The aim of the paper is to identify the economic component of Pope Benedict XVI’s Africae Munus exhortation of 2011, and then to relate his reflection to selected elements of contemporary economic thought. This will be done through a critical analysis of the text combined with a discussion of its diagnosis of the most important economic challenges for Africa and proposals for action in this field. The Pope, listening to the voice of the Second African Synod of 2009, treats the continent in a subjective manner, focusing on the tasks of the Church and local authorities and communities. In doing so, he appeals to the international community to respect the sovereignty of the continent and its specificity, and to beware of ideological pressures. The economic problems addressed in the document are shown from an integral perspective, having its source in Catholic social teaching.

In memory of Benedict XVI (1927–2022)

POSITIONING THE ISSUE AND STARTING POINT

With the death of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in 2022, Pope Francis’s pilgrimage to the Democratic Republic of Congo and South Sudan in 2023, and Africa’s continued growing role in global Christianity, it is important to revisit the Catholic perspective on the continent’s problems. The purpose of this article is to examine the economic component of Pope Benedict XVI’s Africae Munus exhortation of November 19, 2011, and then to relate the papal reflection—not always limited to the African area—to selected elements of contemporary economic thought. This will be done through a critical analysis of the document’s text combined with a discussion of its diagnosis of the most important economic challenges for the continent and proposals for action in this field.

The exhortation crowned the deliberations of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (the Second African Synod), which ran from October 4 to 25, 2009. It was a continuation of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (the First African Synod) of April 10—May 8, 1994, summarized by Pope St. John Paul II in the exhortation Ecclesia in Africa, signed on September 14, 1995. In 2009,
the synodal fathers examined the problems of reconciliation, justice, and peace in Africa, which included both pastoral and social issues (see especially No. 10). The main lines of synodal discussion were reflected in the structure of Benedict XVI’s exhortation.

The issue of both *Africæ Munus*’s content and prescriptions has received no small number of studies. For obvious reasons, African studies in particular provide them. Most works highlight theological, doctrinal, moral, and pastoral issues as those matters are relevant to the evangelization of Africa. Some of these works additionally touch on socio-economic topics, although strictly social problems predominate. This is understandable, given the challenges for the African continent. Strictly economic themes are not likely to receive separate attention, remaining in the orbit of social issues *sensu largo*. Such a panorama of the literature is probably due to the Synod’s agenda and the layout of the papal document.

**AFRICA’S ECONOMIC PROBLEMS**

Benedict XVI admits in the exhortation *Africæ Munus* that he does not wish “to dwell at length on the various socio-political, ethnic, economic or ecological situations” (No. 4). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that thanks to the collegial audience of the synodal fathers in conjunction with the Pope, it became possible to highlight the most burning points relating to society and the Church in Africa. These issues included economic problems, among other matters, and even took up relatively slightly more space than such matters did in the more ecclesiological exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*.

It turns out that the African historical experience of ethnic strife, slavery, and colonialism has not ceased. The Pope points to the contemporary dangers of rivalry, colonization, and slavery taking on new forms, as well as epidemics (especially malaria, AIDS, and tuberculosis), conflicts, or “anthropological crisis,” referring to today’s widespread “culture shock,” undermining what has traditionally defined African social life for centuries (Nos. 9, 11). Threats of this kind also seem to have a significant religious dimension. In reference to exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, Benedict XVI observes, “To deprive the African continent of God would be to make it die a slow death, by taking away its very soul” (No. 7). Therefore, the basic prescription for the challenges identified by the Pope must be multifaceted. It requires a horizontal dialogue that will involve religious, social, political, economic, cultural, and scientific groups. It should be based on an anthropology that presupposes a “profound spiritual renewal” of the individual (Nos. 11, 19). In this context, it is a duty to base social activity on the Word of God (No. 16). According to the synodal fathers, Africa’s
problems do not hinder progress but strike at the best qualities of man: his imagination, intelligence, and vocation to follow Christ to find Love and Truth. “It is, in some sense,” concludes Benedict XVI, “an imperative born of the Gospel” (No. 12).

The Pope stresses that the main themes of the Synod—reconciliation, justice, and peace—are rooted in Christ. They are closely intertwined, mutually conditioning, and complementary to each other. Their social component resonates especially strongly (Nos. 17–18). In the economic context, the category of justice becomes particularly important. Benedict XVI states, “Justice is never disembodied. It needs to be anchored in consistent human decisions. A charity which fails to respect justice and the rights of all is false” (No. 18). However, the Pope does not reduce the concept of justice to social and legal dimensions, and thus to the distribution (redistribution) of wealth or access to basic rights. Although this issue should concern the economic reality of Africa, it would be a mistake to reduce it exclusively to the contemporary economic perspective, often raising the problem of social justice. For example, the exhortation states that giving someone what is due to him (i.e., Aristotelian distributive justice) is “the minimum demands of human justice” (No. 28). Thus, there is no place here for the relatively more communitarian approaches characteristic of, e.g., the concept of global socio-economic inequality (characteristic of Gunnar Myrdal, John Kenneth Galbraith, Amartya Kumar Sen, and others). Even more so, the liberal and individualist proposals of John Rawls or Friedrich August von Hayek cannot fit here either. The category of justice discussed should be based on Catholic social teaching, which represents an alternative “third way” between the extreme approaches.

Thus, a complex picture of justice emerges from the exhortation, including—in addition to the social and legal aspects identified—ethical and theological dimensions as well. In the context of the reconciliation of the peoples of Africa, wounded by civil wars and genocide, Benedict XVI highlights the importance of “purifying memories” by holding the guilty accountable in the name of the victims’ right to truth and justice (No. 21). However, this is only one component of the exhortation. In a separate section of the document, devoted to justice, we find a distinctive logic in the assertion that man must first become just himself, through conversion, in order to then build a just social order (Nos. 22–27). The Bible, the Eucharist, and the sacraments play an important role in this matter (Nos. 150–58). The celebration of the Eucharist should be extended in social life within the framework of “eucharistic consistency,” i.e., the influence of a personal relationship with God on public witness (Nos. 154). This also includes the issue of evangelization (Nos. 159–71, 174–76). Although
building such an order is the domain of politics, the Church in Africa must not lose sight of the legitimacy of forming consciences sensitive to justice. Only then will individuals formed in this way be able to shape the desired social order. As the Pope states, the backbone of Catholic social teaching is the proclamation of the truth about the model for all, which is Christ (No. 22). The exhortation implies that the Church should engage in building inclusive political institutions, i.e., those characterized by an optimal degree of centralization and pluralism, which unite the spread of power in society with defined boundaries. The result is a strong state, which is the guardian of law and order, responsible for public services and regulating economic activity.12

Benedict XVI emphasizes the importance of “civic formation” and “assisting with the electoral process.” One result of this is the educational role of the Church, which is appreciated in many countries. Without becoming directly involved in the political sphere, the Church carries out the task “to open the world to the religious sense by proclaiming Christ” (No. 23).

Thus, we can clearly see that this formulation creates a kind of “logic of justice,” taking on two components: “being just through conversion” and “building a just social order.” The Pope defines this in his characteristic way, saying that “understanding of the faith shapes . . . understanding of the world” (No. 32). Conversion is the foundation: “By accepting Jesus, Africa can receive incomparably effective and deep healing. . . . I repeat: what Africa needs most is neither gold nor silver; she wants to stand up, like the man at the pool of Bethzatha; she wants to have confidence in herself and in her dignity as a people loved by her God. It is this encounter with Jesus which the Church must offer to bruised and wounded hearts yearning for reconciliation and peace, and thirsting for justice. We must provide and proclaim the word of Christ which heals, sets free and reconciles” (No. 149). The above insights are thus universal.

In the context of “logic of justice,” Benedict XVI reveals the Synod’s most relevant conclusions for Africa itself. In the first place, we find a clear statement that the human conscience remains anxious in the face of the contemporary lack of justice, especially in Africa, where we can see the immoral appropriation of land resources by the few. “Africa,” says the Pope, referring to St. John Paul II, “is capable of providing every individual and every nation of the continent with the basic conditions which will enable them to share in development” (No. 24, cf. Nos. 79–80). Indeed, natural resources—those “fundamental goods [such] as land and water” (No. 80, cf. No. 13)—still remain the most important factor of production for African economies. Moreover, natural resources dominate the com-
modity structure of exports there.\textsuperscript{13} If justice is to manifest itself in private, public, economic, and social life, it must be based on the principles of subsidiarity, solidarity, and charity (No. 24). The bond, in turn, is the “justice of Christ,” based on love. However, it is not easy to adopt. Although we have to deal with a “love of justice,” i.e., desiring and expecting it, the prospect of “the justice of love” seems to overwhelm man, who ultimately ignores it. The Pope writes, “Divine justice indicates to human justice, limited and imperfect as it is, the horizon to which it must tend if it is to become perfect. Moreover, it makes us aware of our own poverty, our need for forgiveness and for God’s friendship.” Consequently, the converted righteous people formed in this way can create “the order of love—agape” (No. 25, cf. Nos. 28–35).

This brings us to the second component. Building a just order is the responsibility of the converted individual. In a just order, Benedict XVI notes, everyone has the opportunity to engage in social and economic life through their talents. This is how they will acquire what they need to live with dignity. Significantly, this order is not based on a political or social revolution, but “a revolution of love,” linked to the logic of the Eight Beatitudes, which outline “a new horizon of justice.” The Pope believes that becoming just and building a better reality are possible directions for man, through which “God’s justice” is revealed in the present, even before the end of time (No. 26). A specific task for all follows from this, Benedict XVI stresses: to join in a special way in helping the poor, the hungry, the sick (including those with AIDS, tuberculosis, or malaria), foreigners, the humiliated, prisoners, migrants, refugees, and displaced persons. These are challenges for Africa that must interest the world, but, importantly, should involve Africans themselves. In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, their task is to create “political, social and administrative justice at home; this is part of the political culture needed for development and for peace” (No. 27).

The reality of Africa should be set in this “logic of justice,” which demonstrates the areas of synodal reconciliation, justice, and peace in the exhortation. As the Pope states, these areas were pointed out by the synodal fathers. Let us examine those areas with a greater connection to the economy, remembering that attention to the Synod’s sensitivity to the effective fight against poverty should be emphasized. This is combined with the matter of unjust exploitation of natural resources, which involves the enormous profits of narrow interest groups both from African countries, but also from outside the continent. This exploitation often leads to serious environmental pollution and consequently violates the global ecosystem. In the long term, it risks depleting entire deposits of natural resources,
threatening current and future generations, the environment, and peace. We can hear the Church’s clear voice in the exhortation in defense of the economic sovereignty of Africa, which has the right to create its own socio-economic order based on its particularities. The continent’s equality of opportunity with other players in the world economy is also important. The Church should publicize any abuses that threaten this order, working with civil society in Africa (Nos. 79–80, cf. Nos. 13, 30). Using the language of institutional economics, we would say that African states should build their own formal institutions that make up the socio-economic order, taking into account the informal rules characteristic of these countries.\textsuperscript{14} In turn, relative equality of opportunity and adherence to global “rules of the game” would provide an opportunity to break out of Wallersteinian peripheral status for more African countries.\textsuperscript{15}

The above goal is served by fulfilling other conditions identified in the exhortation: building a civil society, efficient state governance, respect for the rule of law, and the fight against crime, coupled with the creation of an independent judiciary and prison system, effective resocialization, respect for human rights (including those of prisoners), and the abolition of the death penalty (Nos. 81–83). The Pope’s suggestions are confirmed by the academic literature on the matter. Numerous empirical studies in economics and economic history unequivocally prove that high-quality inclusive political institutions influence a country’s economic growth.

Of additional economic importance to Africa is the issue of migrants, displaced persons, and refugees. Benedict XVI, listening to the Synod, calls for universal solidarity. In doing so, he recognizes that African internal and external migration is a multi-faceted challenge. It impairs native human capital, weakening or even destroying the basic social cell, which is the family (Nos. 84–85).

Without denying globalization and its advantages, the Pope warns that it should lead to “development towards what is good.” The construction of the “global village” should, therefore, have a personalistic, communal character and be open to transcendence. In this sense, the exhortation speaks more of a “globalization of solidarity,” which does not mean unification. Instead, while preserving different realities and outlooks on life, culture, politics, or economics, this globalization serves proper integration. Market mechanisms need an additional component based on “the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity.” In turn, valuable assistance from international actors should always be transparent (Nos. 86–87).

However, it does not stop there. Our attention should be drawn to the broader perspective of the document, in which Benedict XVI charts an
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integral vision of Africa’s socio-economic reality. Naturally, this attitude coincides with Catholic social teaching and refers in many places to some approaches of contemporary development economics (e.g., the concept of the “great escape” by Nobel Prize winner Angus Deaton\(^6\)). The Pope links these development issues with social, humanistic, and even ethical concerns. Let us investigate some of these issues in more detail.

In the same part of the exhortation, a strong call for respect for human life from conception to natural death resounds (Nos. 70–78). Citing the voices of the synodal fathers, the Pope opposes the peculiar game of international organizations that promote abortion in Africa with a relativized narrative (Nos. 70–71). Instead, those organizations should respect the peculiarities of institutions (including Church institutions) working in the field of public health (No. 73). Some international actors are known to condition their financial assistance to African countries on the legalization of abortion by the authorities there.\(^{17}\)

The academic literature emphasizes Africa’s high birth rate, especially in the twentieth century, which, along with the birth rate in other underdeveloped regions, contributed to a significant increase in world population.\(^{18}\) At least since the publication of the *Report for the Club of Rome* in 1972\(^{19}\) a Malthusian or neo-Malthusian perspective seems to dominate in contemporary development economics, recognizing the danger to the availability of natural resources in a situation of excessive demographic growth. Hence the ambiguous appeals by some scholars, international organizations, and governments, as well as certain actions, to reduce the world’s population through the promotion of contraception, abortion, and euthanasia. Benedict XVI, meanwhile, diagnoses the problem quite differently, defending the potential inherent in Africa’s many inhabitants. A parallel can be seen here to the arguments of numerous critics of the static resource theory, including the research of Nobel laureate Michael Kremer. He demonstrates that over the very long term, in regions without technological contact, a higher population resulted in technological progress.\(^{20}\) This progress helps to identify new natural resources and increase production (e.g., of food)\(^{21}\) and in time can promote sustainable development.

Other real threats against life are included in the exhortation: drug addiction, alcoholism, and epidemics of malaria, tuberculosis, and AIDS. Their prevalence weakens Africa’s human capital and impedes its socio-economic development (No. 72). Therefore, real Church action is needed to promote the development of health services and defend them against private interests (Nos. 139–41).
Measurable contributions to the defense of life and socio-economic development are being made through literacy efforts and strengthening universal education (from primary level to universities) to overcome the diagnosed “crisis of education” facing Africa. Suffice it to say that Benedict XVI describes illiteracy as “a scourge on a par with that of the pandemics,” leading to “social death” (Nos. 74–78). Elsewhere, he explicitly states that Africa’s future depends on the universality of education (No. 134, cf. Nos. 135–38).

Decent remuneration of those employed in the Church’s institutions, which strengthens the Church’s credibility, is a separate issue to which the Pope draws attention (Nos. 126, 134). New technologies also play an important role in promoting Africa’s development and evangelization, serving to advance communication and reliable and honest media (Nos. 142–46).

The concept of justice is applied to specific social groups in Africa. Thus, we read about the call of the laity to nurture spiritual life, bear witness in professional life, become politically, socially, and culturally active, and explore Catholic social teaching as being very important for public activity (including economic activity) and in forming professional competence (Nos. 128–31). At the same time, we find reflections on the vocation of the family to educate for justice (Nos. 42–46), the social authority of the elderly (Nos. 47–50), the involvement of men in concrete activities for justice (Nos. 51–54), the need for women’s empowerment in African society (Nos. 55–59), the dangers lurking among the youth (who are the most numerous in Africa and should put their ideals into practice [Nos. 60–64]), and, finally, injustice against children and their reification, including the unborn (Nos. 65–68).

The complex tasks of the Church, addressed by Benedict XVI in *Africae Munus* to its specific groups, should be further read in the wide context outlined above (Nos. 88–171). The aim of the Church should be to “mobilize the spiritual energies and the material resources” to overcome the challenges included in the document based on the statements of the Synod (No. 98). With regard to purely economic issues (pastoral and evangelization issues are among the primary and essential ones), the bishops are to beware of nationalism and the absolutization of African culture, focusing on fidelity to the Christian message. The formation of the laity, especially political and economic leaders, should be based on conversion. The Pope demands prayer, witness, presence, as well as “transparency and good financial management” from the bishops. He also appeals: “Do not hesitate to seek help from experts in auditing, so as to give example to the faithful and to society at large. Promote the good functioning of the ecclesial
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bodies provided for by Church law on the diocesan and parochial level.” Active involvement, particularly in financial matters, is required by the “collegial solidarity” of individual episcopates, which also includes other ecclesial structures (Nos. 102–07).

In a similar vein, the Pope addresses priests, who should not be political or social activists, but instead focus on fulfilling their essential vocation: sanctifying themselves and others. Their doing so will contribute to building a renewed society in Africa. In addition to the obvious spiritual formation (which means, among other things, “detachment from material possessions”), this vocational development of priests should be accompanied by and intellectual formation, including the study of Catholic social teaching in particular. Among the classic tasks of the clergy, the Pope mentions “ongoing dialogue with those holding positions of responsibility in society” (Nos. 108–12). In this exhortation away from social activism, there is an indirect echo of Joseph Ratzinger’s criticism of liberation theology, having its source in Marxism. In a similar key, one should read the observations concerning missionaries, permanent deacons (here attention is drawn to their certain duties in the field of co-construction of society and the Church, protection of the environment, or “sense of the common good”), consecrated persons, seminarians, and catechists (Nos. 113–27).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Benedict XVI’s exhortation *Africae Munus* represents the quintessence of Catholic social teaching, creatively taken up and developed by the Pope in the encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate*, to which he otherwise refers. The problems of economic development in Africa have been placed in an integral social perspective. Some of the diagnoses and prescriptions addressed in the document may, on the surface, come as a surprise. Passages on migration or the environment refute the sometimes-proffered thesis that these challenges were alien to Benedict XVI. At the same time, the issues he does formulate are not merely empty slogans. A concrete idea can be seen here, one based on a vertical arrangement. The most important tasks in the exhortation are directed to the Church, which respects the independence of the public sphere, but also expects to maintain its own autonomy. Then we find calls to African states and societies, which are clearly empowered. In keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, the Pope defends the sovereignty of these states and societies. Finally, it is only at the lowest level, as if against the logic of the contemporary world, that we read appeals to the international community, which boil down to being transparent in actions and getting rid of cynicism towards Africa. This is a simple, coherent, and yet profound concept.
Although the very title of the document suggests that the addressees of the exhortation are exclusively directed to the faithful of the Catholic Church, the way the issues are raised within the exhortation makes it universal. The Pope addresses “all people of good will” in some places (see Nos. 13, 174). Therefore, the diagnoses and prescriptions posed, even if only concerning the economy of Africa, should be related to contemporary economic thought overall. The Pope’s goal in the exhortation is not only the development of Africa itself, but also its participation in the development of the world (cf. No. 146). In this sense, the clarity of the document provides an additional argument for those who advocated awarding the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences to Benedict XVI for his 2009 social encyclical letter.26

Notes

1. The author would like to thank all the participants of the scientific conference Modern Ideologies and Christianity in the Thought of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, organized on November 25, 2021, by the Ratzingerianum Scientific Center of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, the Faculty of Theology of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, and the Vatican Foundation Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. The Pope Emeritus was personally acquainted with the agenda.


4. I deliberately omit literature on the Second African Synod that discusses the preparatory work, its proceedings, and decisions. I focus instead on studies that treat the exhortation more directly.

5. See, e.g., R. Baawobr, Africae Munus and What is at Stake for Mission in the Church-Family of God in Africa (paper), Lusaka 2012, https://d1wqtxts1xze7.cloudfront.net/51669558/conference_africae_munus_richard_baawobr_lusaka_zambia_11july2012-with-cover-page-v2.pdf?Expires=1633007689&Signature=Ts9LcuNoaxZzSyHaupAexz93mn315pVKPmmL1npj9exgKbSsWI0koPMVwVgGMfZsaNurDnet~zi60SScz3fWfu274a0v6hd~MU3W4Y5aLhWsNsiiYS
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include references to sources (including documents of the Second African Synod) and literature.


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