

Reflections on Caritas in Veritate – Part III: The Heart of Catholic Social Teaching

At the beginning of the last century Frederick Nietzsche wrote two influential pieces of ethical writing – *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil*. In these works Nietzsche asserts something quite true: in analyzing all the ethical systems there really exists only two. The first he calls hero ethics because it derives from the classical Greek and Roman traditions where the virtuous man is the strong man, the warrior, the hero. By definition this system is limited to an elite group, i.e. only one can be strongest. The other ethical system he called slave ethics because it derived from the Jewish and Christian traditions where love and service to others has primacy of place. Here, virtue is open to all, since everyone is capable of such love and service. Nietzsche would reject slave ethics and call for a return to hero ethics in building his case for a super race to rule the world.

In the last essay we ended with Pope Benedict’s statement that the world needs ethics, but not just any ethics. Indeed, the example of Nietzsche proves the Holy Father’s point: “Much in fact depends on the underlying system of morality. On this subject the Church's social doctrine can make a specific contribution, since it is based on man's creation “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27), a datum which gives rise to the inviolable dignity of the human person and the transcendent value of natural moral norms” (#45). The basis for equality and respect for all people is the fact that every single person - regardless of race, creed, color, or any other factor – is created in God’s image. It is this fact alone that gives the human person dignity and worth.

Since the human person has a spiritual dimension as well as a material one, the development of peoples must be integral. Citing his predecessor Pope Paul VI, the Holy Father states: “Paul VI set out from this vision in order to convey two important truths. The first is that *the whole Church, in all her being and acting — when she proclaims, when she celebrates, when she performs works of charity — is engaged in promoting integral human development*. She has a public role over and above her charitable and educational activities: all the energy she brings to the advancement of humanity and of universal fraternity is manifested when she is able to operate in a climate of freedom. In not a few cases, that freedom is impeded by prohibitions and persecutions, or it is limited when the Church's public presence is reduced to her charitable activities alone. The second truth is that *authentic human development concerns the whole of the person in every single dimension*” (#11, emphasis in original). The human person cannot be divided, for the person is ontologically a radical unity. As a result, the development of the human person must be integral and one, not ignoring any aspect of the person.

From that fact, Pope Benedict reminds us that Paul VI focused on two aspects of human development that are fundamental: the primacy of human life and development as a tool of evangelization: “The Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* emphasizes both the unitive and the procreative meaning of sexuality, thereby locating at the foundation of society the married couple, man and woman, who accept one another mutually, in distinction and in complementarity: a couple, therefore, that is open to life^[27]. This is not a question of

purely individual morality: *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, most recently John Paul II's Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*[28]. 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.”[29]

“The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, for its part, is very closely linked with development, given that, in Paul VI's words, “evangelization would not be complete if it did not take account of the unceasing interplay of the Gospel and of man's concrete life, both personal and social.”[30] “Between evangelization and human advancement — development and liberation — there are in fact profound links”[31]: on the basis of this insight, Paul VI clearly presented the relationship between the proclamation of Christ and the advancement of the individual in society. *Testimony to Christ's charity, through works of justice, peace and development, is part and parcel of evangelization*, because Jesus Christ, who loves us, is concerned with the whole person. These important teachings form the basis for the missionary aspect[32] of the Church's social doctrine, which is an essential element of evangelization[33]. The Church's social doctrine proclaims and bears witness to faith. It is an instrument and an indispensable setting for formation in faith” (#15)

From these two tracks, then, the social teachings of the Church find their foundation and orientation. Throughout this encyclical, the Holy Father points to one or the other aspect to highlight their intrinsic unity. So often today, people want to set these two facets in opposition to one another, but in reality they must both be accepted for any consistency and authentic development to occur.

In highlighting the importance of human life, the Holy Father makes two bold statements: “*Openness to life is at the centre 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[67]. The acceptance of life strengthens moral fibre and makes people capable of mutual help” (#28)

“*Morally responsible openness to life represents a rich social and economic resource* (#44).

A society that does not value human life as the most fundamental of human rights cannot possibly expect to have any authentic development. In fact, development presupposes the guarantee of the right to life of every single person in society from conception to natural death.

At the same time, Pope Benedict stresses the importance of the other side of development; that is, all the other legitimate rights that derive from the right to life: “The right to food, like the right to water, has an important place within the pursuit of other rights, beginning with the fundamental right to life. It is therefore necessary to cultivate a public conscience that considers *food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination*” (#27 emphasis in original). Later in the encyclical, the Holy Father stresses the importance of respect for nature and the environment in our laws and practices. He then links such respect to the right to life, pointing out their intrinsic unity: “In order to protect nature, it is not enough to intervene with economic incentives or deterrents; not even an apposite education is sufficient. These are important steps, but *the decisive issue is the overall moral tenor of society*. If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment and damages society” (#51 emphasis in original).

As Pope Benedict comes to close the final chapter of his encyclical, he issues a strong clarion call to defend human life and the authentic development of peoples in a unified effort of the People of God: “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 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” (#75).

Thus, the Holy Father has once again reaffirmed the consistent ethic of life that has formed Catholic social teaching since the very beginning. Pope Benedict has linked all the issues in a profound way. Every Catholic, then, must defend life in opposing abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, and embryonic stem cell research. Every Catholic must defend life in caring for the poor, victims of injustice, the environment, and the marginalized. In our work for integral development, may God grant us the graces of charity and truth through the intercession of Mary, our Mother.