

## Encyclical letter from Pope Benedict XVI – Caritas in Veritate / Charity in Truth

On 7<sup>th</sup> July, 2009, the Pope issued a letter to the Roman Catholic Church but also to “all people of goodwill” ([http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html)). Such letters are relatively infrequent and very important, providing direction to one of the world’s largest religious bodies and possibly the world’s largest non-governmental organisation. Each encyclical builds on a long tradition of previous letters, adapting the positions adopted and advocated to meet contemporary challenges. This one is particularly relevant to development because it is a contribution to Catholic social teaching and focuses on how to achieve “integral human development” through charity/love based on the “truths” reflected in religious values.

Although not all aspects of human development are dealt with in the encyclical, it explains the thinking that underlies the positions taken quite exhaustively and covers a wide range of issues. It is only possible to identify a few highlights here.

The Pope draws on the concept of “integral human development”, meaning “development of the whole man and of all men”, set out in Pope Paul VI’s Encyclical Letter of 1967, *Populorum Progressio*. Critical of the world’s progress towards achieving wellbeing for all, he argues that one of the main reasons for humanity’s failure is the pursuit of wealth and technology for their own sake, devoid of values, moral purpose and moral responsibility. “Love – *caritas* [he asserts] – 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” (1). However, without ‘truth’ (religious values, especially social justice and the common good, reason and scientific and other knowledge), love/charity “degenerates into sentimentality” (3) and emotionalism.

Clifford Longley, writing in *The Tablet* (11 July 2009) identifies the fusing of “spirituality and social action under the banner of integral human development” as the encyclical’s “theological keynote”. Far from the social teaching being an add-on to the Church’s main purpose of evangelisation, as believed by many conservative Catholics, he suggests, the encyclical “emphatically unites the Church’s roles of spreading the Gospel with working for social justice”. A purely material and technical approach to solving the world’s longstanding and emerging crises without a “spiritual dimension” is, the encyclical asserts, doomed to failure.

In addition to the problems of poverty, hunger and inequality identified in the earlier encyclical, **contemporary problems and crises** are identified and analysed: the financial crisis, the problems caused by globalisation and mass migration, the environmental crisis, issues of sexuality, the family and bioethics. Long passages are devoted to the economy, work and employment, the role of civil society, natural resources and the environment, and global governance.

While accepting the fact of a capitalist **economy**, the letter is extremely critical of current economic trends and much business behaviour. Attributing the world economy’s failure to redistribute the proceeds of economic growth and reduce poverty to the view of economics as a purely technical issue, detached from social responsibilities and moral values, the Pope makes a strong argument for value change and for a major role to be played by businesses that do not solely address the interests of their shareholders and seek to maximise profits. Rights should be accompanied by responsibilities, especially towards workers and the environment; the work of labour unions should be respected and supported; reciprocity should be as important as self interest; businesses based on these alternative principles (mutuals etc) should be recognised and encouraged; and consumers should practise responsible consumption.

We must not see **globalisation** “in fatalistic terms, as if the dynamics involved were the product of anonymous impersonal forces or structures independent of the human will” (42). Neither blind opposition nor regarding ourselves as victims is an appropriate response. Instead, he argues, globalisation trends “suitably understood and directed, open up the unprecedented possibility of large-scale redistribution of wealth on a world-wide scale; if badly directed, however, they can lead to an increase in poverty and inequality” (42). This view leads him to strongly advocate improved global governance (a “world political authority”), incorporating reform of the UN, economic institutions and international finance. While he recognises the danger of “universal power of a tyrannical nature”, he suggests that the danger can be avoided by adopting the principle of subsidiarity and ensuring that “poorer nations are given an effective voice in shared decision-making” (67)

People, the Pope argues, are at the centre of development – it is not correct to see **natural resources** as sacred or equally significant. However, people are stewards of natural resources and must protect the environment and use resources responsibly.

People are also at the centre of development because they are immersed in and defined by their social relations – development means inclusion within a wider “human family, built in solidarity on the basis of the fundamental values of justice and peace” (54), although the unity of this “family” should not (and need not) submerge the identities of individuals, peoples and cultures. In contrast, he condemns religious and cultural traditions and attitudes that “ossify society in rigid social groupings” (55), foster subjugation to magical beliefs and occult powers, and cut their followers off from the wider society. Moreover, he asserts: “Secularism and fundamentalism exclude the possibility of fruitful dialogue and effective cooperation between reason and religious faith” (56).

The Catholic principle of “**respect for life**” is reiterated, and reflected, as expected, in arguments for stronger families based on marriage between a man and a woman and “responsible procreation” (44), and against mandatory birth control, abortion and euthanasia.

### **Comment**

This encyclical letter sets out diagnoses, positions and principles, urging change, but stopping short of committing the Catholic Church to specific actions. Its calls for reform of the global financial system and the UN, and for developing an alternative economic model to neoliberal cutthroat capitalism are radical, although much of its content is not particularly new nor particularly radical. Also, it consistently and annoyingly uses the male pronoun to mean people throughout. It is long, and written in complex and sometimes obscure language. It is available in many languages but relatively few are likely to read it (see Paflin in the *Church Times* for a summary (<http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/content.asp?id=77742>)). Whether or not it is influential will depend on how it is translated and communicated to a wide audience and whether and how Church organisations and adherents (including political and economic leaders) act on its messages.