

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 5, 2010 at 10:58am

Q & A: Father Ken Himes

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Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A, we are looking at the contributions Pope benedict XVI has made to the Church to call attention to the publication of a new book from the USCCB, Pope Benedict XVI: Essays and Reflections on His Papacy.

Today we hear from Fr. Ken Himes, who teaches theology at Boston College.

The question: What do you perceive as a specific contribution Pope Benedict XVI has made to the Church?

Father Himes: After Joseph Ratzinger was elected Bishop of Rome, a friend told me that I should take a vacation from my study of Catholic social teaching since there would be no new social encyclical coming out of Benedict's papacy. While my friend was joking, it is fair to say the expectations of many people were low regarding Benedict's interest in social teaching. Yet this papacy has continued the practice of commemorating the social encyclicals of predecessors while adding its own voice and perspective to social questions.

Caritas in veritate (CV) follows the now customary method of developing its social teaching by building upon a reading of the human person.

In particular, Benedict adopts Paul VI's theme of authentic human development in *Populorum progressio*. Like Paul, Benedict reminds readers that authentic human development cannot be reduced to social and economic goods, yet he affirms there are essential social and economic goods that are integral to human development. Certainly, it would be difficult to read Benedict's letter and somehow conclude that religious belief is unconcerned about temporal wellbeing.

One aspect of Benedict's social thought worthy of note is his contextualization of economic activity. There are many free market economies in our modern world, and yet there are marked differences between how the market operates in Canada, Germany, Japan, Italy, and Argentina when compared to the United States. Some of this has to do with what John Paul II called the juridical framework that regulates a market.

Without denying the importance of such a framework, Benedict broadens the context to discuss a market culture, a term that encompasses more than law and policy. "It must be remembered that the market does not exist in a pure state. It is shaped by the cultural configurations which define it and give it direction" (CV, 36). Market culture includes the values, relationships, and informal practices of people in their economic activity.

Just this week the Census Bureau reported that personal income in the U.S. is more unequal now than at any prior time since that statistic has been recorded. The income disparity between rich and poor in this nation is greater than any other Western industrialized country. Changing that reality may entail altering the juridical framework -- the tax debate in Congress for example.

Yet there is also a place for cultural factors like solidarity across class lines, or a sense of shame on the part of CEOs who receive compensation packages that are hundreds of times larger than other workers in the same company, or a commitment to promoting common goods rather than seeking private gain. Benedict reminds us that attending to the cultural context within which a market functions is important.

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