

Responding to *Caritas in Veritate*

The following article has been received from Mary Cullen, Head of Communications & Education at the Scottish Catholic International Aid Fund (SCIAF). It is based on talks given to various groups in Scotland, including the Glasgow and Edinburgh Circles of the Newman Association.

Then we shall not be children any longer, or tossed one way and another by every wind of doctrine, at the mercy of all the tricks people play and their cleverness in practising deceit. If we live by the truth and in love, we shall grow in all ways into Christ, who is the head by whom the whole body is fitted and joined together, every joint adding its own strength, for each separate part to work according to its function. So the body grows until it has built itself up, in love. Eph 4: 14–16

Caritas in Veritate is a remarkable document in its breadth and depth. Published in July 2009, it is Pope Benedict's third encyclical, and his second to be concerned with the meaning of charity. In it he examines a range of contemporary issues – principally the vast gulf between rich and poor, and the economic and environmental crises – through the lens of the Church's teaching on integral human development, which he grounds in a theology of charity in truth. He stresses the interconnectedness of issues in a world of rapid globalisation and technological change, and sets out moral and ethical principles for a new global economy. He challenges all of us to contribute through personal and institutional renewal, and reflects on the role of particular actors – including the market, the state, civil society, and trades unions – and calls for the creation of a true world political authority.

This is an agenda of immense scope and urgency. The day after its publication, Benedict prayed that the encyclical would “help humanity feel that it is one family committed to bringing about a world of justice and peace, and that those who work in economics and politics realise just how important is the coherence of their Gospel testimony in the service they offer society.”¹

How then is it being received by the lay faithful, to whom, among others, it is addressed? I shared a reflection and workshop on the encyclical with Newman circles, parish groups, trainee catechists and members of St Vincent de Paul Society over several months last winter. What emerged were interesting questions about the church's social teaching and how it is shaped and understood.

Work in progress

The encyclical, like all social teaching, does not provide technical solutions to contemporary problems: it develops through reflection on changing situations. It is “work in progress.”² Benedict refers to it as an assembly of fragments: “Open to the truth, from whichever branch of knowledge it comes, the Church's social doctrine receives it, assembles into a unity the fragments in which it is often found, and mediates it within the ... changing life patterns of ... society”. (CV9). *Caritas in Veritate* contains much which is familiar from previous teaching, incorporates new fragments which will undergo further development, and is mediated through Pope Benedict's reflection on the Church and the world.

Its tone is deeply theological, set by the opening reflection on charity and truth, inspired by the passage in Ephesians which speaks of “living the truth in love.” Benedict returns to this again and again. “Truth, and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced: they can only be received as gift. Their ultimate source is ... God, who is ... Truth and Love. This principle is extremely important for society and for development ... Love and Truth show us what goodness is, and in what our true happiness consists. It shows us the road to true development.” (CV52)

Charity is placed at the very heart of the Church's social teaching. It gives substance to personal relationships with God and our neighbour, friends and family, and wider social, economic and political relationships. It is God's greatest gift to humanity and is the driving force behind the authentic development of every person and all humanity. It is “an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace”. (CV1)

Benedict links charity with justice and the common good. If we love others, then we are just towards them. I cannot give what is “mine” without first recognising and respecting the other's legitimate rights. The more we strive for a common good corresponding to the needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them. “Every Christian is called to practice this charity in a manner corresponding to their vocation and according to the degree of influence they wield. This is the institutional path – we might also call it the political path – of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly”. (CV7)

Benedict's definition of charity is much richer and more demanding than charity understood as individual action. It brings together aspects of faith we sometimes keep in separate compartments: justice and charity, individual giving and structural change, the Church's role in politics and the salvation of souls. Clifford Longley points out that “This fusion of spirituality and social action under the banner of integral human development is the encyclical's theological

keynote. It enables [Benedict] to turn to a series of contemporary crises...and judge the impact of each one on integral human development.”³

The language barrier

Those who came to meetings during the coldest winter for many years were clearly interested in what the encyclical has to say. Few had read it; several had tried and given up because of its complexity and length (47 pages), and its often difficult, exclusive language. Work had begun in France to produce a more accessible version, and the American Bishops had a comprehensive study guide on their website.

People welcomed the encyclical’s redefinition of charity and its call to “walk the political path” as affirmation of an adult faith which seeks to do justice. St Vincent de Paul members regretted that they are still seen as providing handouts to the poor when much of their work at local level is about helping people claim their benefit rights, and at national level they engage with public policy. Many welcomed the encyclical’s stress on personal as well as structural renewal: “Development needs Christians with their arms raised towards God in prayer.” (79)

Human development

Integral human development concerns the whole person in every single dimension – material, moral and spiritual. Without the perspective of eternal life, Benedict says, human progress in this world is “denied breathing space”. (CV76) He emphasises the importance of relationality: we are not “lost atoms in a random universe.” One of the deepest forms of poverty we can experience, he says, is isolation ... as spiritual beings, we are defined through interpersonal relations. The development of peoples depends, above all, on the recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side. (CV53)

St Vincent de Paul members found this insight affirming: it reflects their work in visiting the sick and lonely. It also encouraged people to see that their contribution to building relationships of love, however small, helps build the whole body. One woman spoke of the importance of acknowledging the dignity of young people with addiction problems by greeting them in the street when others pass them by.

Economics and gift

While globalisation makes us neighbours, Benedict says, it does not necessarily make us brothers and sisters. Fraternity is what binds us together. It originates in a call from God, who loved us first, teaching us through Christ to love one another. (CV19) Charity in truth – a true understanding of what it is to be human – places us before the “astonishing experience of gift”. Because it is a gift received by everyone, charity in truth is a force which builds community, bringing people together without imposing barriers or limits. (CV34) This understanding of fraternity and gift informs Benedict’s response to the economic crisis.

It is essentially a moral crisis which led to a breakdown of trust in institutions. “The conviction that the economy must be shielded from influences of a moral character has led people to abuse the economic process in a thoroughly destructive way. (CV34) “The economic sphere is neither ethically neutral, nor inherently inhuman and opposed to society. It is part and parcel of human activity and precisely because it is human, it must be structured and governed in an ethical manner.” (CV36)

Benedict challenges us all – investors and consumers, business people and trades unionists, public officials and city financiers – to go beyond narrow interests and practice love founded in truth, which begins with the search for justice and pursues the common good. He identifies concrete issues like ethical investment and fair trade where we can all play a part, and says “development is impossible without upright men and women, without financiers and politicians whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good.” (CV71) The greatest challenge is to “demonstrate, in thinking and behaviour, not only the traditional principles of social ethics like transparency, honesty and responsibility ... but to make a place for the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity within normal commercial relationships and economic activity.” (CV36)

Many people struggled to see how the concept of gift can be incorporated into a sector dedicated to profit. Some took it as a challenge – how can we make better use of each others’ gifts? We discussed initiatives like a credit union which has loaned over £3 million within a local community in the last two years. Members run it on a voluntary basis and discover skills and a capacity to give which they did not know they had.

People were encouraged to learn that Archbishop Vincent Nichols brought together a group of leading figures from the financial sector last October to explore the relevance of *Caritas in Veritate*, and further meetings were planned. Among the participants was John McFall MP, chair of the Treasury Select Committee, who believes Benedict’s encyclical is timely. He said: “We have seen a banking crisis which prompted economic and political crises; which in turn could have destabilising social consequences. It is important that we adopt a strategic approach to find solutions that encompass ethical and moral considerations, as well as compliance and regulation.”

The need to respond to the encyclical's teaching at different levels, according to our role in society, looking for ways to influence public policy, emerged as one of the key themes in discussion. The encyclical may lack the prophetic edge which some sought, but is no less challenging in its call to action at every level. It is a rich source from which to quarry inspiration.

The environment

The section on the environment provided some of the most useful passages for practical ways in which we can respond. This is a developing area of social teaching: some of the fragments are assembled here. The natural environment, Benedict says, is at our disposal not as a "heap of scattered refuse," but as God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations, and humanity as a whole. (CV48) He challenges us at a personal level to reconsider our lifestyles. The way we treat the environment, he says, influences the way we treat ourselves, and vice versa.

There is a pressing moral need for renewed solidarity, especially between developing and highly industrialised countries: the costs of using up environmental resources should be borne by those who incurred them: not by the poor, or by future generations. (CV49) The Church, too, has a responsibility towards creation which must be asserted in the public sphere. Benedict calls for a human ecology: just as human virtues are interrelated, and weakening of one places the others at risk, so the ecological system is based on respect for a plan that affects both the health of society and its relationship with nature. (CV51)

Global poverty

The passages on global poverty and international development are among the most developed in the encyclical: Benedict restates much of the church's teaching from *Populorum Progressio* onwards. He acknowledges that economic growth has lifted billions of people out of poverty (CV21) but reiterates that "progress of a merely economic and technological kind" is not enough, as this does not constitute true human development. (CV23) He stresses that poor people must be involved in their own development (CV21) and that international aid programmes must be characterised by grassroots involvement. (CV58)

One of SCIAF's partners, Jean Claude Ngendandumwe of the Justice and Peace Commission in Rwanda, opened a meeting of Scottish aid agencies in Edinburgh last September by video link with a reflection on development from a Southern perspective. Like Benedict, he stressed that development is not merely technical: it is about people working together to find solutions to problems. He quoted Henri Nouwen: "Be with us as companions who walk with us, neither behind nor in front, in our search for life, and ultimately for God."

At the structural level, Benedict identifies trade as a key instrument for development: "the principal form of assistance needed by developing countries is that of allowing ... the gradual penetration of their products into international markets, making it possible for these countries to participate fully in economic life." (CV58) In so doing, he reiterates Paul VI's teaching in *Populorum Progressio* (56) that when we give aid to poor countries while denying them the right to trade on a fair basis, we are giving with one hand and taking with the other.

Benedict addresses the scandal of hunger and the need to address its causes. He speaks of the Gospel imperative to feed the hungry, and the universal right to food and water. "Hunger is not so much dependent on lack of material things... What is missing ... is a network of economic institutions capable of guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water.. The problem of food insecurity needs to be addressed within a long term perspective, eliminating the structural causes that give rise to it and promoting the agricultural development of poorer countries..." (CV27)

Aid agencies like SCIAF put this teaching into practice in the way they involve poor communities in their own development, and provide the means to "walk the political path" through campaigns on issues like trade and debt. It was clear from discussions that there is more to do to help people understand the significance of campaigns, and the breadth and scale of the Church's contribution to development.

Caritas Internationalis (CI), the global network of 162 Catholic aid agencies, together with CIDSE, the network of Catholic aid agencies in Europe and North America, is the largest alliance of humanitarian and development agencies in the world. It has the capacity to respond swiftly to emergencies around the globe, and influence policy at the highest level.

SCIAF helped shape the Scottish government's climate change legislation, the most far reaching in the world. One of SCIAF's partners, Dr Ricardo Navarro from El Salvador, an expert on climate change and its impact on poor communities, addressed the Scottish parliament as the bill was being debated last year. SCIAF took that work to the international level through a CI/CIDSE climate justice delegation led by Cardinal O'Brien to the UN, in advance of the Copenhagen summit.

The Church's presence among poor communities and its capacity to bring their concerns to the highest political level is one of its great strengths in a globalised world. There is growing interest within the development community in the role of faith based organisations (FBOs). The World Bank has acknowledged that we cannot fight poverty without

attending to people's spiritual dimension, and has set up a small team on faith and ethics⁴. The UK's Department for International Development also has a faith team, and made a commitment to double funding to faith based groups in its 2009 White Paper. As well as providing a large percentage of development services (an estimated 50% of health and education services in sub Saharan Africa),⁵ FBOs reach people at the grass roots, are present among them for the long term, have a rich understanding of human development, and encourage civil society advocacy.

Conclusion

Caritas in Veritate is a challenging and wide-ranging document in which long passages of theological reflection and social analysis alternate with short sections on practical issues, which are already part of people's experience. It encapsulates and reflects a living tradition, affirming much of what is already being done, and urging people to live out their faith in society with confidence. It raises interesting questions about how the Church's social teaching is disseminated. Until the text is more accessible it is unlikely to be widely read; it is more likely to filter down through local teaching. The English and Welsh Bishops' statement in March, for example, *Choosing the Common Good*, develops the insights of *Caritas in Veritate*, particularly in relation to civil society. The encyclical will continue to shape and inform the work of the Church's social and development agencies.

Development is a journey, and Benedict, echoing the words of Paul VI, invites us to travel the path with all our hearts and intelligence, with the ardour of charity and the wisdom of truth, seeking development which takes people from less human to more human conditions. "The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and reject negative ones. The crisis therefore becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future." (CV21)

Benedict has surveyed the decades from *Populorum Progressio*, developed his thinking and that of his predecessors, and offered us a sobering but ultimately optimistic assessment of where we are, and the direction in which we need to go. We are all invited to join him.

Notes

1 Pope Benedict XVI, general audience 8 July 2009

2 Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004 n86

3 The Tablet, July 2009

4 Faith and Development: Rethinking Development Debates, Katherine Marshall, the World Bank, 2005; Development Dialogue on Values and Ethics strategy note for 2009 and 2010

5 DFID (2006) Faith in Development Position Paper