

Caritas in Veritate: Pope Benedict's Blue-Print for Development

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Pope Benedict's long awaited social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, was released to coincide with the 2009 G8 summit in Rome. The aim of this encyclical, his third, was to commemorate Pope Paul VI's 1967 social encyclical *Populorum Progressio* and, moreover, to apply the teaching of that encyclical to the modern day (§8). This 'commemoration and updating' is the normal way in which Catholic Social Teaching has developed over the years. As the Holy Father notes, many of the social encyclicals of his predecessors have been commemorations of Leo XIII's landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), such as *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), and *Centesimus Annus* (1991); encyclicals which have unpacked its teaching and applied it to situation of their 'today', making developments where necessary to address new circumstances. Benedict calls *Populorum Progressio* the *Rerum Novarum* of the modern age (§8) – praise indeed – because it addresses the central social question of our age. If the most acute question of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century was the labour question – the relationship between worker and capitalist – the question of our age is the *true meaning of human development*. This was at the very heart of Pope Paul VI's considerations in *Populorum Progressio*. The task, therefore, that Pope Benedict sets himself in *Caritas in Veritate* is to take what Pope Paul said about authentic development and apply it to the situation of today and, in particular, to what is new about the current situation, namely *globalization*. These two themes, then, are placed centre stage: development and globalization.

It would be wrong to claim that this is the first time the Church has considered the question of globalization. The theme of the International Community, which is part of any consideration of political globalization, has been a constant concern since *Pacem in Terris* (1963) and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). John Paul II also considered globalization several times.¹ Nonetheless, *Caritas in Veritate* is by far and away the most detailed and sustained consideration to date. Globalization is understood as a phenomenon where, in the realms of economics, politics, and culture, national borders are becoming less significant, while the global dimension of these takes precedence; and this is something that has become a reality only in the last twenty years or so.

According to the Holy Father, the phenomenon of globalization is itself neither good nor bad. He notes that some poor countries have greatly benefited from it economically (notably China) but that, until present, the rich countries, and not the poor, have been the major beneficiaries (§42). Globalization is not deterministic but, since it results from human freedom and choice, open to being guided for the common good (§42). Nonetheless, there is a real danger of de-personalization in the process of globalization and, preying on fallen human nature, it can lend itself to individualism and the pursuit of private gain over the common good (§40).

Populorum Progressio proclaims a very holistic definition of development, which Pope Benedict vigorously reaffirms throughout *Caritas in Veritate*. Paul VI had noted that progress drives us to

¹ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 58; *Address on Globalization to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences*, April 27, 2001.

“do more, know more and have more *in order to be more*” (§18).² Authentic development, therefore, must be “integral, that is, it has to promote the good of every man and of the whole man” (§18).³ This definition means that economically advanced nations cannot claim to be developed when they remain morally and spiritual bereft, nor while they are prepared to tolerate inhuman disparities of economic wellbeing both within their own nation, and between themselves and poorer nations.

Fully embracing this holistic definition, the heart of *Caritas in Veritate* is an examination of those factors impeding development in our globalized world. It is not an easy read, since Pope Benedict employs his penetrating intellect to complex questions, but it is assuredly profound. Without pretending to be exhaustive, I would say he highlights three major impediments to an authentic human development. These are: a crisis in morality, a technological world view, and the near exclusion of God from society.

A moral crisis

The great advances in technology over the forty years since *Populorum Progressio* have failed to fulfill Pope Paul VI’s hope for a holistic development not because of a lack of technical achievement, but because of a lack of parallel moral development, or rather, because of the moral malaise that has gripped the Western world. The crisis in development, and indeed the current crisis, is at root a *moral* crisis, because it is the product of a mentality that divorces economic life from ethical considerations and promotes greed and selfishness.

It is an axiom of Catholic Social Teaching that the Church does not offer technical solutions to social problems but rather presents general principles for the human ordering of society, respecting the “legitimate autonomy of temporal affairs”;⁴ but this “legitimate autonomy” is not an autonomy from morality, since the economy is only part of human life and must be properly integrated into the whole. In addition, the market, good as it is, does not have within it the mechanisms to guide itself to achieve universal and holistic development; on the contrary, it must be guided by ethics if it is to serve authentic human development. To place economics outside morality is to fall once again into the modern error of divorcing truth from freedom, since it implies a concept of the market as utterly free from the constraint of ethical truth. John Paul II notes that Leo XIII had already pinpointed this divorce as *the* root of all errors in social questions.⁵

Pope Benedict points out that the re-subordination of economics to morality is even more necessary in the age of globalization since the State has lost much of its power to legally curb the excesses of the market, because companies now commonly operate on an international plane (§24). We can no longer rely on the State to impose a moral veneer on the market by

² cf. Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 6.

³ cf. Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 14.

⁴ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 36.

⁵ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 17. John Paul II points to Leo XIII’s encyclical *Libertas Praestantissimum* (1888), and also to the fact that the back-drop of *Rerum Novarum* (1891) is the claim of capitalists to be free from moral constraint in dealing with workers, thereby denying the truth of their inherent dignity as persons. Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 31.

redistribution of wealth; the market must be ethical from within (§39). In this way, globalization is proving what Catholic Social Teaching has been saying for a hundred years!

The responsibility for reforming the market from within lies not merely with the producer, but more and more with the consumer also, whose power is often enhanced by the process of globalization. Benedict reminds us that every purchase we make is an ethical decision, or at least ought to be, and cannot be based on merely economic factors (§66). He reminds us of the words of John Paul II that we must develop new life-styles “in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness, and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings, and investments” (§51).⁶

In several places, the Holy Father points to the profound connection between personal morality and social morality, noting that it is a delusion to think that we can sacrifice personal morality to a selfish and relativistic individualism and then hope that social ethics will somehow flourish. This is true not only of development but also of another issue of our times that *Caritas in Veritate* considers, namely the environment. Benedict notes that the environmental question is fundamentally a *moral* question. He says that “the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society,” because environmental degradation rests upon a *selfish* exploitation of the world’s resources in which the rich pay little heed to the needs of the poor or to future generations (§51). In this way the principle of the universal destination of goods – that God wills all men a share in his gift of creation – is ignored.

Of particular importance in this regard is the connection between *life issues* and social morality. The Holy Father draws our attention to the fact that when the life of an unborn child is not respected in the womb of its own mother it is very unlikely that human life will be respected in the poor (§15). If the most primal solidarity can be undermined – the solidarity of mother and child – it cannot hope to flourish on a global scale. The same is also true of the environment. If *human* life is not respected in its most vulnerable state, what lasting motivation can there be to preserve lesser creatures (§51)? Benedict even suggests that an *openness to life* is a prerequisite for respecting the environment – rather than a threat – since it encourages an attitude that creation is good, whereas an anti-life attitude promotes having over being and hence fosters consumerism. In a similar way, an anti-life mentality erodes social solidarity and undermines development because it tends to selfishness. The Holy Father points out that, “the acceptance of life strengthens moral fiber and makes people capable of mutual help” (§28).

In putting morality at the centre of the social question, Benedict is placing himself within the constant teaching of the Popes who have consistently pointed out that the solution to social problem lies not so much in a structural reformation of society as in a moral reformation.⁷ As Benedict said at the beginning of his pontificate with reference to the environment, “the external deserts in the world are growing because the internal deserts have become so vast.”⁸

⁶ cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 36.

⁷ cf. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, 62; Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 127-137; John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 212-257.

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Inauguration Homily*, 24 April 2005.

A technological world view

Alongside *Populorum Progressio*, the Holy Father pays tribute to Pope Paul VI's Apostolic Letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (§14). That letter warned about placing a utopian hope in political ideologies that sacrifice morality. In our age, the dominant ideology is no longer Marxism or liberal capitalism but fascination with technology. Already in *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI had warned that “the reign of technology—technocracy, as it is called—can cause as much harm to the world of tomorrow as liberalism did to the world of yesteryear.”⁹

Benedict, while paying testimony to the significant contribution of technology to economic development, warns us about a technocratic mentality that claims a totalitarian monopoly on the truth, since truth becomes what is possible to technology. Hence, if human-animal hybrids are technologically possible then *ipso facto* it is morally acceptable to make them (§70). Obviously, this leads to a chronic moral underdevelopment.

Moreover, a technocratic mentality thinks that what is *not within the scope of science* is not real. This excludes whole realms of the human person, and consequently human development, from consideration. Not only morality, but also the spiritual dimension of man, is excluded or reduced to the realm of emotions or even neurology (§76); but seeing as man is essentially spiritual, such exclusion totally does away with the possibility of authentic human development.

Interestingly, in addressing the technocratic mentality, Benedict points to another encyclical of Paul VI, namely *Humanae Vitae* (1968). Contraception is fundamentally a technocratic mentality that defines human progress in terms the extension of power over nature (§15). It disregards the wider picture, in which human development must be defined in terms of self-gift and communion (§53).

Yet, it is in the realm of *bio-technology* where the technocratic and Catholic world views clash most dramatically. This is the real “battleground in today’s cultural struggle between the supremacy of technology and human moral responsibility” (74), because it is *par excellence* in this field that what is possible is thereby declared permissible. Moreover, by bio-technology man has gained power over the origins of human life. This can have a profoundly negative impact on his self-image because it fosters “a materialistic and mechanistic understanding of human life” (75), thereby degrading man. Since anthropology – who man is and what his destiny consists in – is the foundation of all moral action it is not surprising that this has a knock-on effect on social action. Again, demonstrating the profound connection between life issues and social ethics, Benedict explains: “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 those knocks, on account of a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human” (§75).

The exclusion of God from society

Intoxicated by his power over the origins of human life, man has another reason to reject God. It also fuels a false notion that social progress in the age of globalization requires the exclusion of

⁹ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, 34.

God from the public realm, since technology and not God now ensure a brighter future.¹⁰ Furthermore, religion is seen as putting the breaks on progress and, anyway, religion is socially divisive. Pope Benedict argues persuasively that such exclusion is detrimental to development for a host of reasons (§29, §56).

First, religious belief brings vitality to society because those with faith have energy for life. The stagnation of atheistic communism bears eloquent testimony to this.

Second, religion claims a transcendent dimension to humanity that is the only sure foundation of his dignity. It is, in this way, the bulwark of all human rights, itself a fundament for authentic development. In contrast, the religious intolerance of the modern State, on account of it promoting or even imposing practical atheism, is becoming so marked that it constitutes a violation of the right to religious freedom; and this right is the crown and goal of all other human rights since it protects the ultimate purpose of human life, communion with God.¹¹

It is a truism that when God is eclipsed then so is man. Man is only great because he is made in the image of a God who is greater. Consequently, atheism is not only an error about God but inevitably about man also: “without God man neither knows which way to go, nor even understands who he is” (§78). If man has no transcendent dimension then each man must fight to gain his heaven on earth. The result is a consumerist outlook on life, where every other man is a threat to one's own share of material happiness. Ultimately, human beings are created for communion with God, and the exclusion of this from human life is the greatest form of underdevelopment.¹²

Not all religions are equal, however, in the contribution they make to society. Christianity, that professes God as a communion of persons, provides the ideal model for human society (§54). In the process of cultural globalization there is the danger of religious relativism and forms of religious syncretism (such as the New Age) that promote an individualism that is harmful to society (§55).

There are some who claim Christianity is a major obstacle to the protection of the environment because it preaches a God who places man above the rest of creation and orders him to subdue to earth (Gn 1:28). Benedict, obviously, refutes this, and points out that only the Christian vision of creation can hold the middle ground between a (so called) cosmocentricism and consumerism (§48). Cosmocentricism turns creation into a museum not to be touched and makes man just another species. Sometimes, especially under the influence of the New Age, it goes as far as divinizing creation. On the other hand, a technological mentality views creation in a purely materialistic way, opening the way for its consumerist exploitation. Both these are excluded by the Christian vision of man as God's steward of creation.

¹⁰ Christian faith has been replaced by “faith in progress” (Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 17).

¹¹ John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 47.

¹² Exclusion of God from the public realm also drives a wedge between faith and reason. Benedict points out the unreasonableness of this because, by *a priori* excluding what faith can offer, it amounts to a capitulation on the part of reason in its *raison d'être*: the search for truth (§74). This condemns reason to futility since reason cannot lay grasp of the ultimate truths of human life; then, despairing of attaining its goal, reason inevitably falls into nihilism (cf. John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, 46).

The solution: *Caritas in Veritate*

So much for the impediments to authentic development! What of the solutions? Of course the Holy Father offers many useful comments but at the heart of the solution is love in truth, *caritas in veritate*.

True charity is by nature gratuitous and this, Pope Benedict explains, is what is missing from economic life: “the spirit of gift” (§37). Economic life, to be sure, is built on commutative justice but it cannot stop there. Only charity allows us to go beyond strict justice and towards a solidarity without which *universal* development cannot be achieved. On the other hand, without possessing the truth about man – and this truth can only come to us from both reason and faith – it is impossible to know what his development consists in; then *holistic* development is impossible. Ultimately, it is not a matter of just charity *and* truth, but of charity *in* truth, since “deeds without knowledge are blind, and knowledge without love is sterile” (§30), but, when the two are married, we have the virtue of *wisdom*. This is the ability to judge things “in the light of [man’s] first beginnings and his final ends”; it is the bird’s eye view of reality, the capacity to see the ‘whole picture’; it is God’s vision of reality (§30-31). Only with this wisdom can we hope to guide the advance of technology and globalization so that true development is realized.¹³

Far from being pessimistic, Pope Benedict understands the current economic crisis as “an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future” (§21). Twenty-years before, John Paul II noted, in *Centesimus Annus*, that the collapse of communism offered both East and West a moment of opportunity to re-orientate economic life in a more human way (§23).¹⁴ For the most part, it was not taken. Let us pray that this time *wiser* minds prevail.

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¹³ Cf. “Our era needs such wisdom more than bygone ages if the discoveries made by man are to be further humanized. For the future of the world stands in peril unless wiser men are forthcoming” (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 15).

¹⁴ Cf. John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 42.