

Reflections on Caritas in Veritate – Part II: Philosophical Foundations

In the field of philosophy there is a distinction between general ethics and special ethics. General ethics looks to the common experiences of all human beings and the general ethical principles that govern human behavior. Special ethics, on the other hand, covers ethical concerns of specialized areas such as business ethics, medical ethics, bioethics, and the like. Every field of human activity has ethical norms that govern human behavior.

Similarly, moral theology has the same principle that all human behavior has a moral component. Moral theologians employ the term fundamental option to refer all human choice has a moral consequence that affects the state of a person's soul and one's eternal salvation. In short, every human choice has a moral consequence that affects a person's relationship with Almighty God.

Pope Benedict XVI constantly makes this point throughout his latest encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. In replying to the conventional wisdom that the market is an impersonal force driven by its own laws and dynamism, the Holy Father rejects this notion, stating that “the market does not exist in the pure state. It is shaped by the cultural configurations which define it and give it direction. Economy and finance, as instruments, can be used badly when those at the helm are motivated by purely selfish ends. Instruments that are good in themselves can thereby be transformed into harmful ones. But it is man's darkened reason that produces these consequences, not the instruments per se. Therefore, it is not the instrument that must be called to account, but individuals, their moral conscience, and their personal and social responsibility” (#36).

Every human activity is governed not by impersonal forces beyond our control, but rather they are put in motion by human choice and the end for which our choice is made. “Thus, every economic decision has a moral consequence” (#37). Citing the work of Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict reminds us that “investment always has moral, as well as economic, significance” (#40). The current economic crisis was not created by some impersonal business cycle, but rather it was caused by the selfish choices of those who made decisions based upon narrow self-interest instead of the common good of all. In fact, the Holy Father states, “Poverty is often produced by a rejection of God's love, by man's basic and tragic tendency to close in on himself, thinking himself to be self-sufficient or merely an insignificant and ephemeral fact, a ‘stranger’ in a random universe” (#53). As a result, “the economy needs ethics in order to function correctly – not any ethics whatsoever, but an ethics which is people-centered” (#45).

Here, we must return to the Pope's insistence upon a morality of gratuitousness that replaces the ethic of self-interest that has dominated Western society since the Enlightenment. The morality of gratuitousness sees everything as a gift from God – a gift that is received and then given to others (cf. #5). The sacrament of the Eucharist should continually remind the People of God about this ethic of gratuitousness, for the word Eucharist means ‘thanksgiving’. Thus, in our celebration of the Eucharist our orientation is not directed toward our self-interest but on service to neighbor. In fact, Pope Benedict

mentioned during the year of St. Paul that any celebration of the Eucharist that is not directed toward propelling the faithful to serve our fellow human beings is a travesty (cf. St. Paul: Reflections on the Year of St. Paul, Ignatius Press).

Towards the end of the encyclical, the Holy Father summarizes all that he has said about the philosophical foundations of charity and truth: “Often, the development of peoples is considered a matter of financial engineering, the freeing up of markets, the removal of tariffs, investment in production, and institutional reforms – in other words, a purely technical matter. All these factors are of great importance, but we have to ask why technical choices made thus far have yielded rather mixed results. We need to think hard about the cause. Development will never be fully guaranteed through automatic or impersonal forces, whether they derive from the market or from international politics. *Development is impossible without upright men and women, without financiers and politicians whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good.* Both professional competence and moral consistency are necessary” (#71). In other words, our faith and morality are not something we can compartmentalize or make reference to only in specific moments of our lives. Rather, faith and morality are part and parcel of every moment of every day in every human life. There is no decision we make that does not have a moral consequence or that does not affect the common good. In short, there are no private choices that affect only an individual person. The current economic and environmental crises make that point abundantly clear.

As we continue our study and reflection on Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, let us reflect upon our own choices, employing the Ignatian method of the daily examination of conscience to attune our conscience to the will of Almighty God and the common good of our fellow human beings.