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On cardinals, consistories and 'Caritas in Veritate'

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

If there's one thing even the most religiously illiterate person tends to get about the Catholic church, it's the difference between a cardinal and everybody else. Cardinals matter: they set a leadership tone, and, of course, they elect the next pope.

The news this week that Benedict XVI has named 24 new cardinals, including 20 who are under 80 and hence eligible to vote in a conclave, merits a few reflections. (My news story on the appointments, including the full list of names, can be found here: [Wuerl and Burke among 24 new cardinals](#)).

First, it would not seem that Benedict XVI has stacked the deck in any ideological sense. While there are no real liberals in this crop (not by the standards of secular politics, or for that matter in ecclesiastical terms), neither is the Nov. 20 consistory stuffed with arch-conservatives. In general, there's a rough balance between traditionalists and pragmatists. The American appointments offer an example, with both the uncompromising Archbishop Raymond Burke and the centrist Archbishop Donald Wuerl.

If Benedict's aim had been to fill the College of Cardinals with the most conservative prelates available, he could have elevated Archbishop André-Joseph Léonard of Brussels, for example.

In truth, Benedict seems determined to defer to tradition at almost every turn, rather than placing his own personal stamp on the college. He sticks close to the ceiling of 120 voting-age cardinals established by Pope Paul VI (while John Paul II sometimes ignored it); he won't break with custom by naming a new cardinal before his predecessor turns 80 (that's why Archbishops Timothy Dolan of New York and Vincent Nichols of Westminster, as well as Léonard and several others, were not on the list); and he insists on giving the red hat to all those Vatican officials who have traditionally held it.

Second, Benedict is continuing what some analysts have described as the 're-Italianization' of the

church's senior government, with ten of the 24 new cardinals, and eight of the 20 electors, being Italians. Some wags in the Vatican press corps have dubbed the Nov. 20 consistory the "revenge of the Italians" because it brings the Italian share of the electors up from 17 percent to 20 -- or one-fifth of the total.

Third, and related to the point above, ten of the 20 new cardinal-electors are Vatican officials, which will bring the total of Vatican officials among voting-age cardinals to 40 -- representing one-third of the total electorate for the next pope.

Fourth, while there are a few obvious efforts to recognize the church outside the West -- elevating a Coptic patriarch from Egypt, for example, as well as four Africans -- in the end, only seven of the 20 new electors come from outside Europe and North America. The appointments thus extend a demographic imbalance between the church at the bottom and at the top. Two-thirds of the 1.2 billion Catholics in the world today live in the global south, but two-thirds of the cardinals are from the north.

Fifth, some people may ask whether these appointments say anything about the church's response to the sexual abuse crisis.

The basic answer is "no," in the sense that most of these new cardinals don't have a high profile on the issue. Had Benedict wanted to send a clear signal on that front, he could have tapped Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin, just ahead of the coming visitation in Ireland.

Martin is widely seen as a point person for an aggressive response to the crisis. Instead, Benedict again deferred to tradition -- Ireland is a small country that already has a cardinal, Sean Brady of Armagh. (The situation is further complicated by the fact that Martin, who is under 80 in Sean Brady of Armagh, is enormously popular with the public and the media, he's a divisive figure for some clerics.) The Friends of NCR 2011



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Sixth, there also doesn't seem to be burning concern with a perceived PR problem at the senior levels of the church. At least in the English-speaking world, the best natural communicators in the queue -- Martin of Ireland, Dolan of New York, and Archbishop Thomas Collins of Toronto -- have to wait for another day.

In general, one could analyze the Nov. 20 consistory largely as a "business as usual" set of appointments. This remains a teaching pontificate, premised on what I've called Affirmative Orthodoxy -- presenting classic Christian doctrine in the most positive terms possible.

Benedict simply is not much interested in governance and thus tends to stick to the script on matters such as who becomes a cardinal -- which, in this case, translates into a bumper crop of Italians and church bureaucrats.

Whether that's a commendably evangelical focus on the heart of the Christian message, or self-defeating indifference to a "crisis of governance" under this pontificate -- or, perhaps, both -- rests in the eye of the beholder.

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Handicappers tend to scrutinize a consistory with one key question in mind: Is there a new *papabile* in the bunch, i.e., a strong candidate to become the next pope?

The consensus answer this time around is 'yes,' and it's Italian Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture. Here's a piece I did on Ravasi from February, laying out why many people find him so impressive: A prelate with the mind of Ratzinger and the heart of Roncalli.

The sound-bite version is this: Ravasi is a prelate with the mind of Ratzinger and the heart of Roncalli. At his best, he blends the intellectual acumen of Benedict XVI and the pastoral heart of John XXIII.

More about the new cardinals:

- **Thumbnail bios of new cardinals -- part 1**
- **Thumbnail bios of new cardinals -- part 2**
- **Thumbnail bios of new cardinals -- part 3**
- **Thumbnail bios of new cardinals -- part 4 and last**

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NOTE: The Synod of Bishops for the Middle East concludes on Sunday. Watch NCR Today for wrap-up coverage. My daily reports from Rome on the synod can be found here.

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When a pope issues a social encyclical, part of the point is to stimulate a conversation about how faith convictions might shape policy choices. On the strength of a fascinating two days in Rome last week, I can report that in the case of Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, which appeared one year ago, the conversation is alive and well indeed.

The setting was an Oct. 15-16 symposium hosted by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in its offices in Rome's Piazza San Callisto and organized by the U.S.-based Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies. The architects were Marianist Fr. James Heft, who founded the institute, Daniel Finn of St. John's University and Paul Caron, a retired European banker, who help lead the institute's 'True Wealth of Nations' project

The symposium assembled some 26 leading lights of Catholic social thought in the United States, representing a variety of disciplines and points of view, along with a handful of observers. The line-up included Mary Jo Bane from Harvard, U.S. Under-Secretary of Commerce Rebecca Blank, Jesuit Fr. John Coleman, Fr. Brian Hehr, Franciscan Fr. Kenneth Himes, Jesuit Fr. David Hollenbach, Katherine Marshall of Georgetown University, and U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See Miguel Diaz.

I was also invited to take part and did my best not to lower the tone.

The symposium was a revolution by the standards of Roman meetings, if for no other reason than this: It allowed an honest-to-God conversation to take place. Rather than reading prepared speeches aloud, participants responded to one another, asked questions, took the conversation in unforeseen directions in response to new ideas, and together explored the terrain of *Caritas in Veritate* at a depth level that Roman conferences rarely allow. (Organizers had requested participants to submit preliminary papers, which were bound and mailed to everyone so those ideas and insights were already on the table.)

Overall, the experience seemed to confirm that American Catholic social thinkers admire much about the encyclical and are committed to fostering its translation into business practices and policy choices, but

also have a few serious reservations about how some aspects of the document were framed.

The hierarchy seemed keenly interested in what this collection of theologians, economists, social scientists and other academics had to say.

Cardinal Peter Turkson, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, was present for much of the meeting, though he also had to slip out to attend the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East. His deputies, Bishop Mario Toso (the council's secretary) and Flaminia Giovanelli (under-secretary) took part in the entire event, as did another official of the council, American Msgr. Anthony Frontiero. On the side of the American bishops, Bishop William Murphy from Rockville Center played an active role in the discussions. (Murphy chairs the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice, Peace and Human Development, after spending fourteen years working in the Pontifical Council in Justice and Peace from 1974 to 1987.)

In the name of the pope, Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, sent a lengthy message of greeting for the symposium.

The symposium took place under "Chatham House Rules," meaning that I'm able to describe the content, but in order to protect the free flow of discussion I won't identify which speakers made any specific point.

Caritas in Veritate

When Benedict's encyclical appeared last July -- just ahead of the G-8 Summit in Italy as well as the pope's first meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama -- global headlines were dominated by its specific policy prescriptions: a stronger global authority to govern the economy, support for labor unions and greater development assistance for impoverished nations, environmental protections, and so on. Media reports also focused on the pope's suggestion that greed was beneath the global financial crisis, and hence his argument that recovery strategies need a substructure of personal ethics.

Intellectually, the heart of the encyclical lies in chapter three, on "Fraternity, Development and Civil Society." That's where Benedict unfolds the notion of "gratuity" as a key element of a Christian vision of the economy -- how giving and receiving gifts reflects the nature of God, and helps build communities. He argues that the "logic of gratuitousness" must find its place within ordinary economic activity.

Another innovative feature is Benedict's attempt to integrate bioethics with social analysis -- or, to put it more simply, to blend the church's pro-life message with its peace-and-justice concerns. He contends that openness to life is at the center of true development.

In effect, Benedict attempted to bring two famed encyclicals of Paul VI back together, which over the last forty years have been championed by very different constituencies -- *Humanae vitae*, on birth control and other bioethical issues, and *Popolorum Progressio*, on social development.

Themes of the Symposium

I'll try to summarize the Oct. 15-16 discussion by identifying a few big-picture themes, though inevitably I can only offer some bits of flavor. Eventually Heft, Finn and Caron intend to produce a book based on the symposium which will capture a much fuller sense of the conversation.

I should add that the symposium was not conceived as an end in itself, but rather as a point of departure for future research efforts.

Language

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When academics sink their teeth into something, one has to expect a certain degree of lofty language and there was some of that in Piazza San Callisto. One expert praised the "imaginative capaciousness" of the encyclical and I lost the next five minutes of discussion trying to figure out what that might mean.

For the most part, however, the conversation was remarkably focused. One session wrestled with the meaning of four key terms in *Caritas in Veritate*:

- Fraternity
- Gift
- Self-interest
- Reciprocity

"Fraternity," for example, means one thing for European intellectuals who associate it with the French Revolution and another for Americans who think of drunken frat boys on college campuses.

Even for Europeans there's no consensus about its applicability to Catholic social thought. One speaker argued that its association with the Revolution and the Masonic tradition make it jarring in a Catholic context, while another insisted that the Franciscans had worked out a spirituality of fraternity long before Voltaire and Robespierre arrived on the scene.

One speaker noted that in economics words usually refer to things rather than people, which points to a deeper problem: How to reintegrate the human dimension back into the "dismal science," so that the focus is on relationships rather than simply transactions.

Much conversation pivoted on the uneasy relationship between the notions of "gift" and "self-interest," with one speaker making the point that most people probably are never going to make economic decisions purely on the basis of giving something away with no expectation of a return. If the popular sense of self-interest can be expanded to include longer-term considerations and a wider circle of people, however, it might have more bite in driving behavior.

Another speaker challenged that argument, saying that if we look at American foreign policy self-interest usually does trump benevolence, but on the level of individual behavior selflessness actually goes further. Most Americans, for example, did not contribute to earthquake relief efforts in Haiti in the expectation of getting something back.

Another focus was the challenge of opening up the encyclical for a wider audience. Some participants argued for using more familiar and easily-understood language, while others insisted that if the church believes some aspects of contemporary culture are profoundly distorted it's compelled to invent a new vocabulary to present an alternative.

Excessive fretting about communications and public relations, one person argued, leads to "intellectual conservatism" -- forever being constrained to speak the language of today rather than tomorrow.

Gift vs. Justice

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Perhaps the most serious theological challenge to *Caritas in Veritate* was on the question of "gratuity" as the cornerstone for economic analysis. Simply put, some speakers felt that an emphasis on gift came at the expense of justice and therefore marks a backward step in terms of Catholic social theory.

The argument goes this way: By definition, giving a gift is a free act. If I was obliged or required to give you something, that's not a gift. Theologically, that's the nature of grace -- something God freely bestows, without any requirement to do so.

Justice, on the other hand, is all about obligation. If I steal \$100 from you, I'm required in justice to give it back and no court of law would ever regard that payment as a gift.

The question is: What term best expresses our responsibility toward the poor? Should we conceive of it under the rubric of freely given gifts, or is there a real duty in justice towards the poor that demands action, rather than merely inviting it?

A lively discussion ensued, with some arguing that the concept of 'gift' waters down the requirements of justice, while others insisted that it doesn't cancel the concept of an obligation to the poor but rather augments it with a new spiritual perspective.

One speaker, for example, said that there's a danger in trying to motivate people solely on the basis of duty because 'love can grow cold.' Duty alone may not be enough to sustain the long-term motivation necessary to curb poverty and other social ills, while the delight of gifts perhaps can.

Distinctiveness vs. Uniqueness

Christian ethics has long wrestled with the question of what's distinctive about the Christian approach: Do Christians have a unique set of conclusions about ethical matters, or is it merely that they sometimes have special motives for reaching the same conclusions that, in principle, any man or woman of good will might arrive at?

That debate also surfaced in the symposium, with one speaker urging a careful distinction between being 'distinct' and being 'unique.' Christians can be distinct, this person argued, without being absolutely singular -- offering an emphasis on 'eco-justice' in environmental debates as a case in point. That tends to be a distinctive Christian touch, this speaker said, even though some other voices say much the same thing.

Another participant, however, insisted that there is something about the Christian approach that goes beyond universal human moral instincts. He offered the example of self-giving love, willing to die to oneself in order that others may live. Ultimately, this person said, that's what Benedict means by the 'logic of gratuity' -- leading the speaker to muse aloud as to whether a non-believer can even really grasp the argument of *Caritas in Veritate*.

Be careful about blame

Some participants felt that, perhaps unintentionally, *Caritas in Veritate* seems to take swipes at a couple of important social constituencies, potentially alienating people who otherwise might be the church's partners in tackling the problems identified in the encyclical -- poverty, war, environmental challenges, and so on.

First, some participants read *Caritas in Veritate* to mean that unbelief in God is at the root of an inadequate response to the problems of human development. That assertion, they argued, sets an uneasy tension with Benedict's ambition to address (and persuade) not just members of the Catholic church, but 'all people of good will.'

Second, some participants also question the pope's linkage of bioethics with other matter of social justice, which could suggest that people who disagree with Catholic teaching on matters such as abortion or homosexuality are responsible for other social ills. One speaker said he's heard reactions along the lines of, "You mean because I'm gay, climate change is my fault?"

Most seemed to concur that's not what Benedict meant, but they nonetheless worried that people who don't know the mind of the pope, or Catholic social teaching, might be tempted to read the encyclical that way.

Women and Gender

Academics notoriously tend to have their pet obsessions, so whenever a church document appears and their *idée fixe* isn't treated they tend to object.

It's no surprise, therefore, that some discussion in the symposium focused on what's not in the encyclical -- from its attention to education and health care to the problem of selective abortions in some parts of the world that have produced an estimated 100-120 million "missing girls" because female children are perceived in some cultures as undesirable.

Setting aside the personal interests of some participants, however, there seemed fairly wide agreement that one issue in particular is notable mostly by its absence in *Caritas in Veritate*: gender issues and women.

Participants stressed that most development experts believe the promotion of women is one key to alleviating poverty, since women and children tend to be its primary victims. It's also central, in the eyes of many experts, to the development of democracy and healthy civil societies.

In terms of why *Caritas in Veritate* doesn't devote more space to women's issues, one participant floated the theory that perhaps debates over the role of women inside the Catholic church lurk in the background. Whatever the explanation, there seemed general agreement that the emancipation and empowerment of women is a theme that merits more reflection as Catholic social theory develops, especially in the church's official documents.

As a footnote, while some participants pointed to what's missing from *Caritas in Veritate*, others complained that it tried to do way too much -- that some portions of the document read like a laundry list of issues that don't really advance the discussion.

One speaker felt compelled to remind the symposium that "it's an encyclical, not an encyclopedia." The point of the document, this person said, is to offer a method for engaging social questions, not a comprehensive treatment of every imaginable issue.

Dialogue with practitioners

Though this was a largely academic meeting, a few flesh-and-blood business people were also in the room. One made among the most memorable interventions of the symposium, reflecting on the recent financial collapse in the States driven in part by "super-derivatives" -- a financial instrument, he said, with no "economic substance" behind it, and from which no benefits flow for the housing market.

This speaker memorably described how he sees the philosophy behind such practices: "I'm coming in with an eye patch and a flag with the skull and crossbones and my goal is to take everything that's not

nailed down. But because I told you up front that's what I'm doing, I'm immune.?

That comment triggered a good deal of reflection about the need for economists and social theorists to be in contact with real-world business professionals, to bring ethical wisdom to bear on rapidly mutating market practices.

One participant pointed out that such testimony ought to prompt researchers to broaden their notion of what counts as "empirical" because this business person's description of super-derivatives won't show up in any statistical chart, but it's as empirical as things come.

Another participant distinguished three types of law: legal (violation of which triggers sanctions), social (shame) and moral (guilt). The problem is that for the most part, only the first type of law gets any traction in our society. Since the financial transactions in our info-tech world are so immediate and sophisticated, laws by themselves will never be able to insure justice -- which points to the need for the cultivation of virtue.

Tribalism in the U.S. Church

Another focus of discussion was on the problem of polarization in U.S. Catholicism -- or, more accurately, tribalization, since the landscape is more complex than a simple division into left and right.

One speaker argued that beyond the intellectual reception of *Caritas in Veritate*, it's also important to ponder its sociological reception in the States -- an aim made infinitely more difficult by the fractured nature of American Catholic life, perhaps most acutely the *de facto* split between the pro-life and the peace-and-justice wings of the American church.

The most eloquent expression of the point came from a participant who teaches at an American Catholic university, but who comes from outside the United States. While this scholar expressed admiration for the vitality and the resources of American Catholicism, he also said he's found the acrimonious climate of the church in the United States "frustrating" and "stifling."

In truth, he said, the tendency for American Catholics to be at one another's throats is almost enough to make him want to "pack up and go home."

Later, there was some discussion about how the Institute for Advanced Catholic Studies, perhaps in partnership with other Catholic studies programs across the country, might consider some new initiative designed to overcome these divisions.

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