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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

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Chapter IX – Concluding remarks

Introduction

Benedict XVI's encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate* (2009) is mainly about social and economic issues. In this regard, it is a further step in the tradition of the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Though the moral norms developed in more than two thousand years of Christian wisdom, social doctrine is a modern concept. Especially since the years of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (1960s), the social teaching 'has grown stronger, deeper, and clearer.'⁵¹⁸

The core of this work, its second part, is an analytical and interpretative study of *Caritas*. In this encyclical one may find the perspective of Benedict XVI, the highest authority in the Roman Catholic Church, about some of the most relevant socio-economic issues of our time. To understand *Caritas* one needs to understand its terminology. Terms such as 'integral human development' draw upon the tradition of social doctrine. The first part of my work, served to introduce the reader into social doctrine and its specific terminology.

One may notice that even though Benedict XVI speaks extensively about the 'common good' or the 'human person', in *Caritas* there is no clear definition of these terms. To evaluate the content of *Caritas* it is necessary to have some knowledge of the tradition that is behind it. My work may be a contribution to the comprehension of Roman Catholic social thought, because here I have tried to give both the basic interpretative tools and the analytical content. These two elements combined may give to the reader a better access to understand the ideas of Benedict XVI from the standpoint of this Pope. With better understanding comes the possibility to evaluate and criticize the social teaching.

Key issues and research questions

In the introductory chapter of this study, three key issues necessary for an adequate understanding of the encyclical were raised. Firstly, it was considered important to understand the nature and authoritative standing of an encyclical and of 'social doctrine'. Secondly, to understand the encyclical *Caritas in veritate* one needs to have a sufficient understanding of previous contributions to the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church. And thirdly, to understand the encyclical one needs to consider it in its contemporary context. This contemporary context includes the theological vision of Benedict XVI (and of his earlier gestalt as cardinal Ratzinger), secular discourse and scholarship on these issues, and the contemporary situation in the world at large. From these key issues, especially the second and the third, in the Introduction of this study some typical questions for research were posed: to what extent is the encyclical *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?

⁵¹⁸ See D. DORR, *Option for the poor and for the earth. Catholic social teaching*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012. 466.

In this concluding chapter, within the following paragraphs, starting from Benedict XVI's theological vision as presented in *Caritas*, we will then address the three key issues including answers to the research questions.

The theological vision of Caritas in veritate

Benedict XVI considers the economic crisis as 'an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future'.⁵¹⁹ Thus, the discourse presented in *Caritas* has to be seen as a socio-economic alternative coming from a religious tradition that aims to say something that can be shared from people, religious and non-religious, in the global perspective.

In *Caritas* Benedict XVI makes some concrete proposals, for instance calling for a supranational authority able to counter the dysfunctions of the financial system in the global economy,⁵²⁰ and for an 'economy of communion', that is, an economy with companies that integrate social values and profit-making, co-existing with companies that are primarily profit-oriented.⁵²¹ This moment of crisis, as Benedict XVI thinks, furnishes exactly the opportunity to discuss, develop and implement new ways that can help us to come out from the contemporary economic crisis and develop a more just global socio-economic system.⁵²²

This being said, we notice how the Encyclical shows a theological foundation. A clear example of this can be found in the closing lines of *Caritas*, that we have previously analysed in the part regarding the principle of solidarity.⁵²³ We can look at that passage as an eminent example of the theological foundation of Benedict XVI's social thought. Notwithstanding the fact that humanity as a global family is a view that can be shared even without a theological basis, we see that in *Caritas* Benedict XVI finds inspiration in a theological source, that is the interpretation of Jesus' words. The core is the relationship of each individual human person with God, the primacy of God's gift of love to all persons. This core has various consequences, which might be spoken of as universal, individual, and transcendental.

Caritas expresses the hope that all the people of the world will come to recognize God as the father of the human family. This has a universal horizon; it encompasses all human persons. And it has immediate moral implications: to recognize God as our common father would mean also to recognize all the people as our brothers and sisters.

Another theological concept that throughout the analysis of *Caritas* can give us the insight of an encyclical with a theological foundation is the concept of the human being as created in God's image. We have already seen the consequences of this idea on the socio-economic view prospected in *Caritas*,⁵²⁴ but we now look at it as a confirmation of the solid theological basis that Benedict XVI wanted to give to its work.

⁵¹⁹ BENEDICT XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 2009.21; see above VII, 1.

⁵²⁰ See VII, 2.3.

⁵²¹ See VII, 6.

⁵²² See VII, 1.1.

⁵²³ See VIII, 2.2.

⁵²⁴ See, for instance, VII, 5.

The core – each individual person receiving God’s love and being allowed to respond to this love – aligns well with a certain ‘individualism’ and ‘personalism’ in the position developed in *Caritas*. The main call is upon each individual to be moral (understood in this relation to God and fellow humans) in their own particular setting; solidarity is to be shown by individuals. An example is the discussion on business ethics, which is very much about the orientation of individual actors – even if they then get together to organize businesses that have a social nature.⁵²⁵ There is no rejection of organizations, even up to the level of a transnational authority, but such more encompassing forms of organization are only justified when needed for the purposes at hand. Subsidiarity – dealing with issues at the lowest possible level – is the guiding principle.⁵²⁶

The human-centred theology shows itself also in its understanding of the environmental issues. Though the created order is God, it is understood as God’s gift to humans, not for exploitation, but as context for human integral development. Thus, the typical expression on ecology is ‘human ecology’.⁵²⁷

Last but not least, the theological core expresses itself in the criticism of an exclusive material orientation and consumerist mentality. As human persons in relation to God, the ultimate aim (the common good) transcends such a material horizon; the ‘integral’ in human integral development points to such wider moral and spiritual concerns.⁵²⁸

All in all, though *Caritas* is a document about social and economical affairs, it has an outspoken theological foundation. Furthermore, it is a Roman Catholic theology that furnishes these basic theological pillars.

The theological foundation of *Caritas* might be seen as the source of misunderstandings in the dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the secular world. Namely, if the socio-economic considerations of *Caritas* are coming from a theological interpretation of ‘revealed words’, how is it possible that they fit with the complex and evolving reality? A possible answer to this question is in the consideration of the nature of the Encyclical as part of the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

First key issue: the nature of an encyclical on social doctrine

One potential misunderstanding regards the nature of an encyclical. It should be emphasized that papal statements are important, but not all papal statements are equal in kind and status.⁵²⁹ An encyclical is to be understood as a pastoral letter. Traditionally, such letters were addressed at the bishops. *Caritas* is addressed not only at the bishops, but also at priests and deacons, men and women religious, the lay faithful and all people of good will’.⁵³⁰ This inclusion of ‘all people of good will’ can be found in social encyclicals since John XXIII.⁵³¹ By choosing to be so inclusive, the popes have made clear that these encyclicals are not to be seen as documents that

⁵²⁵ See VII, 5.

⁵²⁶ See VIII, 2.1.

⁵²⁷ See VIII, 4.

⁵²⁸ See VI, 3.

⁵²⁹ See II, 2.1.

⁵³⁰ See VI, 2.

⁵³¹ See III, 5.

deal with topics internal to the Roman Catholic Church and that the common good envisaged is to be inclusive as well. In this case, the letter deals with social, economic and ecological themes of our time.

The encyclical letter is not directly about matters of faith, such as the understanding of dogmas. As a pastoral letter, an encyclical is offering guidance or advice in the world of today. It is not a dogmatic pronouncement, and does not have a claim to ‘infallibility’. Though not to be given too much weight, an encyclical is, of course, an important document, that is supposed to be taken very seriously. It presents itself as a letter from the current pope, but is set in the context of the overarching tradition. Thus, legitimacy is claimed by the biblical and theological framework, as well as by the overwhelming amount of references to previous encyclicals, papal messages, and documents of the Second Vatican Council. It is not a letter from an individual, but a letter that carries the authority of the papacy, and in which the specific view presented is acknowledged as open to dispute, and still has to make its case by convincing and inspiring people.

Second key issue: continuity? Caritas in veritate and the tradition of Roman Catholic social thought

By including extensive references to previous encyclicals since 1891 and to other documents of social thought, Benedict XVI presents *Caritas* as standing in continuity with that tradition.⁵³² Regarding the theme of global economic development and social justice, most references regard pope Paul VI (1963 – 1978). References to Benedict’s immediate predecessor John Paul II (1978 – 2005) often have to do with pastoral and theological aspects, and also with concern about the environment.⁵³³ The documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965) and the encyclical *Pacem in terris* of John XXIII (1958 – 1963) are probably the sources of the general atmosphere in *Caritas*.

Though there is much continuity, specific to *Caritas* may be the focus on the consequences of globalization, both with respect to economic development and with respect to ecological problems of our time. *Caritas* can add something to previous social teaching in giving a special global accent that Benedict XVI believes will be central from now onwards.

Since the 1960s, ‘social thought’ has caused some division in the Roman Catholic Church as well. The ‘liberation theologians’ have called for a strong commitment, arguing that it is especially by engaging with the poor that one may understand the message of the Gospel. Though some of the terminology has entered the vocabulary of the successive encyclicals, including this one – the strong emphasis on love and justice as intimately connected, on integral development and global fairness may serve as key examples –, Benedict XVI’s encyclical has not taken as outspoken a political stance as advocates of liberation theology might have hoped for.⁵³⁴ There is in the encyclical a strong focus on the individual person, and thus more a tendency to stress the morality of individuals than the struggle against oppressive structures. In this, there is in *Caritas* adherence with the tradition of the

⁵³² See, for instance, VI, 3.

⁵³³ See VIII, 3.

⁵³⁴ See VI, 2.3.

Roman Catholic personalism.⁵³⁵ On the other hand, Benedict XVI has stressed development and justice, and suggested that the establishment of a supra-national authority might be needed to control the international financial and economic markets. With this plea for a supranational authority, *Caritas* drew criticism from ‘the right’, especially from advocates of a free market economy (especially in the USA).⁵³⁶ The unwillingness to support explicitly a political side may have caused concern among those, on the left and the right, who expect that the Roman Catholic Church joins this or that cause.⁵³⁷

Though the encyclical, in line with almost all previous social doctrine, abstains from a specific political stance, it does in its principles give good grounds for the religious engagement with justice that drives the liberation theologies of the last decades. This may be seen as remarkable, as in his pre-papal status, cardinal Ratzinger was the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that in the 1980s produced strong criticism of liberation theologians. As pope Benedict XVI, he has endorsed these documents again and repeated his concern for ‘marxism’ and direct political activity by priests.⁵³⁸

Notwithstanding such disagreements in the dialogue between ‘local’ theologies of liberation and the ‘official’ theology of the Roman Catholic Church, some optimism may be based on the recent appointment of Gerhard Ludwig Müller as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.⁵³⁹ This choice made by Benedict XVI as a ‘pope’, which differs from the approach he took as ‘cardinal’, might open new opportunities for a constructive relation among theologians and among theologies that all seek ‘the common good’ in the political, social and economic context.

A new emphasis: ecology

Looking back at this research I think that one can consider *Caritas* to be in line with previous social teaching. I think that it is possible to recognize that Benedict XVI’s encyclical is a piece of social thought in line with the tradition of the Roman Catholic social thought.⁵⁴⁰ This can be concluded not only on the basis of the many references that Benedict XVI makes in his work, but also from the analysis of the content as such. From this latter consideration, nevertheless, it arises also the acknowledgement that something new there is in *Caritas*. This is the attention that Benedict XVI gives to the environment and to sustainability of our progress in relation with the phenomenon of globalization. This is both a strength and a weakness.

From one side, as a *strength*, by being open to new issues *Caritas* stands in the tradition of affirmation and development that we have previously encountered.⁵⁴¹ Globalization and the environment were not totally ignored by previous social

⁵³⁵ See IV, 2.

⁵³⁶ See DORR, *Option for the poor and for the earth*, 394 – 396.

⁵³⁷ See DORR, *Option for the poor and for the earth*, 449 – 450.

⁵³⁸ See DORR, *Option for the poor and for the earth*, 387, quoting a speech of Benedict to bishops in Brasil, delivered December 5, 2009; and above VI, 2.3.

⁵³⁹ See above VI, 2.3.

⁵⁴⁰ See in this sense also P. K. TURKSON, *Conclusions: Caritas in veritate in the tradition of Catholic social thought*, in D. K. FINN, ed., *The Moral Dynamics of Economic Life: An Extension and Critique of Caritas in Veritate*. Oxford University Press, New York 2012.

⁵⁴¹ See above II, 2.

teaching, especially that of Paul VI and of John Paul II. In *Caritas* the ecological theme is integrated into the theological and moral framework (e.g. the notions of ‘God’s gift’, ‘integral human development’, ‘human ecology’), rather than a separate issue. This integration of new themes, or at least of the place it receives, may give to the teaching stability and coherence through time, and provide a stable platform for the ecumenical dialogue.⁵⁴² At the same time, in *Caritas*, these topics are addressed in a way that deals both with the terminology and the content of more secular sensibilities about the environment and globalization of the economy. The global accent and the environmental preoccupation of Benedict XVI in *Caritas* represent ‘renewal’. The strength is given by an attitude that does not refuse to update the content of social teaching with contemporary issues. This renewal is demanded given that social thought is an answer to the social questions of our time.

A *weakness* might be an unnecessary uneasiness in allowing some topics to enter the themes of social teaching. Especially for what regards the ecological issues, the social doctrine lacks specificity in outlining for its audience a clear and proper attitude. It is not that social doctrine lacks theological foundations for developing an ecological discourse, but if it were more effective among Roman Catholics in the world, more results in terms of environmental preservation might perhaps be noticed. More emphasis could have been given towards recycling. More interest could have been shown in, and more support given for, research on alternative and renewable energy sources. And the ecological theme is intrinsically related to the economic one: more concern could have been expressed about attitudes devoted to the accumulation of money and goods, instead of the sharing of money and goods. More openness could be proposed towards alternative, traditional or new, ways of handling property and re-distribution. More analytical arguments regarding all these topics should be included in the social doctrine to make it more effective.

The instant gratification of the individual, intended as the need of consuming, immediately satisfied with the act of purchasing, can be considered as a distinctive trait of the economically developed parts of the world. The Westernized world has been able to produce material wealth and stability in the access to the means of sustenance. Material needs are also primary needs, thus this can be considered a success. Nevertheless, social teaching would not speak of a general well-being as given from the sum of the individual material satisfaction. And because of this, in the end, it should be put more emphasis on new-life-styles that break with certain behaviours of the past.

Third key issue: Caritas in veritate in the contemporary world

The specific setting of *Caritas* is not just that this is the first social encyclical of a new pope, but also that it appears in the midst of a major economic crisis. The publication of *Caritas* has been delayed due to new elements that the economic crisis was presenting, making a re-thinking of certain arguments necessary.⁵⁴³ This crisis has been interpreted by the social teaching of Benedict XVI also as an opportunity for building a new social framework, an occasion for organizing the global society according to its global needs. In this direction goes the proposal for a

⁵⁴² See DORR, *Option for the poor and for the earth*, 456.

⁵⁴³ See J. M. BREEN, *Love, truth and economy. A reflection on Benedict XVI's Caritas in veritate*, in *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, 33. 2010. 991.

world leading authority for the financial world.⁵⁴⁴ This is an example of the social doctrine's approach to the global issues, but here, it serves us for reflecting about another tension. Namely, the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church aims to propose principles, solutions and approaches to the problems that are supposed to be effective worldwide.

We may consider this global ambition a *strength* of the social teaching. The same ideals are to be valid everywhere. This fact avoids internal contrasts in the development of the teaching. To be universal is also a good contribution in the ecumenical and interreligious dialogue, and it simplifies the dialogue with social sciences.⁵⁴⁵ There are, indeed, values and principles that can be shared globally. Principles such as the recognition of the intrinsic and transcendental dignity and freedom of each individual human being, the pursuing of the end of the common good, and the consequential universal destination of goods, are principles that might work and be applied also beyond the Western culture.

From another side, a *weakness* arises when social teaching faces the complex reality. The social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church has to face many different contexts, as many as the places where the Roman Catholic Church is present. The tension between the homogeneous proposal of the social doctrine in the global perspective and the local situations is the source of some problems. As the debate around the liberation theology can show, local contexts may need diverse local approaches. In the will of preserving its traditional vocation, the Roman Catholic Church should be able to differentiate in methods, aims and approaches according to local realities. This should be balanced with the interrelated global proposal that social thought aims to present. In the end, this new attitude calls for a *glocal* perspective on the social issues of the world.

Caritas in veritate and secular thought

Not only is *Caritas* an engagement with the global economic and, to a lesser extent, ecological crisis, but it is also an engagement with secular thought on these issues. This is less explicit, but shows through in the analysis of *Caritas*.⁵⁴⁶

When the social doctrine referred to the contributions of different sciences I have tried to see what can be the shared standpoints in some secular fields. As economic globalization is a central theme in *Caritas*,⁵⁴⁷ I have pointed towards those authors, economists, philosophers and sociologists, who also maintain in their work a strong focus on globalization and justice. These authors share some ideas with Roman Catholic social teaching, for instance a possible re-evaluation of the wealth measuring parameters, GDP,⁵⁴⁸ or the plea for a world leading financial authority.⁵⁴⁹ This sort of compatibility between secular thinkers and the official social doctrine, may encourage the Roman Catholic Church to be open to the involvement of lay

⁵⁴⁴ See above VIII, 2.3.

⁵⁴⁵ See VI, 3.

⁵⁴⁶ See, for instance, above VII, 2.

⁵⁴⁷ See L. CAMPIGLIO, *Verso un'economica globalmente responsabile*, in F. G. BRAMBILLA, L. CAMPIGLIO, M. TOSO, F. VIOLA, V. ZAMAGNI, *Carità globale. Commento alla Caritas in veritate*. Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009. 79.

⁵⁴⁸ See above, VI, 2.2.2.

⁵⁴⁹ See above, VIII, 2.3.

people and specialists from all the fields in developing a better social doctrine to be implemented for a better world.⁵⁵⁰

The consideration of the 'Economy of Communion' can be considered a positive example. We have seen how Benedict XVI has welcomed in his social teaching this particular way of understanding the economic interactions proposed by the Focolare movement, seeking the creation of businesses that combine an interest in profit with a social agenda. Indeed, the 'economy of communion' can be seen as a concrete proposal able to build 'a more human model of economics'.⁵⁵¹

We have also seen that Benedict XVI has asked technical help in preparing the Encyclical,⁵⁵² in a certain way putting into practice the proposal for a wider perspective on socio-economic issues.

To understand the encyclical, it is necessary to understand the language and concepts. As it has been pointed out before, to a large extent these derive from previous encyclicals and other documents in Roman Catholic social thought. This is obvious, as the text of the encyclical comes with 159 endnotes referring to these documents. Though not explicit, it turns out to be also necessary to pay attention to elements that may have their origins elsewhere, be it among lay movements within the Roman Catholic Church (e.g. Focolare), be it among scientists and scholars, both Catholic and non-Catholic.

From one side, as a *strength*, the social doctrine is open to the contribution of secular sciences. The Roman Catholic Church claims for the independence of all the sciences in pursuing their results.⁵⁵³ It is then in a second moment that social teaching may acquire certain scientific results and integrate them. The social doctrine aims to be interdisciplinary. It aims to dialogue with all the sciences with the objective of finding, when possible, a *humanistic synthesis*. We observe how behind the proposal of social teaching there are considerations about the socio-economic world that come from scientific studies.

From the other side, anyhow, emerges a *weakness*. To be open, in the sense prospected above, means to maintain a level of generality and abstractedness that can generate incomprehensibility. The ground of social teaching remains a theological one; its authority is thus not supported by references to secular, scientific literature, but to earlier statements of the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church. The interdisciplinary attitude might expect that one places theological issues next to, for instance, economic issues. However, preserving the theological ground as the solid basis of the social doctrine may cause a less effective penetration of the secular scientific discourse inside the themes of the social doctrine. An answer to this difficulty might come from the analysis and evaluation of social thought's claims without referring to their theological basis. In a phase of evaluation of social thought's claims, and while comparing the proposals of social teaching with those coming from the human sciences, it is possible to temporarily leave apart the theological foundations of social teaching. In other words, there is the possibility that even without sharing the theological basis of social thought, its aims and proposals can still be considered helpful and valid.

⁵⁵⁰ See DORR, *Option for the poor and for the earth*. 465 – 466.

⁵⁵¹ See DORR, *Option for the poor and for the earth*, 457.

⁵⁵² See VII, 2.

⁵⁵³ See, for instance, II, 2.

A message for all

What might appear to be something specific to the encyclical is that the Roman Catholic criticism of some secular standpoints is based primarily on theological considerations. It is from a theological framework that the moral structure is developed. This moral system is eminently Christian, and specifically Roman Catholic. And even if it is not excluding what in the moral message from other religions might coincide with the Roman Catholic doctrine,⁵⁵⁴ it definitely remains a proposal marked with the Roman Catholic heritage in interpreting the message of Jesus. Its ultimate declared purpose is to help the human beings to become more humane human beings, understood as persons in relation to God.

In this context we find the message that the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church sends to the economic world. This message is to all the people who act in an economic context. The appeal regards the moral consequences of their actions. All economic actors should be aware of the consequences of their way of consumption. This call regards also the institutional level and the business level of the economic world. Social doctrine also calls for the construction of institutional frameworks that guarantee transparency in business and dignity at work. Entrepreneurs, for their part, should commit their business not exclusively or absolutely to profit making. The social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church claims that this way of approaching business, production and consumption, can benefit the enterprise also.

Here probably lays a major objective of the Roman Catholic social thought, to address what economic science could not: we are not made to take advantage from each other, but we are made to love each other in a fraternal world that needs to go beyond egoistic attitudes. The final contribution of the Roman Catholic social doctrine would exactly point to this, namely to make of humanity in the world a global family. Both secular and religious thought can contribute to this.

Some considerations on Benedict XVI's resignation and pope Francis election

On February, 28 2013, Benedict XVI left the papacy. The Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio, was elected as his successor. He took the name pope Francis.

We are now sure that *Caritas in veritate* will remain the only social encyclical of Benedict XVI. Benedict XVI did the historical step through a declaration on February 11, during the Consistory for three canonizations.⁵⁵⁵

The resignation of a pope is something that the Code of Canon Law presents as possible saying that 'if it happens that the Roman Pontiff resigns his office, it is required for validity that the resignation is made freely and properly manifested but not that it is accepted by anyone'.⁵⁵⁶ The whole world, believers and non-believers, was certainly more than surprised to hear that. This is true even if we notice that in 2010 Benedict XVI already pointed out that when a pope is fully aware of being not

⁵⁵⁴ See VI, 3.

⁵⁵⁵ See BENEDICT XVI, *Declaration*. Città del Vaticano, 2013. Full text available online at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130211_declaratio_en.html

⁵⁵⁶ *Code of Canon Law*, can. 332, 2. Full text available online at: http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/_P16.HTM

physically and psychologically able to continue the papacy, the pope has the right and, in some cases, the duty to resign from the papacy.⁵⁵⁷

The declaration through which the highest seat of the Vatican was left empty, although brief, contains some relevant elements for reflecting upon Benedict XVI's choice. Indeed, the brief document has been compared to a sort of 'last encyclical' from Benedict XVI.⁵⁵⁸ In particular three elements could help for a serious reflection.⁵⁵⁹

First, Benedict XVI appeals to the fact that he has 'repeatedly examined'⁵⁶⁰ his conscience. Explicating this fact, in the context of such an important choice for the life of the Roman Catholic Church, can be considered as an attempt to put personal conscience at the centre of the religious life. It means to re-affirm the primacy of conscience and of the intimate relationship with God through the prayer, even if in opposition with the tradition. Reading this in the perspective of social doctrine means to notice again how Benedict XVI sees fundamental the confrontation with our conscience. We have said that his social thought emphasizes the role of the choices and behaviour of the individual, and if we assume that his considerations in the declaration have a wider perspective, this confirms that the social thought of Benedict XVI is strongly inspired by a theological reflection on the role of the individual believer in front of God.

Second, in the declaration there is the acknowledgement that 'today's world' is 'subject to many rapid changes'.⁵⁶¹ With his choice Benedict XVI also wants to change something. Because he adheres to the mission of the Roman Catholic Church, Benedict XVI felt the need to resign. The RCC needs a shift, radical changes and renovations; it needs to be ready to face new and old difficulties. In this sense, Benedict XVI as head of the RCC has made what he thinks and believes is the best choice for the RCC. It is not that he is too weak in an absolute sense, but that he is too weak 'to adequately fulfil the ministry entrusted'⁵⁶² to him, so that the resignation appears a coherent act of service for the good of the RCC.⁵⁶³ We could paraphrase this by saying that Benedict XVI made a step backwards to allow the Roman Catholic Church to make a step forward. These considerations become more realistic when we consider that the future of the RCC appears to be outside Europe, or non-West-centred.⁵⁶⁴ Though at first the feelings of the many people hearing him were ranging from surprise to disappointment,⁵⁶⁵ we can now say

⁵⁵⁷ See EDITORIALE, 'Una decisione di grande importanza per la vita della Chiesa', in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, I. 3904. 2013. 323. The article quotes the Italian edition of Benedict XVI's interview with Peter Seewald, BENEDICT XVI, P. SEEWALD, *Light of the world: the pope, the church and the signs of the times*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010.

⁵⁵⁸ S. FEMMINIS, L'ultima enciclica, in *Popoli. Mensile Internazionale dei Gesuiti*, 3. 2013. 1.

⁵⁵⁹ For the following schematization see FEMMINIS, L'ultima enciclica, in *Popoli*, 1.

⁵⁶⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Declaration*.

⁵⁶¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Declaration*.

⁵⁶² BENEDICT XVI, *Declaration*.

⁵⁶³ See T. SÖDING, Un papato paolino, in *Il Regno*, 4. 2013. 106; H. LEGRAND, in *Il Regno*, 4. 2013. 107 – 108; EDITORIALE, 'Una decisione di grande importanza per la vita della Chiesa', in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 323

⁵⁶⁴ See T. P. RAUSCH, Temi di Benedetto XVI per il prossimo futuro, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, I. 3906. 2013. 571.

⁵⁶⁵ See A. SPADARO, La rinuncia di Benedetto XVI. La stampa, la rete, la gente, in *La Civiltà*

that that choice opens also perspectives of hope and courage for the future of the Roman Catholic Church.⁵⁶⁶

Thirdly, Benedict XVI asks forgiveness for all his sins and all his imperfections. This can be read as a declaration of humanity, namely a declaration of the limitedness and fallibility that every human task bears as it is human. Benedict XVI obviously feels the weight of his age, but to admit one's weaknesses and imperfections also can be read as a sin of mental and spiritual strength.⁵⁶⁷ This is a call to the humble attitude that should aim, but also encourage, every human activity.

Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected new pope on 13 March 2013, calling himself Francis. Since the first moments of his papacy, he emphasized his role as the bishop of Rome. This has been interpreted as the will of tracing an ecumenical path with other Christian confessions as well as with other religions, and also as an emphasis of the 'local' dimension of the Roman Catholic Church.⁵⁶⁸ If confirmed, and transferred on the level of social doctrine, such an approach can give new strength to the social teaching of the RCC in respect to some difficulties prospected above in this chapter regarding *Caritas in veritate* and the contemporary world.

Three particular novel aspects about pope Francis may be considered. He is the first Jesuit pope, the first from an extra European country in more than a thousand years, and the first to call himself Francis, after Francis of Assisi. All these three elements might furnish us some insights about the possibilities for the directions that the social teaching of the Roman Catholic Church may take in the future.

He is a Jesuit. The Jesuit order, called Society of Jesus, was founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1534. The Society has a special vow regarding the missionary service that a pope might assign them. To have a Jesuit pope prospects an emphasis on the universality of the Roman Catholic Church's missionary vocation⁵⁶⁹ that should not renounce to deal with the local peculiarities.

He is from Argentina, where in 2001 a huge economic and social crisis almost made the country collapse. This knowledge of what an economic crisis can do is probably a guarantee that he will try to bet on relations of communion and trust, more than on exclusively economic solutions to overcome the actual economic and social crisis of the West. Having been archbishop of Buenos Aires, in South America, he cannot have avoided any contact with the liberation theology. Here, he might be close to the perspective of his predecessors. Namely, a formal or official rejection of liberation theology⁵⁷⁰ as a bishop does not exclude the possibility to endorse some of its practical considerations as a pope. Indeed, that he has always been concerned about the poor people, and that his pastoral activity was oriented

Cattolica, I. 3905. 2013. 426 – 427.

⁵⁶⁶ See EDITORIALE, 'Una decisione di grande importanza per la vita della Chiesa', in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 323 – 324.

⁵⁶⁷ See SPADARO, La rinuncia di Benedetto XVI, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 427 – 429.

⁵⁶⁸ See A. SPADARO, I primi atti di papa Francesco. Una lettura teologica, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, II. 3907. 2013. 78.

⁵⁶⁹ See EDITORIALE, L'elezione di papa Francesco, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, I. 3906. 2013. 533.

⁵⁷⁰ See, for instance: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2013/mar/13/jorge-mario-bergoglio-pope-poverty>

towards the common people and not for the elite⁵⁷¹ encourages us to think that he will not forget to make one central theme of his papacy the action necessary to counter the world's misery.

As a Jesuit, the Franciscan vocation and mission is definitely not unknown to Francis. Indeed, Francis of Assisi, together with Saint Dominic, was a major inspiration for the definitive conversion of Ignatius of Loyola.⁵⁷² Also, pope Francis declared that the choice of calling himself Francis is due to the fact that 'he [Francis of Assisi] is the man of poverty, the man of peace, the man who loves and protects creation'.⁵⁷³ In this respect, the view outlined by pope Francis seems social in its deep constitution. Questions will regard the fact whether, and with which weight, the accent will be on the structural or the individual level of injustice, or even on both. Also, a claim for the respect and protection of creation might call for a more incisive consideration by the Roman Catholic Church of the ecological issues, in which collaboration with secular expertise is unavoidable.

For answering these questions we will have probably to wait some more time. Nevertheless, if these three words, poverty, peace, and creation, would really become the three keywords, three objectives, three milestones of this papacy, there will be a papacy that will return to major themes of the social doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church.

⁵⁷¹ See EDITORIALE, L'elezione di papa Francesco, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, I. 537

⁵⁷² See EDITORIALE, L'elezione di papa Francesco, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, I. 533. Quoted in the article is the Autobiography see EDITORIALE, L'elezione di papa Francesco, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, I. 533.

⁵⁷³ FRANCIS, *Audience to representatives of the communications media*. Città del Vaticano, 16 March, 2013. Available online at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/march/documents/papa-francesco_20130316_rappresentanti-media_en.html