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Encyclical seen breaking new ground

by Catholic News Service

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Pope Benedict XVI's new encyclical, "Caritas in Veritate" ("Charity in Truth"), breaks new ground on such topics as microfinancing, intellectual property rights, globalization and the concept of putting one's wealth at the service of the poor, according to Catholic scholars and church leaders.

In interviews with Catholic News Service and in statements about the encyclical released July 7 at the Vatican, commentators said the more than 30,000-word document takes on a variety of issues not previously addressed in such a comprehensive way.

"I was surprised ... at how wide-ranging it is," said Kirk Hanson, a business ethics professor at Santa Clara University in California and executive director of the Jesuit-run university's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. "It's not just an updating of 'Populorum Progressio'" ("The Progress of Peoples"), the 1967 social encyclical by Pope Paul VI, he added.

Hanson said he also was struck by Pope Benedict's concept of "gratuitousness" or "giftedness," which reminds people "not to consider wealth ours alone" and asks the wealthy to "be ready to put (their money) in service for the good of others."

The encyclical is "a plea for the wealthiest on the planet to put their wealth toward the development of peoples," he said. "In many ways, (Microsoft founder and philanthropist) Bill Gates would be the poster child for this document."

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has donated billions of dollars for health and development programs worldwide, as well as for education and housing programs in the United States.

Terrence W. Tilley, who chairs the theology department at Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York and is immediate past president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, said one unique aspect of the encyclical is Pope Benedict's "vision that all flows from the love of God."

"It's unusual as a theological reflection on social justice," he said. "But that's what holds it all together."

Tilley said the encyclical makes a "pedagogical attempt to get people out of the mindset that charity is just giving money to those poor people over there." The pope rejects such a "dismissive attitude," he said.

The Fordham professor also said he was "delighted to see the strength with which (Pope Benedict) supports labor organizations." But the pope also stresses "the responsibility of both management ... and labor to take care of and be responsible to other than their own constituencies," he added.

Tilley said that although the document is "full of principles it really attempts to get in touch with empirical realities."

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Bishop Michael P. Driscoll of Boise, Idaho, said that aspect of the encyclical will be particularly helpful in these "difficult times for the poor in Idaho or anywhere around the world."

"The Holy Father, who has seen the terrible toll these times have taken, has given us a new vision on which to build a just economy, where all can thrive, not merely the rich and powerful," he said. "We cannot achieve true prosperity unless it is built upon a foundation of justice and care for all, including the poor."

In a different part of the country, Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron of Detroit said people in southeast Michigan "are living through profound changes in the social and economic fabric of our community."

"All of us citizens, and especially our leaders, need to make wise and farsighted decisions in order to lay the foundation for the better future we want to hand on to succeeding generations," he said. "The Holy Father's new encyclical, as the latest application of the church's social teaching, offers an important resource for us in the great project we are engaged in.

"In particular, it will give us guidance, 'signposts' as it were, about how to build a society that is grounded in the foundational truths about the human person, wisdom for a future that advances the true dignity and real progress of every individual," Archbishop Vigneron added.

Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl of Washington said the encyclical is "very welcome and particularly timely as our political and economic leaders struggle to address the devastating global economic crisis."

The document also notes that "responsibility does not stop at a nation's borders nor does it fall solely to political leaders," the archbishop said. "Universal human truths about human dignity transcend geographic, economic and political boundaries."

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said the encyclical provides helpful guidance for finding answers to the social, economic and moral questions of the contemporary world in a search for truth.

The document offers sound reflections on the vocation of human development as well as on the moral principles on which a global economy must be based, he added.

"This encyclical offers a powerful warning to the modern world -- especially the West," said Steve Schneck, director of the Life Cycle Institute at The Catholic University of America in Washington. "It speaks to the dangers of commerce, popular culture and technology unhinged from a vision for the common good informed by charity."

Vincent Miller, associate professor of theology at Georgetown University in Washington, said Pope Benedict "rejects the dominant vision of economics as abstract, technological efficiency" and "calls for a revisioning of economics as an essentially moral undertaking."

"His complex thought does not fit easily into our political map, but there is no doubt that Benedict is much more critical of contemporary economics than any political party in our country," added Miller, who was recently named to the Gudorf chair in Catholic theology and culture at the University of Dayton in Ohio.

Andrew Abela, an associate professor of marketing who chairs the department of business and marketing at Catholic University, said the pope's main message is "that spiritual development is essential to development, and that 'even in the most difficult and complex times, besides recognizing what is happening, we must above all else turn to God's love.'"

"I hope this core message is not drowned out in the politicizing of this encyclical that will inevitably happen," he added.

Abela said he was "intrigued by the pope putting forward the example" of Economy of Communion, a project launched in 1991 by Focolare movement founder Chiara Lubich that brings together more than 700 companies worldwide committed to pursuing a "higher goal" than just profit.

"I think that the Economy of Communion has the potential to revolutionize the relationship between workers and employers in positive ways," he added.

Officials of International Cooperation for Development and Solidarity, an international alliance of Catholic development agencies known by the acronym CIDSE, hailed the encyclical as helpful to their work, saying that it might convince wealthier countries to "make up for broken promises" to the developing world.

"Political leadership in resolving the (global economic) crisis is lacking and developing countries continue to suffer the direst consequences," said Bernd Nilles, secretary-general of the organization based in Brussels, Belgium. "It's time for true reform and solidarity in the fight against global poverty."

"Economic processes should serve justice, one of the two dimensions of true human development set out by the pope," said Rene Grotenhuis, president of CIDSE and director of Dutch Cordaid. "Every economic decision has moral consequences."

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