

Pope Benedict proposes a 'Christian humanism' for the global economy

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Blending a call for increased aid to developing nations, support for global governance with “real teeth,” alarm at the “unregulated exploitation” of the environment, and staunch opposition to population control programs, Pope Benedict XVI today sketched what he called a “Christian humanism” for the globalized age in his long-awaited social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (“Charity in Truth”).

To be sustainable, Benedict argues, economic policies must be rooted in a comprehensive vision of human welfare, including spirituality – as opposed to a “technocratic” approach, or one driven by “private interests and the logic of power.”

The pope rejects a laissez-faire economic philosophy which would treat the market as largely free-standing. Benedict specifically brushes off the idea that the economy has an in-built “quota” of poverty and underdevelopment required to function successfully.

“The conviction that the economy must be autonomous, that it must be shielded from ‘influences’ of a moral character, has led man to abuse the economic process in a thoroughly destructive way,” the pope writes.

In terms of secular politics, there’s something for both left and right to cheer in *Caritas in Veritate*, and something for them to be grumpy about. Liberals will likely applaud Benedict’s call for robust government intervention in the economy and his endorsement of labor unions, while conservatives will appreciate his unyielding opposition to abortion, birth control and gay marriage, insisting that such policies are not only morally flawed but poor economic strategy.

Release of the 30,000-word *Caritas in Veritate* was delayed in order to give the pope time to reflect on the economic crisis that erupted in mid-2007. On the eve of a G8 summit in Italy this week devoted to pondering a new architecture for the global economy, Benedict says the church does not have “technical solutions to offer,” but nonetheless issues a slew of specific recommendations:

- Resisting a “downsizing” of social security systems;
- Support for labor unions and the rights of workers in a global economy marked by mobility of labor;
- Combating hunger “by investing in rural infrastructures, irrigation systems, transport, organization of markets, and in the development and dissemination of agricultural technology”;
- Enshrining access to steady employment for all as a core economic objective;
- Protecting the earth’s “state of ecological health”;
- Seeing “openness to life,” meaning resistance to measures such as abortion and birth control, as not only morally obligatory but a key to long-term economic development;

- Ensuring that the targets of international aid programs are involved in their design and implementation, and trimming the bureaucracy sometimes associated with those programs;
- Lowering domestic energy consumption in developed nations, investing in renewable forms of energy, and adopting new more sustainable lifestyles;
- Curbing an “excessive zeal for protecting knowledge” among affluent nations, “through an unduly rigid assertion of the right to intellectual property, especially in the field of health care”;
- Opening up global markets to the products of developing nations, especially in agriculture;
- Commitment among developed nations to devote a larger share of their gross domestic product to development aid;
- Greater investment in education;
- More generous immigration policies, recognizing the economic contributions of migrants, both to their host countries and to their countries of origin by sending money home;
- Support for micro-finance, consumer cooperatives, and socially responsible forms of business;
- Reform of the United Nations and international institutions of economics and finance, in order to promote “a true world political authority ... with real teeth,” though one informed by the principle of subsidiarity – meaning respect for the liberty of individuals, families, and civil society;
- Opposition to abuses of biotechnology such as a new eugenics.

Underlying his specific positions, Benedict argues for a view of the human person founded on faith in God and open to spiritual meaning, as opposed to “an empiricist and sceptical view of life.”

“Without the perspective of eternal life, human progress in this world is denied breathing-space,” the pope writes. Authentic development “requires a transcendent vision of the person, it needs God.”

In that context, Benedict insists on a strong public role for religion, against what Italian Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, called “a militant secularism, sometimes exasperated,” during a Vatican news conference this morning.

In the encyclical, Benedict XVI argues that both secularism and fundamentalism “exclude the possibility of ... effective cooperation between reason and religious faith.”

Signs of the times flagged by the pope include “badly managed and largely speculative financial dealing, large-scale migration of peoples, often provoked by some particular circumstance and then given insufficient attention, [and] the unregulated exploitation of the earth’s resources.” Benedict also laments the juxtaposition of “a ‘right to excess’, and even to transgression and vice, within affluent societies, [alongside] the lack of food, drinkable water, basic instruction and elementary health care in areas of the underdeveloped world and on the outskirts of large metropolitan centres.”

In addition to structural reform, Benedict suggests that a lasting remedy to the present economic crisis will require conversion of individual hearts and minds.

“Development is impossible without upright men and women, without financiers and politicians whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good,” the pope says.

Benedict champions organized labor in *Caritas in Veritate*, arguing that in a global economy marked by massive mobility of labor workers’ rights “must be honoured today even more than in the past.” He calls upon labor unions in developed countries to devote greater attention to “exploited and underrepresented” workers in other parts of the world.

The pope also calls for urgent efforts to alleviate hunger, asserting that food and access to water must be regarded as “universal rights of all human beings.”

To some extent, *Caritas in Veritate* is styled as an update of Pope Paul VI’s 1967 social encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, which addressed the newly emerging global order in the era of decolonization. Benedict calls Paul’s document “the *Rerum Novarum* of the modern age,” a reference to Pope Leo XIII’s landmark 1891 encyclical that launched the modern tradition of Catholic social teaching.

Experts in Catholic social teaching say much of *Caritas in Veritate* is not exactly new – the call for a true world political authority, for example, reaches back to Pope John XXIII’s 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris*, and has periodically been repeated by popes ever since.

Nonetheless, there are a couple of new wrinkles in *Caritas in Veritate*.

For one thing, Benedict XVI insists that Catholic social teaching must be seen as a package deal, holding economic justice together with its opposition to abortion, birth control, gay marriage, and other hot-button issues of sexual morality. The pope expresses irritation with “certain abstract subdivisions of the church’s social doctrine,” an apparent reference to tensions between the church’s pro-life contingent and its peace-and-justice activists.

For the first time in a social encyclical, a pope argues that current demographic trends – in particular, population declines and rapid aging in parts of the developed world, especially Europe and Japan – illustrate the wisdom of Catholic sexual morality.

“Decline in births, falling at times beneath the so-called ‘replacement level’, also puts a strain on social welfare systems, increases their cost, eats into savings and hence the financial resources needed for investment, reduces the availability of qualified labourers, and narrows the ‘brain pool’ upon which nations can draw for their needs,” Benedict writes.

Benedict called falling birth rates in the developed world a sign of “scant confidence in the future and moral weariness.”

A second original touch in *Caritas in Veritate* is Benedict’s description of the emergence of a “broad intermediate area” between private business firms and non-profit initiatives, made up of business enterprises that operate not just from the profit motive but also out of a sense of

social responsibility. The pope explicitly cites the “Economy of Communion,” linked to the “Folcare” movement founded by the late Italian Catholic laywoman Chiara Lubich, which links almost 800 businesses worldwide in a commitment to pool a share of their profits in order to fund development and formational programs.

“It is to be hoped that these new kinds of enterprise will succeed in finding a suitable juridical and fiscal structure in every country,” Benedict writes. “The very plurality of institutional forms of business gives rise to a market which is not only more civilized but also more competitive.”

Third, despite the argument of some social theorists that the nation-state may become obsolete in a globalized age, Benedict argues that “both wisdom and prudence suggest not being too precipitous in declaring the demise of the State.” In fact, the pope says, the current economic crisis may mark something of a renaissance for the state, as public authorities once again assert control over economic life.

One interesting twist to *Caritas in Veritate* is that Benedict XVI managed to pen a 144-page reflection on the globalized economy without once using the term “capitalism.”

Caritas in Veritate is the first social encyclical of the 21st century, and the third encyclical letter from Pope Benedict XVI, after *Deus Caritas Est* in late 2005 and *Spe Salvi* in 2007. The new encyclical carries the date of June 29, the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul.