

WHOSE LOVE? WHICH TRUTH? A POSTMODERN ENCYCLICAL

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The most remarkable characteristic of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical Caritas in Veritate is its theologically robust mode of discourse: a pervasive and unapologetically Trinitarian and Christological, substantive argument, based in a robust theological anthropology of person and society as gift, and a peculiarly Platonic and Augustinian rhetorical mode of discourse. Caritas reveals the implicit, hidden, and faulty theological and philosophical commitments of secular reason—which, when used as a medium for the Gospel, can too easily taint the true doctrine the Church attempts to convey with it—proclaiming instead a radically orthodox diagnosis of and prescription for a disenchanted, love-and-truth starved—yet Enlightenment-weary—postmodern world.

Human knowledge is insufficient and the conclusions of science cannot indicate by themselves the path towards integral human development.¹

Without truth, without trust and love for what is true, there is no social conscience and responsibility, and social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power, resulting in social fragmentation, especially in a globalized society at difficult times like the present.²

What can convince modern man is not a historical or a psychological or a continually ever modernizing Christianity but only the unrestricted and uninterrupted message of Revelation.³

I. A Postmodern Pope

Pope John XXIII's final encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, written two months before his death on June 3, 1963, was the first in history to address "all men of good will," rather than only the bishops and laity of the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Benedict's most recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, unlike his first two, is also addressed to both Catholics and non-Catholics. It would seem safe to assume that an encyclical whose audience includes both believers and unbelievers would be quite different in both substantive content and mode of

discourse than one addressed only to believers. To be rhetorically effective, a writer must construct his argument carefully with an eye to the presuppositions, beliefs, attitude, sentiments—the *mindset*—of his audience. Thus, the discourse of choice for a Pope speaking to a post-Christian West about love and truth would avoid the particular, tradition-exclusive truths of Catholic theology, proposing instead the universal, tradition-inclusive principles of the *natural law*; for, “men of good will,” even though sinners, are by definition cognizant of it. As St. Augustine says in *The Confessions*, “Thy law is written in the hearts of men, which iniquity itself effaces not.” Indeed, in his dialogue with the atheist philosopher Jürgen Habermas, Pope Benedict wrote: “The natural law has remained (especially in the Catholic Church) the key issue in dialogue with the secular society and with other communities of faith in order to appeal to the reason we share in common and to seek the basis for a consensus about the ethical principles of law in a secular, pluralistic society.”²⁴

However, after reading *Caritas in Veritate*, these assumptions no longer seem safe. The most remarkable characteristic of *Caritas* is its theologically robust mode of discourse. Although it certainly employs language and encourages values intelligible and sympathetic to men of good will, especially in its more practical analyses of and prescriptions for remediating the universally recognized, worldwide economic crisis; there is, nevertheless, a pervasive and unapologetically Trinitarian and Christological, substantive argument, based in a robust theological anthropology of person and society as *gift*, and a peculiarly Platonic and Augustinian, rhetorical mode of discourse. This is in great tension with and a departure from the strategic project of using the language of “secular reason,” but informing it with true theological and philosophical and anthropological content, tried by the Church in earnest in *Gaudium et Spes*, but begun even earlier with the non-encyclical writings of Pius XII and John XIII’s *Pacem in Terris*. In fact, *Caritas* reveals the implicit, hidden, and faulty theological and philosophical commitments of secular reason—which, when used as a medium for the Gospel, can too easily taint the true doctrine the Church attempts to convey with it—proclaiming instead a radically orthodox diagnosis of—and prescription for—a disenchanting, love-and-truth starved—yet Enlightenment-weary—postmodern world.

In his dialogue with Habermas, Benedict (then Cardinal Ratzinger) went on to say: “Unfortunately, this instrument [the natural law] has become blunt. Accordingly, I do not intend to appeal to it for support in this conversation. The idea of the natural law presupposed a concept of nature in which nature and reason overlap, since nature itself

is rational. With the victory of the theory of evolution, this view of nature has capsized.” Going further, I would say that Catholicism contends not merely with formidable anti-nature and anti-reason *ideas*, but with a systematic and consistent body of such ideas, united by a historical narrative, and embodied in well-entrenched and concrete habits, attitudes, customs, rituals, institutions, and practices—a full-fledged tradition. Archbishop Javier Martinez Granada writes:

Nihilism is today not a philosophy, it is above all a practice, and a practice of suicide even if is a soft suicide. It is the suicide of the depressed. It is also a practice of violence. The secular society lives in daily violence, violence with reality. This violence shows that nihilism cannot and does not correspond to our being. But it shows also, in a very concrete way, how the secular society annihilates itself by engendering the very monsters that terrify it most and that itself hates most.⁵

And, as *Caritas* makes clear, the implicit logic of this tradition is becoming more and more explicit in economic, political, and cultural life:

How can we be surprised by the indifference shown towards situations of human degradation, when such indifference extends even to our attitude towards what is and is not human? What is astonishing is the arbitrary and selective determination of what to put forward today as worthy of respect. Insignificant matters are considered shocking, yet unprecedented injustices seem to be widely tolerated. While the poor of the world continue knocking on the doors of the rich, the world of affluence runs the risk of no longer hearing those knocks, on account of a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human (no. 75).

As Benedict XVI warned us on the day before his election to the Pontificate, “[W]e are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.”⁶ In light of these passages, one can see why the Pope has judged the traditional, natural-law discourse to be insufficient for speaking to a culture that “engender[s] monsters,” and is “no longer [able to] distinguish what is human.” It is as if the culture that western man inhabits today embodies an *alternative, unnatural-law*, with radically different notions of nature and law, as well as being, the good,

the human person, and the relation of all these to each other. Charles Taylor writes, “It is not that we have sloughed off a whole lot of unjustified beliefs, leaving an implicit self-understanding that had always been there, to operate at last untrammelled. Rather one constellation of implicit understandings of our relation to God, the cosmos, other humans, and time, was replaced by another in a multifaceted mutation.”⁷

This would seem an insuperable challenge for the Church’s charge to evangelize all nations—like trying to explain both the nature of color and its spiritual significance to a blind man. Moreover, since the Church herself is in the world, and since grace builds upon nature—even from the inside, as de Lubac, Rowland, Schindler, Benedict XVI, et al., have shown—then the considerable deformities, confusions, and eclipses the world is undergoing are bound to affect the Church in her human aspect. This human aspect includes papal encyclicals with regard to their effectiveness of discourse, especially an encyclical like this one aspiring to connect intimately with the world.

But if there is no longer a consensus in western culture on natural-law truths and values, and if the truths of Catholicism are even more incomprehensible to it, then how is the Church to help save the world? Alasdair MacIntyre articulates the dilemma:

The theologian begins from orthodoxy, but the orthodoxy...becomes too easily a closed circle, in which believer speaks only to believer, in which all human content is concealed. Turning aside from this arid in-group theology, the most perceptive theologians wish to translate what they have to say to an atheistic world. But they are doomed to one of two failures. Either [a] they succeed in their translation: in which case what they find themselves saying has been turned into the atheism of their hearers. Or [b] they fail in their translation: in which case no one hears what they have to say but themselves.⁸

Is there a solution? If there is, I think Benedict performs it for us in *Caritas in Veritate*. In both proclaiming to believers and unbelievers alike the postmodernist insight (though the Church had it first) of the inescapable intertwining of *theoria* and *praxis* in all personal and social human activity, and revealing the ultimate explanation and foundation of this intertwining in the person of Christ, the very embodiment and integration of truth and love, *the Pope has written the first truly postmodern encyclical*, one that strategically and spiritually capitalizes on the contemporary, post-Enlightenment and post-secular weariness with secular reason, and its new openness to religiously informed narrative and practice.

II. *Veluti Si Deus Daretur*

Before I cite and comment on some passages in *Caritas* that illustrate my characterization, I would like to cite a passage from the Pope's "Subiaco Address," which, I think, provides the key hermeneutic to understanding the Pope's postmodern, post-Enlightenment project:

The attempt, carried to the extreme, to manage human affairs disdaining God completely leads us increasingly to the edge of the abyss, to man's ever greater isolation from reality. We must reverse the axiom of the Enlightenment and say: Even one who does not succeed in finding the way of accepting God, should, nevertheless, seek to live and to direct his life *veluti si Deus daretur*, as if God existed. This is the advice Pascal gave to his friends who did not believe. In this way, no one is limited in his freedom, but all our affairs find the support and criterion of which they are in urgent need.⁹

The Pope does not expect his Trinitarian, Christological, Catholic-tradition-constituted encyclical, calling for an economics and politics of *gratuitousness*, self-giving love informed by the truth of the Gospel, to be immediately intelligible or credible to a non-believing audience! What he is attempting instead is to meet his audience in its interior state of emergency, as it were, as well as to help bring this state about, in which the choice for God becomes desperately urgent and overwhelmingly attractive in the face of the only alternative: a culture of death, force, fraud, meaninglessness, and despair.

As many commentators have opined, the encyclical is *long*, as well as multi-faceted, ambitious, and comprehensive, with some judging it excessive on all of these points. Be that as it may, for our purposes we can break the encyclical down into three categories of discourse, two of which we shall consider in the remainder of this essay. The first category is a kind of gentle, phenomenological enquiry, in which the Pope employs Socratic questioning and teleological descriptions of common human experiences and desires, both personal and social, to dispose his interlocutor to his proposal of the true supernatural ground and orientation of these experiences and desires. The second kind of discourse is not so gentle, for it consists in a straightforward proclamation of the primacy and indispensability, in both knowledge and action, of grace, faith, the Church, Christ, love, and truth; as well as the utter destitution of nature, reason, the world, man, desire, and knowledge when dissevered and divorced from God. (The third category, which we

shall not treat here, is the Pope's practical advice in the areas of economics and politics.) This balanced combination of cooperative, philosophical, aporetic enquiry from the bottom up, as it were, with authoritative, theological, spiritual instruction from the top down, is at the heart of the Pope's postmodern strategy of evangelization: simultaneous conversion and conversation, invitation and instruction, giving and receiving.

Here is an exemplar of category one, presented here in dialogue form:

In this most delicate and critical area, the fundamental question asserts itself forcefully: is man the product of his own labours or does he depend on God? Scientific discoveries in this field and the possibilities of technological intervention seem so advanced as to force a choice between two types of reasoning: reason open to transcendence or reason closed within immanence. **[Yes, I can see the choice. But I have no reason to think that there even exists a "transcendent.]"** We are presented with a clear either/or. Yet the rationality of a self-centred use of technology proves to be irrational because it implies a decisive rejection of meaning and value. **[Is a rejection of cosmic or transcendent meaning and value really "irrational"? Perhaps it is *more* rational for humans to *impose* a meaning and value on things, one that corresponds with our desires! Isn't that what the humanism and freedom we have finally secured in our day all about?]** It is no coincidence that closing the door to transcendence brings one up short against a difficulty: how could being emerge from nothing, how could intelligence be born from chance? **[But I have had no reason to ask these questions, so it is has not been a difficulty for me. But then again, perhaps I should be at least *open* to these kinds of questions. I just don't see how one could possibly answer them for sure.]** Entranced by an exclusive reliance on technology, reason without faith is doomed to flounder in an illusion of its own omnipotence. Faith without reason risks being cut off from everyday. **[But I still am not sure how man can recognize his limits without becoming weak and slavish, and how "Faith" can be anything more than just personal opinion.]** (74)

Here is another passage in which the Holy Father performs a masterful phenomenology of knowledge:

Yet everyone experiences the many immaterial and spiritual dimensions of life. Knowing is not simply a material act, since the object that is known always conceals something beyond the empirical datum. All our knowledge, even the most simple, is always a minor miracle, since it can never be fully explained by the material instruments that we apply to it. In every truth there is something more than we would have expected, in the love that we receive there is always an element that surprises us. We should never cease to marvel at these things. In all knowledge and in every act of love the human soul experiences something “over and above”, which seems very much like a gift that we receive, or a height to which we are raised. **[Perhaps my experience is richer than the language I have been taught to use to express it. Might there be a different kind of discourse that can account for and explain what my experience suggests might very well be “over and above” my ego?].**

Here is a good example of discourse two:

While the poor of the world continue knocking on the doors of the rich, the world of affluence runs the risk of no longer hearing those knocks, on account of a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human. God reveals man to himself; reason and faith work hand in hand to demonstrate to us what is good, provided we want to see it; the natural law, in which creative Reason shines forth, reveals our greatness, but also our wretchedness insofar as we fail to recognize the call to moral truth.

And from the opening of the encyclical:

Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity. Love—*caritas*—is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace. It is a force that has its origin in God, Eternal Love and Absolute Truth. . . . Without truth, without trust and love for what is true, there is no social conscience and responsibility, and social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power,

resulting in social fragmentation, especially in a globalized society at difficult times like the present (nos. 1, 5).

For the unbeliever, such declarations are not immediately believable, self-evidently persuasive, or even fully intelligible. What *is* universally acceptable, however, is the human experience of love of others and desire for truth, and the Pope begins his encyclical by stating and then providing an explanation for these phenomena, which becomes a constant theme throughout the encyclical.

III. The Failure of the Enlightenment

The twentieth-century project of trying to use the language of modern liberal culture (rights, freedom, autonomy, reason, etc.), inaugurated in earnest with *Gaudium et Spes*, as a preliminary rhetorical bridge after the crossing of which the unbelievers of the world would be in the best position to listen with eagerness to the Church's correct philosophical and theological conceptual understanding of and ontological supernatural grounding for such language, has failed. As Tracey Rowland writes in her brilliant, critical analysis of *Gaudium et Spes*:

Instead of seeking to critique and transcend a culture which is, on its best construction, the severed fragments of the classical theistic framework operating dysfunctionally, or, at its worst, a new heretical reconstruction of those same severed fragments, the masters of the Thomist tradition have been engaged in an enterprise of détente, transposition and even in some cases of synthesis. Having been told that the Church recognises the 'legitimate autonomy of the cultural realm' they have not been particularly keen to develop a specifically Thomist account of the relationship between religion and culture.¹⁰

Jacques Maritain's and John Courtney Murray's analogous project of shoring up a natural-law based "democratic charter" for America's political order in the 1950s has likewise failed. A non-religious yet morally based political consensus on shared values presupposes a relatively robust *philosophical* consensus; of course, this is nowhere to be found in the western culture of liberal pluralism:

What Maritain wished to affirm was a modern version of Aquinas' thesis that every human being has within him or

herself a natural knowledge of divine law and hence of what every human being owes to every other human being. The plain pre-philosophical person is always a person of sufficient moral capacities. But what Maritain failed to reckon with adequately was the fact that in many cultures and notably in that of modernity plain persons are misled into giving moral expression to those capacities through assent to false philosophical theories. So it has been since the eighteenth century with assent to a conception of rights alien to and absent from Aquinas' thought.¹¹

What has also failed, or, at least, was relatively successful in its own day but can be no longer, is the neo-Scholastic, Leonine project of articulating the natural-law teachings of the Church strictly in the Church's "home-language," as it were, that is, using classical metaphysics and syllogistic, deductive, Thomistic argumentation. Leo XIII exemplifies this: "Now, natural reason itself proves convincingly that such concepts of the government of a State [social contract and other purely naturalistic concepts] are wholly at variance with the truth. Nature itself bears witness that all power, of every kind, has its origin from God, who is its chief and most august source."¹²

These failures—a lack of recognition of the limits and relevance of neo-Scholastic discourse in a world enamored by secular, scientific reason; an insouciance regarding the implicit goodness of modern culture; and naïveté about that culture's structurally antagonistic elements—reflect the fundamental failure of the Enlightenment project itself, and the Church's lack of awareness and consequential delay in recognizing the full implications of this failure for her evangelization. In his writings, Pope Benedict XVI has made the Enlightenment's failure clear, as well as his disfavor of the "Whig Thomist" project of translating the Church's tradition into theologically neutral, tradition-transcendent-and-inclusive, natural-law content mediated by the language of the Enlightenment tradition. The Pope's mode of theological analysis and discourse is doctrinally and dogmatically traditional, *a la* Leo XIII, yet it is historically and culturally sensitive and situated. He is Augustinian as well as Thomistic, but more at home in the Bonaventurian, Guardinian, von Balthasarian, de Lubacian, and *Ressourcement/Communio* tradition. Indeed, his thought is a unique synthesis of Thomism and Augustinianism, incorporating not only the essential, perennial truths developed through the abstract, syllogistic, propositional, and dogmatic methodology of the neo-scholastics, but also the historical, cultural, linguistic, phenomenological and personal aspects and implications of

these truths rendered conscious to the Church through the distinctly Augustinian, “theo-dramatical” epistemology and hermeneutic developed in the post-conciliar period, and now displayed wonderfully in *Caritas in Veritate*.

IV. Openness to Transcendence

MacIntyre has written:

There is no way to engage with or to evaluate rationally the theses advanced in contemporary form by some particular tradition except in terms of which are framed with an eye to the specific character and history of that tradition on the one hand and the specific character and history of the particular individual or individuals on the other.¹³

What Pope Benedict XVI knows is that the Western world—in both theory and practice—has moved, in the words of Archbishop Javier Martínez of Granada, “beyond secular reason.” The era of Enlightenment, modernist, foundationalist, universalist, and tradition-prescinding *rationalism* has been displaced by post-Enlightenment, post-modernist, anti-foundationalist, particularist, and tradition-constituted *narrative*. And for all of postmodernism’s sometimes explicit nihilism and its disdain for any normative understanding of nature and truth, it is radically skeptical of the knee-jerk, anti-religious, reason-idolizing, autonomy-seeking discourse and practices of the Enlightenment; it is intrinsically open to a new “story” (though not necessarily inclined to the *true* one), to radically new hermeneutics and explanations, to radically “other” ontologies and epistemologies, indeed, to alien theologies and spiritualities. The “new atheism” of Hitchens, Harris, and Dawkins is not new at all, but the outdated, pathetic, “last gasp” of modernity, to use the phrase of James K. A. Smith.¹⁴ In short, Enlightenment secularism is dead. As Jürgen Habermas has stated, Western culture is now “post-secular.”

Since the Enlightenment’s reductionist explanation for truth and love in secular pragmatic reason and individual self-interest is no longer publicly authoritative in culture, as it is now just one narrative among others, in *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict is counting on the power of straight Gospel—untranslated, unmediated, unfiltered—to convert postmoderns who, precisely because they are disillusioned by the Enlightenment’s false promises, are open to anything because they have nothing: “Perhaps love and truth *are* immaterial and spiritual realities,

and perhaps the Church's account of these, embodied in Jesus Christ and the Church, is not to be immediately discounted." Benedict's (possible) response:

Yes, I am glad you are open to this possibility. I have described the good values and practices that you and I are proud to support, such as human rights, religious freedom, and equality before the law. We agree that these are good, but where did they come from? Where *do* they come from? What is their driving force? Did you ever ask these questions? With the economic crisis upon us, perhaps you're now interested in asking them? If so, please listen to me, for I would like to propose some answers you may have never heard of. Only love in truth can account for these goods, these practices, and these aspirations. And if we do not authentically *live* love in truth, engaging in it in conscious deference to the Truth, Who is Jesus Christ, then all these good things will be used against humanity. They already have, as I have shown.

Don't you see that we're all on the branch of a tree that's falling and is about to crash because the trunk has been cut off? Well, here's the trunk in all its splendor—it's Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church He founded—and here's how we can reattach the trunk to the branches. Don't you want to satisfy the desires you admit to having for truth and love! Catholicism presents a very attractive account of these desires, both their origin and consummation. But consider that these desires and achievements are now destroying you and the whole city of man you have painstakingly built. Here's the path to the City of God.

Notes

1. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, June 29, 2009, Section 30.
2. Ibid., Section 5.
3. Romano Guardini, Letter to Paul VI, 1965, quoted in Tracey Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition after Vatican II* (London: Routledge, 2003), 22.
4. Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007), 69.
5. Francisco Javier Martinez, "Beyond Secular Reason," *Communio* 31/4 (2004): accessed 12 June 2007; available at <http://www.secondspring.co.uk/articles/martinez.htm>.
6. Homily for the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, April 2005.
7. Charles Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity," *Hastings Center Report*, March–April, 1995, 24 and 27.
8. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 19 -20.
9. Cardinal Ratzinger, from an address given at the convent of Saint Scholastica in Subiaco, Italy, April 1, 2005.
10. Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition*, 168.
11. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy, and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 76.
12. Leo XIII, *Immortale Dei*, November 1, 1885, Section 30.
13. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 398.
14. James K.A. Smith, "Beyond A/Theism: Postmodernity and the Future of God," a lecture given at the University of Ottawa for *The House*, October, 2010, <http://vimeo.com/17928669> (February 10, 2011).