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JAMES STONER: ENCYCLICAL FORCES CATHOLICS OUT OF THE BUNKER

"Caritas in Veritate" Presents a Challenge to Everyone

By James Stoner

BATON ROUGE, Louisiana, JULY 10, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Faithful Catholics in America today often seem tempted by cultural hostility to withdraw into our own circle of faith and family, asking of law and government only that we be left alone.

To this tendency, Pope Benedict's new encyclical on the social teaching of the Church, "Caritas in Veritate," is a thorough rebuke, for it is a call to engage the world—not only through evangelization, but through economic, social, and political thought and action; through commitment to the cause of integral human development and social progress.

One can see why liberal commentators quickly seized on the encyclical as friendly to their agenda. The Pope is critical of contemporary market society, with its "scandalous speculation," its emphasis on short-term profit, its ambivalent record in combating poverty, and its disregard of the cultural fabric of societies it would modernize; moreover, he calls for extensive global reform and even "for a reform of the United Nations...so that the concept of the family of nations can acquire real teeth."

One doubts liberals will cheer so loudly when they read more carefully, because he also insists that the culture of life needs to be recovered, that atheism and relativism

are threats to genuine human development, that "a metaphysical understanding of the relations between persons" is essential, that cultural and religious syncretism is dangerous, and that freedom is not autonomous license but formation under the natural moral law.

And he warns against "a dangerous universal power of a tyrannical nature," which must be countered by the principle of subsidiarity.

On the one hand, the failure to think and act boldly for world-wide justice indicates a dearth of charity, while on the other, charity needs to be anchored in universal truth -- as the title of the encyclical makes plain.

Vast in its sweep of topics -- the Pope comments not only on major institutions of governance and finance but on the environment, on migration, on international aid, even on tourism -- there is much that will bear further study and ought genuinely to provoke fresh thought.

I found suggestive his notion that the categories of most 20th century Catholic reflection on social justice have been altered, as many economic and social institutions in contemporary global civilization cannot be identified as clearly public or private; to debate state versus market solutions to social problems is thus to miss the question.

The Pope's attention to the centrality of "the astonishing experience of gift" or "gratuitousness," while not completely unknown in social science, might prove fertile in the development of paradigms of social and economic life that transcend the pinched model of economic man as rational maximizer, without falling into the trap of totalitarian socialism.

His discussion of technology, as simultaneously a testimony to the power of the human spirit and the characteristic engine of soulless materialism, is lucid; recovering respect for nature as God's gift is an imperative not only for planetary survival, but for self-knowledge.

Papal encyclicals studiously avoid being partisan documents -- that's one reason why they are sometimes hard to read -- but citizens who heed the Pope's call to enter the fray of political "praxis" in the search for justice and the common good will rarely be able to escape the pull of partisanship.

By giving each side a picture of its own strengths and failings and by urging sustained dialogue over global policy, the Pope deepens his project of reconciling faithful Christians and the children of Enlightenment. His term "praxis," an ancient Greek word for "action," "deed," or even "business," known to modern intellectuals chiefly through its use by Marxists, is, after all, in its plural form, the title of the New Testament's fifth book.

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