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For the love of justice

(A comment on the Encyclica “Deus caritas est”)

Peter Henriot

Much of the reaction to Pope Benedict XVI’s first encyclical has dwelt on the practice of personal love and less on the practice of charity and social action. But both are crucial to the Pope’s powerful message, particularly amid the poverty of rural Africa



WHAT DO *eros* and *agape* have to do with my everyday work for social justice here in Zambia? That’s the question that came to my mind when I picked up Benedict XVI’s first encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*. Was this just a pleasant theological/philosophical discourse about love without much relevance to the issues facing a Church struggling to share good news in a country with many potentials but also many problems? Would this letter make any difference on a continent where the justice, development and peace agenda is so central to our Catholic Church?

To be honest, I was somewhat concerned because I had heard some comments that the new Pope was not going to be as strong on the promotion of Church social activism based on social teaching as had been his predecessor, John Paul II. Some had even speculated that an emphasis on *charity* was now being made in order to put into second place an emphasis on *justice*. A stress on the role of the Church in sharing charitably with the poor would then move away from the Church’s political role of changing the structures of poverty.

My worry was put to rest in a careful reading of the document. I would say that the whole encyclical, not simply the second part which speaks of the “practice of love” in its social dimension, pushes forward the more radical aspects of the Church’s social teaching. If the first part of the letter speaks of a “mysticism” that is social in character, it lays a foundation for charitable activity of the Church that is necessarily orientated towards justice. And this, of course, continues with the best of the social teaching of the past century.

Let me set down what I see to be three major social theses of *Deus Caritas Est* and describe their implications. I look at these points from the particular perspective of a Jesuit priest serving in a small local language parish in a poor rural area and also directing a very active social research and advocacy centre in a Church strongly committed to justice. What does this encyclical say to me?

First, the entire activity of the Church “is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of women and men ...”, promoting human beings in all arenas of life and attending to human sufferings and needs, including material needs. Hence the Church’s promotion of love is intimately compatible with the works of justice, development and peace that play such central roles in the mission of the Church in Zambia and throughout Africa (and wider). Some might argue that such pastoral activities should take second place behind more spiritual work such as liturgy and sacramental ministry. But Benedict argues differently: “The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.”

When the Pope’s vision of charity is seen in its widest sense as described above, then an integrated social activism is essential to the mission of the Church. For charity that attends only to

alleviating suffering without attempting to do away with it is only partial love at best and *destructive* love at worst – something open to the Marxist critique that Benedict soundly rejects.

Here Benedict is in continuity with Paul VI's recognition in his 1967 *Populorum Progressio* that generous gifts – offered in charity – are not sufficient to eliminate hunger or reduce poverty if not linked to the effort for “building a world where all people, no matter what their race, religion or nationality, can live fully human lives, freed from servitude imposed on them by others or by natural forces over which they have no sufficient control; a world where freedom is not an empty word ...”

Second, Catholic social teaching is central to the message and mission of evangelisation. Benedict is very careful in distinguishing action in the political sphere as a “direct duty” of working for a just ordering of society – something proper to the laity – and the promotion of just structures through the “indirect duty” of rational argument and moral sensitisation – something proper to church leaders. The Church has the responsibility to promote rational argument (the Pope calls it the “purification of reason”) and moral sensitisation. Indeed, the Pope argues that without such reawakening of moral forces “just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run”. I believe Benedict is emphasising the power of effective use of Catholic social teaching, something we have seen clearly here in Zambia over the years since independence from Britain in 1964. Bishops' pastoral letters, statements from justice and peace commissions, formation programmes for laity, Religious and clergy: all these efforts have brought the Church's social teaching into the public sphere of politics and policy.

It is true that many politicians in Zambia (and certainly in other countries as well) assert that social teaching interventions in socio-economic, governance and justice issues are “political” and insist that Church leaders should be silent on such affairs and concentrate only on “spiritual” matters. Can these critics of Church activism find support from Benedict's position? The answer is an emphatic no, in my opinion. For Benedict's view is in continuity with the major emphasis of that great social teaching document from the 1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World* : “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world” is constitutive (that is, central, essential, necessary, indispensable) to the preaching of the Good News.

Third, solidarity is a basic mark of true charity and a key element in “the struggle for justice and love in the world of today”, as the encyclical puts it. Benedict introduces the notion of solidarity when he discusses the consequences of an increasing globalisation of communication (enabling us to know the needs of others around the world) and of the means of assistance (enabling us to respond to these needs). I would describe solidarity as the sense that moves us beyond the physical reality of economic interdependence to the ethical reality of human interconnectedness. It is a profoundly moral sense that teaches us that our well-being is dependent on the well-being of others and that no matter how materially prosperous some of us may feel, we are spiritually and morally poor when we live in a world of great disparity.

As popular as was this concept of solidarity with John Paul II, it was Paul VI who had earlier defined its message in *Populorum Progressio* : “There is no progress towards the complete development of women and men without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity.” I believe that Benedict speaks of this situation when he makes a very strong statement of what can or cannot constitute the Church as the normative community described in Acts 2: 44-45: “... within the community of believers there can never be room for a poverty that denies anyone what is needed for a dignified life.” That poverty, as noted above, cannot be dealt with by the *gift* of charity alone but requires also the *consequence* of charity, the promotion of a justice that changes the structures of society. In Zambia, our Church's current calls for more integral development and for more accountable governance mean that charity moves into social activism.

These three key arguments, on activism, evangelisation and solidarity reveal a framework for my social activism and that of so many others in Zambia and around the world. I don't believe I have distorted Benedict's message to justify my activism. Indeed, I've been personally challenged to examine my activism in the light of his call for prayer, humility and hope as necessary elements in effective charitable activity.

I take consolation from the canonisation of a contemporary Jesuit saint just a few months before the new encyclical was released. Fr Alberto Hurtado, a social activist in Chile in the early twentieth century, is reported to have remarked once: "Marx said that religion was the opium of the people. But I also know that charity can be the opium of the rich." Certainly a charity without justice, without commitment to structural change, can be such an opium. But I see in *Deus Caritas Est* a beautiful description of a charity that is not an opium. For Benedict's *invitation to charity* is never far from the *mandate for justice* .

If a revised version of this important encyclical were one day to be released (though I don't think encyclicals come out with revisions), I'd recommend that the precision of its powerful message would be greatly enhanced by a quotation from the 1971 Synod: "Christian love of neighbour and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one's neighbour. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love." What could be clearer?

Peter Henriot SJ directs the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection in Lusaka, Zambia.