

Caritas in Veritate: much to offer, but needs perspective

Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, OMI | Aug. 3, 2009



In *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), the third encyclical of Benedict XVI's papacy, the pope deals with the present challenges to humanity and the church and updates Catholic social teaching with references to them. He studies issues such as the ethics of business, globalization, the role of technology, the right to life, sexuality and family life, abortion, euthanasia, migration, labour unions, outsourcing of production, consumerism, mass media and communications, climate change and dangers to the environment and the future of humanity on planet earth.

Reflecting on the present economic crisis, the encyclical offers some guidelines for the ethical conduct of business and prevention of abuses such as speculative use of financial resources for short term profits. Stressing that economic life has been detached from ethical considerations, he calls for a new way of understanding business enterprise.

Noting the great increase in wealth in the world alongside the increasing inequality among countries and within countries, Pope Benedict urges a reform of the United Nations and likewise of economic institutions and of international finance. So that the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth.

On all these issues he recalls the teachings of the church since 1891 and reflects on the lessons of contemporary challenges. He points out the dangers of attachment to ideologies, the evils of corruption in political and economic life, of relativism and totalitarianism, of the need of religious freedom and inter-religious dialogue, and of action together for the common good of all, universal fraternity.

Analysing the positive and negative potentialities of modern developments like science, technology, globalization, modernity, in these issues the pope tends towards a middle path away from ideologies, and fundamentalisms. The crises humanity faces are challenges and opportunities for us to re-plan our journey, with a positive vision for the future with confidence in the God of love.

Caritas (love) is more than law and justice, the pope writes, while seeing justice as a primary requirement of charity. I cannot give what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice.

This encyclical is a valuable document, but has some missing dimensions. It does not analyse the way the

modern world has been set up as an association of Christians with governments and colonial powers, especially from 1492 to 1945. The pope seems to overlook the inadequacies of the church in the course of history.

The Catholic church, it needs to be recalled, was closely associated with the invasion of the lands of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Oceania. In addition to plundering the riches of these lands, the Western invaders virtually exterminated almost the whole of these people in North America. It is estimated that there were 80 million Native Americans in these lands in 1492, but by 1600 their numbers had been reduced to one million due to wars and diseases brought by the invaders.

The map of the modern world was made mainly by European (colonial) expansion which was by invasion and capture of weaker peoples territories, by expelling the natives further into the interior, by their murder and virtual extermination, by wars among colonial powers, and even by purchase of vast areas of land from colonisers, usually after their conflicts.

Thus the purchase of a portion of the United States from France in 1803, of an area covering 2,144,000 sq km / 828,000 sq mi, including the present-day states of Louisiana, Missouri, Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Oklahoma. The price paid was \$15 million, or roughly 4 cents an acre. The purchase doubled the size of the US and has been called the "greatest land deal in history."

Texas was bought from Mexico in 1848 for \$15,000,000. Mexico ceded to the United States nearly all the territory now included in the states of New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, California, Texas, and western Colorado.

Alaska was bought for \$ 7,200,000 from Russia in 1867. Thus, the US was bought and formed in large measure for \$37 million. Is this legal according to international law, or even rational reasoning? Are these not sales of territory conquered or stolen from previous occupiers such as the native Americans? Is the US to control such amount of territory for all time or even during the rest of the 21st century, whatever the demand for land and food may be in the rest of the world as in Asia and Africa?

Similar histories could be written concerning the formation of many other colonial enterprises such as the states of Canada, of Latin America, Russia, Australia and New Zealand. Africa was carved out into European colonial possessions at the Council of Berlin in 1885.

This is what passes for the present world order, legitimized by the United Nations, set up with their national borders as inviolable. It consolidates centuries of European victories, pillage, colonization, exploitation, and marginalization of other peoples. The structural adjustment policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank do not call for structural improvements in relation to population and land. Only factors such as capital, resources and technology are considered mobile in the so called "free market" and "free world". The present distribution of land among the peoples is taken as legal and unchangeable, except with their consent.

The encyclical refers to migration of peoples but does not consider how the world map, as it is, was formed by European migration in the past few centuries to the rest of the world which were their colonies. "Between 1800 and 1930 the White proportion of the world's population expanded from 22 to 35 percent" [p 209 *Times History of the World*]

Fifty-five million people migrated from Europe between 1846 and 1924. Is this not the greatest migration and settlement in human history? In this period Chinese, Indians and Japanese also moved, but much less and often as laborers. It would be good for present peoples of European origin to reflect on how they were able to migrate in the 19th century when their population was increasing and they had problems like the Irish potato famine.

How have Christian peoples and countries treated problems of global migration? Have they practiced genuine

love and openness towards others in need? The new encyclical does not deal with this major issue that will be crucial in the 21st century with foreseeable demographic trends.

Reform of the United Nations proposed by the pope is a necessary agenda for the world to meet current problems. To it can be added considerations of how the present nations were formed. How much are they the fruit of (in)justice, not to mention lack of love. Do not the colonial powers owe a debt of reparation to the exploited indigenous peoples? The historical record of Christianity would be much worse if the encyclical took into account the crusades, the inquisition, the intolerance of theological dissent, denial of religious freedom, and the wars of religion.

The church needs to analyse how the message of love of God and neighbor revealed by Jesus Christ seems to have been gravely distorted during many centuries until the Second Vatican Council in 1962-1965. Further, has not the truth of history been so overlooked by Christians and the church to forget the harm they have done to other peoples, other religions and nature itself during nearly a millennium? We can all profit by reflecting on the hundred and more apologies of the Pope John Paul II to the groups thus offended.

Pope John Paul did not, however, take these apologies to their practical consequences of a good and integral confession and penance including: to assess the extent of the damage, reparation, compensation, firm purpose of amendment, avoiding occasions of sin. The tone of the encyclical would be less self justifying and more self purifying if it would undertake a good analysis of these historical realities, seeing also the neo-colonial re-domination of the world by the super powers and their multinationals. Can not the universities, seminaries and research institutes of Christians and civil society help us all in seeking the truth and action of justice and charity to build a better world as the pope desires?

The church would have much to learn and gain from a serious dialogue on these issues with activists and scholars of other faiths and cultures, who have a not so pleasant experience and memory of powerful Christian powers during the past five centuries. As the pope mentions, the human community can get together to build a civilization of love and truth in this century, which commenced with a 'war against terror' since March 2003.

In his inauguration homily, Pope Benedict XVI said: 'My real program of governance is not to do my own will, not to pursue my own ideas, but to listen with the whole church, to the word and the will of the Lord, to be guided by Him, so that He himself will lead the church at this hour of our history.'

This reflection shows that the Catholic church has had to correct herself on several issues during the course of the centuries. Some issues include the claim that the Catholic church is the sole possessor of the truth about God, ignoring that the Spirit of God is present to all persons, cultures and historical events and processes and unique and necessary path to human salvation.

The church has shown it could:

- marginalize women in church and society and exclude them from decision making.
- violence as a means of spreading the faith,
- adopt authoritarian ways to suppress dissent on doctrines.
- tolerate and even encourage colonial imperialist policies and profit from them.
- teach that the way to human salvation depends on amends made to God the Father for the sins of humanity by Jesus Christ by his death on the cross.
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This view has overlooked the social mission of Jesus in working for the liberation of the poor and oppressed.

The church accordingly stressed works of charity but neglected action for social justice and the reform of the social structures within countries and the world at large.

On this basis Christian spirituality encouraged humble acceptance of domination by others, as a way of discipleship of Jesus who accepted suffering even unto death on the cross. This is said, to make amends to the Father for the sins of humanity. Due to this perspective, the spiritual life was interpreted more as a flight from the world rather than as a commitment to realise the kingdom of God on earth.

During 15 centuries, until recently, the accent in Christian spirituality was more on charity and works of mercy rather than social justice. There was no insistence on the need of reforming the unjust world order which Christians helped to set up. Thus, even at the beginning of the 21st century, Euro-Americans, controlling most of the land and resources of the world, forgetful of the core teaching of Jesus on sharing with the needy.

In the process the Catholic liturgy was made more a ritual than an expression and experience of the love of God and neighbor. Thousands of Holy Masses can be celebrated in a country without much serious reflection on and impact on social justice in a world of great inequalities and armed conflicts. Prayer and meditation can be, de facto, indifferent to unjust social realities and to gross violations of human rights.

It would be beneficial if pluralist groups would dialogue on these issues for our common good.

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