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The social and economic message of Benedict XVI's Caritas in Veritate in the perspective of the Roman Catholic social doctrine

Puggioni, R.

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Author: Puggioni, Roberto

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**The Social and Economic Message
of Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate*
in the Perspective of
Roman Catholic Social Doctrine**

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Roberto Puggioni

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PROMOTIECOMMISSIE

Promotores

Prof.dr. M.B. ter Borg

Prof.dr. W.B. Drees

Overige leden

Dr. C.N. de Groot (Tilburg University)

Prof.dr. H.L. Murre-van den Berg

Prof.dr. H. Noordegraaf (Protestantse Theologische Universiteit)

Prof.dr. E.G.E. van der Wall

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Introduction

In 2009 Benedict XVI published the encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate*. The encyclical *Caritas in veritate* is the main document about social and economic issues that Benedict XVI published during his papacy, and came when a major economic and financial crisis had emerged. *Caritas in veritate* presents itself as a continuation of previous Roman Catholic social doctrine. Given the importance of socio-economic issues in our globalizing world it may be relevant to study the perspective of what has been very recently the leader of one of the largest religious movements worldwide on these issues. Though the encyclical is available in multiple languages, the thought world of the encyclical is not easily accessed. Even among Roman Catholics the knowledge of social doctrine is limited; it was called ‘our best kept secret’ in the sub-title of a recent study.¹ Even if one knows of this encyclical and of Roman Catholic social teaching, the text may easily be misunderstood. For an adequate interpretation, several things have to be kept in mind.

Firstly, it is important to understand the nature and authoritative standing of an encyclical. An encyclical does not presume to be a theological pronouncement with dogmatic authority, but rather is a letter with pastoral and moral advice to people inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church.

Secondly, the encyclical draws on expressions and principles that have been coined in pronouncements of earlier popes. Thus, in order to understand the encyclical *Caritas in veritate* one needs to have a sufficient understanding of key themes and principles as they have been articulated in the history of social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. (As synonyms of ‘social doctrine’, we will also use ‘social thought’ and ‘social teaching’.)

Thirdly, the encyclical is not a document that stands alone. Rather, to understand the encyclical one needs to pay attention to other theological writings of Benedict XVI (and his earlier gestalt as cardinal Ratzinger), to other recent and contemporary developments within the Roman Catholic Church such as ‘liberation theology’, and to the contemporary situation in the world at large.

Research questions

The main ambition of this study is to analyse the encyclical *Caritas in veritate* as a new encyclical in the ongoing development of the ‘social doctrine’ of the Roman Catholic Church. In this regard, and referring to the three key issues outlined above with particular attention to the second and the third, the research questions are: to what extent is *Caritas in veritate* continuous with earlier pronouncements? To what extent is it new? In as far as there are new elements, can these be understood in relation to the theological thought of Joseph Ratzinger, who became pope Benedict XVI? To what extent can the specific points of view present in *Caritas in veritate* be seen as responses to contemporary social and economic developments such as globalization, or to new insights in the human sciences and contemporary secular thought?

¹ See E. P. DE BERRI, J. E. HUG, P. J. HENRIOT, M. J. SCHULTHEIS, *Catholic social teaching. Our best kept secret*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003. 3. This expression was used to refer to Roman Catholics in the United States, but here it is considered relevant also for other contexts.

This analysis and its author

Though the central object of study is a pastoral and normative pronouncement of a religious leader, the method aspires to be analytical. The study tries to unfold the language of the encyclical and give, when it is possible, the eventual connections of ideas present here with previous teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and with developments and ideas from elsewhere. –

For the sake of honesty, it may be disclosed that the author is also convinced that Roman Catholic social thought is valuable when facing socio-economic issues, such as the current economic crisis and the need for sustainable development for all peoples of the world. Others have already given a positive evaluation of the contribution of the Roman Catholic social doctrine.² However, even if a reader does not share this positive evaluation of Roman Catholic social teaching, the academic purpose is merely to offer an analysis and interpretation that provides access to Roman Catholic social thought, and in particular to *Caritas in veritate*.

Structure of the study

The first part (A, chapters I – V) considers the social thought of the Roman Catholic Church. In order to clarify the nature and authoritative standing of an encyclical and counter potential misunderstandings, there will be an analysis of the meaning of ‘doctrine’, and its difference from ‘dogma’ (II.2). The discussion of Roman Catholic social thought will draw extensively on a reference work that has been put together by the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, the *Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church* (2004). This document is an official and exhaustive guide to social thought. Drawing on the *Compendium*’s historical account, the history of the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church will be summarized (III), as well as its systematic basis in a few principles (IV). This will make the reader familiar with selected topics of the Roman Catholic Church’s social thought, as well as with expressions such as *fraternity*, *human integral development*, *human person*, and the concept of *development*, which have a particular and specific meaning in this context. The concluding chapter of this section (V) will analyse the topic of human labour and will give us the opportunity to offer some closing considerations about new developments (in the Latin of these documents sometimes called *res novae*), especially globalization.

The second part (B, chapters VI – VIII) is dedicated to an analysis of Benedict XVI’s social encyclical *Caritas in veritate*. Major questions are the continuity between this document and previous doctrines on social thought in topics such as, for instance, subsidiarity, solidarity and ecology, as well as original elements in this text. We will consider the influence of the encyclical *Populorum progressio* and the Second Vatican Council on *Caritas in veritate*, the possibility of a world authority in financial and economic matters, the logic of gift in the economic context, business ethics in the context of globalization of economy and ecology. A parallel issue that I will return to regards the dialogue between the Roman Catholic social teaching and the secular fields of expertise.

The concluding chapter (IX) recapitulates the main points of the study, reflecting on what I consider some strengths and weaknesses of Roman Catholic social doctrine.

² See D. K. FINN, Introduction, in D. K. FINN, ed., *The true wealth of nations. Catholic social thought and economic life*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 4.

Abbreviations

Here is a list of most used abbreviations in this work. For each of the following references I have used the whole name when it was to be used for the first time in each chapter.

| | |
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| <i>AAS</i> | <i>Acta Apostolicae Sedis</i> |
| <i>Acta</i> | <i>Acta Leonis XIII</i> |
| <i>Caritas</i> | <i>Caritas in veritate</i> |
| <i>Catechism</i> | <i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> |
| <i>Compendium</i> | <i>Compendium of the social doctrine of the Church</i> |
| <i>Deus caritas est</i> | <i>Deus</i> |
| <i>Fides</i> | <i>Fides et ratio</i> |
| <i>Lumen</i> | <i>Lumen gentium</i> |
| <i>Nostra</i> | <i>Nostra aetate</i> |
| <i>Populorum</i> | <i>Populorum progressio</i> |
| RC | Roman Catholic |
| RCC | Roman Catholic Church |
| <i>Rerum</i> | <i>Rerum novarum</i> |

About the works cited in the text

When there is a bibliographical source cited the numbers refers to chapters (capital Roman numbers, I, II, III, etc.), to pages of introductions or prefaces (small Roman numbers, i, ii, iii, etc.),or to the exact page of the book (Arabic numbers, 1, 2, 3, etc.).

References within the thesis itself are always by chapter, Roman numbers, followed by section, Arabic numbers.

For official documents of the Roman Catholic Church which are available online the numbers with citations refer to paragraphs and not to pages, as paragraphs are numbered in these online editions. When the full citation of an official document is quoted from *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, numbers at the end of the quote are by page number, and numbers after the document's title refer to paragraphs. Full references of texts quoted are in the bibliography.

