

Working-Class Perspectives

Religion, Workers, and the Economy: Caritas in Veritate
July 27, 2009 · 1 Comment

Since the publication of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, Catholic social teachings have provided moral and ethical guideposts for economic behavior. Of particular importance, have been the Papal Encyclicals on the economy that have sought to protect the working class and their institutions in the face of unfettered capitalism. In Pope Benedict XVI's recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, the Church goes a step further by providing a critical analysis of neoliberal economic thought and the problems of globalization while reiterating the need for basic protections for workers and unions.

Caritas in Veritate calls us to avoid the pursuit of narrow, short-term economic interests and practice genuine love founded on truth, beginning with justice and pursuing the common good in our economic choices. The pontiff points to “badly managed and largely speculative financial dealing, large-scale migration of peoples . . . [and] the unregulated exploitation of the earth's resources.” Benedict writes: “the economy needs ethics in order to function correctly — not any ethics whatsoever, but an ethics which is people-centered.”

Benedict laments that “The global market has stimulated . . . a search for areas in which to outsource production at low cost with a view to reducing the prices of many goods . . . Consequently, the market has prompted new forms of competition between States . . . by means of a variety of instruments, including . . . deregulation of the labour market.” This has, in effect, “led to a downsizing of social security systems . . . with consequent grave danger for the rights of workers, for fundamental human rights and for the solidarity associated with the traditional forms of the social State.”

The pope writes explicitly that justice abhors great disparities in wealth and that societies need “to prioritize the goal of access to steady employment for everyone.” Employment, however, needs to be “decent work.” Benedict writes that such work “expresses the essential dignity of every man and woman; work that is freely chosen, effectively associating workers, both men and women, with the development of their community; work that enables the worker to be respected and free from any form of discrimination; work that makes it possible for families to meet their needs and provide schooling for their children, without the children themselves being forced into labour; 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; work that guarantees those who have retired a decent standard of living.”

The encyclical notes that the current market/state logics have constrained union work: “budgetary policies, with cuts in social spending . . . can leave citizens powerless in the face of old and new risks; such powerlessness is increased by the lack of effective protection on the part of . . . trade union organizations (who) experience greater difficulty in carrying out their task of representing the interests of workers, partly because Governments . . . limit the freedom or the negotiating capacity of labour unions. Hence traditional networks of solidarity have more and more obstacles to overcome.”

He affirms the moral importance of unions as an organized voice for the working class. Benedict XVI challenges workers and unions, however, to change the way they “do business” and model ethical agency. The message proclaims that the world desires a new way of thinking and working which goes beyond minor regulatory reform. Solidarity, justice, and the common good must replace the worn out binary logics of markets and States.

Further, labor unions must be more than economic self-interested units caught in the logic of exchange. Benedict dares unions to be in solidarity with workers in developing countries. This role includes advocating for appropriate foreign aid and re-thinking positions on immigration and migrant workers. Benedict exhorts trade unions to re-evaluate their political activities as a quasi-interest group and focus more on “defending . . . exploited and unrepresented workers, whose woeful condition is often ignored by the distracted eye of society.”

This encyclical renews the Church’s commitment to labor unions and worker associations. These working-class organizations, however, do not get off the hook from their responsibility for the current crisis in thinking and action. Worker associations must be engaged in the work of “caritas,” which inherently includes a passion for justice that advances the common good. Put differently, labor organizations must be more involved in social justice unionism rather than just economic self-interest.

Labor associations provide key assets for working people to be heard, respected, and engaged in this new world order of post-financial/industrial capitalism at a critical moment in its trajectory. The current global crisis cries out for a radical new vision. Working people, the very agents of creating wealth and community, like managers and financiers, are called to choose a lifestyle that is wholly ethical and life-giving. This moral way of living is not just about individual choices. Organizational structures and systems must be integrated moral agents. For unions, I wonder if it is time to let the business-unionism model wither away and allow working-class people to re-invent their associations based on “caritas”?

What is the essence of this “caritas?” “Solidarity is clearly a specific and profound form of economic democracy,” the pope writes. “Solidarity is first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone.” Solidarity is both the end and the means. We are gifts to each other. Working-class persons and labor unions must be leaders in weaving “networks of charity.” Labor movements have to be models of a “caritas” called justice. The world can’t wait much longer.

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