

The pope's social encyclical

Richard McBrien | Aug. 10, 2009 Essays in Theology

The first impression one has of Pope Benedict XVI's new social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth"), is that it is long and dense -- too much so in both categories to expect the document to be read by a significant minority of Catholics, not to mention other Christians and non-Christians.

The encyclical is very much the work of someone with many years of careful research, writing, and teaching in his background. Few would question the opinion that Benedict XVI is the most gifted theologian ever to occupy the Chair of St. Peter.

But what of this latest encyclical, apart from its length (some 30,000 words, which is equivalent to a small book) and the intellectual challenges it would surely pose to many non-specialist readers?

One well-regarded Vatican expert noted that there is something in the encyclical for "both left and right to cheer ... and something for them to be grumpy about. Liberals will likely applaud Benedict's call for robust government intervention in the economy and his endorsement of labor unions, while conservatives will appreciate his unyielding opposition to abortion, birth control and gay marriage..." (John Allen, "[Pope proposes a 'Christian humanism' for the global economy](#) [1]," the *National Catholic Reporter* on-line, 7/7/09).

I would register a mild reservation. There is far more in this encyclical for liberals to cheer than for conservatives to applaud. With a few significant exceptions, *Caritas in Veritate* is in the left-of-center tradition of Catholic social teachings, from the time of Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("Of New Things") in 1891 to the present..

To use John Allen's own list in a slightly modified fashion, in addition to its strong support for labor unions the encyclical warns against the "downsizing" of social security systems, supports the combating of hunger and poverty by increasingly aggressive governmental action, favors a full-employment strategy, advocates protection of the earth's environment, calls for international aid programs that involve a larger share of a wealthy nation's gross national product, urges reduction in energy consumption while investing in renewable forms of energy, supports the opening of global markets to the products of developing countries, especially agricultural, calls for greater investment in education and more generous immigration policies, a strong internal authority "with real teeth," and closer, tougher regulation of markets and financial institutions.

Pope Benedict XVI also comments on the current worldwide economic crisis, citing "the damaging effects ? of badly managed and largely speculative financial dealing, large-scale migration of peoples, often provoked by some particular circumstance and then given insufficient attention, [and] the unregulated exploitation of the earth's resources" (n. 21).

To be sure, the encyclical also repeats the Catholic church's moral opposition to abortion, contraception, and similar issues, but these concerns do not occupy a large portion of the document's overall content.

What is striking about this new encyclical is its unstinting and repeated praise for Pope Paul VI's 1967

encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* ("The Progress of Peoples"), which in political terms was perhaps even further to the left than Pope Benedict's.

In that encyclical Paul VI highlighted and deplored the gap between rich and poor nations, and reminded readers that the goods of the earth are intended by God for everyone. The new name for peace, he wrote, is "development" -- a theme which Benedict XVI elaborates upon with renewed emphasis and fundamental agreement.

Pope Benedict XVI even refers to *Populorum Progressio* as "the *Rerum Novarum* of the modern age" (n. 8) -- the now-classic encyclical from which all subsequent social encyclicals had taken their own measure.

Thus, Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* ("The Fortieth Year") appeared 40 years after Pope Leo XIII's. Pope Paul VI's *Octogesima Adveniens* ("The Eightieth Anniversary") was published 80 years after *Rerum Novarum*, and Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* ("The Hundredth Year") provided a centenary observance of Leo XIII's encyclical.

Some commentators had criticized Pope Benedict XVI's previous encyclicals on charity for their failure to link it more clearly with the virtue of justice. He does so in this new encyclical, and early on in the document, where he insists that "justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it." The endnote reference is to both Paul VI's encyclical and to Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 69.

Later in his new encyclical Benedict XVI cites Paul VI's apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* ("Of Proclaiming the Gospel," also known as "On Evangelization in the Modern World"), to the effect that Christ's charity, through works of justice, peace, and development, "is part and parcel of evangelization," and that the church's social doctrine is "an essential element of evangelization" (n. 15).

More next week.

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