Christology and Prophetic Witness in *CARITAS IN VERITATE*

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“The human community that we build by ourselves can never, purely by its own strength, be a fully fraternal community, nor can it overcome every division and become a truly universal community.”²

The Christology of Pope Benedict XVI is not especially formulated in any one of his works. Rather, it is to be found in every one of them. The consistent interweaving of a vision of the figure of Christ, the one through whom we discover “the Christian God with a heart of flesh,” provides the foundation for the whole of his theological vision and shapes how it is that he sees God and the world and the mission of the Church in that world.

In his most recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, we see his most comprehensive and detailed approach to the practical demands of the life of the Church in the modern world, as she faces the social concerns of development of peoples, the degradation of the environment and the responsible use of technology. The grounding for these detailed practical solutions certainly stems from his theological vision. Specifically, his Christology serves as the grounding for the conclusions he makes, not just as a theologian, but now as universal pastor of the Church and a uniquely listened-to moral leader on the global scene in the midst of an economic and environmental crisis which affects people in every corner of the earth.

In this paper I propose to look at the contours of Pope Benedict’s Christology in order to shed light on his practical vision offered in his first explicitly “social encyclical.” I will examine, in particular, one theme of *Caritas in Veritate* wherein he develops the notion of “fraternity” as a bedrock principle for the establishment of social justice and authentic development of peoples.

Secondly, I will offer a perspective on how it is that elsewhere in Benedict’s theological project, his Christology that serves as a basis for fraternity among peoples, is formulated and shaped in the context of the celebration of the liturgy. This sacramental and liturgical hermeneutic then becomes a place of enrichment of theological vision not for a merely privatized devotional faith, but for an outward-looking sense of being-sent-into-the-world to work for peace and justice and the development and progress of all peoples.

Ratzinger’s Christological Anthropology

In Benedict’s thought, God has a plan for the world and the people who populate the world are created for cooperation with this plan of love. The full

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flourishing of people comes about only when there is recognition of the truth of who they are as those made from and for God who is love. The discovery of this end is made possible by the divine initiative of self-communication when God sends his Eternal Son to initiate a plan of solidarity of humanity with God and within itself. Such is the heart of the body of the Church’s social teaching from which Pope Benedict proceeds in his own theological reflection and later magisterial teaching. This is the grounding of the vision articulated in Caritas in Veritate.

Drawing on his predecessor’s teaching in Populorum Progressio from 1967, he recalls the importance of a basis of a transcendent vision of man that serves as the foundation for authentic human development. From within the Christian horizon, then, the development of all peoples becomes an integral aspect of the Christian identity and mission. Contributing toward this development is not merely an option for those who happen to feel moved to do so. It is an obligation of all those who claim the identity of Christian. To regard development as a vocation is to recognize, on the one hand, that it derives from a transcendent call, and on the other hand that it is incapable, within a merely secular horizon, of supplying its ultimate meaning on its own. Neither in a utopian return to primitive, “pristine” culture nor in the false promise of technological fulfillment of a materialist end, is real human and social development to be found; rather, only in openness to the Absolute is true humanism made possible.

But this openness to the Absolute is not simply a matter of theoretical speculation. Benedict highlights in Caritas in Veritate how it is that this body of social teaching does not derive simply from the natural law but is ultimately discovered in the Gospel, in the person of Jesus Christ, who simultaneously reveals God to man and man to himself. The natural law tradition, if unhinged from this biblical vision can become a mere abstraction according to Benedict and it is for this reason that it is important to see more clearly how it is that he recapitulates this social vision for the world in light of biblical and ecclesial faith, centered on the person of Jesus Christ and the fraternity that he makes possible in the world.

While certainly encouraging the full resources of the secular sphere of influence in order to address the problems of poverty and injustice in our time, Benedict also operates from a rather sober posture toward the ability of this

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3Benedict explains, “Paul VI clearly understood that the social question had become worldwide and he grasped the interconnection between the impetus towards the unification of humanity and the Christian ideal of a single family of peoples in solidarity and fraternity. In the notion of development, understood in human and Christian terms, he identified the heart of the Christian social message, and he proposed Christian charity as the principal force at the service of development.” Ibid., #13.

4Ibid., #16.

merely secular modus operandi to deliver on its promises.\textsuperscript{6} Anthropology is to be understood Christologically in Benedict’s thought and it is necessary to explore the texture of this Christology in order to see how it shapes the vision for the social development of peoples in \textit{Caritas in Veritate}. Above all, for Benedict, the figure of Jesus Christ is to be understood always in the context of relationship—never as an isolated individual. Christ is from the Father and for humanity.\textsuperscript{7} Only from within this two-fold relational dynamic can we come to know Christ and therefore come to know the truth of the human person and the true ground of development of persons among the nations. Only in relationship with God and with the rest of humanity is the fullness of the person discovered and supported. Mere assertions and moralizing about social development and politics are of little use. In his “portrait” of Jesus, Benedict puts it very simply: “In the Son of Man, man is revealed as he ought to be.”\textsuperscript{8} And what man “ought to be” is made possible not by man’s own striving but by the union made possible of divine and human in the Incarnation. The full dignity and flourishing of humanity then is grounded ultimately in what is opened up in the horizon of Chalcedonian faith.

Grounded very much in the biblical vision from which the figure Jesus of Nazareth emerges, Benedict understands Christ according to the categories established earlier in the biblical witness, namely, that of the People of God, Israel. Indeed, in bringing to fulfillment the “true Israel” Benedict sees Christ as fulfilling the height of Sonship of the Divine which was anticipated in Old Testament faith. Further, as he explains in \textit{The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood}, Jesus “does not regard his divine sonship as something reserved only for himself: the meaning of the Incarnation is rather to make what is his available to all.”\textsuperscript{9}

It is at this point that we come closer to the notion of Christian brotherhood that makes possible human fraternity grounded in Christ’s identity as Eternal Son of God the Father. It is also at this juncture wherein we come to a sense of what is at stake in the question of the progress of peoples.\textsuperscript{10} His answer to this question of course is in the negative and he thus uncovers the need to examine

\textsuperscript{6}He writes: “Reason, by itself, is capable of grasping the equality between men and of giving stability to their civic coexistence, but it cannot establish fraternity. This originates in a transcendent vocation from God the Father, who loved us first, teaching us through the Son what fraternal charity is.”\textit{Caritas in Veritate}, #19, citing \textit{Populorum Progressio} #21.

\textsuperscript{7}Benedict, \textit{Introduction to Christianity} (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 184ff.

\textsuperscript{8}Benedict, \textit{Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration} (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 325.

\textsuperscript{9}Benedict, \textit{The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood} (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 49. This work is significant in the broader landscape of Ratzinger’s thought as it stands out, according to Aidan Nichols as his “first widely disseminated essay treating of a doctrinal topic in propria persona, rather than by way of exposition of some earlier father or doctor.” See Nichols chapter “Christian Brotherhood” in \textit{The Thought of Benedict XVI}. (London: Burns and Oates, 2007).

Benedict writes, “Underdevelopment has an even more important cause than lack of deep thought: it is ‘the lack of brotherhood among individuals and peoples.’ Will it ever be possible to obtain this brotherhood by human effort alone?”\textit{Caritas in Veritate}, #19, citing \textit{Populorum Progressio} #66.
how it is that this brotherhood might be cultivated in an ever new way which is always harkening back to the original vision for brotherhood given in the encounter with the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the account of which is given in the biblical witness of the New Testament. The Gospel is fundamental for development because in the Gospel we encounter the One who is the “Yes” of God to man and “precisely because God gives a resounding “yes” to man, man cannot fail to open himself to the divine vocation to pursue his own development.11

Brotherhood in the Christian Vision

In The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood, Benedict examines the uniquely Christian dimension of human “fraternity”. Starting with the ancient pagan world and then moving to the context of Hebrew scripture, he indicates how the notion of brotherhood has always been essential in the attempt to establish human society and order among peoples. The bond is always recognized, but to differing degrees and with a varying scope of influence. From Plato’s use of the term brother to connote those who comprise the polis to the more religious context within which it was used in Mithran and other mystery cults of the Hellenistic world, the term would always simultaneously connote a sense of unity among those comprising one group, while also designating separation from those outside that same group.12

In the Old Testament, this dual usage of the term continued but now, in certain instances, the term began to be able to be applied to the whole of the human family. The notion of “universal brotherhood” then began to emerge. As the notion of the national God, Yahweh, came to be simultaneously recognized as the God of the whole universe, those “children” of that universal God came to be considered in universal terms even if a special designation continued for those who belonged to the unique relationship of the covenant. This biblical justification for a universal brotherhood provided the foundation in the history of ideas for the Enlightenment and Marxist ideals of fraternité and comrade even if, inevitably, all of these modern aspirations toward equality and brotherhood ended in sharp divides between those who recognize the universal brotherhood and those who do not and who must, consequently, be overthrown for the sake of the ideal.

Ratzinger explicates this dynamic of the simultaneity of a universal brotherhood on one hand and the need for a kind of dialectic between true brotherhood and those not yet incorporated into it as he turns his attention to the Church. In the New Testament witness, he examines how it is that in the words of Jesus in the Gospels and in the description of the building up of the

11Ibid., #18.
12Christian Brotherhood, 5-14.
early Church in the Acts of the Apostles, there are numerous instances of the use of the term “brother” to indicate relationality within the national identity of Judaism. Only in Paul, however, does the term come to be used more decisively in relationship of those united to Christ.13

Recalling a centerpiece of the Pauline vision of brotherhood taken from Romans 8:14-17, 29, Ratzinger draws close to the Christian mystery which makes possible the unique vision of brotherhood at the heart of his thesis: “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ...For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Only in the context of this Trinitarian dynamic of being led by the Spirit to call God Father and in so doing, establish our identity as brothers and sisters and fellow heirs of the Son who has taken the initiative to unite himself to us, do we fulfill our true end and destiny as human persons. Only in this setting does true and lasting human development begin to be possible. As he would later pose the possibility, Pope Benedict asserts in the opening lines of Caritas in Veritate that only the force of love compels people to work for true justice and not just ideological purposes. Christ is that force of love. “In Christ, charity in truth becomes the ‘Face of his Person.’”14

Encountering Christ, then, is to encounter love itself and the inner dynamic of the truth of every human person. This love is that which joins us together in union with the One who is Love only because He has loved us first. He explains that as objects of God’s love, we become, in turn, subjects of charity in our earthly relationships. Insofar as we are able to receive that love, we become disposed to acting outwardly according to that love in the world for the sake of others, especially those most in need. Being drawn up into that divine dynamic of Trinitarian love which gives and receives, which pours out without hesitation and without limit– this is the basis for a lasting and efficacious progress of peoples.15

Fraternity, then becomes the basis for a vision of human solidarity and development grounded in and ultimately ordered toward charity which goes beyond even the demands of justice. As he explains in Caritas in Veritate, “Charity goes beyond justice, because to love is to give, to offer what is “mine” to the other; but it never lacks justice, which prompts us to give the other what is “his”, what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting.”16 What Benedict proposes then, is a vision of development that runs deeper than many other forms of calls for social justice. Indeed, this vision of what is possible and what is called for according to true Christian identity opens up the way in the

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13Ibid., 21ff.
14Caritas in Veritate, #1.
15Ibid., #5.
16Ibid., #6.
community of nations, to a more robust and radical vision of solidarity and unity precisely because of the union of brotherhood with Christ that precedes it. The texture of this call to go even beyond justice is an urgent one. There is no setting of leisure at work here from which these matters can become a matter for mere academic speculation. The matter of development becomes urgent precisely because of the personal dimension of what is unfolding. Again, recalling Paul VI’s foundational shaping of the question, he explains: This urgency is also a consequence of charity in truth.

How then, is this sense of urgency to be cultivated? One must indeed keep up with the “rapid succession of events and problems” and do the hard and careful work of social analysis and activism. But these alone may well end only in exhaustion and cynicism if engaged in within the limited horizon of the secular sphere. One’s vision and spirit must be ever renewed and revivified if one is to engage in this demanding call to work for true and lasting development. From within the horizon of Christian brotherhood, it is in the context of the Church, then, that one’s vision of fraternity with others is cultivated. More specifically, it is in the context of the liturgical encounter, with one’s brothers and sisters in Christ, meeting the one in whom they are united in brotherhood and sonship of the Eternal Father—only here is that infinite and ever new horizon opened up. Only from here does the possibility of efficacious engagement with the modern world become reality.

Fraternity Established in the Liturgical Encounter

Following the liturgical pattern and framework for “doing Christology” sets a trajectory oriented toward a robust “prophetic witness” and a movement toward solidarity with and “progress” of the least in society. The source and centre of Christian fraternity is the Eucharist. It is important, though, that this formation of a people through the action of the liturgy, not result in simply another circle of spiritually inclined people closed in on itself and set off against the surrounding culture. Rather, in authentically following the Eucharistic pattern, it becomes clear that this brotherhood formed by the Eucharist “does not stand against, but for the whole” of the world.

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17 As he explains in Caritas in Veritate, “The Council probed more deeply what had always belonged to the truth of the faith, namely that the Church, being at God’s service, is at the service of the world in terms of love and truth…the whole Church, in all her being and acting – when she proclaims, when she celebrates, when she performs works of charity – is engaged in promoting integral human development.” Ibid., #11.

18 Populorum Progressio repeatedly underlines the urgent need for reform, and in the face of great problems of injustice in the development of peoples, it calls for courageous action to be taken without delay. This urgency is also a consequence of charity in truth. It is Christ’s charity that drives us on: “caritas Christi urget nos” (2 Cor 5:14). The urgency is inscribed not only in things, it is not derived solely from the rapid succession of events and problems, but also from the very matter that is at stake: the establishment of authentic fraternity.” Ibid., #20.

19 Christian Brotherhood, 75.
world—*ita missa est*—is essential for this vision of Christian brotherhood which can be transformative of and for the world.

Benedict’s Christological pattern of Jesus being *from* the Father and *for* humanity is extended to the Church, the mystical body of Christ, in the context of the liturgical encounter. The inner dynamic of the mystery of the Eucharist has its pattern established in that of the Passover. Drawing upon the Hebrew understanding of this mystery of the Pasch, Ratzinger recalls how there is a double dynamic at play in the liturgy that involves both a “sharing out” and “sharing in” among those gathered in worship. What is given away in the course of the meal has the power to draw those participating into the very same salvific mystery that is commemorated in the being led out of slavery into new freedom.

For Ratzinger there is something similar at work in the course of the Eucharist that fulfills the Passover. In this Christian vision, the “Eucharistic communion is aimed at a complete reshaping of my own life. It breaks up man’s entire self and creates a new ‘we.’” And even further, the restoration of man is achieved in this Eucharistic context wherein “I myself become a part of the new bread that he is creating by the resubstantiation of the whole of earthly reality.” Here we find in a most concrete mode, the foundation for a reordering of the social dimension of the world community according to divine initiative toward a new creation. The new “we” that is created around the person of Christ becomes a people formed for mission according to the same inner Christological principles at work in Jesus and in the dynamic of the liturgy. It is a two-fold conversion that begins to unfold in the course of the liturgy, and those drawn in are soon to be poured out according to the pattern set by the person who calls them together in the first place.

Pope Benedict expounded this dynamic powerfully, appropriately enough, in the context of the liturgy when he preached a homily to the hundreds of thousands of young people gathered from around the globe at World Youth Day in Cologne in the first year of his pontificate. Leading these young people to see the mystery of the Eucharist with new eyes, he explained the inner connection of Christ’s act of love in the course of his own Passover and how it is that the whole Church is drawn into the same dynamic for the sake of the world marred and broken by sin and darkness.

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21Ibid., 78.

22*What on the outside is simply brutal violence - the Crucifixion - from within becomes an act of total self-giving love. This is the substantial transformation which was accomplished at the Last Supper and was destined to set in motion a series of transformations leading ultimately to the transformation of the world when God will be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15: 28). In their hearts, people always and everywhere have somehow expected a change, a transformation of the world. Here now is the central act of transformation that alone can truly renew the world: violence is transformed into love, and death into life. Since this act transmutes death into love, death as such is already conquered from within, the Resurrection is already present in it. Death is, so to speak, mortally wounded, so that it can no longer have the last word. To use an image well known to us today, this is like inducing nuclear fission*
This radical vision of the Paschal Mystery, of the power of the liturgy and the path set before those who partake in this mystery points to the possibility of a new creation that is once and for all transformed by love. For Benedict this must be the aim of true and lasting progress of peoples and social development. This is the aim of Caritas in Veritate.

Fraternity and Eschatology

By way of an attempt to bring to a close some of these reflections on true development being grounded in human relationship with Christ, we do well to turn to a mystery in the life of Christ which sums up the final vision for the human person centered on union with Christ. In the Transfiguration of the Lord, the path is laid out before the faithful as to what their true destiny is. It is a glimpse of what it means to be in union with the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit, and this glimpse is given in continuity with the whole plan of salvation from the giving of the Law and the summation of the message of the Prophets up to the contemporary union with the apostles, the foundation of the Church. Here, in the vision of the Transfiguration, the destiny of the Church for Trinitarian communion and the ecclesiological identity and mission is given. Here, the shape of the life of the Church on earth is illuminated. What is possible, what love looks like when illuminated by the truth of our identity—this is given in the moment wherein we can gaze upon the Transfigured Christ atop the mountain.

In a commentary on a particular icon of the Transfiguration, a figure close to home helps to illuminate this vision by drawing on a mosaic depiction of this mystery of the life of Christ. This icon of the Transfiguration of Jesus can serve, he says, as a key to interpreting Caritas in Veritate, specifically with respect to the true end of man and therefore the shape of authentic human development on earth. Our commentator reminds us of St. Mark’s account: “After six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them” (9:2).

This is the vision of Pope Benedict XVI in Caritas in Veritate. The fullness of what it means to be a human person is illuminated in this scene of the

in the very heart of being - the victory of love over hatred, the victory of love over death. Only this intimate explosion of good conquering evil can then trigger off the series of transformations that little by little will change the world. All other changes remain superficial and cannot save. Homily, World Youth Day Eucharistic Liturgy, Cologne-Marienfeld 21 August, 2005.

He goes on to indicate how some of the Christian tradition has situated this testimony in the larger scope of the biblical witness. “Some Fathers of the Church,” he explains “have understood the words ‘after six days’ as an announcement of the fulfillment of creation. That is, the creation of Adam and Eve by God is fulfilled in the revelation of the true man, the new Adam, Jesus Christ, in whom the glory of God dwells bodily. In this light, therefore, the Transfiguration can be celebrated as the feast in which the Church proclaims its vision of comprehensive humanism. Contemplating the beauty of the transfigured Christ makes the disciples desire that the entire world be enveloped by the transfigured light, and act boldly according to this holy desire.” Robert Imbelli, "L'Osservatore Romano", Aug 5, 2009.
Transfiguration. It is in communion with God and with fellow human persons that a true humanism becomes possible. This divinely illuminated humanism is the foundation and the true end of all efforts toward justice and human development. As Benedict explained earlier in his career in reflecting on the “last things”, he explains the anthropology at work in this vision that orients the human person outwardly, beyond him or herself. This true human is fulfilled having been conformed to the figure of the God who became a person and the fulfillment is accomplished only in heaven. It is in this perspective that we come to know “the individual’s salvation is whole and entire only when the salvation of the cosmos and all the elect has come to full fruition. For the redeemed are not simply adjacent to each other in heaven. Rather, in their being together as the one [body of] Christ, they are heaven.”

Bibliography


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\[24\]Ibid., 238.