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Nov 5, 2010 *Caritas in Veritate* : Its Reception, Problems with its Diffusion, and Future Initiatives to Deepen its Understanding in Asia

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Caritas in Veritate is Pope Benedict's third encyclical letter and it's the first social encyclical from John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* in 1991. In fact, it is in the tradition of previous social encyclicals, going back more than a century to Pope Leo XIII's landmark *Rerum Novarum*, published in 1891. Praising Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) as the starting point for Catholic social teaching in this modern age, Pope Benedict takes up his own responsibility to bring Catholic social thought to bear in a much changed economic and political landscape.

The title expresses Pope Benedict's distinctive concerns. He proposes *caritas* as a virtue with the moral, intellectual and political force desperately needed in our globalizing world. *Caritas* drives us to passionately question the status quo and to understand the full moral truth about the human person. In truth it is possible for a profound and critical conversation among religions, cultures and human sciences so that they can work together for human flourishing.

For Asia, this most recent encyclical, indeed, is a concrete response to global poverty and violence, especially the inequities and imbalances of power that lie behind the global economic crisis of 2008 to 2010. Pope Benedict sketches a vision of what he calls "Christian humanism," with the core idea that markets ought to work for human beings, not the other way around. He calls for the full and equal participation of all peoples in the international economy, the cultivation of educated, spiritually rich societies working in global solidarity, and the protection of political regimes capable of ensuring peace and fostering participatory governance. He argues that ever-widening gaps between "superdevelopment" and near-subsistence around the world, the emergence of new forms of poverty, mass migration, and the uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources are evidence of disordered, indeed dangerous, economic growth.

Asia is a region of multi-religion and multi-ethnicity, with socio-economic and political conditions of vast difference. Asian countries have to face different problems. However, with most countries having colonial background and being affected by globalization, there are also commonalities among them. Under globalization, the gap between the rich and the poor are widened both at the national and international levels. Although some countries develop rapidly economically, the poor of the Asian countries, especially the unskilled blue collar workers and the landless rural poor, are being ruthlessly dispossessed. Cheap female labor in developing countries is exploited in order to guarantee a constant supply of affordable goods for mass consumption in the rich and industrialized nations. The increased linkage of Asian economies to the global market has brought changes in cultural values, consumption patterns, life-styles and social expectations.

To examine the reception of *Caritas in Veritate* in Asia, I contacted some church organizations and tried to understand what the church social concern groups have done or plan to do relating to the promotion of this encyclical. I have also researched among the websites of the Asian Church news and the articles on Catholic magazines and academic journal, examining the comments and social activities in Asia related to this encyclical. I found that the encyclical receives many positive feedbacks in Asia. With limited time and means of access, this is not a thorough and comprehensive research. But these materials do show the viewpoints of various church leaders, scholars and activists in Asia towards the encyclical and how they relate it to their social ministry. Below is a synthesis of these materials.

1. Some main themes in *Caritas in Veritate* which are especially appealing to the Asian Church for action with reference to the Asian social context:

1.1 Economic development, poverty and labour rights

Financial crisis is affecting not only the West, but also many countries in Asia. It is a chance for people to reflect on the necessary relationship that economics and politics should have with morality. There is a need to combine ethics and economics. In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict highlights the dangers involved in rapid economic growth which can all too easily bypass ethical considerations, with the result that the poor in society tend to be excluded from their rightful share of the nation's prosperity. This theme is resonated by many church leaders, scholars and social activists. Many are impressed by the progressive economic analysis of Pope Benedict, that he decisively rejects a laissez-faire economic approach. Markets ought to work for human beings, not the other way around. The economy needs a people-centered ethics that involves people in planning and implementing development programs.

PHILIPPINES

- In Philippines, in 2009 alone more than 200 thousand workers abroad lost their jobs and many of them were forced to return home. In the face of this situation, Cardinal Gaudenzio Rosales, archbishop of Manila, points out that the encyclical is "a suitable tool to focus on integral human development instead of a development centered on greed and profit." "If the institutions of global finance, business centers and banks had had as a priority the common good of people, the global crisis would have been avoided. They should not exist merely to make a profit but to serve the people. Profit is only a byproduct of the economy. Excessive greed is blinding man and distancing him from the right path." He reaffirms the need for an economy that develops mankind integrally and a society based on the Christian values of charity and love. It is necessary to reshape the economic framework for the future and work hard to avoid another economic crisis.
- Father Bernard O. Diaz (professor of religion at Adamson University in Manila): In a developing country like the Philippines, a wrong economic growth is often the product of poverty, crime, corruption, conflict. In this context, the encyclical is an "essential tool for understanding the real meaning of human development". Pope Benedict says that development "if it is to be authentically human", we must "make room for the principle of freedom and pursue the achievement of the common good." Inspired by the "Economy of Communion" theory of the *Focolare* movement born in the 60s', Fr. Diaz says a group called *Bukas Palade* (Open Hand) is trying to build an alternative to the excessive use of capitalist ideology.
- Antonio L. Maisong (Professor of Social Doctrine at the Church at St. Thomas Aquinas, Manila): "an appropriate use of the encyclical could lead to a reassessment of the role of the state and to its active involvement in the problems of society." He adds that in a country where the poverty rate exceeds 15%, the attention to the poor proclaimed by Pope Benedict is crucial. He points out that "the authorities must consider the poor an asset and not a burden."

VIETNAM

- In recent years, Vietnam is experiencing the biggest economic development in its history and is now one of the main economic players in South East Asia. However, the Communist government has focused only on economic issues; local authorities aim to achieve maximum profit in the minimum time possible, forgetting the traditional values and culture of the country. The impact of the global crisis is bringing out increasingly evident social issues. *Caritas in Veritate* is a help to the Church and the Vietnamese people to build a new vision of life and concretely combat the materialism of the government.
- In light of the content expressed in the new encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Father Nguyen Van tan of the De la Salle Congregation says the work of the Catholic Church is to help the poor and young people to move forward in faith and to address the daily problems by developing

values such as love and brotherhood. The current crisis is in fact bringing out into the light of day the limits of the system developed by the government.

- The head of the Vietnamese bishops' conference, Msgr. Peter Nguyen Van Nhon, wrote in a letter dated July 15 addressed to priests and laity that "now, Vietnam is beginning to suffer the impact of international economic crisis. Parents are focused on the income of their families. But parenthood is expressed through the education of children". In his message, the bishop also says that "we adults must sustain and admonish our children to live honestly. In particular we must set them good example by following God and His law. "

SRI LANKA

- Fr Reid Shelton Fernando (a priest from the diocese of Colombo and well-known in Sri Lanka for his writings and commentaries on economic and social issues) praises the encyclical that Christian humanism comes alive in the encyclical. On the one hand, the pope shows his concern for the challenges of hunger and poverty. On the other, he underscores the importance of social security and markets. He says that the positive aspects of the process of globalization must be used to beat poverty everywhere and that profits should not be considered as ends in themselves. He also focuses on the malaise generated by the economic crisis, financial speculation, labour market-related large scale migration and the largely ignored calls for ethical foundations. Moreover, he emphasizes that it is a crucial tool for the social ministry and it can be used to appeal to the world's political leaders. Not only elites and theologians must study the encyclical. It ought to touch everyone's heart. Everyone should read it, including ordinary people.

INDIA

- In the first international meeting of Christian professionals and industrialists in Mumbai, India, in which over 300 leading Indian industrialists attended, the co-founder Freddie Mendonca points out that it is a platform to remind the various Christian entrepreneurs to act according to human values and to bring their Christian identity and values to economy. Economic development should be attentive to human needs. He urges all employers to use the teachings of *Caritas in Veritate* by Benedict XVI as a guide to operate in a moral and ethical way in today's world devoid of values.
- Mgr Thomas Dabre, chairperson of the Commission for Theology and Doctrine of the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India, says that *Caritas in Veritate* is a magnificent gift to the world. The vision it outlines for the development of humanity provides excellent guidelines to India. India is benefiting from the process of globalization and is involved in a process of growth that will provide security and development to all its citizens. Economic issues are necessarily human issues, because the economy ought to serve all human beings. Market must be ruled by ethics and profits cannot be the ultimate goals. Progress must be available to everyone.
- Even though India is becoming a global economic power, the rural poor are still languishing in inhumane conditions. They even lack the necessity to meet their basic needs like food, clean drinking water and primary health care. India has the third largest scientific and technical labour pool in the world, and yet, whilst India's progress in space technology has attracted worldwide attention, the gap between the rich and the poor grows ever more. Those who live on the margins of society, the poorest of the poor, Dalits, Tribals, unorganised labour are all excluded from this economic progress. Corruption, fundamentalism and social discrimination are real social evils in our society.
- Fr Theodore Mascarenhas, in charge of the Asia Desk at the Pontifical Council for Culture, says *Caritas in Veritate* deals with the challenges facing the rapidly growing economy of India and is invitation to people to understand the impact of globalization on Indian culture. He points out that the section on cultures (no. 26) is very important for a multicultural country like India. What the Indians need is real inter-cultural dialogue where every individual and his

culture is respected, a dialogue that is based on “a deep-seated knowledge of the specific identity of the various dialogue partners. What matters is not only material progress but progress of the whole human person.

HONG KONG

- Fr. Stephen Chan (advisor of the Hong Kong Justice and Peace Commission): Taking development as a main theme, the encyclical gives a strong warning signal to the contemporary society. In the face of the economic challenges after the financial crisis, the encyclical provides Hong Kong guidance and principles in responding to the social condition, e.g. providing a fair wage for the low-income workers.

1.2. Environment and development

The economic crisis is a symptom of a much deeper moral crisis, a crisis of culture rooted in a fundamentally distorted view of freedom. It was not just the greed or hubris of a few individuals that brought down the markets, but a collective failure to reflect on the meaning and purpose of the economy. The widespread destruction of the natural environment is but another symptom of this moral crisis. Genuine respect for the environment, therefore, encompasses human ecology, and assumes an understanding of the human person as simultaneously creature and partner in God's continuing creative activity. Therefore, it is not enough to have environmentally friendly policies, incentives for ecologically responsible business practices, or even broad and effective environmental education in the traditional sense. Rather, the fate of the environment depends upon our coming to understand how nature communicates God's design for human life, how it is "prior to us, and ... has been given to us by God as the setting for our life" (no. 48).

In the encyclical, Pope Benedict points out that the Church must defend earth, water and air as gifts of Creation. She must promote a human ecology that sets the tenor of society and restores man's spirituality. Humans interpret and shape the environment through culture, which is given direction by the responsible use of freedom, in accordance with the dictates of the moral law.

SOUTH KOREA

- In South Korean, the community of faithful united to stop the government project on the Four Major Rivers that poses a serious risk to the development and ecology of the country. According to critics, the plan puts at risk the drinking water resources as well as the ecological balance of the country. For the government, however, is a unique opportunity to remove freight from highways and to renew the tourist market. Quoting the Pope Benedict's *Caritas in veritate*, in the final report of their plenary in March 2010, the Korean Bishops' Conference has spoken against the project on the major rivers, pointing out that “nature is God's gift to man. We are responsible for it and we cannot manipulate it at our pleasure.” Over 30 thousand people signed a document calling on President Lee Myung-bak, who received a copy of *Caritas in veritate* from the pope recently, to make a u-turn on the project. The signatures were collected in over 250 churches around the country, and others are joining.

BANGKOK

- Father Bonnie Mendes of Thailand, regional coordinator of Caritas Asia, concerns about climate change and its relation to the ecology. He thinks the excesses of the past must be set aside and all of us have to live a lifestyle that can allow everybody to develop. This is what Pope Benedict XV in *Caritas in Veritate* calls for all to work for the common good. It is the right time for local churches in Asia to get involved to save the earth for future generations. Some practical steps of saving the earth must be taken immediately, whether it is avoiding chemical fertilizers and pesticides for crops or making proper use of water resources or planting more trees.

1.3. Religious freedom

Pope Benedict mentions that the denial of religious freedom and promotion of religious indifference or atheism obstructs development. In some places, religion is excluded from the public square, and at the other extreme, is religious fundamentalism, both of which hinders encounter between persons and their collaboration for progress (no.29).

ASIA

- Attacks on religious freedom and violence against Christians embrace nearly all Asian countries. Western governments prefer to criticize some of the violations - such as those committed by Muslims - but are silent on the attacks against Christians in Vietnam or China which are communist nations with strong economic power. The realization that freedom of religion - and in particular for Christians - serves the economic development of nations of which they are part, has yet to be grasped. Christians are reconcilers of social conflicts and, at the same time, catalysers of human transformation beneficial to the economy, far more effective than compromises with some dictatorship or oligarchy.

2. Some of the national and continental initiatives in Asia since its promulgation

- A Chinese version of the encyclical has been translated by Cardinal Joseph Zi-kiun Zen and two translators, for China, Taiwan, Macau and Hong Kong.
- The Hong Kong Justice and Peace Commission had organized a seminar to promote the encyclical in November 2009, focusing especially on the themes of integral human development and globalization. Two professors from the seminary and Cardinal Zen were invited as speakers. The main contents of the seminar were published on one of the issues of the newsletter of the JP Commission so that people who could not attend the seminar can also know about what the speakers had said on this topic. Moreover, a workshop has been planned for the university students to examine the social problems of the society and look for moral principles in the encyclical that can help them to face the problems. Furthermore, some church organization and social concern groups of the church also plan to held a series of study sessions on the encyclical.
- In India, about 100 members of Northeast regional Pastoral Conference - Bishops, major Superiors of Religious men and women, Vicars Generals, Diocesan priests' Representatives, Diocesan Directors of Social Service and Secretaries of Regional Commissions – gathered for three days (6-8 September 2010) at Shillong (Bethel, Barapani) to reflect on *Caritas in Veritate* and Social Development in Northeast India. The issued a statement cum action plans at the end of the Conference.
- Caritas Singapore published a one-page simplified summary of *Caritas in Veritate* on a Catholic newspaper in November 2009. The following week Caritas published a special on how to act on the message of the encyclical. They employed the migrant issues as a concrete example, showing the believers how to relate the message of the encyclical to their daily lives.
- The Asian Centre for the Progress of Peoples (ACPP) had organized a JPIC gathering on the topic: "How to promote *Caritas in Veritate* in Church?" in which those who are interested and involved in justice and peace issues and initiatives in Hong Kong attended to discuss. About 15 people joined the discussion.
- FABC-OHD has organized a preparatory meeting on 16-19 October in Bangkok to prepare the Colloquium(s) on *Caritas in Veritate* in the Context of Asia in 2011.
- Some justice and peace workers of other Asian countries, such as Korea, Cambodia show interest in planning or have already organized some seminars or workshops on the encyclical and other church social teaching documents.
- Some journalists and scholars wrote articles or express pinions through interviews in analyzing the encyclical.

3. The problems relative to the diffusion and reception of the Encyclical

There are problems at two levels, being known by the Christians in general at the popular and pastoral level, and being accepted or agreed by scholars at the conceptual level.

Diffusion at the popular level:

- In a forum to discuss “how to promote *Caritas in Veritate*?” being organized by the Asian Centre for the Progress of Peoples, most participants show interest in the church social teachings, but many have not read the full document, including *Caritas in Veritate*, or do not really understand the document word for word. This is because of the length of these encyclicals and the style of writing of the encyclical is not very attractive for general Christians to read; they found the language and subject too profound.
- For those who read the encyclical, they think that apart from the introduction which seems quite inspiring, the other parts are not new, comparing with the past social teachings. The principles are more or less the same although the wordings or way of expression may be different. This may due to the lack of up to date examples of analysis (refer to the next point).
- There is a lack of reference to Asian countries or concrete stories of Asian realities in the encyclical, so Asian readers have to relate the general analysis to our own social context. In doing faith reflection, many Asians tend to start from concrete experiences and social realities and read them in light of the scripture and church tradition. With concrete experiences, it is easier for Christians to relate the church teachings to our real life realities.
- Some pastors or church workers indicate that they will read the encyclical only when there is a need, e.g. need to present it in a meeting or attending a meeting with it as a topic. They think that the encyclical is a tool, while the real question about promoting social encyclicals is to ask: “how can we get more believers aware and involved in social issues?” In the face of this question, they think they need to simplify the encyclical into a reader-friendly version, rather than asking parishioners to read the whole encyclical.

Some questions being raised by critics (general comments):

- Some critics and scholars point out that the encyclical fails to show a true compassion for women, who often are the last to benefit from development aid. There is no gender lens in the analysis of the economic crisis or environmental issue. However, the problems women and men face are quite different. In this way, the persuasiveness of the moral teachings in the encyclicals is not strong enough. For example, while decrying infant mortality, Pope Benedict never mentions maternal mortality and fails to fully address the impact of HIV and AIDS on developing economies, especially on women.
- Pope Benedict calls for a new 21st-century business model, something that falls between for-profit business and classic nonprofit institutions--rupturing what the pope called an “exclusively binary model of market-plus-state” that is “corrosive of society.” The only example cited by the pope was the Economy of Communion, a network, founded by the Focolare movement, of almost 750 business firms around the world. Profits are pooled to fund development programs, charitable activities, and formation and education efforts in disadvantaged areas. The question is whether the Catholic Church can mobilize its resources at various levels to enlarge the scale of such alternative business models.
- Some critics ask what a “true world political authority” might actually look like. Spelling out how a global system with power would work--while also respecting the principle of subsidiarity, meaning that matters ought to be handled by the lowest and least centrally organized authority capable of doing the job--is seen as a critical challenge.
- The pope asserts in the encyclical that the church does not “interfere in any way in the politics of states.” But what is meant by interfere in politics of states is vague. Some fear that Benedict would subordinate justice to charity in a manner that signaled a withdrawal of the church from politics. However, Pope Benedict offers a complex account of the interplay of justice and charity. With Paul VI, he asserts that justice is the “minimum measure of charity.” Charity

demands justice, but goes beyond "what is due" seeking to build "relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion."

- The pope has to clarify theologically the relation of non-Christians to the "common good" in societies that are religiously pluralistic by virtue of longstanding demographics, changing national borders, recent conversions, or immigration.

4. Future plan and suggestion

- Since not many people are familiar with the encyclical, a simplified and reader-friendly version is needed to introduce the main ideas of the encyclical. The FABC-OHD is planning to promote it through collection of available materials or study guide from the Asian local churches.
- Since the encyclical lacks contextualization of different situations in Asia, it is suggested that the encyclical should be re-interpreted in the Asian context, for example, exposure/ immersion program should be employed when introducing the encyclical to the faithful. Justice and peace workers can be invited to share their experiences in social charity work. The faithful are to be encouraged to reflect the teachings of the encyclicals from their own concrete experiences and social context. Then they can plan pastoral action according to the need of the society and ability of the church communities.
- Religious and lay people are encouraged to educate themselves in various settings on the social teachings of the church and the issues highlighted therein, and renew themselves through retreats and animation programs. It is suggested that some main ideas of the encyclical should be added to the syllabus for programs of on-going formation at various levels, e.g. seminary, catechism class, parish formation program. Circulars and newsletters on the themes highlighted in it should be published.
- To cooperate with other Christian communities and non-Christian communities in various social issues related to justice and human rights as a strategy to work for the empowerment of the people.
- To reflect on the experiences of social involvement periodically in laity council, priest council, or meetings of bishops' conferences.

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