

# The Church, The Economy and Social Justice: Reflections on *Caritas in Veritate*

Remarks by Rev. Robert P. Imbelli  
Associate Professor of Theology, Boston College

BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE  
BOSTON COLLEGE, CHESTNUT HILL, MASSACHUSETTS  
October 8, 2009

In his generally appreciative comments in *Commonweal Magazine* on Pope Benedict's encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, Professor Finn remarks, "The encyclical reminds us, once again, that Benedict is first and foremost a systematic theologian" (August 14, 2009, p. 10). I am not quite sure whether Professor Finn means that as a compliment – but I will take it as such. On the basis of that recognition, I will highlight three features of *Caritas in Veritate* that I believe pose challenges for the development of the Church's social teaching and for Catholic theology more generally.

Though I shall not focus directly upon the strictly economic implications of the encyclical, it seems clear that, in the pope's view, economic considerations cannot ultimately be divorced from God's economy of salvation.

The first feature of the encyclical that I propose may seem self-evident. However, I think it crucial to underline: the Church's social teaching is **ecclesial** — its basis and matrix is the Good News of Jesus Christ entrusted to and proclaimed by the Church.

Pope Benedict writes "social doctrine is built upon the foundation handed on by the apostles to the Fathers of the Church and further explored by the great Christian doctors. This doctrine points definitively "to the New Man, to the 'last Adam who became life-giving spirit' (1 Cor. 15:35), the principle of the charity that 'never ends' (1 Cor. 13:8)" (#12).

Pope Benedict's conviction is indeed clearly enunciated in the very first section of the encyclical where he writes: "All people feel the interior impulse to love authentically: Love and truth never abandon them completely because these are the vocation implanted by God in the heart and mind of every human person. The search for love and truth is purified and liberated by Jesus Christ from the impoverishment that our humanity brings to it, and he reveals to us in all its fullness the initiative of love and the plan for true life that God has prepared for us. In Christ, *charity in truth* becomes the face of his person, a vocation for us to love our brothers and sisters in the truth of his plan" (#1).

Now an implication I would draw from this orientation is that the Church's social teaching is rooted ultimately in the Gospel, not in "natural law." In saying this, I do not mean to rule out all appeal to "natural law" reasoning which is certainly a characteristic aspect of Catholic reflection on social issues. There are contexts in which such appeal is appropriate. However, the well-intentioned desire to find common ground with all people of good will can uproot the Catholic appeal to natural law from its rich theological soil which alone can nourish and sustain it. In other words, natural law discourse is an "abstraction" from a far thicker and more comprehensive Catholic language that

articulates a vision for humankind and the world: an integral humanism. Indeed, unless that richer Catholic language is invoked and drawn upon, as the Pope does throughout the encyclical, one risks reducing religion to ethics, and personal relationships and fraternity to the promotion of a cause (however just and desirable).

A second feature of the Encyclical is the need, precisely in order to foster authentic development, to have recourse to an **integral vision of the human**, one whose concern embraces “the good of every man and of the whole man” (#18, quoting Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #14). This “truly **integral humanism**” (#78) weaves into a seamless garment the individual and the social, the body and soul, effective concern for the earthly city and fervent hope for the heavenly city. It is noteworthy that Pope Benedict XVI brings together in one over-arching vision aspects of the magisterium of Pope Paul VI that are too often kept apart in Catholic circles, contributing, in no small part, to our present fragmenta

In the concluding section of *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict writes, “Development requires attention to the spiritual life, a serious consideration of the experiences of trust in