

Caritas in Veritate: An Initial Outline

By John Carr

In his new encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), Pope Benedict XVI offers an ethical **analysis** of the global economic crisis and an essential **moral framework** on how to move forward as one human family.

In the release welcoming the encyclical, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops said, “The encyclical offers **sound reflections** on the vocation of human development as well as on the moral principles on which a global economy must be based. It challenges business enterprises, governments, unions and individuals to reexamine their economic responsibilities in the light of charity governed by truth. . . . The pope points out the responsibilities and limitations of government and the private market, challenges traditional ideologies of right and left and calls all men and women to think and act anew.”

This initial and partial review is intended to encourage people to read the entire encyclical and consider ways to act on its challenges. The encyclical includes both profound reflections on the moral meaning of economic life and urgent calls for individuals and institutions to place ethics and concern for the poor at the center of a new global economy. The encyclical challenges investors and consumers, business and labor, public officials and financiers, to avoid the pursuit of narrow, short-term economic interests, and instead to practice *caritas in veritate*: genuine love founded on truth, which begins with the search for justice and pursues the common good in our economic choices.

In a deeply divided economy, Benedict makes essential **connections** between charity and truth, between the protection of life and the pursuit of justice, between rich and poor, between business and ethics, between care for the earth and care for the “least of these” (Matthew 25). These essential links express the principles of “the Church’s social doctrine [which] illuminates with an unchanging light the new problems that are constantly emerging.”

The core of the encyclical is the essential connection between the duty to live out an expansive and demanding definition of charity and to anchor this love in the truth about the human person and the ethical requirements of economic life. The pope takes on those who dismiss charity as simply individual action or as irrelevant to structural economic reforms. He insists **charity begins with justice**: “If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them. Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity.” (6) He makes a similar connection between **charity and the common good**: “The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practice this charity . . . This is the institutional path — we might also call it the political path — of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly.” (7)

Another central theme of the encyclical is that there is **one Catholic teaching** which unites the Church’s moral and social doctrine and brings together our protection of human life and dignity, the defense of marriage and the family, the protection of the poor, the pursuit of economic

justice, and the practice of solidarity. The pope warns against “certain abstract subdivisions of the Church’s social doctrine,” insisting that “*respect for life . . . cannot in any way be detached from questions concerning the development of peoples. . . . Openness to life is at the center of true development.*” (12, 28) [Emphases here and throughout in italics are in the original.]

The first part of *Caritas in Veritate* reviews the message of earlier social encyclicals, especially *Populorum Progressio (On the Progress of Peoples)* (1967) by Pope Paul VI. Benedict not only affirms this teaching; he also extends it to the current crisis. He says there is “clear proof . . . at the present time” of the “pernicious effects of sin” in economic life. (34) He points to “badly managed and largely speculative financial dealing, large-scale migration of peoples . . . [and] the unregulated exploitation of the earth’s resources.” (21)

A foundation of the letter is the **moral dimension of economic life**. According to Benedict, “*The economy needs ethics in order to function correctly — not any ethics whatsoever, but an ethics which is people-centered.*” (45) He points out that “the conviction that the economy . . . must be shielded from ‘influences’ of a moral character, has led man to abuse the economic process in a thoroughly destructive way.” (34) The pope insists “the Church’s social doctrine has always maintained that *justice must be applied to every phase of economic activity. . . .* Locating resources, financing, production, consumption and all the other phases in the economic cycle inevitably have moral implications. *Thus every economic decision has a moral consequence.*” (37) Investors and consumers have moral responsibilities, realizing “purchasing is always a moral — and not simply economic — act.” (66)

The Holy Father **connects personal and structural ethics**, insisting that both individuals and institutions need to act in economic life with greater attention to moral principles and ethical criteria. He calls for personal conversion and ethical action by individuals as a foundation for structural steps toward a more just economy. According to Pope Benedict, “*Development is impossible without upright men and women, without financiers and politicians whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good.*” (71) At the same time, the pope calls for sweeping reforms to address the injustices that leave so many without hope or a decent life, across the globe. He insists “*there is urgent need of a true world political authority . . . to manage the global economy; to revive economies hit by the crisis; to avoid any deterioration of the present crisis and the greater imbalances that would result; to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace; to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration.*” (67) He calls for both **new attitudes and new structures to promote both solidarity and accountability within the global economy**.

A groundbreaking element of the encyclical is an extended treatment of the “state of ecological health” and the **moral dimensions of the environment**, a first for papal encyclicals. Benedict declares, “*The Church has a responsibility towards creation and she must assert this responsibility in the public sphere.*” (51) The pope also says, “The environment is God’s gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole.” (48) He calls for “*inter-generational justice*” and a “responsible stewardship over nature, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits and to cultivate it in new ways,” including restraining consumption, renewable energy technology, and helping the poorest people and countries to deal with environmental challenges. (48, 50) The pope says, “The protection of the environment, of resources and of the climate obliges all international

leaders to act jointly and to show a readiness to work in good faith, respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet.” (50) He remarks, “How many natural resources are squandered by wars!” (51) Most significantly, Benedict links natural ecology and “human ecology,” calling on care for the earth and care for “the least of these” (Matthew 25) as complementary obligations: “it would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other.” (51)

Benedict also offers a complex and nuanced assessment of **globalization**, reaffirming that “globalization . . . is neither good nor bad. It will be what people make of it. We should not be its victims, but rather its protagonists, acting in the light of reason, guided by charity and truth. . . . It is necessary to *correct the malfunctions*, some of them serious, that cause new divisions between peoples . . . The transition inherent in the process of globalization presents great difficulties and dangers that can only be overcome if we are able to appropriate the . . . ethical spirit that drives globalization towards the humanizing goal of solidarity.” (42) According to the encyclical, “As society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbors but does not make us brothers.” (19)

The encyclical has a carefully crafted and challenging treatment of the **moral dimensions of the market and the ethical responsibilities of business**. It affirms and recognizes the advantages of the market and the essential role of business. It also suggests that “today's international economic scene, marked by grave deviations and failures, requires a *profoundly new way of understanding business enterprise*.” (40) The encyclical declares that “the market is not, and must not become, the place where the strong subdue the weak.” (36) The pope also laments the loss of trust in economic life: “*Without internal forms of solidarity and mutual trust, the market cannot completely fulfill its proper economic function*. And today it is this trust which has ceased to exist, and the loss of trust is a grave loss.” (35) According to the Holy Father, “there is . . . a growing conviction that *business management cannot concern itself only with the interests of the proprietors, but must also assume responsibility for all the other stakeholders who contribute to the life of the business*: the workers, the clients, the suppliers of various elements of production, the community.” (40) Pope Benedict argues that “the intention to do good must not be considered incompatible with the effective capacity to produce goods. Financiers must rediscover the genuinely ethical foundation of their activity, so as not to abuse the sophisticated instruments which can serve to betray the interests of savers. Right intention, transparency, and the search for positive results are mutually compatible and must never be detached from one another.” (65)

Regarding **labor**, the letter re-emphasizes the Church’s continuing support of “workers’ associations” going back to Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. Instead of treating labor unions as a product of a bygone era, Pope Benedict says “the repeated calls . . . for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honored today even more than in the past, as a . . . response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level.” (25) He says it is “important . . . that *labor unions* — which have always been encouraged and supported by the Church — should be open to the new perspectives that are emerging in the world of work,” and warns against the politicization of labor. (64) The letter calls unions to work for the common good in a globalized world, turning “their attention to . . . workers in developing countries where social rights are often violated.” (64) On a related matter, Benedict says, “the dignity of the individual and the

demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner, and that we continue to *prioritize the goal of access to steady employment* for everyone.” (32)

The encyclical offers an extended treatment of “**authentic human development**” and what promotes and threatens it. Benedict insists overcoming hunger “is an ethical imperative for the universal Church The elimination of world hunger has also, in the global era, become a requirement for safeguarding the peace and stability of the planet.” (27) Pope Benedict also calls on “more economically developed nations . . . to allocate larger portions of their gross domestic product to development aid.” (60) The Holy Father explicitly warns against anti-life, anti-poor, and anti-immigrant tendencies, and the ways they threaten human life and dignity and undermine genuine human development and true economic progress. He deplores an “anti-birth mentality” that promotes abortion and birth control, which cannot lead to morally sound development. (28) According to the letter, “To consider population increase as the primary cause of underdevelopment is mistaken, even from an economic point of view.” (44) The pope also emphasizes the complementary duties of subsidiarity and solidarity, overcoming indifference, and avoiding bureaucratic excesses. “*The principle of subsidiarity must remain closely linked to the principle of solidarity and vice versa*, since the former without the latter gives way to social privatism, while the latter without the former gives way to paternalist social assistance that is demeaning to those in need.” (58) He also calls for active participation of the poor themselves and effective involvement of civil society, Catholic groups and mediating institutions in the design and carrying out of development strategies. Poor persons, communities, and nations have the right and duty to actively participate in the planning and implementation of development programs designed to promote human development and reduce poverty.

The encyclical also addresses **immigration**, urging greater cooperation among nations and governments to address its causes and effects. In a message relevant to the debates in our own country, Pope Benedict insists, “Every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected by everyone and in every circumstance.” (62)

There are many **other issues** addressed in the encyclical: the dignity and importance of work; the relationship between human rights and duties; the importance of education; the responsibilities and limitations of government; reductions in social security and programs for those in need; the need to open trade barriers for less developed countries; the uses and abuses of technology; excessive protections on knowledge and intellectual property to the detriment of poorer societies; alternative forms of marketing of products from developing countries (“fair trade products”); the dangers of some biotechnology which manipulates life for profit; better integrated, improved welfare systems with greater involvement of civil society and less waste or fraud; and a substantial discussion of the merits of enterprises which do not fit the traditional economic categories of profit or non-profit.

There are some elements of the encyclical which may confuse American readers. For example, the letter repeatedly refers to an “**economy of gratuitousness.**” For many of us, “gratuitous” suggests excessive, over the top, unnecessary. This not what the Holy Father is suggesting; rather, he is encouraging a spirit of unselfish generosity, of giving without an expected return, of compassion and care for others as an essential part of economic life. There is also an affirmation

of the “birth of pawnbroking” which may confuse some readers, but it refers to the medieval development of a practice to make interest-free loans to the poor. (65)

Those who seek to share and apply the Church’s social teaching can take comfort and great hope in the Holy Father’s **words of encouragement**: “As we contemplate the vast amount of work to be done, we are sustained by our faith that God is present alongside those who come together in his name to work for justice. . . . *God's love calls us to move beyond the limited and the ephemeral, it gives us the courage to continue seeking and working for the benefit of all.*”

The encyclical closes on a note of hope, and a powerful reminder that God is the source of our hope. The practice of “charity in truth” is essentially **a work of faith** which must be anchored in prayer and shaped by Catholic teaching, not any secular ideology or economic theory. The pursuit of a just economy and authentic development “requires a transcendent vision of the person, it needs God.”

No quick and partial review can do justice to the many elements, careful nuances, and challenging directions which make up *Caritas in Veritate*. Reading the full text is essential.

At a time when our society is too often preoccupied with the sensational, distracted by the scandals of the moment, overwhelmed by so much information and so little perspective, the Holy Father’s words in *Caritas in Veritate* haunt and challenge us:

Insignificant matters are considered shocking, yet unprecedented injustices seem to be widely tolerated. While the poor of the world continue knocking on the doors of the rich, the world of affluence runs the risk of no longer hearing. (75)

In the midst of economic crisis, when so many in our own nation and around the world lack decent work and struggle for the necessities of life, when so many fear for what the future might bring for their children or their retirement, our Holy Father offers a moral framework for economic life, a word of hope, a call to solidarity, and a challenge to work together to build an economy which is founded on charity and truth. As Pope Benedict XVI writes in this letter:

The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes *an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future.* (21)

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