

CARITAS IN VERITATE: LOVE SHAPING THE REAL WORLD THROUGH RATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

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The significance of the title of Benedict XVI's encyclical Caritas in Veritate has not been adequately appreciated. It is the first social encyclical with an expressly theological title. Benedict calls for Catholics to shape the economic world (specifically, globalization) with Christian love.

Benedict XVI's last encyclical has already been discussed so extensively that I wonder what can be added to the conversation: hence the strange title of this essay, which emphasizes the insufficiently noticed complexity of the encyclical's original Latin title.

I

The place of Benedict's letter in the series of the Church's social encyclicals has been clearly perceived: Many commentators have noticed that Benedict published his encyclical "nine months too late" to celebrate, as obviously intended, the fortieth anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*. That such a celebration was Benedict's intention is demonstrated by the fact that the first and second chapters of *CV* discuss the central topic of Paul VI's encyclical, globalization. Even this fairly obvious fact, however, was a bit disguised by the publication of the encyclical in the midst of the worst international financial and economic crisis in several decades. The quite understandable attention given to this important short term development distracted attention from one of Benedict's central arguments, namely, that we should move away from focusing on the "social" dimension in nation-states of the previous encyclicals (celebrated by the enumeration of the years passed since their publication, from *Quadragesimo* to *Centesimo anno*), toward concentrating on the new reality of globalization, which is the topic of *Populorum Progressio*, the human reality in need of a thorough renewal by loving in the truth.

The emphasis laid on *Populorum* (and the journalistic attention paid to administrative delays) helped to disguise, as it were, the other fact, namely, that Benedict spends no time celebrating the numerous encyclicals of his predecessor, whose close cooperators he had been at the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith. But, as could be expected from Benedict, the very careful pope, while he praises Paul VI and the

shift from the old “social doctrine” to the new central reality of globalization in the text of *CV*, he cites John Paul II abundantly in the footnotes. Furthermore, as has been noticed by many astute observers, *Caritas in Veritate* can be roughly divided into two parts: the beginning of the encyclical, which is more obviously written in Benedict’s usual style; and the latter parts of the encyclical—which elaborate the developments of the conventional social doctrines—and which, even if written in collaboration with others, bear the pope’s name and authority.¹

II

Because of the attention paid to the administrative and journalistic aspects mentioned above, many observers failed to realize sufficiently that when Benedict discusses the impact of *caritas* on *veritate* he is trying to address the basic contemporary mission of the Church: That Christians focus on the global-societal, or sociological, human reality of the globalizing world as different from the (merely) “social” dimension in a nation-state of the traditional social doctrines of the Church. The reference to *Populorum Progressio* is therefore not limited to its “geographic” dimension but also to its “social and human science” dimension. Benedict’s emphasis on globalization clearly highlights the intimate nature of economic and “global social and political and cultural developments”² and the dependence of this human reality on *caritas in veritate*, on our capacity as Christians to breathe the realism of love into the structure (*veritas*) of this newly developing world.

These important and not always emphasized developments in the grasping of Benedict’s first “anthropological” encyclical represent its core message. What has been insufficiently noted is the obvious fact that this encyclical is called *Caritas in Veritate*. It is thus the first “social” encyclical published under a *theological* title. All others referred to the original social encyclical (*Rerum Novarum*), or to social phenomena (e.g., work, in *Laborem Exercens*, globalization in *Populorum*). Given Benedict’s clear perception of the total-global nature of our present human-world evolution, his choice of a theological term to describe it, and to give his encyclical a clear theological title, merits all the emphasis we can give his move. Yes, Benedict asks us to develop the *veritas* of what is happening to us—the deep human knowledge of anthropological globalization—but *caritas* should be the motor and the result of *veritas*, namely, of our effective knowledge of globalization and of the societal instruments used to shape it.

Benedict does not express these points in the rough terms used by this commentary. But his great discretion should lead us to emphasize

the following three sets of facts. First, this anniversary encyclical, which was so long delayed, and which celebrated his admired predecessor, Paul VI, does not mention *Populorum Progressio* in its title or in the core message of the encyclical, which concentrates on charity in truth.

Second, the encyclical has been given a very difficult title—difficult because many have hesitated to translate *caritas* as *love*, perhaps with good reason because of the difference between the two in modern languages, in which *caritas* becomes a technical/practical aspect of love (as Benedict points out in Part II of *Deus Caritas Est*).

Third, and most importantly, Benedict obviously and strongly links *Caritas in Veritate* to *Deus Caritas Est* and to *Spe Salvi*. He thus strongly stresses the need to subordinate our Christian anthropological science and policies to our theological faith-awareness. Our attempt to shape the world through our understanding rooted in love (*caritas in veritate*) is not only dependent on pure human science but also on the truth-we-build (*veritas*) both in loving (*Deus Caritas Est*) and in hoping in change and progress (*Spe Salvi*).

We can now conclude our social scientific look at the encyclical. Benedict invites us, by giving a novel title to his encyclical, a title that relates it strongly to his first two theological and “non-social” encyclicals, to definitely root our Christian view of the scientific anthropological evolution of humanity in our foundational Christian theological view. *Veritas in caritate* means that knowledge is first of all deep understanding through the love generated in us by faith. And Benedict emphasizes these essential epistemological relationships by carefully choosing the title of his letter and by explicitly linking *CV* to his previous two encyclicals. (Rather than by ponderously discussing his epistemological choices as commentaries such as this do.)

How then, according to Benedict, should our *caritas* shape the *veritas* of globalization?

First, three major “practical” points that stand out in *Caritas in Veritate* and that have been discussed by most commentators:

- (a) The emphasis on the fact of globalization and on the need to concentrate on the many dimensions of globalization—for example, the dimension of care for the environment.
- (b) The critique of the almost total emphasis laid by the various dominant ideologies on the technical aspects of the problems confronting humankind. Benedict discusses this issue in depth in *Spe Salvi* and in Chapter 5 of *Caritas in Veritate*, which concludes the encyclical with a lengthy discussion of this subject.³

(c) The emphasis put on the role of the “gift” in the market society, discussed in chapter 3 of *CV*. Here the treatment is strongly based on *Spe Salvi*, which is perhaps the reason why it was only noticed by some discussants. In both texts, Benedict does not, of course, mention the highly theoretical contemporary economic discussion that a totally solipsistic market system is inconsistent because solipsists can at best utilize an existing market system but never develop such an inter-human exchange system. The attention drawn to the deep function of *caritas* in the *veritate* of the market exchange system—and more generally of political systems—is therefore central to the role Christians must play in developing the *veritas* of modern anthropoplogy.

Up to here, the discussion of *CV* has limited itself to the “human science” subjects that were just mentioned and that have been paid much attention by the public discussion of the encyclical. Central however to our Christian view of this “scientific” *veritas* is the fact that God is love (*Deus caritas est*). It is with this link that the Christian provides the full “scientific *Veritas*” needed for the universal understanding of the burning issue of globalization. Benedict *mentions* all of this in the preface of *Caritas* (his first “social science” encyclical), by pointing out that his entire anthropological science project can only be perceived “in truth” by being linked to *Deus Caritas Est* and *Spe Salvi*. To conclude our discussion of *Caritas in Veritate*, let us follow Benedict’s suggestion in the preface of *this* encyclical and look briefly at his two preceding ones, so as to fully appreciate the unity of his approach.

III

Deus Caritas Est gives us a clear picture of Benedict’s approach. In the first part of the encyclical he reminds us how much Christian Faith and Christianity were deeply rooted in love in their beginnings and how much they implemented this love through the *diaconia*, the service, of their environment. But in the second part he insists that the social expression of this love—he now speaks of *caritas*—must remain within the ambit of the Church and should not be institutionalized, especially by state functions. The long discussion of *Deus Caritas Est* thus reflects the role of the Christian community in history and in the world. In practice, and stated a bit bluntly, Benedict concludes that *caritas* extends to Christian social but not political activity. There is no room for the “Theology of Liberation” or for a

caritas of revolution. *Deus Caritas Est* (published December of 2005) thus proposes a quite specific theology of humanity and society, which may well be thought to be very close to his original Augustinianism.

Spe Salvi, his second encyclical, was published two years later. Its first words are *Spe salvi facti sumus*, In hope we are saved. It follows a pattern similar to *Deus Caritas Est*. It admirably shows how much our Christian life and faith are rooted in hope, in looking and planning for the future, something essential to our life of love, and vice versa. It is a hope that is therefore radically different from an individualistic hope, as Benedict emphasizes (nos. 13–15). But then again he shifts attention to an exposition and critique of the degeneracy of Christian hope into Western Enlightenment and revolutionary “reason” and “freedom” ideologies. And Benedict concludes correctly (no. 26) that “it is not science that redeems man: man is redeemed by love... as life is not something we have exclusively in and for ourselves: it is a relationship” (no. 27).

This is an essential conclusion: Rational expectations without social love and hope fall quickly back into technicalities. Benedict has put his finger on the core of the problem of contemporary solipsistic neoclassicism: Societies need hope and love to move forward, and the strong belief that God is love lies at the foundation to both. More practically, we might remind economists of the well-known fact that Max Weber emphasized how much Christian societies opened themselves to a prophetic spirit and thus invented the market system and economic progress. What we must now tell these economists is that after his major work in 1900, Max Weber spent most of his time trying to find out why other cultures missed the prophetic dimension, the *Spe Salvi* rooted in *Deus Caritas Est*.

Notes

1. George Weigel, “*Caritas in Veritate* in Gold and Red,” *National Review Online* (www.nationalreview.com), July 7, 2009.
2. In the European world we used the term “anthropology” to designate the “global science of man” (*Science de l’homme*) as opposed to the various “scientific techniques” presently called “sciences.” In Ratzinger’s Germany there were clear terminological differences between the global science of man and its various techniques.
3. In our conventional Christian language, technicalities could well be called Pharisaic preoccupation with the details—e.g., not pulling off a leaf of corn on Sabbath. The tendencies to fall back into technicalities, including in the organization of liturgy, is an old, well known weakness of humanity.