

Encyclical Preview: Benedict XVI on Economics and Ethics in a Time of Crisis

By John Carr

Pope Benedict XVI's new encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, is set for release Tuesday, July 7. The Holy Father signed this much anticipated and delayed letter on June 29, on the Feast of Sts. Peter and Paul. I have been asked to suggest what journalists might look for as they cover this important encyclical letter. Obviously, these expectations are my own, and cannot fully anticipate what the Holy Father will say and not say in this important teaching document.

This encyclical continues a long and powerful tradition of popes articulating biblical values and Catholic moral principles which should guide and measure economic and social life. Benedict XVI follows in the footsteps of Pope Leo XIII and subsequent popes. In 1891, Pope Leo wrote *Rerum Novarum (Of New Things)*, which placed the dignity of work and the rights of workers at the center of Catholic teaching.

For more than a century, popes have courageously called Catholics and all people of good will to protect human life and dignity, to defend the poor and the vulnerable, and to pursue greater justice and peace. Now, amidst an international economic crisis, Pope Benedict assesses and responds to the “new things” in the global economy that have enormous moral and human consequences. He will likely call for solidarity at a time of increasing divisions, summon individuals to greater ethical responsibility amidst economic irresponsibility, and place a priority on the poorest and weakest in the human family, whose lives and dignity are threatened by widespread deprivation and desperation.

Here are some possible directions and themes to watch for in this groundbreaking encyclical letter:

Benedict XVI will likely suggest that the economic crisis is, **at its core, a moral crisis**. He will observe that we have lost our way by ignoring or violating the “truth” about the dignity of every human person, about responsibility for one another, about the common good, about the moral foundations of economic life. He will offer the “truth” as taught by the Church through the centuries as an antidote to the moral relativism, dishonesty, greed, and unrestrained economic opportunism that helped bring about the economic crisis.

Pope Benedict will probably affirm and **extend Catholic social teaching** by applying longstanding principles to new economic forces in a globalized world. He is likely to highlight that we are one human family, not simply competing nations or regions. He is likely to intensify John Paul II's call for solidarity to be globalized.

The Pope will likely build on the message of his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love)*, and his clear insistence that concern for those who are poor is at the heart of the Church's mission, along with proclaiming the Gospel and celebrating the sacraments. He is also likely to insist that **how the poor and vulnerable are faring in the economic crisis is an essential moral measure of the global economy**.

The Holy Father **consistently connects personal and structural ethics**, insisting that both individuals and institutions need to act in economic life with greater attention to moral principles and ethical criteria. He will call for personal conversion and ethical action by individuals as a foundation for structural steps toward a more just economy. At the same time, the Pope is also likely to call for sweeping reforms to address the injustices that leave so many without hope and a decent life across the globe. He may call for both **new attitudes and new structures to promote both solidarity and accountability within the global economy.**

Pope Benedict has consistently placed environmental ethics at the center of his social teaching. He makes clear connections between respect for the Creator and care for creation, between human and natural ecology, and between care for the planet and care for the poorest people on the planet. **Environmental themes** may be addressed more thoroughly than in any other encyclical.

The Pope will probably emphasize once again the **unity of the Church’s teaching and witness for human life and dignity: protecting the unborn and the poor, defending the family from both economic and moral pressures.**

The new encyclical is likely to disappoint those looking for simple analysis or easy answers. It will be filled with nuance and complexity. It will probably disappoint the ideologues of left and right looking for a sound bite to prove their favorite points. **Anyone who tries to reduce the encyclical to a bumper-sticker endorsement of their own economic or political preferences will inevitably distort its complete message.**

I expect Pope Benedict will add a **powerful new chapter** to the Church’s prophetic tradition of applying the wisdom of the Scriptures and Catholic moral principles to the “new things” of our own time and situation. Benedict XVI will bring a much needed ethical **analysis** of how we got into this global economic crisis, and will offer an essential **moral framework** for how we can move forward as one human family.

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