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Caritas in Veritate:
The Meaning of Love and Urgent Challenges of Justice

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Vigorous response to social issues by the Catholic community surely depends on the community's active appropriation of the religious and spiritual roots of the Christian commitment to justice. Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* seeks to strengthen the way Catholic social teaching is rooted in the gospel by stressing Christian charity as the energizing force of Christian social engagement. This brief paper will seek to make three points concerning the Pope's approach. First, it will consider how *Caritas in Veritate* understands charity primarily *as gift and gratuity*. It will suggest that Jesus's command to love one's neighbor as oneself calls for a stronger emphasis on how Christian love requires *equal regard* for all of one's neighbors, especially the poor. Thus Christian love itself demands justice toward one's neighbors, not only treating them with the graciousness expressed in gift. In addition, as a form of communion among persons Christian love is based on *mutual relationship* in community. Such mutual love requires equality among those in relationship if it is to be genuinely reciprocal. Therefore a relational understanding of Christian love itself demands justice. Thus this essay, therefore, will argue for a much tighter link between the requirements of love and those of justice than is suggested by those central passages of the encyclical that treat love as a gift gratuitously given. Second, it will propose that supplementing the encyclical's interpretation of charity with greater emphasis on the importance of love as equal regard and mutual relationship would strengthen the encyclical's practical approach to the alleviation of poverty in today's global economy. Third, and with much regret, some observations will be made about how church leaders' approach to

the relation between pro-life issues and issues of economic and political justice and their response to the sex abuse crisis contradict key aspects of Christian love and thus seriously undermine the social contribution of Christian love that *Caritas in Veritate* seeks to promote.

1. Charity in the Encyclical

The encyclical begins with several ringing affirmations about the role of charity in shaping the Christian response to urgent social issues that mark in our increasingly integrated global society. Arguing that “charity is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine,” Benedict XVI sees charity the source of the virtues of courage and generosity that are needed to sustain Christian “engagement in the field of justice and peace.” The encyclical does not hesitate to describe charity as a political virtue that works to enhance the quality not only of “micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also macro-relationships (social, economic, and political ones).” (C in V, nos. 1-2.) It affirms that this political form of charity is just as fully Christian as that form that serves the neighbor in direct encounter (C in V, no. 7).

The encyclical makes strong claims that charity is a norm appropriate to the public life of our contemporary pluralistic world by arguing that it is an “authentic expression of humanity” (C in V, no. 3.) Charity encourages us to promote the deepest requirements of human nature and our true humanity. Action shaped by charity will also lead to the realization of the common good of a truly human society. The requirements of charity, therefore, include respect human nature as this has been discovered through the authentic use of human reason. Therefore those who are not Christian should be able to recognize the important role of charity in public life.

At the same time, the encyclical also argues that the deepest meaning of charity can only be known from the standpoint of Christian faith, which enables us to see God’s love for us as

gratuitous and beyond anything we deserve. It is, first of all, “creative love”—a love that led God freely and graciously to create the world, the human race, and each individual human being. It is “redemptive love,” though which sinful human beings are have been recreated in Christ and the Holy Spirit. Charity understood in this light is above all a form of love that freely and graciously *gives*—God giving us being through our creation, and giving us new being through forgiveness and recreation. The encyclical repeatedly describes charity as gift, as grace, and as gratuitous. There can be no doubt, therefore, that Benedict XVI’s social thought begins from and remains deeply rooted in the creative and redeeming love God has for human beings in and through Jesus Christ.

Starting from this theological understanding of charity as seen in God’s love for humanity, the Pope moves on to a consideration of the ethical implications of charity for social, economic, and political life. Accepting the gift of God gratuitously given in Jesus Christ empowers humans to become authentically open towards their brothers and sisters and thus capable of working effectively for the solidarity so sorely needed in our world (C in V, no. 78). The encyclical speaks of how the experience of the gratuitous love of God leads men and women to give the gift of love to others. This gift creates bonds of fraternity and solidarity. Achieving these bonds of unity will go beyond the demands of justice in market exchanges and even beyond what reason tells us is required by our humanity. (See C in V, nos. 6 and 19.) Though justice is presupposed by love, charity as gratuitous concern for one neighbor transcends justice and makes it possible. Repeatedly the pope speaks of the indispensable contributions of charity as gift, grace, and gratuity for the development of the relations of unity, solidarity and even communion needed to heal our hurting world (C in V, no. 6).

This emphasis on how charity-as-gift can contribute to solidarity today is surely important. Clearly we need moral and spiritual forces that go beyond the pursuit of narrowly defined self-interest within the global economy. I want suggest, however, that the encyclical's interpretation of charity as a gratuitous gift is not the only possible interpretation of its meaning. Also, linking charity with gift in an almost exclusive way carries some significant dangers and an understanding that includes other important dimensions of Christian love can counteract these dangers.

The ethical expression of Christian love among humans includes but is not restricted to gratuitous giving by one human being to another. Love as gracious, even undeserved, giving is surely one way that humans can imitate the love God has for them in their interpersonal and social relations with each other. Perhaps the fullest expressions of charity as gift are the forgiveness that a person or community offers to another who has oppressed them, or the self-sacrifice that leads one person or community to surrender its own well being on behalf another. Such forgiveness has, of course, become newly salient in political life through recent movements for reconciliation based on the model of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa.

There is a serious risk, however, if Christian love is seen preeminently as a form of self-gift or self-sacrifice that transcends the requirements of justice, especially if this transcendence is interpreted to mean that love could call for surrender to injustice. Christian love does not require the issuing of a "blank check" that leads to submission to exploitation.¹ Indeed, Christian love may call for self-defense in some circumstances. Nor does Christian love call for one to stand aside when one's neighbor is being exploited. Love for an innocent neighbor can call one to come to her defense if she is being violated.

Charity understood as gratuitous self-gift or self-sacrifice, therefore, needs to be complemented by an understanding that sees that we are called to love our neighbors with *equal regard*. Each and every neighbor is irreducibly valuable and is to be treated as such, independent of their special characteristics. This form of love reflects the fact that each person has been created in the image of God and is loved by God in Christ. This dimension of Christian love overlaps in very important ways with justice understood as respect for the equality of all persons. When Christian love is understood this way, it *requires* justice and *comes to expression* in the pursuit of justice. *Caritas in Veritate* affirms the link of charity to justice when it states that “justice is inseparable from charity” (See C in V, no. 6.). In the encyclical, however, this affirmation of the link between charity and justice is preceded by the statement that “charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving” (C in V, no. 6.). The precedence granted to charity over justice risks downplaying the work of justice to a lower spiritual plane than the love-as-gift that the encyclical strongly and repeatedly stresses.

In addition, Christian love can also be a positive, reciprocal relation like the mutual concern that exists among friends—love as *mutuality* or solidarity. The encyclical points to this form of love when it describes charity as a form of communion. Significantly, it adds that such communion can and should exist within public life, including its economic sectors. This will happen when solidarity among the members of society builds the common good (C in V, no. 36). In order for the unity that can be achieved in social life to be a genuine form of solidarity it must be fully reciprocal. And this reciprocity requires equality. Charity as a gratuitous gift, however, calls neither for the equality nor the reciprocity that is essential to solidarity. Indeed it risks seeing charity as a stance taken by a superior or more powerful donor to a subordinate or weaker recipient.

Since love as mutuality requires equality and reciprocity, one can ask whether the encyclical's interpretation of love-as-gift will support the social and structural innovations required in a world marked by steep inequalities in both power and wealth. The encyclical clearly wants to affirm the importance of the structural changes needed for development. But in stressing that charity "transcends every law of justice" (C in V, no. 34) and by failing carefully consider the way Christian love calls for both equal regard and reciprocal mutuality, it downplays those aspects of love that are most important in the quest for structural change. One can also ask, therefore, whether the encyclical's approach to the relation of love and justice is consistent, and whether its approach is adequate for addressing some key practical matters on the development agenda today, including the alleviation of poverty in developing countries. I wish now to turn to those questions.

2. Practical Implications for Overcoming Poverty

The encyclical strongly advocates social changes that will help alleviate poverty in the developing world. Efforts aimed at overcoming poverty, of course, require addressing current patterns of trade, finance, investment, and development assistance. In the interest of brevity, only development assistance will be considered here as an illustration of this larger agenda, and this will be primarily in light of the encyclical's approach to the relation of love and justice.

There are significant voices today that strongly support development assistance or aid as a key element in efforts to address global poverty. For example, the leaders of most nations of the world, at a 2002 UN conference on financing development at Monterrey, Mexico, reached consensus that developed countries should continue to set 0.7 % of GNP as their target for development aid to poor countries.²

At the same time, however, the effectiveness of aid as a remedy for poverty has also been challenged by a number of analysts. Some have argued that aid creates dependency in the peoples who receive it, reducing incentives for actions by poor countries themselves that would enhance development through increased trade and investment. Aid is also seen as encouraging corruption by giving corrupt leaders resources they need to stay in power, which leads to continuing poverty and, in turn, to further aid. Because aid puts large pots of money at the disposal of the government in power, it also increases the incentive to use violent force to keep power, or to seize it if one is out of power, thus making civil war more likely. Thus some have argued that aid should be replaced by market-based initiatives such as trade, enhanced foreign direct investment, and support for micro-finance that enables the poor to participate in the market.³

Such critiques of aid contain a number of elements of truth. Purely market-based responses to poverty, however, overlook the failure of the market-oriented structural adjustment programs of the 1980s and early 1990s.⁴ They fail to attend to the likelihood that, in the face of the present global financial crisis, poor countries are less attractive sites for direct foreign investment and less able to enter into global trade markets. Calls for the abolition of aid also fail to give adequate attention to the effectiveness of some aid programs, such as aid targeted on the alleviation of the effects of HIV-AIDS, other health needs, and educational programs.⁵ People who are sick or illiterate will simply be left out of whatever growth and development occurs. Pope Benedict recognized this when he stated directly that “the worldwide financial breakdown has . . . shown the error of the assumption that the market is capable of regulating itself, apart from public intervention and the support of internalized moral standards.”⁶

Nevertheless, government-to-government bilateral aid is not the single key to the alleviation of poverty in developing countries such as those in sub-Saharan Africa. International pressure to deal with corruption and move toward good governance has rightly become a central concern of the World Bank and the IMF.⁷ Good governance, of course, is not guaranteed by conducting multiparty elections. When a large percentage of the population is very poor and illiterate, manipulation of elections through patronage and the distortion of information is relatively easy. Under such conditions, elections do not guarantee accountable government. Therefore development policy, both public and private, should aim to make governments more accountable and to increase the participation of the poor in both the economic and political life of the society being assisted. In countries where corruption is widespread, this will mean placing conditions on aid to prevent it from simply ending up in the pockets of the ruling elite. Further, since civil conflict and lack of development can be closely linked in poor nations, efforts to prevent internal conflicts and civil war must be central in development strategy.⁸ Work for development in such contexts will require political and diplomatic efforts to address the roots of conflict and to prevent it.

These matters raise significant questions about the adequacy of *Caritas in Veritate*'s stress on charity as a gift relationship that goes beyond the requirements of justice and equality. Overcoming the corrupt misuse of development aid that has caused some to call for the abolition of aid altogether will require creating structures of accountability that seek to guarantee that aid actually benefits the poor. It means that assistance must be seen as a two way street in which conditions are placed on the behavior of the leaders of recipient nations as a condition for the aid itself. Aid provided purely as gift risks reinforcing patterns of governance that can further entrench poverty rather than helping to overcome it.

An ethic based on love as equal regard expressed in justice, therefore, rather than charity as gift, will be needed to determine whether assistance is really benefiting those it seeks to aid. An ethic of love as reciprocal mutuality that supports genuine solidarity is needed to shape institutions of accountability that work to prevent the irresponsible behavior of too many governments in the developing world today. Clearly, the encyclical is aware that aid can create dependency and reinforce governmental domination of the poor in developing nations and it urges that we find ways to avoid this (C in V, no. 58.). It can be questioned, however, whether the encyclical's understanding of the relation of love to justice is adequate to this task.

Further, an African commentator has noted that the gratuitousness, gift, and affective social relationships stressed by the encyclical bear remarkable a resemblance to the personalized and patronage-based systems that have led too many African governments to fall into patterns of corruption, bribery, and tribalism.⁹ What is needed in these countries is not more gift-giving, but an increase of efficiency, accountability and the rule of law. Moving in that direction will require an approach based on love as equal regard and reciprocity, those forms of love that require and come to expression when norms of justice shape social, economic, and political institutions. These standards of justice are far from being met by a number of developing countries, including quite a few in Africa. Implementing these norms of justice, rather than transcending them in a spirit of gift or gratuitousness, is the key challenge of development in these countries. Whether the encyclical is entirely self-consistent in the way it advocates both the requirements of justice and the spirit of gift and gratuitousness is unclear. In any case, a stronger argument is needed that Christian love of neighbor *itself* requires institutions shaped by these standards of justice.

3. Contextual Challenges

Let me conclude by a few observations of the impact of *Caritas in Veritate* within the context of the larger life of the church in the United States and the world today. Pope Benedict is clearly seeking to tie the social teaching of the church closely to the church's proclamation of the gospel through by linking this teaching so directly to the love that is at the heart of Christian faith. Unfortunately several other actions by church leadership in the past few years are threatening to undercut this effort. I refer to the way episcopal responses to the issue of abortion have eclipsed church action on other important issues of social justice and to the fact that the authenticity of church commitment to the agenda of *Caritas in Veritate* has been called into question by the way the sex abuse scandal has been handled. Without seeking to give a full account of either the health care debate or the sex abuse scandal, let me make two points very briefly and schematically.

First, abortion. The way the US bishops intervened in the legislative debate about the 2010 health care reform bill in the United States suggests to many, including some who fully agree with the bishops in rejecting all abortions, that official Catholic opposition to abortion overshadows other social concerns. Though the U.S. bishops continue to state their support for health care insurance for all in the United States, in 2010 they opposed legislation that would greatly expand the number of people covered as "profoundly flawed."¹⁰ This opposition was based on their conclusion that the legislation could lead to tax dollars being used to fund abortions. The U.S. bishops rejected the arguments made by other significant Catholic groups, including the leadership of the Catholic Health Association and a significant group of leaders of women's religious communities, that the legislation would not in fact fund abortions.

The issue debated within the U.S. Catholic community was not about the ethics of abortion, but whether the proposed health-care reform bill in fact could lead to governmental funding of abortion. This called for an interpretation of what a very complex piece of legislation would lead to, and thus for careful understanding of many dimensions of the U.S. legal and medical systems. The questions about the abortion-related consequences of the legislation were not matters of moral principle; they were prudential judgments about what would occur if the legislation were passed. How making a definitive judgment on this matter falls within the competence and charism of the episcopacy can be questioned. Nevertheless, official representatives of the bishops stated that “providing guidance to Catholics on whether an action by government is moral or immoral, is first of all the task of the bishops, not of any other group or individual.”¹¹ A significant number of U.S. Catholics have concluded that this claim exceeds the legitimate role of the episcopacy and that it denies the faithful their appropriate role in bringing the gospel and a Christian ethic to realization in the social and political realm. They feel that the activity of the bishops on the health care bill amounts to a claim that abortion is the overriding issue that the church should address in public life, that bishops have insight into this question that those who are not bishops lack, and that the bishops are insufficiently interested in dialogue about how best to pursue the realization of Christian values in social and political life.¹²

The relation of these objections actions by the U.S. bishops to *Caritas in Veritate* might be formulated this way. Many would challenge an interpretation of the requirements of charity that go beyond norms of justice when these norms of justice have not themselves been met in the procedures followed by the bishops. Love as equal regard for one’s fellow Christians calls for respect for their insight and their prudential judgments about the concrete application of moral principles. Thus genuine dialogue in the church about the implications of faith for social and

political action is called for by the dignity shared by all the faithful. Reason as a standard for the pursuit of human well being and respect for the judgments of prudence requires that one not claim certitude about the moral implications of complex policies where contingency and a degree of uncertainty mark such policies.¹³ Further, love as mutuality and reciprocity call for the church to be a preeminent exemplar of the sort of reciprocal respect that the pursuit of the common good in civil society requires. Thus church leadership should not disregard the carefully developed conclusions of serious groups of Christians, especially those with professional expertise, on the moral dimensions of social issues such as health care. In other words, the love that unites Christians in the body of Christ means that the church is no less answerable to the standards of justice than is civil society. The transcendent gift of the grace of Christ is present in and through the church, but this does not exempt that church from the full requirements of justice.

This leads to the issue of the sex abuse crisis, which needs only to be mentioned to indicate how the encyclical's call to charity has been eclipsed by the church's own failures and sinfulness. One point, however, is especially relevant to the abuse crisis in light of the clarifications of the meaning of Christian love presented here. Mutual care based on reciprocal equality brings justice and love together. This means, of course, that justice for the victims of abuse cannot be dispensed with in the effort to carry out pastoral care for the sinful men who have committed abuse. The reciprocal equality of mutual love also means that the leaders of the church, including bishops, cardinals, and the pope himself, must be accountable for securing the protection of those the church serves. Criticism of church leaders and holding them accountable for what they have done is called for when they have failed to protect those the church serves. Regrettably, when a one cardinal criticized another for minimizing the seriousness of the sex abuse crisis he was told that such criticism was the responsibility solely of the Pope. To appeal

to the hierarchical structure of the church in this way, and to suggest that only criticism from above is appropriate, is to substitute the dynamics of a Renaissance court for the demands of Christian love.¹⁴ It is far from the communion and solidarity found in a just community.

Inadequate realization of the norms of justice called for by Christian love within the church itself, therefore, has placed the teachings of *Caritas in Veritate* under a dark shadow. More disturbing is the data that suggests that U.S. Catholics are not simply failing to pay attention to church teachings like those in the encyclical, but that a significant number of U.S. Catholics are simply leaving the church. The U.S. Religious Landscape Survey of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life has revealed that “Approximately one-third of the survey respondents who say they were raised Catholic no longer describe themselves as Catholic. This means that roughly 10% of all Americans are former Catholics.”¹⁵ The Catholic church has experienced a greater net loss of those raised within it than any other religious community in the United States.

I am not in a position to offer a scientific explanation of why so many Catholics have been leaving the church of their youth. Certainly there are a variety of factors involved, including general cultural openness to religious change, the pressures exerted on religious commitment by a secular environment, and the demanding nature of Catholic moral doctrine in a cultural context of permissiveness. These pressures, however, are also felt by non-Catholics in the U.S., who are leaving their faith communities at a lower rate. I would suggest, therefore, that we not minimize the possibility that a sizable number of those departing the Catholic community are doing so because they judge that the actions and structures of the Catholic church itself are failing to live up to the requirements of love and justice.

If this interpretation of the data on church departures is even partly correct, then the church needs to work more vigorously at a fuller and deeper realization of the requirements of justice in the way it exercises its ministry, in the style it follows in developing and communicating its teachings, and in the way it deals with the failures of its own members and clergy. Regrettably, in the present context the call of *Caritas in Veritate* to focus on how the gospel transcends the requirements of reason, justice, and equality could be heard as a call to move in the wrong direction. It is my hope that a renewed stress on how the gospel of love requires unwavering commitment to justice and a solidarity based on reciprocal equality will help avoid that outcome and thus strengthen the life of the church both in its own inner life and in its mission to a world that so deeply needs to hear the good news of the gospel.

Notes

¹ Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 21-24. For the following analysis see also Outka's chapters 1, 3, and 8, passim.

² Monterrey Consensus, no. 42, in *Financing Development: Building on Monterrey* (United Nations: 2002), p. 8. Online at <http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/documents/Building%20on%20Monterrey.pdf> (accessed May 27, 2010).

³ For the most provocative statement of this argument, see Dambisa Moyo, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2009).

⁴ Several economists who had been highly placed within the World Bank wrote strong critiques of the policies followed by the major international financial institutions in the 80s and early 90s. See Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002); William Easterly, *The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists' Adventures and Misadventures in the Tropics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).

⁵ See the very critical review of Dambisa Moyo's treatment of aid that addressed HIV-AIDS by Michael Gerson, who worked in the White House under George W. Bush, "'Dead Aid,' Dead Wrong," *Washington Post*, April 3, 2009, online at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/02/AR2009040203285.html> (accessed May 28, 2010).

⁶ Benedict XVI, Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, April 30, 2010, online at: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2010/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100430_sienze-sociali_en.html (accessed May 25, 2010).

⁷ See World Bank, *Global Monitoring Report: Millennium Development Goals: Strengthening Mutual Accountability, Aid, Trade and Governance* (2006), online at:

<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTGLOBALMONITORING2006/Resources/2186625-1145565069381/GMR06Complete.pdf>

⁸ See Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns, and Votes*, esp. Chap. 5, “Wars: The Political Economy of Destruction.”

⁹ See Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, “*Caritas in Veritate* and Africa’s Burden of (Under)development,” *Theological Studies* 71 (June, 2010), 320-334, at 327.

¹⁰ Cardinal Francis George, OMI, President on the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Statement on Universal Health Care, March 23, 2010. Online at: <http://www.usccb.org/healthcare/cardinal-george-healthcare-statement.pdf> (accessed August 7, 2010).

¹¹ See the statement issued by Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, Chairman of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Pro-Life Activities; Bishop William Murphy of Rockville Centre, New York, Chairman of the USCCB Committee on Domestic Justice, Peace and Human Development, and Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake City, chairman of the USCCB Committee on Immigration, “Setting the Record Straight,” May 21, 2010, online at: <http://www.usccb.org/comm/archives/2010/10-104.shtml> (accessed July 13, 2010).

¹² Sadly, a similar episode in which abortion has eclipsed other important social issues has recently occurred in Kenya. The Kenya Episcopal Conference urged Kenyans to vote “no” in the August 4, 2010, referendum on the proposed new constitution for the country on the ground that it could make abortion accessible. See Kenyan Episcopal Conference, “Moral Case Against Proposed Constitution,” online at: <http://www.kec.or.ke/documents/NO.pdf> (accessed July 14, 2010). The Kenyan bishops took this position in a context where, lacking a revised constitution, violence like that following the 2007 election and possibly even civil war were real risks. Thus this is another case in which a single issue—abortion—has become the touchstone that determines official church response to a political action that will in fact have

importance consequences for an array of issues. The Kenyan people, however, approved the new constitution on by an approximately two to one margin.

¹³ Aristotle stresses that not seeking more precision and certitude than is possible is a characteristic of good reasoning in the moral domain. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book One, 3.

¹⁴ Regrettably, the Holy See criticized Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna for raising questions about the response to the abuse crisis by Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Dean of the College of Cardinals and former Vatican Secretary of State. In the words of the statement of the Holy See, "It should be remembered that in the church, when there are accusations against a cardinal, the competence rests solely with the pope; others may have an advisory role, always with the proper respect for the person." See John Thavis "Vatican clarifies Cardinal Schonborn remarks, defends Cardinal Sodano," *Catholic News Service*, June 28, 2010, online at: <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1002654.htm> (accessed July 14, 2010).

¹⁵ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* (2008), "Summary of Key Findings," available online at: <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports> (accessed July 13, 2010).