to discuss possible measures for restoring vitality and function to the global market, there does seem to be some earnest hope that the Church's social criticism might perhaps influence at least some of the world's economic decision makers. In fact, the apparent urgency and opportunity of the moment may partly account for the sheer size of the document. The text is nearly 28,000 words in length. It's as if the Pope and his advisors wanted to be sure to leave nothing unsaid, given the present historical moment.

For this very reason, however, critics have complained of the encyclical's "density" and its apparent lack of editorial cohesion. The document was clearly circulated among and revised by a number of experts close to the papacy, and at times the tone of the document may seem foreign to those not familiar with the language of philosophy and systematic theology. But the central and consistent message of the encyclical is clear even when the prose is not: our social and economic policies must be informed by a radical devotion to the welfare and dignity of human persons, and they must account for the present economic conditions which marginalize so many of the world's people. This must be the foundation of political decisions and the end to which they are directed, Benedict suggests. The proper role of political organization and economy is one that serves to promote and secure this welfare. Though Benedict is quick to emphasize that none of these institutions, even the most beneficial and effective among them, is sufficient per se to ensure complete security, they are, nevertheless, indispensable to the "integral development" of the human community.

But the prevailing ethos of the global market and the practices of too many multinational corporations, Benedict suggests, are at best indifferent to human dignity and freedom. At worst, these practices have radically compromised the welfare of many people throughout the world. Economic models and political institutions are not morally neutral; they are vehicles for our moral commitments, the Pope suggests; they are sure reflections of our level of commitment to human freedom and justice.

The impact of market economies on working people has always been of particular concern in the discourse of Catholic social teaching, and Benedict again highlights the challenges workers face in the context of the present crisis. The Pope speaks of the “grave dangers for the rights of workers” in the current global economy, for example, and he reiterates the Catholic Church’s unequivocal support of the right of workers to organize unions. Catholic social teaching has long recognized the crucial role of labor unions in the modern world, organizations whose defense of workers’ rights, according to the encyclical, must be “honored today even more than in the past.” The freedom to form unions is central to an ethic of creative and meaningful work and human dignity that is at the heart of Catholic social teaching. Benedict provides a descriptive catalogue of the kind of work that every human person is entitled to by virtue of his or her very existence, not the least of which is work that permits men and women to form unions:

What is meant by the word ‘decency’ in regard to work? ... It means work that expresses the essential dignity of every man and woman... work that is freely chosen... work that permits the workers to organize themselves freely, and to make their voices heard; work that leaves enough room for rediscovering one’s roots at a personal, familial and spiritual level. (Section 63, emphasis added)

The Church’s traditional commitment to the right of working people to form unions is not simply a political position. The foundation of this commitment is principally one of theological ethics. Human persons have an intrinsic right to free association and community. At its best, and in the simplest terms, a union is a community of women and men who have freely chosen to stand together for the purpose of securing their common welfare and dignity. Such a community is inherently valuable in a democratic society, and this principle of free association is something that resonates deeply with American civic values. It is especially necessary to honor this principle where prevailing models of business enterprise tend to reduce workers to nonhuman variables in an economic formula that is solely oriented to profit.

Because of the peculiar evolution of the global economy in recent decades, however, sufficient legal protections for workers have not been firmly established, and, in many instances, the effectiveness of unions has been intentionally undermined, according to the Pope:

Trade union organizations experience greater difficulty in carrying out their task of representing the interests of workers, partly because Governments, for reasons of economic utility, often limit the freedom or the negotiating power of labour unions. Hence, traditional networks of solidarity have more and more obstacles to overcome. (Section 25)

The freedom to organize unions and to bargain collectively has been limited in our own country. The “obstacles” for workers remain overwhelming in the absence of any substantially beneficial reform of American labor law in decades. Whether the American bishops and pastors take the Pope’s message to heart remains to be seen. In recent years, health care workers at Catholic hospitals in the US have attempted to organize unions and have been met with fierce resistance from the managers of those same hospitals. Until recently, many American bishops have been noticeably silent when efforts have been made to break unions organized by Catholic hospital workers. Far from attempting to undermine the good faith efforts of workers to form unions, the social teaching of the Church suggests that people of faith and good conscience would do well to encourage their formation.

Ultimately, according to *Caritas in Veritate*, there is a causal relationship between justice and economic progress, human dignity and global development. They are mutually dependent. Economic models that tend to neglect the welfare not only of workers, but of consumers, the natural environment, and other “stakeholders” (in favor of being exclusively answerable to financial “shareholders”), will necessarily undermine long-term economic development. An economy organized by the “logic of power” and private gain is not only immoral but impractical, because it ignores the common good and threatens the welfare of the very stakeholders whose creative energy and personal and spiritual resources are necessary for a truly prosperous economy. “Human costs always include economic costs, and economic dysfunctions always involve human costs.”

It will be some time before the lasting significance of *Caritas in Veritate* is clear. Its relevance for the Catholic Church in the United States will in many ways depend on the willingness of the bishops and priests, men and women religious, theologians and teachers, and most importantly the rank-and-file faithful to recover and communicate the Church’s greater tradition of Christian humanism. ♦

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