

## Reflections on “Caritas in Veritate” – Part I

The initial reactions to Pope Benedict XVI’s latest encyclical have focused on the political and economic message contained therein. Such reactions are predictable in our politically saturated culture that discerns all known facts through the narrow prism of liberal and conservative ideologies. However, in order to appreciate the full import of the Holy Father’s message, it is important to look at the theological foundations that uphold the Church’s social doctrine. Thus, I will attempt to provide those foundations in this post, and in subsequent posts we will look at the pope’s conclusions in the area of social justice based on these foundations.

In the opening paragraph, Pope Benedict attempts to orient our minds in the realm of the theological: “Love – caritas – 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, Eternal Love and Absolute Truth. Each person finds his good by adherence to God’s plan for him, in order to realize it fully: in this plan, he finds his truth, and through adherence to this truth he becomes free” (#1). Love, then is not a mere sentiment or emotion that propels us to volunteerism or good deeds. Instead, love is God himself and thus is ordered to the truth that God has ordained for us to follow and which is the very being of God himself. God communicates this being and love in creating each and every human person in his image.

The Holy Father reflects on the divine source of love later in the letter when he talks about the theological foundation for solidarity. He writes, “This perspective is illuminated in a striking way by the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity within the one divine Substance. The Trinity is absolute unity insofar as the three divine Persons are pure relationality. The reciprocal transparency among the divine Persons is total and the bond between each of them complete, since they constitute a unique and absolute unity. God desires to incorporate us into this reality of communion as well: ‘that they may be one even as we are one’ (John 17: 22). The Church is a sign and instrument of this unity. Relationships between human beings throughout history cannot but be enriched by reference to this divine model. In particular, in the light of the revealed mystery of the Trinity, we understand that true openness does not mean loss of individual identity but profound interpenetration. This also emerges from the common human experiences of love and truth. Just as sacramental love of spouses unites them spiritually in ‘one flesh’ (Genesis 2: 24; Matthew 19: 5; Ephesians 5: 31) and makes out of the two a real and relational unity, so in an analogous way truth unites spirits and causes them to think in unison, attracting them as a unity to itself” (#54).

The very life of charity comes from the communal life of God himself. Only through this revealed truth of faith can we arrive at a notion of love among human beings and solidarity among all peoples. The Church as the sacrament of God is the society Jesus instituted in order to be the sign of love and solidarity to the world. This idea should give us pause to reflect on whether in our own lives we imitate that love in our ecclesial life. How can we preach solidarity and love to the world when we fail to practice it in the very

institution and sign wherein we are commanded to love – to be the sign of God’s love in the world?

Finally, the very life of God himself communicated to us in creation and in the sacraments of the Church and the sacrament of the Church gives rise to the idea of the holy father of love being a gift of God we receive and then give to others. He writes: “Charity is love received and given. It is ‘grace’ (charis). Its source is the wellspring of the Father’s love for the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Love comes down to us from the Son. It is creative love, through which we have our being; it is redemptive love, through which we are recreated. Love is revealed and made present by Christ (cf. John 13: 1) and ‘poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit’ (Romans 5: 5). 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” (#5).

This notion of charity as a gift received and then given to others forms the basis of what is radically new in this encyclical for Catholic social teaching – the idea of gratuitousness. A gift is not merely something we receive, but a gift is also something to be shared with others. It is in the sharing of the gift that we demonstrate the gratitude of receiving the gift and in how we fulfill the command of Jesus at the last supper: “As I have done, so also you must do.”

Thus, the Holy Father grounds Catholic social teaching in the two fundamental truths of the Catholic faith – the Trinity and the Incarnation. In our future reflections, we will focus on the social dimensions of these two doctrines and Pope Benedict has explicated them to us for implementation in the social order.