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The pope's social encyclical -- Part 2

Richard McBrien | Aug. 17, 2009 Essays in Theology

Pope Benedict XVI's new social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth"), is in the tradition of previous social encyclicals, going back more than a century to Pope Leo XIII's landmark encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* ("Of New Things"), published in 1891.

What is remarkable about this latest social encyclical is that Benedict XVI suggests that the new starting-point for Catholic social teaching in this modern age is Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* ("The Progress of Peoples"), published in 1967 (see n. 8). Indeed, *Caritas in Veritate* is filled with praise for Paul VI and for the encyclical he authored.

While it is surely the case that Pope Benedict XVI reaffirms traditional Catholic teaching on various issues related to sexuality, marriage, and human reproduction, the preponderance of attention is given to other elements in Catholic social teaching.

Thus, the encyclical rises strongly to the defense of labor unions, which are still vehemently opposed by large numbers of politically conservative Catholics. The pope notes that unions "have always been encouraged and supported by the Church" (n. 64).

He also acknowledges the great difficulty that labor organizations encounter "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 labor unions" (n. 25).

The pope cites 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," and insists that these statements of papal support "must therefore be honored 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."

"In comparison with the casualties of industrial society in the past," *Caritas in Veritate* continues, "unemployment today provokes new forms of economic marginalization, and the current crisis can only make this situation worse. Being out of work or dependent on public or private assistance for a prolonged period undermines the freedom and creativity of the person and his family and social relationships, causing great psychological and spiritual suffering. I would like to remind everyone, especially governments engaged in boosting the world's economic and social assets, that the *primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity* ... " (italics in original).

Later the pope writes: "Lowering the level of protection accorded to the rights of workers, or abandoning mechanisms of wealth redistribution in order to increase the country's international competitiveness, hinder the achievement of lasting development" (n. 32).

Pope Benedict also chastises those who think that a "market economy has an inbuilt need for a quota of poverty and underdevelopment in order to function at its best." On the contrary, the market is not merely "an engine for

wealth creation." It must also function "as a means of pursuing justice through redistribution" (n. 35).

In the most recent presidential campaign in the United States, the concept of redistribution was hung around the neck of one of the major-party candidates as if he were a Socialist. If so, that term of opprobrium would apply to Pope Benedict XVI as well.

But the new encyclical is not without its critics on the left. In a statement released by Jon O'Brien, president of Catholics for Choice (7/7/09), the encyclical was applauded for its "dedication to improving development," while at the same time faulted for "some serious omissions."

According to Mr. O'Brien the encyclical "fails to show a true compassion for women, who often are the last to benefit from development aid."

While decrying infant mortality, Pope Benedict XVI "never mentions maternal mortality [and] fails to fully address the impact of HIV and AIDS on developing economies...."

The bulk of the press release focuses on issues that have always been at the heart of Catholics for Choice's moral agenda: family planning and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The statement criticizes not only the encyclical, but the Catholic hierarchy generally, which is "swayed not by a call to serve the common good, but rather the fear of losing authority on moral issues."

The statement also questions the pope's assertion in the encyclical that the Church does not "interfere in any way in the politics of States." Over against this claim, the press release points out that the bishops lobbied the U.S. Congress "to strip life-saving family planning measures from the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) bill that would have reduced mother-to-child transmission of HIV."

To be sure, no encyclical can hope to please everyone. *Caritas in Veritate* is no exception.

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