

Caritas in Veritate and Catholic Health Care

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Pope Benedict XVI has issued his third encyclical (and his first “social encyclical”) entitled “Charity in Truth” (*Caritas in veritate*) dated June 29 of this year. The greeting which begins the encyclical explains that its theme is “integral human development in charity and truth.” The Pope himself describes the encyclical as a commentary on Pope Paul VI’s 1967 encyclical “On the Development of Peoples” (*Populorum progressio*: PP) and a further exploration of the earlier encyclical’s understanding of authentic human development in relation to the changes that have occurred in the past 40 years. In another sense, the encyclical can also be seen as a further elucidation of a key theme articulated in Pope Benedict’s first encyclical “God is Love” (*Deus est caritas*) regarding how the work of charity relates to that of justice. This essay will explore the Pope’s understanding of charity and integral human development and ask whether these ideas might have anything to say to Catholic health care. The last section of this essay will then comment on the relationship between justice and charity that is put forth in this encyclical and relate it to what the Pope expressed in his first encyclical.

“Integral Human Development”

Populorum progressio initiated the Vatican’s discussion of the meaning of human development. Developing the thought of the philosopher Jacques Maritain,¹ Pope Paul VI suggested that authentic development could occur only if humanity adopted what he termed a “full-bodied humanism,” understood as “the fulfillment of the whole person and all people” (par 42).

Twenty years later, Pope John Paul II used his encyclical “On Social Concerns” (*Sollicitudo rei socialis*: SRS) to examine, from the point of view of the poor, the world situation in which the Church then found itself. It was in this encyclical that he articulated his now famous account of the “social structures of sin” (par 37) and further noted that the antidote to these sinful structures was the virtue of solidarity, which he described as “a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good” (par 38). This encyclical also set forth Pope John Paul’s understand-

ing of “integral human development,” claiming that it was “a duty of all to all” to collaborate “in the development of the whole person and of every human being” (par 32). In this way, “the characteristics of full development, one which is ‘more human’ and able to sustain itself at the level of the true vocation of men and women,” are enhanced (par 28).

Pope Paul VI wrote *Populorum progressio* at a time when developing countries, especially those in Africa, were beginning to achieve their independence from European colonialism. Pope John Paul II wrote his encyclical two years before the fall of the Berlin wall, when the tensions between East and West were still high. If Pope Paul suggested that “development is the new name for peace” (PP, par 76), Pope John Paul suggested that the new name for development might be solidarity.² In *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Benedict now offers a further reflection upon “integral human development” at a point in history quite different from that of either of his predecessors. He speaks of the globalization that has occurred in recent decades, but he also recognizes an apparent contradiction that at the same time the world has become more globalized there is also an increasing social fragmentation arising from “private interests and the logic of power” (par 5). This has become even more exacerbated by the current economic crisis.

Looking at this situation, Pope Benedict asks whether the world has actually witnessed any true progress in the past forty years (par 33). In his own answer he notes that “progress of a merely economic and technological kind is insufficient” for true development (par 23). What is needed, he insists, is *integral human development*. Using wording that is reminiscent of both Paul VI and John Paul II (and thus Maritain), he clarifies his point of view:

Integral human development is primarily a vocation, and therefore it involves a free assumption of responsibility in solidarity on the part of everyone. Moreover, such development requires a transcendent vision of the person, it needs God: without him, development is either denied, or entrusted exclusively to humans, who

fall into the trap of thinking they can bring about their own salvation, and end up promoting a dehumanized form of development (par 11).

Integral human development must be a spiritual as well as a material reality.

It is within this context that the Pope explains the place of charity. He shows that integral human development presupposes “responsible freedom” (par 16) and “respect for truth” (par 17). He maintains that “charity in truth” is thus central for true development because, while globalization can make people neighbors, “it does not make them sisters and brothers.” He argues that this latter relationship “originates in a transcendent vocation from God the Father, who loved us first, teaching us through the Son, what fraternal charity is.” Quoting Pope Paul VI, he concludes that the goal of development is “unity in the charity of Christ who calls us all to share as sons [and daughters] in the life of the living God” (par 19; see PP par 21). This, he claims, is the starting point of Catholic social teaching:

As the objects of God’s love, men and women become subjects of charity, they are called to make themselves instruments of grace, so as to pour forth God’s charity and to weave networks of charity. This dynamic of charity received and given is what gives rise to the Church’s social teaching (par 5).

Medical Ethics

Does this understanding of “integral human development,” however, have anything to say to Catholic health care? I believe that the encyclical does engage the ministry. On the one hand, the Pope speaks explicitly about health care when he discusses the relationship between human development and technology; and, on the other hand, he also treats health care in his discussion of solidarity.

Regarding the first of these, the most explicit references to health care come at the very end of the encyclical, in the chapter entitled, “The Development of Peoples and Technology.” After discussing the use of technology in peace-building and the media, Pope Benedict turns his attention specifically to bioethics (par 74-75). He briefly touches upon a range of issues such as in vitro fertilization, embryo research, cloning, human hybrids, abortion,

ethanasia and eugenics. He sees these issues as examples of what he calls “today’s cultural struggle between the supremacy of technology and human moral responsibility.” He further suggests that because of these technological advancements “the very possibility of integral human development is radically called into question.” He continues:

These practices 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 toward 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 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 (par 75).

Pope Benedict thus maintains that what many advocates of science would consider advancement is in fact the very opposite of integral human development.

This gives rise to the second consideration mentioned above, the issue of health care and human solidarity. The Pope speaks about the reciprocity of rights and duties within the context of human solidarity. He decries the fact that while some within affluent societies claim what the Pope calls a “right of excess,” most people in the underdeveloped world experience “the lack of food, drinkable water, basic instruction, and elementary health care.” He charges that society has lost sight of “the objectivity and inviolability of rights,” and he calls upon all to recognize that “the sharing of reciprocal duties is a more powerful incentive to action than the mere assertion of rights” (par 43). Notice that in this articulation, human rights always also carry corresponding human duties.

Both of these concerns can be placed under an even broader rubric. In this encyclical, Pope Benedict tries to show the consistency between the Church’s social teaching and its broad defense of life:

The Church forcefully maintains this link between life ethics and social ethics, fully aware that “a society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized” (par 15).³

In emphasizing this element, Pope Benedict places himself firmly within the thought of Pope John Paul II.⁴ What is more instructive, however, is that the Pope actually credits Pope Paul VI for the development of this linkage between life ethics and social ethics. Immediately before the quote mentioned earlier in this paragraph one finds the following: “*Humanae vitae* indicates the *strong links between life ethics and social ethics*, ushering in a new area of magisterial teaching that has gradually been articulated in a series of documents” (par 15, emphasis in the original).

Charity and Justice

Prior to completing this short analysis of the Pope’s latest encyclical, it might be helpful to say a bit about the relationship between *Caritas in veritate* and the Pope’s first encyclical, “God Is Love” (*Deus caritas est*). In his earlier document, Pope Benedict made a relatively strict distinction between the work of justice and that of love. He stated that the just ordering of society was the work of politics and therefore the responsibility of the State. He added, “The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible” (see par 28). He described that the work of the Church in this regard was “to awaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper” (par 28). The work proper to the Church, he said, is that of charity. He suggested that “love – *caritas* – will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love,” (par 20). The Pope then spoke of Catholic health care institutions in terms of “ecclesial charity” (par 29). Of their very nature these institutions must witness to an “unselfish love which shows itself to be a culture of life by the very willingness to ‘lose themselves’ for others” (par 30).

Several social ethicists were critical of this formulation, sug-

gesting that it did not fully reflect Catholic social teaching on justice. The current encyclical seems to nuance these previous statements and articulate a more complete understanding of the relation between justice and charity. First of all, as already discussed, Benedict explicitly relates Catholic social teaching to charity. He claims that it is charity that gives rise to the Church’s social teaching (par 5). He further suggests that charity always “goes beyond justice . . . but it never lacks justice” (par 6). Charity thus presupposes justice, but it also completes and transcends it. He concludes: “The earthly city is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion. Charity always manifests God’s love in human relationships” (par 6).

Conclusion

Using the framework of “integral human development,” Pope Benedict’s latest encyclical addresses several issues that have also been a concern of Catholic health care. Even more basically, the document adds a perspective to these issues that can be helpful to health care institutions as they discern their response to questions that continue to arise in our increasingly complex and global environment.

NOTES

1. Jacques Maritain (†1973) was a French lay Catholic philosopher and contemporary interpreter of Thomas Aquinas. One of his characteristic ideas was that of “integral Christian humanism,” a point of view that considered the person (1) as a unified whole and (2) as a member in society with other people, all of whom are participants in the common good. This formulation is virtually identical to what Pope Paul discusses in PP, par 42 and to Pope John Paul II’s formulation in SRS, par 32. Pope Paul VI refers to Maritain’s work, *Integral Humanism: Temporal and Spiritual Problems of a New Christendom* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1968). The original French volume, *Humanisme intégral: problèmes temporels et spirituels d’une nouvelle chrétienté*, was published in 1936. An earlier English translation, entitled *True Humanism*, was published in 1938.
2. See Charles Curran, Kenneth Himes, and Thomas Shannon, “Commentary on *Sollicitudo rei socialis*,” in Kenneth R. Himes, et al., eds., *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2005), 420.
3. The quote is from Pope John Paul II’s encyclical, “The Gospel of Life” (*Evangelium vitae*), par 15.
4. This theme is articulated throughout Pope John Paul’s encyclical, “The Gospel of Life.” Even earlier, Cardinal Joseph Bernardin developed this theme in thirty-five lectures he gave on the “Consistent Ethic of Life.”