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Caritas in veritate: A New Vision of Global Economics

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On July 7, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI issued *Caritas in veritate*. This was his third encyclical of his pontificate, and the first social encyclical in the Catholic Church since 1991.

An encyclical is a moral exhortation written by the pope to the faithful and men and women of good will, inviting them to reflect deeply on a temporal or spiritual issue. *Caritas in veritate* focuses on global economics. It invites us to envision a world where greed and selfish consumption are replaced by Christian love and truth.

At the beginning of the new encyclical, the Holy Father calls on us to rethink basic ideas like charity. He says:

“I cannot ‘give’ what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice. If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them.” (Par. 6)

How many of our great museums, theaters and art centers have been “philanthropic” gifts from people known in their times as “robber barons.” Yet, these acts of “charity” were gifts to the people who were unjustly deprived of living wages, and dignified work and living conditions.

Today, many developing countries are dependent on humanitarian aid from developed countries. However, these dependent countries are also the world’s producers of many basic commodities. Since so little is paid for these commodities, foreign aid (national charity) is sent by developed nations to make living conditions bearable. Pope Benedict stresses that this “charity” in no way makes up for the lack of just remuneration for these commodities in the first place.

Pope Benedict calls on the world to rethink its fundamental ideas of economics, and move from one based on pure market principles of minimizing costs and maximizing profits, to one built on the dignity of every human being, and a principle of justice that guards that dignity.

On this Labor Day, I would like to share some of the important ideas he has about workers and unions.

Pope Benedict is painfully aware that many forces conspire to prevent workers from exercising their natural right to form worker associations. He specifically notes some governments who, in an effort to be globally competitive, have limited the ability of trade unions to represent workers and promote their interests. In spite of this, he reminds everyone of the Church’s unbroken doctrine which promotes unions. He writes:

“Through the combination of social and economic change, 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 capacity of labour unions. Hence traditional networks of solidarity have more and more obstacles to overcome. The repeated calls issued within the Church's social doctrine, beginning with *Rerum Novarum*, for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honoured today even more than in the past, as a prompt and far sighted response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level.” (Par. 25)

However, models of unionism that focuses exclusively on a specific group of workers, or with workers from only one country, are no longer tenable in the globalized economic realities. In the new economic order, unions must recognize that they have an essential role to play not only for the economic development of their members, but of all workers. Pope Benedict states:

“...(I)t is appropriate to recall how important it is that labour 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 . . . The global context in which work takes place also demands that national labour unions, which tend to limit themselves to defending the interests of their registered members, should turn their attention to those outside their membership, and in particular to workers in developing countries where social rights are often violated.” (Par. 64)

Finally, Pope Benedict’s draws our attention to the fact that unemployment and underemployment threaten basic human dignity.

“No consideration of the problems associated with development could fail to highlight the direct link between poverty and unemployment. In many cases, poverty results from a violation of the dignity of human work, either because work opportunities are limited (through unemployment or underemployment), or ‘because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family’. For this reason, on 1 May 2000 on the occasion of the *Jubilee of Workers*, my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II issued an appeal for ‘a global coalition in favour of ‘decent work.’...In this way, he gave a strong moral impetus to this objective, seeing it as an aspiration of families in every country of the world. (Par. 63)

Jesus came into the world to proclaim a new Kingdom of God. A place where the last will be first and the first will be last. A place where the basic assumptions of life are turned on their heads. In reading Pope Benedict’s new social encyclical, many have rejected what he has said as a pipe dream, or an exercise in utopia thought. For them, the market rules are fixed and unchangeable. However, as a Christian minister, I continually think of the adage by the Catholic philosopher, Peter Maurin: “Lets build a society where it is easier to be good.”

Pope Benedict gives a vision of that society to Catholics, and men and women of good will.

