

The Reception of *Caritas in Veritate* in the USA: Appreciation and Perplexity

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1. Introduction

Benedict XVI's latest encyclical gave rise to controversy in the scientific community across the Atlantic, known for its freedom of expression without being too "diplomatic". According to well-informed sources, the original text of the document was in Italian, and not in the German author's mother tongue, differently from Pope Ratzinger's other two pastoral letters (2006 and 2008). Perhaps for this reason, as well as the difficult task of explaining some shades of meaning in the pragmatic and concise Anglo-Saxon language, the translation of *Caritas in Veritate* into English was not judged to be impeccable by the experts. Be that as it may, there remains the fact that, while in Italy scholars of the Church's social doctrine, independently of their different schools of thought, exclusively formulated positive and enthusiastic remarks about the Benedictine social encyclical, in United States, intellectuals advanced some enthusiastic comments but some strong doubts too.

2. The Judgment of the Catholic Neo-Conservative School (Whig Thomist)

The Catholic Neo-Conservative school promotes an economic approach aimed at developing a partnership between Catholic ethics and the free market. It was born as a current of the bigger Neo-Conservative intellectual movement promoted in the sixties by Irving Kristol (1957). This Jewish scholar argued that human values deriving from Biblical anthropology could not be adequately defended by the Democratic Party to which he and his cultural friends belonged (1995). In Kristol's judgment (1972), the Left always

develops a utopian ideology of building a perfectly equal community. But this constructivist dream is never realisable because society is constituted by human persons who exercise an unpredictable freedom in making their choices (von Hayek, 1949b). Therefore, the only solution for attaining a just economic and political system is a cultured civilization (Niebhur, 1944). Only those who are educated in the practice of ethical virtues can transform a free social context into a morally good one. It was along these lines that Fr Richard Neuhaus, a Protestant priest converted to Catholicism, wrote a column for many years called "The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America" in the review *First Things*. He explained that the American constitutional right to the search for happiness had to be made in reference to an integral conception of the human being, including his religious sense (Gaustad, Schmidt, 1974). Neuhaus identified the real and deep meeting between people of faith as the proper instrument of peaceful development of society from all points of view. This dialogue had not only to deal with abstract themes but it also had to take place with regard to ethical, political and economic topics (Felice, 2010). We may say that, in developing their framework, the Catholic Neo-Conservative school have tried to combine the insights of thinkers like Jacques Maritain (1944) and John Courtney Murray SJ (1960), representing a Thomist philosophical approach regarding the relation between Catholicism, democracy and a free enterprise economy, with those of figures like Alexis de Tocqueville (1835-1840), Ludwig von Mises (1927) and Friederick von Hayek (1960) on the ethical foundations of liberalism.

Among Neo-Conservative authors, George Weigel seemed to be the most adverse to *Caritas in veritate*. He is a Distinguished Senior Fellow at the “Ethics and Public Policy” Centre in Washington D.C. and the author of one of the most successful official biographies (1999) of Pope John Paul II. Weigel argued (2009) that the last encyclical is composed of two parts: a theological one and a practical one. According to him, the first was personally written by the Holy Father and it groups together a lot of teachings of great importance. In this regard, the Neo-Conservative thinker especially appreciated the affirmation of the truth of the Christian event as the objective source from which flows charity (CV, 1-9), the cultural explanation of reasons for the non-negotiability of life’s value as compared to the presumed value for the common good of abortion and unnatural family planning (CV, 28), and the establishment of the connection between freedom of religion and economic development (CV, 29). But the American scholar attacked the economic passages that he guessed to be consistently inspired by the “Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace”. Weigel wrote:

«There is also rather more in the encyclical about the redistribution of wealth than about wealth - creation — a sure sign of Justice and Peace default positions at work. And another Justice and Peace favorite — the creation of a “world political authority” to ensure integral human development — is revisited, with no more insight into how such an authority would operate than is typically found in such curial fideism about the inherent superiority of transnational governance. (It is one of the enduring mysteries of the Catholic Church why the Roman Curia places such faith in this fantasy of a “world public authority,” given the Holy See’s experience in battling for life, religious freedom, and elementary decency at the United Nations. But that is how they think at Justice and Peace, where evidence, experience, and the canons of Christian realism sometimes seem of little account). [...] The incoherence of the Justice and Peace sections of the new encyclical is so deep, and the language in some cases so impenetrable, that what the defenders of “*Populorum Progressio*” may think to be a new sounding of the trumpet is far more like the warbling of an untuned piccolo. Benedict XVI, a truly gentle soul, may have thought it necessary to include in his encyclical these multiple off-notes, in order to maintain the peace within his curial household» (2009: 2).

In other words, Weigel saw an attempt to reintroduce into Catholic social thought an alternative “third way” to capitalism and socialism by following the “static and egalitarian economic idea” of Pope Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio* and by missing out the favorable positions towards the open and free market economy elaborated by Pope John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus* (CA, 34). Thus Weigel considered obscure or, anyway, inapplicable any recourse to the adoption of “communion economies” on a large scale and the inducement to back the Third World’s development by “quotas of gratuitousness” (CV, 39).

On the other hand, Michael Novak, prominent exponent of the “American Enterprise Institute” in Washington D.C., shows himself more moderate but no less perplexed. He underlined (2009: 1) that the beautiful introduction about the divine nature of *caritas* explains in an insuperable way that real love does not have a sentimental character but comes objectively from divine grace, a free and gratuitous gift of the Creator to his creature in Christ’s incarnation. Human persons can only love others as a reflexive consequence of God’s love towards them (CV, 1-9). Therefore, gratuitousness should be represented by the attitude of the human soul within every activity. In this way it is possible to understand that human merits and human cares have to be rewarded as well as entrepreneurial profit legitimated (CV, 47). Novak especially liked Pope Ratzinger’s stress on the decisive contribution of the subsidiarity principle in order to create a just economic order. In fact, Benedict XVI affirms at number 57:

«A particular manifestation of charity and a guiding criterion for fraternal cooperation between believers and non-believers is undoubtedly the “principle of subsidiarity”, an expression of inalienable human freedom. Subsidiarity is first and foremost a form of assistance to the human person via the autonomy of intermediate bodies. Such assistance is offered when individuals or groups are unable to accomplish something on their own, and it is always designed to achieve their emancipation, because it fosters freedom and participation through the assumption of responsibility. Subsidiarity respects personal dignity by recognizing in the person a subject who is always capable of giving something to others. By considering reciprocity as the heart of what it is to be a human being, subsidiarity is the most effective antidote against any form of all-encompassing welfare state. It is able to take

account both of the manifold articulation of plans — and therefore of the plurality of subjects — as well as the coordination of those plans. Hence the principle of subsidiarity is particularly well-suited to managing globalization and directing it towards authentic human development».

But Novak did not like the general style of the economic part of the encyclical because it is «confused and it seems to go in two directions at the same time» (Novak, 2009: 2). Moreover, the Neo-Conservative intellectual was surprised by the lack of institutional normative provisions in order to protect society from the selfish and free-riding behaviour of economic agents, missing Saint Augustine's lesson in the *De Civitate Dei* on original sin and John Paul II's advice in *Centesimus Annus* regarding the fact that economic activity «cannot be conducted in an institutional, juridical or political vacuum» (CV, 48). Finally, this Thomist Whig was surprised to observe some criticism in the Benedictine text of the phenomenon of globalization. According to him, this is paradoxical, because the Pope always tends more to the global cultural point of view, referring to all Christians in the world, mainly because he is the leader of the biggest global institution in history which was the first to defend human rights everywhere by trying to modify the international law for this purpose. In Novak's opinion, denying that globalization benefits the poor means not considering, for example, that «China and India in the last twenty-five years have grown economically, and this fact has allowed one and a half million to escape from life under the poverty level» (Montanari, Sandonà, 2010: 34).

Gabriel Vidal, member of the “von Mises Institute” in Alabama, praised Pope Benedict for underlining the constitutive and unavoidable link between ethics and the economic, social and political system (CV, 34). He liked too the encyclical's attempt at using a framework of voluntary exchange founded on Aristotelian, Thomist, and Rothbardian philosophical approaches. On the other hand, Ratzinger's value theory based on a social justice conception related to a presumed equivalent exchange of goods or services between buyer and seller appears antithetical to the Austrian school's tradition of subjective (and relativistic) value theory. In Vidal's vision, «we cannot measure value, we can only

prefer one good to another» (2009: 2). The mistake in the encyclical is the undervaluation of the marginal benefits of commodities and services as a function of every single individual's utility maximization. Moreover, this exponent of the von Mises Institute criticised the consequent Benedictine moral permission for applying wealth distribution measures by affirming:

«The common good is the result of an integral dynamic process of human action in an environment of freedom. The process is dynamic because it changes every second by the trillions of individual interactions in the economy. If this process is manipulated or controlled partially or totally by political action through central planning, taxation, fiat money, etc., with the noble intent of improving social cohesion, the process is no longer dynamic. It becomes static, predetermined, and dead, because it is no longer a reflection of trillions of individual subjective valuations in the marketplace. A static conception of the economy destroys wealth and capital, and creates the very malfunctions of the current model of development that Benedict deplores» (2009:3).

Actually, in *Deus caritas est* Ratzinger recognized (2006: 28) that state intervention risks diminishing the vocation of entrepreneurs and intermediate bodies to respond to different material and spiritual needs that emerge in the human community by discovering new products, improving production and supply processes, and giving love in human relations. For this reason Vidal argued that public interference paradoxically produces more poverty (2009: 4) because, as von Hayek demonstrated (1949a), a “spontaneous order” exists among the economic forces of society which is destroyed by growth in taxation and the complications of bureaucracy.

3. The Judgment of the Catholic Distributist School (Augustinian Thomist)

The Catholic Distributist school in United States is very different from that in any other country. In the American academic world, the background of religious, political and economic liberty, avoiding any possibility of diffusing statist and socialist thought, is always present (Schumpeter, 1943). The demand and supply mechanism is connatural to Americans' daily way of living, from the cost of a bus or airplane ticket to the tuition fees for a masters' degree. In addition,

many Americans are immigrants who, coming from countries that are poorer than they should be thanks to the adoption of inefficient economic planning, do not want to return to this (Daniels, 1990). But that does not mean that all American economists, especially those who are Catholic, fully accept capitalism. In fact, there are some important scholars that have identified many controversial aspects of the free market system (Greider, 2003) by following Pope John Paul II's advice:

«the error of early capitalism can be repeated wherever man is in a way treated on the same level as the whole complex of the material means of production, as an instrument and not in accordance with the true dignity of his work – that is to say, where he is not treated as subject and maker, and for this very reason as the true purpose of the whole process of production» (LE, 7).

For example, in the capitalist system it is often possible to find: little respect for handicapped or weak people; an excessive consumption of commodities and services; widespread use of corruption for obtaining favours; and a tacit justification of all tools for creating wealth (included drugs in order to work harder and sexual relations for getting on in a career). Finally, from a methodological point of view, the distributist school uses a way of analysing phenomena which mixes a Thomist perspective, with its unifying, teleological consideration of all reality, with an Augustinian attention to the mystical claims of the Christian faith.

In this cultural context Charles Clark, associate professor at Saint John's University in New York, has highlighted the necessity of reinforcing the ethical role of institutions for directing individual acts towards the common good (Clark, 2008). The problem of the unequal allocation of resources among and within countries cannot be superficially solved by Milton Friedman's demonstration (1953) that free competition generates the best Paretian efficiency. The thesis of the Chicago school may be strictly true in a mathematical – statistical perspective, but epistemologically it implies a view of economic science as the final aim of human activity (Robbins, 1932: 15). Instead, economics is simply a technical instrument which needs a moral orientation for really improving the historical conditions of human existence (Clark, 2006b). The free market

economy, abandoned to its own devices, provokes a great deal of injustices. For instance, Clark affirmed in a publication with Helen Alford:

«When the death of the pop star, Michael Jackson, was announced, there was a frenzy of reaction, and an estimated billion people watched his memorial celebration. On the same day an estimated 25,000 children under the age of 5 died from mostly poverty related causes (9 million a year), without fanfare or ceremony. The contrast between the obsessive attention paid to the lifestyle of the rich and famous and the indifference shown to the world's poor, both in life and death, is indicative of the gap between the rich and poor, a gap that transcends economics and politics, defines education and culture, determines health and well-being and, in the end, establishes in a very real way who counts as a person and who does not» (2010: 4).

Moreover, the criterion for measuring wealth cannot only be quantitative but needs to start from “integral human development” (CV, 11). The accent must be put on the adjective “integral”, which views the material and spiritual aspects of human life at the same time. Clark has thus argued (2009a) that Benedict XVI has understood that globalization is the bad fruit of that capitalism which really introduced new forms of slavery. Clark appreciates the Pontiff's remark that «the Church's social doctrine has always maintained that “justice must be applied to every phase of economic activity”» (CV, 37). Indeed, it is necessary to rethink the economic system, replacing the protestant ethic, where wealth accumulation is justified by the subsequent distribution of resources, with a more Catholic one, where economic activity has to be directly oriented to the good throughout the economic process, both during production and distribution (2009b). Consequently he argues that it is necessary to give greater importance to the common origin of all people as God's children, and their shared destiny in Christ's salvation (CV, 21) – in short, to their nature and being – than to their capacity for creating wealth, that is, to their activity (CV, 45). For Clark, the reduction of social inequalities constitutes an unavoidable need if there is to be real recognition of universal human dignity (Clark, 2006a).

On the other hand, Father Thomas Massaro, professor at Boston College in Massachusetts, has added that the Benedictine proposal might meet agreement from all reasonable people for its ethical vision of aspiring «to build a truly global society of

trust, mutuality and concern for the disadvantaged» (2009a: 11). The document provides the ethical concepts for understanding why recent economic operators' cynical manipulation of credit and injection of toxic financial products into the economic system constituted a myopic and selfish goal. It then goes further, rediscovering the high real economic ideals of the common good, human solidarity and healthy family life. Regarding this last subject Pope Benedict argues that:

«States are called to enact policies promoting the centrality and the integrity of the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman, the primary vital cell of society, and to assume responsibility for its economic and fiscal needs, while respecting its essentially relational character» (CV, 44, italics original).

Massaro suggests that this point of the encyclical may not be glossed over because education towards honesty, trust and generosity in the family reinforces the realisation of harmony within households, as well as in society (2009b: 12). In fact a family, intended as a married couple of a man and a woman open to life and seriously committed to bringing up children, constitutes the decisive resource for just economic development based on a moral natural order.

4. The Judgment of the Catholic Personalist School (Phenomenological Thomist)

The Catholic personalist school was born during John Paul II's papacy as an attempt to implement the dramatic (not tragic) anthropology of human life in economics (Danner, 2002). The Polish Pontiff's philosophical approach was introduced in his Ph.D. dissertation, writing about Saint John of Cross at the "Pontifical University Saint Thomas Aquinas – Angelicum" in Rome (Buttiglione, 1982). In the "Acting Person" (1969) Wojtyła successfully laid out his unique description of the human journey by unifying the Thomist classical tradition of truth, discovered within the entire reality of being (static conception) with Edmund Husserl's (1913) and Max Scheler's (1913-1916) phenomenological novelty of meeting truth during personal action (dynamic conception). This synthesised anthropological paradigm has been used by personalist Catholic American economists, members of the "Association for Social Economics" and writers in the "Review for Social

Economics", the "Forum for Social Economics" and, more recently, the "Journal of Markets and Morality".

Edward O'Boyle, emeritus professor of economics at Louisiana University and president of the Mayo Research Institute in West Monroe, has observed two new elements in magisterial teaching: the requirement of limiting the protection of intellectual property rights in the field of healthcare (CV, 22) and the promotion of subsidiarity in fiscal affairs to the advantage of intermediate bodies (CV, 60). On the first point, O'Boyle is in agreement, given the difficulty that poor countries have to acquire even basic pharmaceutical products. Instead, he has declared himself perplexed regarding the second proposal because there is the risk, in his opinion, of misunderstanding the needs of the common good of the intermediate body in relation to that of the individual subject (O'Boyle, 2009: 7-8). Furthermore, he notes (2009: 10) the elimination of the formula "preferential option for poor" with regard to economic development, and its replacement with a broad treatment of the problem, based on a concept of poverty that is not limited to the material level (CV, 5). The same author, nevertheless, has criticised the Benedictine text for its trust in the role of unionism in a world where the excessive rights of workers in developed countries have generated a need to delocalise the production of goods (CV, 64). Finally, O'Boyle has suggested that in *Caritas in veritate* there are «ambiguous or questionable parts, especially as regards solidarity, poverty and unemployment, social justice and contributive justice, and pawn broking» (2010: 10).

On the other hand, Fr Robert Sirico, president of the Acton Institute in Grand Rapids, Michigan, has commented that *Caritas in veritate* does not represent a change of magisterial teaching on social issues, but the confirmation that «there is no just or moral system without just and moral people» (2009a). For a correct analysis of the encyclical, this American priest notes that the document was published in the historical context of an economic crisis that led the Holy Father to focus on moral themes, using the richness of the preceding tradition, instead of trying to identify practical indications for political economy as Pope John Paul II did to a degree in *Centesimus Annus* when he promoted a free market configuration based on a personalist framework (CA, 34). Sirico argues that in *Caritas in veritate* there are no

judgments against a free enterprise economy, but that the affirmation that this instrument presupposes the cultivation of people is integral to a correct anthropological conception (CV, 28-29). Furthermore, he added that any development program that involves denying human dignity in theory or practice, whatever its character, «ought to be walked away from, because it is intrinsically disordered at its root» (Sirico 2009b).

Finally, Daniel Finn, professor at Saint John's University in Minnesota, identified a series of novelties in the text of the encyclical. Benedict has given a deep meaning to “integral human development” which Pope Paul VI introduced, by pointing out that he does not want to reduce:

«[t]his issue of development down to some kind of formula for something that econometrics can measure easily. Human development is the way out of this problem, but it must integrate all aspects of human flourishing, which would include the family as one psychological state, equations of status in society, and spiritual questions, all of which taken collectively could create a proper development plan. The other piece is the fact that all of these elements claim that integral human development is needed in our own lives, rather than being a special case, based on a fundamental Christian anthropology. In other words, it is not just something we desire for the people of Guatemala or Tanzania. It is something we all need» (Finn, 2009a: 2).

In fact, in *Caritas in veritate* there is a comprehensive integration of all life issues, related to procreation, biomedical discoveries, work, leisure, production, consumption, justice, and the safety of the environment (2009b). That means that Christian life touches all dimensions of reality (individual, social, and institutional) and that development has not only an economic aspect, but a moral one too. Pope Benedict explains clearly the impossibility of dividing human life into separate pieces, because human nature originally has, as well as the whole of created nature, a unitary character and «a “grammar” which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation» (CV, 48). In this regard, Finn approves the proposal of the natural law tradition in a new “dynamic” modality, able to capture the attention of modern men and women (2010a). Actually, as Thomas taught, an internal logic exists inside natural structures «from which one could discover principles for proper action» (Finn 2009:

2). Secondly, as Wojtyła taught, the person meets the deep truth contained inside reality by freely carrying out “proper action”. For this reason, Finn has appreciated (2010b) Ratzinger’s endorsement of a new type of enterprise, having some characteristics of profit making and some other of non-profits (CV, 37). The beautiful intuition of this hybrid economic organization regards the application of the principles of fraternity, reciprocity and solidarity (static principles of truth) to working efforts (dynamic situations) for really attaining the common good (CV, 41).

5. Conclusion

After this review of reactions to the encyclical, it is possible to see that the reception of *Caritas in veritate* in the United States has been very varied. Pope Benedict’s document combines parts on faith and morality, with which Catholics have necessarily to agree, with sociology and economics, about which Catholics are free to discuss. Actually, Ratzinger has affirmed, like his predecessors, that his indications have only an ethical character and they do not want to be taken as practical measures on a par with the recommendations of, say, an economist (CV, 10 and 11). At the same time, it is not intellectually acceptable to suppose, as George Weigel has done, that some parts of the encyclical were not written by the Holy Father. Indeed, as Daniel Finn has explained (2010b: 1), there has always been the influence of Catholic economists on the history of the social magisterial texts because Popes are not experts in this matter. In this specific case, Ratzinger is a systematic (not moral) theologian who, as he himself has confessed (2000: 17), is not a professional expert in Catholic social doctrine (Finn 2009a: 1) but in the questions of the Trinity, Christology, Holy Scripture, and Ecclesiology. In the economic sections of *Caritas in Veritate* the influences of the Bologna school of “Civil Economy” (Bruni, Zamagni, 2004), lead by Stefano Zamagni, is clear. The latter attended the first public presentation of the text of the encyclical with Cardinal Renato Martino, Cardinal Joseph Cordes, and Bishop Giampaolo Crepaldi. But that does not mean that the Pontiff was forced to affirm that which he did not want to affirm, all the more so if one knows Pope Benedict’s moral stature and sense of responsibility (Finn, 2010a: 2-3).

Anyway, it is as well to remember that the magisterial tradition of Social Catholicism, in which the encyclical is situated, was born over a hundred years ago as an alternative to liberalism, intended here as the Jacobin ideology of “laissez faire” (Solari, 2007). Catholic social teaching has always promoted a market, although with different emphases, based on good human relationships and social justice (Solari, Corrado, 2009). In *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Pope Leo XIII argued for the necessity of state intervention for improving the contingent situation of misery deriving from unlimited liberalism, while in *Quadragesimo anno* (1931), Pope Pius XI argued against the risk of an

excessive public presence when confronted with the birth of new dictatorships. Similarly, in *Populorum Progressio* (1967), Pope Paul VI invited us to pay attention to the development of all the countries of the world, while in *Centesimus Annus* (1991), Pope John Paul II expressed a preference for, though not a blind embrace of, a democratic, Western free market system, as compared to an Eastern, Communist dictatorship and the planned economy. In fact, the practical economic suggestions of Popes only change in relation to actual situations, and always aim at defending the same human values based on God’s creation of men and women (Hannafey, SJ, 2006).

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