

The Church, The Economy and Social Justice: Reflections on *Caritas in Veritate*

A Conversation with Daniel Finn

INTERVIEW BY ERIK OWENS
BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE
BOSTON COLLEGE, CHESTNUT HILL, MASSACHUSETTS
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OWENS: I'd like to begin by asking about the context of the document in question, *Caritas in Veritate*. Could you say a word about where it fits into the recent history of encyclicals as well as the general global environment in which it comes?

FINN: Every pope seems to need a social encyclical or two, and this is Benedict's third. It was a long time coming. I remember I was in Rome for a conference on corruption in June 2006 and Cardinal Martino, who heads the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, told us kind of slyly at the end of the conference that there would be a social encyclical out that Christmas, 2006. So that took a long time, but it comes from a pope who has not been known in his own personal life as having addressed justice issues. He's a systematic theologian and so I think there was a lot curiosity about what it was going to be and how he would approach this. It's not the area where he feels at home, even though, like every good theologian, he's got convictions there.

Benedict's decision to pick up on Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Populorum Progressio* was a surprise to most people, especially to the right wing who have always thought of it as sort of an aberration, a liberationist aberration that Catholics are best to leave behind. Instead, here is Benedict holding it up. It remains to be seen how this will work out, but the language and the research he has chosen to develop in this encyclical promises a fruitful conversation.

OWENS: As a professor trained in economics as well as theology, how does the pope's version of economics and the economic theory and practice hold up, at least at first glance?

FINN: In some ways, though there's not a lot of specific economic analysis in there, when economics does come up, it's quite good. For example, in dealing with issues around international trade, he very rightly takes the economists' angle and talks about what trade does, not simply for the instability of jobs as they move around the world, but for what it does to bring about lower prices. He successfully articulates the prices economists would want to have set at that point; in other words, lower prices actually increase people's purchasing power. If you have to pay less for your shirts and your shoes, you have more money leftover for other things. That is the standard economic analysis of the main benefit of international trade: people's purchasing power rises because of the lower price for imported goods, so they can spend that money on whatever else they wish. It's just one example of the quite good economic analysis that he incorporated in the midst of his

discussion of trade. So after a first look at it, I would say yes, he's clearly got some good advice. I'm guessing that he has help in this area.

OWENS: I wanted to ask about a couple primary themes of the document. At the center of any of this has to be his notion of integral human development and a relationality that comes out of it. Could you summarize the thrust of his message on this point?

FINN: It's a quite extended analysis, so I can't get it all here, but clearly he's picking up on integral human development as the major theme from Paul's encyclical. Of course *Populorum Progressio* was really focused on the development of people; the question of economic development for poor nations was at the center of that. Popes Paul and Benedict end up pointing out very vividly that while there are important economic issues here, we don't want to reduce this 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's not just something we desire for the people of Guatemala or Tanzania. It's something we all need.

OWENS: He also speaks about the civil economy. Could you elaborate on what he's after, especially vis-à-vis the current status of market economies?

FINN: The notion of civil economy seems to have come from the Bologna School of thought on these things. A key feature is the economist Stefano Zamagni, who has spent his entire career in Bologna. He has also been a consultant with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and was involved on the committees that help advise the Pope; therefore, my presumption is that the Pope found himself persuaded by these arguments and attempted to integrate Catholic social thought and economic life through this argument on civil economy. One can't be sure if the Pope buys into more than he's said in this encyclical, but their argument is that we currently have a form of economic market that we didn't used to have. The modern economic markets' predecessor actually began in the fourteenth or fifteenth century.

Zamagni himself points to Franciscans in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for inventing the first banks, the first corporations, and developing a market in a unique way that only they could do; since their attitude about wealth and property was to put it aside, they thought very creatively about how one should organize these things. For a couple hundred years, there was what some historians have come to call "civil humanism" or "civic humanism" in the various city-states of Italy. Unfortunately, this flourishing of their version of economic life was eventually overtaken, marginalized, and even eliminated by the politics. The Machiavellis and the Hobbeses of the world argued for a different model for understanding how society should be organized. So Zamagni argues for and refers to

this conviction that for the last three hundred years, we've had a version of markets that, despite the fact that they've produced wealth very well, tend to undermine human life in other ways. A civil economy would try to recover a lot of that while holding on to the wealth producing capacity of the economy.

OWENS: So it's civil in the sense of being civilized as well as non-state driven?

FINN: Exactly. Civil society is involved in this and yet, as the Pope's encyclical points out, there are what he calls "hybrid economic organizations," firms in the sense that they're making a profit. We can compare them to other firms, but they are also dedicated to the common good. They dedicate those profits not just to the well being of the firm, but also to some larger public purpose. They're civilizing as well as an example of civil society.

OWENS: The document itself seems to be a running commentary on civic engagement and the role of the person in society. Do you see anything new here in terms of the theology of public life-- a mode or a theological justification for engagement at different levels of society that's noteworthy or different than his predecessors' views?

FINN: Certainly more than the earlier Popes, but even more than Pope John Paul likely adhered to. There's a sense of vibrant engagement of persons and discussion of democratizing the economy, but certainly democratizing the democracy. He insists that civil society groups are politically engaged, not just in the electoral politics but also in the development and building up of society. This way, it isn't just do-gooders who are trying to build new playground equipment over here for the kids, but rather the very structure of society should be enlivened by this sort of civic engagement. These institutions of civil society get a better, more important play here. The other place it comes up is in his rejection of what he called the hegemony of the economy/state/ bi-polar that of many people presume.

What's going on in the world? There's the economy, and then there's the state that regulates it. For Benedict, there is this third part of life. He didn't want to identify with the third sector, as the French refer to it, or the nonprofit sector, as we call it, but he certainly wants to talk about the importance of this independent force in the development of society.

OWENS: He also appears to be a tethering together social justice, issues of sexual reproduction, biomedical research, ethical issues, and environmental dangers into a consistent package here. How would you characterize that process in this document?

FINN: One might criticize the Pope for trying to put too many different themes into one document. All of the sudden, new themes come in and one wonders where the organization is. On the other hand, it does insist that all of these moral themes are related to each other and to a fundamental Christian anthropology. Human flourishing includes everything from spirituality to daily work. He is striving for that although it does not seem very clear at times. Morally speaking, he doesn't want to divide up social ethics and personal ethics (something ethicists often do). He doesn't use those terms for the two areas, but we recognize that they are artificial boundaries used for simplicity. There is an underlying dominant, secular inclination to divide things up in a way that tends to forget certain pieces.

Benedict is trying to bring the whole thing together so we don't forget any piece of it. We can certainly hear that echo here from an American point of view.

OWENS: What is the potential impact of the encyclical, not just within Catholic communities, but the traditional people of good will around the world? How important do you see this document being in the coming years?

FINN: In some ways, the document is not as well written as his other two documents. It's not as well organized nor as well written in other ways, yet it's more accessible because it engages issues that more people are already engaging. Thus, the topics he addresses, in particular this stressing of civil economy, may be a way for people to access Catholic social thought who might not otherwise be able to. Yet, it's not user friendly. For example, if you ask where in the document would find a description of civil economy, there are three different. That will hurt its relevance. Then again, how many people actually do read them? How many get them secondhand from people who interpret and articulate them in ways that are more accessible to others? That will clearly happen.

Even on some of the social ethical topics, Benedict's credibility as a systematic theologian and the fact that he's been known as a theological conservative will mean that there will be a greater necessity to wrestle with this. The people who have been the most disappointed been the right wing Catholics. In fact, it seems that secular people have not had a problem with this document very much. There was a very nice essay about this, I think in the *New Republic* online, which engaged the argument and included specifically the Christian analysis of it.

It's hard to say how influential it will be. Particularly given the current economic crisis, the materials that he's brought forth have a kind of impact today. Had he published this around Christmas 2006 or even any time before the crisis began, there would have been less interest in this kind of rethinking of the economy than there is now. That also contributes to its potential to have some kind of real impact on economic life.

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