

Papal disconnect: Benedict's social encyclical

by [Dennis P. McCann](#) in the [August 25, 2009](#) issue

I've studied papal encyclicals for over 30 years, and *Caritas in veritate* ("Charity in Truth") is the first one I was eager to be finished with. Clearly Pope Benedict XVI wants his message about "integral human development" in the context of global economics to be understood in continuity with Paul VI's *Populorum progressio* ("On the Development of Peoples") of 1967, a document considered the high-water mark of Catholic social radicalism. But whereas Paul VI exhibited a passionate concern for the peoples of the so-called Third World (dramatically symbolized by his decision to sell his papal tiara and give the proceeds to the poor), Benedict's attention in his first social encyclical seems divided among a host of various concerns.

Consider, by way of example, his references to the problem of violence. He uses the term first to condemn religiously motivated violence, as in "the terrorism motivated by fundamentalism." He then uses it to deplore forced abortions and sterilizations intended to carry out what he sees as misguided policies for population control. He uses it a third time in analyzing the damage done to the environment because of "materialistic" ideologies. To be sure, each issue is appropriately addressed, but the way these different issues of violence are taken up is not only highly abstract but also curiously detached. For all the letter's invocations of solidarity with ordinary people, it fails to connect with people's problems.

Benedict's reading of *Populorum progressio* takes its cues not from Paul VI's passion for the poor but from the concept of integral human development, which Benedict proposes as the unifying perspective for applying Catholic social teaching. What he means by *integral* becomes clear in the way he focuses on some issues while ignoring others. Particularly instructive is Benedict's decision to include a discussion of Paul VI's *Humanae vitae* (1968), the encyclical in which Paul VI rejected the advice of a papal commission and reiterated the Catholic Church's condemnation of artificial means of birth control.

Why would that issue show up in a letter on Catholic social teaching? In Benedict's view, unless one has achieved moral clarity about the evils of birth control, sterilization and abortion—a concern expanded to include other “right to life” issues such as euthanasia, in vitro fertilization, embryonic stem cell research and cloning—one hasn't grasped what is “integrally human” or the ways humanity is threatened by various programs and ideologies of development. A distinctively Christian concern for economic and social justice must be framed by respect for life in all its developmental stages. That Benedict would want to make this point in defense of the past 40 years of papal social teaching comes as no surprise, but his own sense of urgency seems spent once he tries to move the discussion beyond this particular spectrum of issues.

Curiously, the greatest potential threat to human life—global warming—is not addressed in *Caritas in veritate*. Though it does devote one long paragraph to the environment and another to energy policy, these come toward the end of a wide-ranging chapter on “The Development of People—Rights and Duties—Environment,” in which Benedict seems motivated primarily by a desire to show the relevance of certain Catholic perspectives, such as the indispensable correlation between human rights and moral duties. We have duties toward the environment on the basis of the fact that it is “God's gift to us.” The Christian understanding of “nature” is contrasted with the ideological distortions of both “neo-paganism or a new pantheism” and the dream of “a total technical dominion over nature.”

In conceptualizing environmental responsibilities the pope uses an appropriately ecumenical vocabulary of vocation, covenant and stewardship. But here again he warns specifically against programs designed to limit population growth, insisting that “on this earth there is room for everyone.”

The fact that *Caritas in veritate* treats the environment without so much as mentioning global warming suggests that the omission is deliberate. When one rereads the letter for clues to explain that omission, one is struck by its deep skepticism about social analysis and public policy on all matters other than human sexuality and bioethics. Commenting on various proposals for economic development, Benedict remarks in passing: “The criteria to be applied should aspire towards incremental development in a context of solidarity—with careful monitoring of results—inasmuch as there are no universally valid solutions.” In short, the pope identifies Catholic social teaching with piecemeal reformism, because in his view any more emphatic policy is unpersuasive.

This may be true, perhaps even tragically true, but it is curious that despite a similar lack of consensus, the pope claims a certainty bordering on infallibility about questions regarding human sexuality and bioethics. When piecemeal reformism is the best we can do, one may easily yield to the mistaken idea that reducing global warming is just one more good cause among others and less of a priority than, say, opposing embryonic stem cell research.

Benedict does take up, however sketchily, an array of social and economic questions, and in passing makes some promising contributions to Catholic social teaching. In a section titled “Fraternity, Economic Development and Civil Society” he addresses the roles and responsibilities of what Peter Berger and others have described as “mediating structures”—the web of professional and civic associations, not-for-profit organizations, economic cooperatives and other private voluntary organizations that constitute civil society. Though Benedict’s appreciation of this sphere hardly represents a breakthrough—as he himself notes in acknowledging the work of John Paul II—he does offer a new and theologically significant perspective by identifying mediating structures with the logic of a “gift economy” that he sees systematically diverging from “the logic of the market and the logic of the state.” Benedict regards these mediating structures as our best hope for a global redistribution of resources, for creating social and intellectual capital, and for developing the finances, technology and mundane goods and services we all need in order to flourish.

Yet even here, as in virtually every part of this encyclical, the pope speaks in generalities and avoids concrete examples, so it is difficult to track the bearing of his teachings. Clearly the pope sees great promise for the alleviation of poverty in the development of producer and consumer cooperatives, as well as in the proliferation of microfinance institutions. He may wish to endorse experiments that were undertaken in order to demonstrate the practical relevance of Catholic social teaching, such as the industrial cooperative in Loppiano, Italy, or the Mondragon community in Spain. But he offers no specific references, so pundits on the right and left are more or less invited to treat this encyclical as a Rorschach test—one can find a papal blessing here for pretty much any program of economic development.