

Reflections on Caritas in Veritate – Part IV: Final Thoughts

Paul Johnson, in his book *The History of the American Nation*, argues that two distinct groups of people came to settle here. The first was the business interests who saw profit and self-interest in the new lands here in the Western Hemisphere. They came to ravage the land and derive as much profit from it as they possibly could. The second group of people was the religious groups who came here to practice their faith freely and to establish a place where virtue could flourish apart from the money interests and religious wars of the continent. Johnson argues that these same two groups have always existed up to the present day in America. What has changed, however, is that previously these two groups thought they could peacefully coexist. However, as the events of our nation's history have shown, they have not and they do not coexist well today.

That seems to be the basic conclusion of Pope Benedict XVI's latest encyclical, but now expanded in a global perspective. The notion of self-interest has no place in authentic Catholic theology. Only a theology of love, gratitude, and the common good can lead to an authentic society, culture, and economy. The world has witnessed time and again the results of allowing self-interest and consumerism to rule the roost: it leads to economic ruin and the growth of poverty. Incremental adjustments to the economy will not solve the problem because the root has not been severed. Self-interest must not be allowed to dominate our systems.

In our discussion of the Holy Father's theological foundations we touched upon the Trinity and the Incarnation as the foundation for Catholic social teaching. In the Trinity we see the workings of solidarity and subsidiarity at work. The three persons of the Blessed Trinity love one another to such a degree that they form one being, one Godhead. At the same time, these three persons maintain their distinct identity, an identity that is respected by the other, and thus we see the workings of subsidiarity within the Triune God. It is this interplay of solidarity and subsidiarity - grounded in the life of the Trinity - that must form our own families, Church, and society. By extension, our states and economies must also be grounded in these realities of faith. It is for this reason that Pope Benedict argued in this encyclical that not all religions have the same weight and validity in forming an authentic society.

In the doctrine of the Incarnation, we find the total and selfless love of the second person of the Blessed Trinity, Jesus the Christ, to be the foil against any notion of self-interest. The Lord Jesus came to redeem the world in the selfless act of suffering, dying, and ultimately rising from the dead. In the act of becoming man, in living with human beings, and in dying for all human beings, Jesus shows us the agape love of total care for another that has no interest in self. The life of Jesus is the model God has given us to follow. Our lives and our love must then be selfless and entire.

The theological doctrines of creation and the Incarnation of Jesus give rise to our foundational ethical principle of the dignity and worth of the human person. The book of Genesis states that every person is created in the image and likeness of God. Thus, it is because God created us that we have dignity and worth, and that every person's life must

be respected. What is more, the Incarnation of Jesus gives the human race an even greater dignity than before, for God himself took upon our human nature, redeemed it, and graced it with his very being. For these reasons, respect for human life in all of its stages – especially when innocent human life is threatened by abortion, embryonic stem cell research, euthanasia, genocide, and terrorism – must be recognized for authentic development to take place.

The very fact that the human person has a transcendent nature means that development must not be merely material; it must also be intellectual, spiritual, psychological. In short, it must be holistic and integral. Development, then, becomes a form of evangelization because it leads the whole person to God, who alone can save, restore, and lead the human person to full actualization. That is why persons have a right to food, water, a clean environment, and the like.

Therefore, Catholic social teaching embraces the whole range of issues from the life issues, poverty, immigration, criminal justice, care for the environment, work and workers' rights, and all other aspects of the human person that are affected by the political and economic forces of life. All of these issues are intimately connected, and as Catholics we must care for all of these issues without exception. As the Holy Father stated, "*Development needs Christians with their arms raised towards God* in prayer, Christians moved by the knowledge that truth-filled love, *caritas in veritate*, from which authentic development proceeds, is not produced by us, but given to us. For this reason, even in the most difficult and complex times, besides recognizing what is happening, we must above all else turn to God's love. Development requires attention to the spiritual life, a serious consideration of the experiences of trust in God, spiritual fellowship in Christ, reliance upon God's providence and mercy, love and forgiveness, self-denial, acceptance of others, justice and peace" (#79, emphasis in original).

This work is ultimately a spiritual one, and we need God's help when we work in all these areas. Only people with deep lives of prayer and sacramental participation can transform our society. Let us, then, commit ourselves to prayer and sacramental participation that will dilate our capacity to love our neighbor as Jesus loves us. Finally, may we turn to Mary as our Holy Father suggests: : "Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honour' (Rom 12:9-10). May the Virgin Mary — proclaimed *Mater Ecclesiae* by Paul VI and honoured by Christians as *Speculum Iustitiae* and *Regina Pacis* — protect us and obtain for us, through her heavenly intercession, the strength, hope and joy necessary to continue to dedicate ourselves with generosity to the task of bringing about the '*development of the whole man and of all men*'" (#79, emphasis in original).