

POPE BENEDICT XVI'S ENCYCLICAL CARITAS IN VERITATE ON LIFE ISSUES

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July 29, 2009

First, I will present Pope Benedict's teaching on life issues in the encyclical and then offer comments thereon.

The Pope's Teaching

Pope Benedict XVI addresses issues related to the sanctity of human life and human sexuality in depth in three different areas of his new social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth).

In Chapter 2, titled "Human Development in Our Time," the Pope begins by saying: "One of the most striking aspects of development in the present day is the important question of *respect for life* (emphasis in original), which cannot in any way be detached from questions concerning the development of peoples. It is an aspect which has acquired increasing prominence in recent times, obliging us to broaden our concept of poverty and underdevelopment *to include questions connected with the acceptance of life, especially in cases where it is impeded in a variety of ways* (emphasis added) (no. 28, 1). He then goes on to declare:

...some parts of the world still experience practices of demographic control on the part of governments that often promote contraception and even go so far as to impose abortion. In economically developed countries, legislation contrary to life is very widespread, and it has already shaped moral attitudes and praxis, contributing to the spread of an anti-birth mentality; frequent attempts are made to export this mentality to other States as if it were a form of cultural progress (no. 28, 2). Some non-governmental Organizations work actively to spread abortion, at times promoting the practice of sterilization in poor countries, in some cases not even informing the women concerned. Moreover, there is reason to suspect that development aid is sometimes linked to specific health-care policies which *de facto* involve the imposition of strong birth control measures. Further grounds for concern are laws permitting euthanasia as well as pressure from lobby groups, nationally and internationally, in favor of its juridical recognition (no. 28, 3). *Openness to life is at the center of true development*. When a society moves towards the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man's true good. If personal and social sensitivity towards the acceptance of a new life is lost, then other forms of acceptance that are valuable for society also wither away. The acceptance of life strengthens moral fiber and makes people capable of mutual help. By cultivating openness to life, wealthy peoples can better understand the needs of poor ones, they can avoid employing huge economic and intellectual resources to satisfy the selfish desires of their own citizens, and instead, they can promote virtuous action within the perspective of production that is morally sound and marked by solidarity, respecting the fundamental right to life of every people and every individual (no. 28, 4).



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In Chapter 4, “The Development of People; Rights and Duties; The Environment,” the Holy Father refers to procreation and sexuality in the context of population issues. In no. 44 he writes:

The notion of rights and duties in development must also take account of the problems associated with population growth. This is a very important aspect of authentic development, since it concerns the inalienable values of life and the family. To consider population increase as the primary cause of underdevelopment is mistaken, even from an economic point of view. Suffice it to consider, on the one hand, the significant reduction in infant mortality and the rise in average life expectancy found in economically developed countries, and on the other hand, the signs of crisis observable in societies that are registering an alarming decline in their birth rate. *Due attention must obviously be given to responsible procreation, which among other things has a positive contribution to make to integral human development. The Church, in her concern for man's authentic development, urges him to have full respect for human values in the exercise of his sexuality. It cannot be reduced merely to pleasure or entertainment, nor can sex education be reduced to technical instruction aimed solely at protecting the interested parties from possible disease or the “risk” of procreation. This would be to impoverish and disregard the deeper meaning of sexuality, a meaning which needs to be acknowledged and responsibly appropriated not only by individuals but also by the community. It is irresponsible to view sexuality merely as a source of pleasure, and likewise to regulate it through strategies of mandatory birth control. In either case materialistic ideas and policies are at work, and individuals are ultimately subjected to various forms of violence. Against such policies, there is a need to defend the primary competence of the family in the area of sexuality (emphasis added) as opposed to the State and its restrictive policies, and to ensure that parents are suitably prepared to undertake their responsibilities (44, 1).*

*Morally responsible openness to life represents a rich social and economic resource. Populous nations have been able to emerge from poverty thanks not least to the size of their population and the talents of their people. On the other hand, formerly prosperous nations are presently passing through a phase of uncertainty and in some cases decline, precisely because of their falling birth rates (emphasis added); this has become a crucial problem for highly affluent societies. The 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 laborers, and narrows the “brain pool” upon which nations can draw for their needs. Furthermore, smaller and at times miniscule families run the risk of impoverishing social relations, and failing to ensure effective forms of solidarity. These situations are symptomatic of scant confidence in the future and moral weariness. *It is thus becoming a social and even economic necessity once more to hold up to future generations the beauty of marriage and the family, and the fact that these institutions correspond to the deepest needs and dignity of the person. In view of this, States are called to enact policies promoting the centrality and the integrity of the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society, and to assume responsibility for its economic and fiscal needs, while**



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respecting its essentially relational character (emphasis added) (no. 44, 2).

Benedict returns to issues involving human life in his discussion of bioethics in Nos. 74 and 75 of Chapter 6, which is titled “The Development of Peoples and Technology”:

A particularly crucial battleground in today's cultural struggle between the supremacy of technology and human moral responsibility is the field of *bioethics*, where the very possibility of integral human development is radically called into question. In this most delicate and critical area, the fundamental question asserts itself force-fully: is man the product of his own labors 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. We are presented with a clear *either/ or*. Yet the rationality of a self-centered use of technology proves to be irrational because it implies a decisive rejection of meaning and value. 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? Faced with these dramatic questions, reason and faith can come to each other's assistance. Only together will they save man. *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 life* (emphasis in original) (no. 74). Paul VI had already recognized and drawn attention to the global dimension of the social question. Following his lead, we need to affirm today that *the social question has become a radically anthropological question* (emphasis in original), in the sense that it concerns not just how life is conceived but also how it is manipulated, as bio-technology places it increasingly under man's control. *In vitro* fertilization, embryo research, the possibility of manufacturing clones and human hybrids: all this is now emerging and being promoted in today's highly disillusioned culture, which believes it has mastered every mystery, because the origin of life is now within our grasp. Here we see the clearest expression of technology's supremacy. In this type of culture, the conscience is simply invited to take note of technological possibilities. Yet we must not underestimate the disturbing scenarios that threaten our future, or the powerful new instruments that the “culture of death” has at its disposal. To the tragic and widespread scourge of abortion we may well have to add in the future — indeed it is already surreptitiously present — the systematic eugenic programming of births. At the other end of the spectrum, a pro-euthanasia mindset is making inroads as an equally damaging assertion of control over life that under certain circumstances is deemed no longer worth living. Underlying these scenarios are cultural viewpoints that deny human dignity. These practices in turn foster a materialistic and mechanistic understanding of human life. Who could measure the negative effects of this kind of mentality for development? 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



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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 (no.75).

Commentary

First of all, Pope Benedict begins 28, 1 by declaring “One of the most striking aspects of development in the present day is the important question of *respect for life*,” opposes abortion and contraception declaring that they contribute to “to the spread of an anti-birth mentality...[and obliging him]to include questions connected with the acceptance of life, especially in cases where it is impeded in a variety of ways.”

In 28, 2 he then condemns governments that impose abortion and then speaks of “non-governmental Organizations [that] work actively to spread abortion, at times promoting the practice of sterilization in poor countries, in some cases not even informing the women concerned...[and that] there is reason to suspect that development aid is sometimes linked to specific health-care policies which *de facto* involve the imposition of strong birth control measures.” In 28, 3 he says: “Further grounds for concern are laws permitting euthanasia as well as pressure from lobby groups, nationally and internationally, in favor of its juridical recognition.” And in 28, 4 he declares: “*Openness to life is at the center of true development*. When a society moves towards the denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man's true good,” and ends by demanding respect for “the fundamental right to life of every people and every individual.”

That the life to be respected by a right that is inviolable because the deliberate killing of the innocent is protected by absolute moral norms includes *human bodily life* is made clear in 44, 1 where he affirms: “*Due attention must obviously be given to responsible procreation, which among other things has a positive contribution to make to integral human development. The Church, in her concern for man's authentic development, urges him to have full respect for human values in the exercise of his sexuality. It cannot be reduced merely to pleasure or entertainment, nor can sex education be reduced to technical instruction aimed solely at protecting the interested parties from possible disease or the “risk” of procreation. This would be to impoverish and disregard the deeper meaning of sexuality, a meaning which needs to be acknowledged and responsibly appropriated not only by individuals but also by the community. It is irresponsible to view sexuality merely as a source of pleasure, and likewise to regulate it through strategies of mandatory birth control. In either case materialistic ideas and policies are at work, and individuals are ultimately subjected to various forms of violence. Against such policies, there is a need to defend the primary competence of the family in the area of sexuality* (emphasis added) as opposed to the State and its restrictive policies, and to ensure that parents are suitably prepared to undertake their responsibilities.” Here he is obviously reaffirming that human bodily life is integral to the being of the human



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person who is one in the unity of body and soul, and is opposing contemporary dualism that severs the “person” from his or her body.

In 44, 2 the Holy Father then affirms: “It is thus becoming a social and even economic necessity once more to hold up to future generations the beauty of marriage and the family, and the fact that these institutions correspond to the deepest needs and dignity of the person. In view of this, States are called to enact policies promoting the centrality and the integrity of the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society, and to assume responsibility for its economic and fiscal needs, while respecting its essentially relational character.” In other words the family rooted in marriage is the primary vital cell of society whose rights must be recognized by society.

In 74, 1 he introduces the subject of bioethics insisting that we are faced with an either/or decision: “reason open to transcendence or reason closed within immanence,” and that “the rationality of a self-centred use of technology proves to be irrational because it implies a decisive rejection of meaning and value.” Then in no. 75, with Paul VI (and John Paul II as well), he affirms that “today that *the social question has become a radically anthropological question* (emphasis in original), in the sense that it concerns not just how life is conceived but also how it is manipulated.” He then speaks of the “culture of death,” observing that “To the tragic and widespread scourge of abortion we may well have to add in the future — indeed it is already surreptitiously present — the systematic eugenic programming of births. At the other end of the spectrum, a pro-euthanasia mindset is making inroads as an equally damaging assertion of control over life that under certain circumstances is deemed no longer worth living. Underlying these scenarios are cultural viewpoints that deny human dignity.” He then concludes by saying that in the contemporary world [that holds the dualistic anthropology already noted] we discover: “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.”

Conclusion

I think that here I have shown how profoundly *Caritas in veritate* treats life issues concisely but vigorously and intelligently.

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