

"The Heart of Social Doctrine Remains the Human Person"

VATICAN CITY, JULY 17, 2009.- Here is a Vatican translation of the address Cardinal Paul Josef Cordes, the president of the Pontifical Council Cor Unam, gave July 7 at the press conference that marked the release of Benedict XVI's encyclical "Caritas in Veritate."

I have been asked to situate the Encyclical "Caritas in Veritate" within the context of the thought and magisterium of Benedict XVI. His first Encyclical, "Deus Caritas Est," on the theology of charity, contained indications on social doctrine (nn. 26-29). Now we have a text dedicated entirely to this subject.



Cardinal Paul Josef Cordes

What strikes me from the outset is that the central concept remains caritas understood as divine love manifested in Christ. This is the source that inspires the thinking and behavior of the Christian in the world. In its light, truth becomes "gift ..., not produced by us, but rather always found or, better, received" (n. 34). It cannot be reduced merely to human goodwill or philanthropy. In my intervention, I wish to comment first on social doctrine within the mission of the Church, and then treat one of its principles: the centrality of the human person.

1. Social Doctrine in the Mission of the Church

1.1. The Church's task is not to create a just society

The Church was constituted by Christ to be a sacrament of salvation for all men and women (LG 1). This specific mission subjects her to a constant misunderstanding: secularization to the point of making her a political agent. The Church inspires, but does not do politics. Drawing on "Populorum Progressio," the new Encyclical states clearly: "The Church does not have technical solutions to offer and does not claim to meddle in the politics of the State" (n. 9). The Church is neither a political party, nor a politicizing actor. Woe to those who reduce the Church's mission to a worldly pressure movement to obtain political results. Cardinal Ratzinger himself opposed this possible misunderstanding in the 80's as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the face of certain theologies of liberation. (Instructio of 6.8.1984).

This implies in turn that the social doctrine of the Church is not a "third way," that is a political program to be implemented in order to attain a perfect society. Whoever thinks in this way risks -- paradoxically -- creating a theocracy, in which the valid principles concerning faith become tout court principles to be applied for social life, both for believers and unbelievers, embracing even violence. In the face of such errors, the Church safeguards, together with religious freedom, the rightful autonomy of the created order, as assured by the Second Vatican Council.

1.2. Social Doctrine as an element of evangelization

Of course, the Encyclical "Caritas in Veritate" expresses the import of the Church social doctrine in various places, for example number 15, which treats the relationship between evangelization and human promotion, from the starting point of "Populorum Progressio." Whereas, up until now, social

doctrine emphasized action to promote justice, now the pastoral side is broached: social doctrine is affirmed as an element of evangelization. That is to say: the Church's perennial announcement of Christ dead and risen has a consequence also for social living. This affirmation contains two aspects.

We cannot read social doctrine outside the context of the Gospel and its proclamation. Social doctrine, as this Encyclical demonstrates, is born from and is interpreted in the light of Revelation.

On the other hand, social doctrine cannot be identified with evangelization, but is one element. The Gospel deals with human acting also in social relations and institutions born from them, but cannot limit man to his social life. John Paul II vigorously defended this concept in "Redemptoris Missio" (n.11). Hence, the Church's social doctrine cannot take over the announcement of the Gospel in the person-to-person encounter.

1.3. Social Doctrine: not without revelation

A brief historical overview: as a result of the industrial revolution (19th century) and its negative consequences, the Church's leaders urgently pressed the State for a response in order to reestablish social justice and the dignity of the human person in philosophical terms. Later, with "Pacem in Terris," John XXIII focused largely on the horizon of faith and spoke of sin and victory over it through the divine work of salvation. John Paul II then introduced the concept of "structures of sin" and applied salvation also to the fight against human misery. His "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis" integrated social doctrine within moral theology: "This belongs, therefore, not to the field of ideology, but theology, and especially moral theology" (n. 41). With this step, social doctrine enters clearly into the theological domain. The principles of social doctrine have not remained merely philosophical, therefore, but have their origin in Christ and His word. In "Deus Caritas Est," Benedict XVI writes that faith purifies reason and thus helps it to create a just order in society; this is where social doctrine is inserted (cfr. 28a).

This proceeds, then, upon the foundation of a discussion accessible to all reason, and hence on the basis of natural law. But it recognizes its dependence on faith.

The new Encyclical treats more explicitly and more decisively all of this, with charity as the foundation. It teaches, "charity is the supreme path of the Church's social doctrine" (n. 2). Charity understood here as "received and given" by God (n. 5).

The love of God the Creator Father and His Redeemer Son, poured out in us through the Holy Spirit, empowers the social life of man on the basis of certain principles. It affirms for development the "centrality ... of charity" (n. 19). Wisdom -- it also says -- capable of orienting man "must be 'mixed' with the 'salt' of charity" (n. 30). These simple -- apparently obvious -- affirmations conceal some important implications. When it is loosed from Christian experience, social doctrine becomes that ideology which John Paul taught it should not be. A political manifesto without a soul. Social doctrine rather, in the first place, commits the Christian to "incarnating" his faith. As the Encyclical claims: "Charity manifests always, even in human relations, the love of God, it gives theological and salvific value to every worldly task" (n. 6). To the oft-formulated question: "What contribution does the Christian make to the edification of the world?" social doctrine provides the answer.

2. An anthropocentric approach

The heart of social doctrine remains the human person. I already said that, in a first phase, the attention of this discipline was oriented, rather, to problematic situations within society: regulation of work, right to a just wage, worker representation. Later, these problems were dealt with at an international level: the disparity between rich and poor, development, international relations. With the theological emphasis, John XXIII treats more decisively the question of all this in terms of the human person -- we are in a second phase in the evolution of this discipline. John Paul II then reinforced this understanding centering social reflection on the anthropological. This aspect is present in a striking way in the document: "The first capital to be defended and valued is man, the human person, in his entirety" (n. 25); "The social question has become radically the anthropological question" (n. 75). Progress, to be truly so, must, therefore, enable man to grow in his entirety: in the text, we find references to the environment, market, globalization, the ethical question, culture, that is, the various places where man carries out his activity. This end remains a precious heritage in social doctrine from its beginnings. But, more deeply, the anthropological question implies answering a central question: which man do we wish to promote? Can we consider true development a development that imprisons man in an earthly horizon, formed only by material well-being, ignoring the question of values, meaning, the infinite to which he is called? Can a society survive without foundational reference points, without looking at eternity, denying man and woman an answer to their deepest questions? Can there be true development without God?

In the logic of this Encyclical, we find then a further stage, perhaps a third phase in the reflection on social doctrine. It is not by chance that charity is placed as a key link: divine charity responds, as a human act, through a theological virtue, as I said at the beginning. Man is not considered only as the object of a process, but as the subject of this process. The man, who has known Christ, makes himself the agent of change in order that social doctrine does not remain a dead letter. Pope Benedict writes: "Development is impossible without upright men and women, without economical actors and politicians who do not live strongly in their consciences the call to the common good" (n. 71). Here, we are in perfect continuity with the Encyclical "Deus Caritas Est," which, in its second part, treats the characteristics of those who work in charitable organizations. And the horizon widens to the public world, where often, in the north and south, we experience phenomena that are all too well-known, preventing the growth of people: corruption and illegality (cfr. n. 22), the lust for power (cfr. DCE 28). The "original sin," as the text recalls in n. 34, prevents the construction of society in many places. Also in those who guide society. We cannot confront the social question without the ethical. The Encyclical refers to the "new man" in the biblical sense (n. 12). There can be no new society without new men and women. Social doctrine will not remain a treatise or an ideology only if there are Christians prepared to live it in charity, with the help of God. Authenticity on the part of all the actors is needed. Formulated without any twist of words: "Far from God, man is troubled and sick" (n. 76). It is very significant that the last paragraph of the Encyclical (n. 79) is dedicated to prayer and the call to conversion: God renews the heart of man so that he may dedicate himself to living in charity and justice. Christians, therefore, do not simply stand at the window to watch or protest, infected by the modern culture of denouncing others, but they allow themselves to be converted to build, in God, a new culture. This is true also for the Church's members, both as individuals and groups.

3. Progress

I wish to end with a reflection on the concept of progress. Paul VI -- this Encyclical also recalls -- spoke about it in a succinct way ("Populorum Progressio," n. 21). Unfortunately, human growth has often been conceived as independent from the question of faith, as if human promotion is one thing, and the proclamation of the faith another. In addition to unifying the two dimensions, this document introduces a further element in the concept of progress: hope (n. 34).

As Pope Benedict XVI stressed in "Spe Salvi," hope cannot be that of progress constructed for well-being in this world (n. 30), since this does not coincide with human freedom (nn. 23-24); the foundation of Christian hope is the gift of God (n. 31). Hence, hope helps us not to enclose progress in the edification of an earthly kingdom, but it opens us to the gift: in God, we find the crowning of the desire for man's good. It is always within this optic that the Church formulates social doctrine and Christians find in it inspiration for their engagement in the world.

Ladies and Gentlemen: There is great interest in this Encyclical. When read well, Benedict XVI's text is a light for society and, last but not least, for us Christians.