

**JUSTSHARE LECTURE
23rd September 2009**

**Catholic Social Teaching: A Vision for our Times?¹
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This is a lengthy and unedited reflection which formed the basis of my JustShare lecture. I am posting it in its unedited form as a contribution to the discussion and informed debate which I think needs to happen if this important encyclical is to have an impact, but also if its shortcomings are to be identified and explored.

Last year, a Vatican official announced seven new social sins to be added to the original list of seven deadly sins which, you might remember, include lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy and pride. The new sins – included by *Time* magazine among the fifty best inventions of 2008 – include bioethical sins, morally dubious experiments that harm human embryos, drug abuse, polluting, social injustice, accumulating excessive wealth and creating poverty.² One could argue that this updated list more or less coincides with those whom Dante consigned to hell, where the lustful and the gluttonous endure the torments of hell alongside misers, spendthrifts, fraudsters and grafters, each with a form of torture tailor-made to their particular sins. But it is also evidence of the extent to which the modern Catholic understanding of sin is shifting to accommodate new challenges to traditional moral values, in a way which entails broadening the concept of sin to include social and economic as well as private and personal sins.

When I proposed the title for this lecture, I had not realized that I would be speaking so soon after the issue of a new papal encyclical which deals with the current economic crisis. The encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth – encyclicals take their names from their opening words in the Latin text), is long, repetitive, and would have benefitted from some rigorous editing. Nevertheless, it is an important and insightful document which deserves to be widely read and which also invites some criticism, and I want to spend some time this evening considering its arguments in more detail.

Let me begin, however, with a brief background to the title of tonight's talk. Catholic social teaching refers to a body of official writings such as encyclicals, apostolic letters, constitutions and other documents produced by the Roman Catholic hierarchy which seek to interpret and apply the teachings of the Catholic tradition in the context of the challenges of modern economic and political life. Although the church claims to eschew party politics and avoids aligning itself with any particular political system, its social

¹ All quotations to official documents in this paper are taken from the links in the excellent website on Catholic Social Teaching run by the Office for Social Justice of the American Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis at http://www.osjspm.org/catholic_social_teaching.aspx. Links to the documents and a range of other useful resources are available on this site.

² See *Time* website

http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,1852747_1854195_1854179,00.html.

teaching constitutes a call to 'read the signs of the times' (cf Matthew 16:4)³ and to promote and defend Catholic concepts of social justice in the light of the changing conditions of modern society.

Catholic social teaching is rooted in scripture, in the natural law tradition, and in the sometimes radical writings of the early church with regard to questions of wealth, property and justice. It originates with Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, which addressed the challenges posed by liberal capitalism and the abuses of the industrial revolution on the one hand, and the rise of various forms of socialism and communism on the other. The careful path which Leo XIII negotiated between these two competing political perspectives marked out the general terrain of all future social teaching, which seeks to maintain a balance between defending workers' rights and the social principles of subsidiarity and the common good on the one hand, while on the other hand defending the right to private property and the practices and institutions of capitalist economies governed by appropriate state controls and restraints.

Catholic social teaching is a developing tradition, in which each new document presents its arguments and insights in conversation with its predecessors. So, for example, Pope John Paul II's 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus* commemorated the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* while widening the scope of the earlier document to address more recent social concerns, including the destruction of the environment. *Centesimus Annus* also adopted the idea of 'human ecology', rooted in marriage and the family, which has been developed in some of the writings of Benedict XVI, and it affirmed the idea of religious freedom which had not explicitly featured in *Rerum Novarum* but has become a significant feature of subsequent social teaching. *Caritas in Veritate* is written as a reflection on *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI's 1967 encyclical on human development which many regard as the most left-wing of all the church's teaching documents. Catholic reactions to different encyclicals can be used as a barometer to measure just how radical they are. So, like *Populorum Progressio*, *Caritas in Veritate* has dismayed those on the political right for its far-reaching critique of the late capitalist ideology which led to the economic collapse, while *Centesimus Annus* was welcomed by those on the right because it was seen as restoring the balance upset by *Populorum Progressio* in its carefully qualified defence of capitalism and the right to private property.

The greatest impetus to the development of the church's social teaching came from the Second Vatican Council, which in the years between 1962 and 1965 brought about arguably the greatest transformation in the Roman Catholic Church since the Reformation. The Council was initiated by Pope John XXIII, a quiet and modest man whom many believed to be a 'caretaker pope' at the time of his election, so that his decision to launch a process of such profound and far-reaching change in the worldwide church caught many off guard, delighting liberals and dismaying conservatives. John XXIII died in June 1963, and the Council continued to its conclusion under the papacy of Paul VI.

³ This phrase was first used in Pope John XXIII's encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, and it was taken up by the Second Vatican Council, since when it has become a leitmotif for Catholic social teaching.

The opening paragraph of the 1965 Vatican II Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, offers a clear vision of how the Council sought to reposition the Church in the world, and it continues to be a source of inspiration for many who seek to keep that vision alive at a time when it is perceived to be under threat from powerful forces within as well as outside the church:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father's kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all of humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history. (#1)

The Council coincided with a postwar era when liberation movements were transforming the shape of global politics and revolutionising the social and sexual values of the western democracies. European colonialism was coming to an end in the African independence movements, in America the civil rights movement was at its height, the cold war and the war in Vietnam were inspiring widespread peace movements, and the women's movement was gathering momentum across the western world with demands for sexual and reproductive liberation which would overturn centuries of patriarchal Christian hegemony. They were heady times – a series of seismic shifts within the values and institutions of modern society which heralded widespread and irrevocable change. For some it was an era of exhilarating freedom, for others it was a catastrophic falling apart of the values and institutions of society. This was also true with regard to the impact of Vatican II on the world of Roman Catholicism.

Catholics who had been raised in a spirit of suspicion often verging on isolation with regard to the non-Catholic world were suddenly told that they had a duty to enter into dialogue and active social and political participation with those of all faiths and none. The barriers which had kept Catholics safely insulated from their Protestant neighbours came tumbling down as new ecumenical initiatives were fostered and encouraged. The vernacular replaced the rituals and mysteries of the Latin Mass, and a church rooted in western history, tradition and culture put out new shoots of inculturation and liberation, so that it became a world church bearing the cultural imprint and expressing the political concerns of a representative cross-section of the whole human race, particularly the poor and the marginalised. The old rules and regulations which had governed Catholic life for generations were abandoned in favour of a new approach which privileged personal conscience and responsibility over unquestioning obedience to the Church's teaching authority, and which allowed for a far greater plurality of interpretation and observance than had previously been the case. For some Catholics, this was a time of unprecedented optimism and freedom. For others, it was (and remains) a near-apocalyptic disaster.

Many would say that the door slammed shut on the liberalism of the postconciliar church in 1968 with the publication of the birth control encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*. Pope Paul VI went against the advice of the commission he himself had appointed and insisted upon the unbreakable connection between the procreative and unitive aspects of married sexuality (in theory, the only kind of physical sexual expression permissible

to Catholics). The widespread failure of that encyclical to gain acceptance even among many devout Catholics, and the sense of outrage which it provoked in societies which were celebrating the sexual revolution, the invention of the contraceptive pill and the coming of age of the women's movement, shattered the optimism which the Council had inspired. For conservatives, *Humanae Vitae* was and continues to be a much-needed brake on the libertarianism and licence of modern sexual mores which they argue have led to the unleashing of feminism and homosexuality, the destruction of the family, and the spread of abortion. For liberals, *Humanae Vitae* was a profound betrayal of the spirit of Vatican II. Many left the church, many others ignored the teaching on contraception, and some would say that 1968 was the beginning of an age of dissent on the one hand and growing authoritarianism on the other, so that the teaching authority of the church is undermined and conflict intensifies between liberals and conservatives – a conflict which has had a deleterious effect on American politics in recent years. So, that is the context in which I approach the question I set out in my title – is the church's social teaching a vision for our times? Let me give a broad overview of the main concerns and developments in the social encyclicals.

There are certain basic concepts which have shaped Catholic social teaching from the beginning. These include the inherent dignity of the human person made in the image of God; solidarity and respect for the common good in recognition of the fundamental sociability of human beings; the balancing of individual rights and responsibilities; defence of workers' rights; respect for the family as the foundation of the social order; the demand that justice entails a particular concern for the most vulnerable members of society, and the principle of subsidiarity, in which the responsibility of the state to maintain justice, protect its citizens and participate in the international order is balanced against the rights of smaller and more localised groups to organise their own affairs and to participate in civil society without undue interference by the state. While the right to private property is also enshrined in Catholic social teaching, this is always relative rather than absolute, for poverty and need have a prior claim upon our individual and shared resources. This means that, although the church ostensibly rejects socialism and communism, its preferred economic model is closer to that of European Christian democracy with its broadly socialist economic principles than British and American forms of free market capitalism. The continuing economic disagreements between Britain and America and their European counterparts might have much to do with the different religious inheritance of these societies, and indeed, the values enshrined in the European Union are significantly influenced by Catholic social teaching.

The most recent encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, is vast in its scope. It includes globalisation and world government, procreation, marriage and the family, the market, technology, tourism (including sex tourism), trade unions and workers' rights, finance and the economic crisis, the role of consumers, the natural environment, energy, and social communications and the media. It is evidence of the fact that Catholic social teaching is now an all-embracing ethos which encompasses every aspect of human activity, from the most intimate domestic relationships to questions of the global economic and political order. Although rooted in the Catholic tradition and its understanding of God, scripture and natural law, it is an ethos which seeks universal relevance and applicability, with modern encyclicals being addressed not only to the faithful but to 'all people of good will'.

Turning to the question in my title, I want to begin with a brief consideration of *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John XXIII's 1963 encyclical on peace, justice and human rights, moving on to *Populorum Progressio*, and finally asking how we might interpret *Caritas in Veritate* in the light of these earlier documents, with a particular focus on questions of the role and rights of women.

Pacem in Terris is the last encyclical to base its arguments primarily on an appeal to natural law as a common basis for human understanding, so that it largely avoids justifying its arguments by appeals to revelation or to the particular beliefs of the Christian faith, opting instead to speak of spirituality in general terms as an intrinsic dimension of the human condition. This approach reflects a distinction between nature and grace in early twentieth century Catholic thought which many theologians have since rejected, for it implies that the natural, historical world of human affairs is in some sense a separate sphere from the life of grace revealed in Jesus Christ. The risk of this is that the church understands itself as inhabiting a separate and more elevated plane which sets it apart from the world, so that there is little connection between reason and revelation, and the language of human affairs becomes largely dissociated from the language of salvation and faith. The advantage is that it allows the church's teachings to be expressed in a language which appeals to a wide audience, because it is not predicated upon a set of religious beliefs particular to the Christian faith. More recent encyclicals have been more biblical and Christocentric in their arguments, so that they manifest a greater tension between the appeal to universal reason on the one hand and the appeal to Christian revelation on the other.

Pacem in Terris marks the moment when the Catholic Church opened its arms and greeted the modern world in a welcoming embrace which opened up new frontiers in the relationship between the church and the world, anticipating the vision which would be further developed in *Gaudium et Spes* and later encyclicals. The Catholic moral theologian Charles Curran points to the emphasis on freedom which marks *Pacem in Terris* out from its predecessors, and the transition from 'an authoritarian and moralistic view of society to a more democratic one.'⁴

Two themes still stand out for their prophetic clarity nearly forty five years after that encyclical was written: first, in a time of proliferating theories and books about human rights, it remains one of the most coherent and wide-ranging affirmations of the idea of universal human rights enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Second, it sets out a vision of international law and justice which unequivocally condemns militarism and the arms trade, and which makes no appeal to the just war tradition as a legitimate form of conflict resolution. Instead, it expresses support for the United Nations and argues for the establishment of systems of international law and conflict resolution which would avoid any need for the resort to war.

Pacem in Terris identifies 'three distinctive characteristics' of our age. (#39) First, the extension of workers' rights beyond the socio-economic sphere had led to widening demands for equality at all levels of cultural and political life. Second, women were becoming increasingly involved in public life and, 'ever more conscious of their human

⁴ Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching 1891 – Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), p. 74

dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life.’ (#41) I shall come back to that insight when I discuss *Caritas in Veritate*. Third, the rise of independent nation states had meant that ‘in very many human beings the inferiority complex which endured for hundreds and thousands of years is disappearing, while in others there is an attenuation and gradual fading of the superiority complex which had its roots in social-economic privileges, sex or political standing.’ (#43)

I cannot here offer a detailed analysis of how *Pacem in Terris* applies its concern for human rights and international justice in the context of these challenges, but it is a document which rewards repeated readings and which still has much wisdom to offer in our quest for a just and viable political order. However, it is also an optimistic document, reflecting perhaps the spirit of the age when there was widespread confidence in the possibility of creating a better world. Curran criticizes ‘the natural law optimism’⁵ of *Pacem in Terris*, particularly with regard to its confidence that a worldwide system of authority and law could obviate the problems of war and injustice. Curran argues that ‘The pitfall always remains that in the context of human limitation, human sinfulness, and the lack of eschatological fullness, such a situation will benefit the powerful and exclude the powerless and the marginalized.’⁶ He observes that, given ‘the presence and power of evil in the world’, it would have been just as valid to write an encyclical titled *Bellum in terris*.⁷

Pope Paul VI’s 1967 *Populorum Progressio* takes up the theme of peace and roots it in human development, arguing that ‘Peace cannot be limited to a mere absence of war’ but rather must be ‘built up day after day, in the pursuit of an order intended by God, which implies a more perfect form of justice among people.’ (#76) It calls for a new humanism based on the concept of integral human development, in which the material needs of the poor are rooted in a holistic appreciation of the political and economic conditions necessary for human flourishing. As I mentioned earlier, it is the most politically radical of all the social encyclicals and marks the high point in the church’s engagement with socialist principles. *Populorum Progressio* is also the most genuinely dialogical of the encyclicals, insofar as it cites a number of theologians as well as previous popes and official documents – although no women, perhaps not surprisingly.

In the post-independence era in which it was written, *Populorum Progressio* is primarily concerned with the widening gap between rich and poor nations, and it bases its arguments on the principles of justice and peace which would become the guiding light of Catholic justice and peace movements and liberation theologies over the next twenty years. It is silent on the abuses and dangers of communism, while repeatedly condemning the excesses and injustices of liberalism. It identifies avarice as ‘the most evident form of moral underdevelopment’, (#19) and it condemns a system which ‘considers profit as the key motive for economic progress, competition as the supreme law of economics, and private ownership of the means of production as an absolute right that has no limits and carries no corresponding social obligation.’ (#26) All this, twelve years before Margaret Thatcher came to power. It insists that ‘The right to

⁵ Ibid, p. 30.

⁶ Ibid, p. 158.

⁷ Ibid, p. 30.

property must never be exercised to the detriment of the common good', and goes on to quote Saint Ambrose:

You are not making a gift of your possessions to the poor person. You are handing over to him what is his. For what has been given in common for the use of all, you have arrogated to yourself. The world is given to all, and not only to the rich. (#23)

In international terms, this means that 'The superfluous wealth of rich countries should be placed at the service of poor nations. The rule which up to now held good for the benefit of those nearest to us, must today be applied to all the needy of the world.' Otherwise, the greed of the rich will 'call down upon them the judgement of God and the wrath of the poor, with consequences no one can foretell. (#49)

By way of a relevant aside, I want to draw attention here to *Populorum Progressio's* approach to questions of the family and birth control, for we shall see that this is in marked contrast to the approach adopted by *Caritas in Veritate*. Affirming the importance of the family for society, *Populorum Progressio* also acknowledges that 'The family's influence may have been excessive, at some periods of history and in some places, when it was exercised to the detriment of the fundamental rights of the individual.' (#36) It goes on to consider the question of procreation and over-population, and it argues that

it is for the parents to decide, with full knowledge of the matter, on the number of their children, taking into account their responsibilities towards God, themselves, the children they have already brought into the world, and the community to which they belong. In all this they must follow the demands of their own conscience enlightened by God's law authentically interpreted, and sustained by confidence in Him. (#38)

That was written a year before the publication of *Humanae Vitae*. One cannot help but wonder how much greater credibility Catholic social teaching might have had, if it had been based on this kind of pragmatic approach to the family and contraception rooted in a respect for personal conscience.

The early encyclicals of Pope John Paul II continued the theme of relative optimism with regard to the capacity of human beings to change the world, while stepping back from the socialist ethos which informed *Populorum Progressio*. His social encyclicals sustain the critique of the free market economy and continue to privilege the demands of justice over the right to private property, while emphasising the importance of 'being over having' in response to the increasingly consumer-driven economies of the western world. His first encyclical, written in 1981 and titled *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work), concentrated on workers' rights and on the importance of putting labour before capital, of recognizing that 'work is ... "for the worker" and not the worker "for work"' (#6), and of acknowledging the value of human work as a participation in the work of creation. His 1987 encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern), develops the vision of *Populorum Progressio*, and refers to 'the option or love of preference for the poor' (#42) and 'the structures of sin'. (#37) This is an interesting example of an unacknowledged shift in official church teaching. When liberation theologians first

referred to structural sin and to the preferential option for the poor in the 1970s, the then Cardinal Ratzinger in his role as Head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith spoke out against these ideas, because they jeopardised faith in the universality and impartiality of God's love and in the essentially personal nature of sin. The language of a preferential option for the poor and of structural sin constitutes official acceptance by the church authorities of ideas which were initially regarded as too radical and theologically unsound when they were promoted by liberation theologians.

When the ageing John Paul II surveyed the world by the time of his later encyclicals, he saw a darkening of the human horizons. As well as continuing war, violence and economic injustice, he identified new and serious threats to the fundamental dignity of the human person in the form of reproductive technologies, the legalisation of abortion, and the growing threat of euthanasia. In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), he continues to seek a balance between the politics and economics of socialism and liberalism, but he also focuses considerable attention on abortion, euthanasia, war and capital punishment. In fact, the church is gradually shifting its teaching on capital punishment, as it is on war, so that it is edging towards an ethos of non-violence which would encompass all deliberate taking of human life as wrong, whatever the circumstances. Whether or not this will ever translate into moral absolutism on questions of war and capital punishment remains to be seen, but in pragmatic if not in absolute terms, recent popes have been unequivocal in their condemnation of war and, when the 1992 *Catechism* was revised in 1997, the teaching on capital punishment had been reworded in such a way as to render 'practically nonexistent' the conditions under which an offender might be executed.⁸

If we step back to gain an overview of the tensions, visions and ideals which inform Catholic social teaching, it becomes clear that the Church's official teachings defy conventional stereotypes which see the world in terms of conservative and liberal, right wing and left wing, although Catholics themselves tend to be highly selective in what they applaud and in what they condemn. On questions of economic and social justice, the Catholic Church is arguably the most radical of all global institutions, and the only one which still has the potential to subvert the dominant economic ideology. Since the 1960s it has consistently upheld a position which calls into question many of the values and practices which sustain free market capitalism, and it has increasingly aligned itself with the poor and the marginalised. On the other hand, on matters of sexuality and reproduction, there is a growing sense of moral absolutism which now pervades all the church's social teaching, in a way which it did not in the earlier encyclicals. This means that liberals and those on the left of the church who would lend whole-hearted support to the vision of society and economics which informs recent encyclicals, including *Caritas in Veritate*, are dismayed by the position they adopt on questions of sexuality and reproduction. On the other hand, more conservative or right-wing Catholics have enthusiastically welcomed the fact that *Caritas in Veritate* affirms *Humanae Vitae*, condemns abortion and birth control policies, and insists upon the centrality of marriage and the family for a just society. The conflict between these two factions is clear if we consider reactions to the encyclical among American Catholics.

⁸ See 'Update of the Catechism: (capital punishment and homosexuality)' at the website [http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Update+of+the+Catechism:+\(capital+punishment+and+homosexuality\).-a030125177](http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Update+of+the+Catechism:+(capital+punishment+and+homosexuality).-a030125177). For the online Catechism, see

George Weigel is a Catholic theologian and public commentator who is well-known as one of the leading voices of American Catholic conservatism. He published an article in the *National Review* on *Caritas in Veritate* which had the subheading “The revenge of Justice and Peace (or so they may think).”⁹ Here, Weigel claims that *Caritas in Veritate*

seems to be a hybrid, blending the pope’s own insightful thinking on the social order with elements of the Justice and Peace approach to Catholic social doctrine, which imagines that doctrine beginning anew at *Populorum Progressio*. Indeed, those with advanced degrees in Vaticanology could easily go through the text of *Caritas in Veritate*, highlighting those passages that are obviously Benedictine with a gold marker and those that reflect current Justice and Peace default positions with a red marker. The net result is, with respect, an encyclical that resembles a duck-billed platypus.

The Benedictine influence Weigel sees in the encyclical’s ‘strong emphasis on the life issues (abortion, euthanasia, embryo-destructive stem-cell research)’. Supporters of the economic critique in *Caritas in Veritate* have criticized Weigel for his selective engagement with papal teaching, but they too have been highly selective insofar as they have minimized or ignored the problems which arise if one focuses on the more conservative aspects of the encyclical. For example, writing in the *National Catholic Reporter*, theologian Richard McBrien claims that

There is far more in this encyclical for liberals to cheer than for conservatives to applaud. With a few significant exceptions, *Caritas in Veritate* is in the left-of-center tradition of Catholic social teachings, from the time of Pope Leo XIII’s landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (‘Of New Things’) in 1891 to the present.¹⁰

I cannot do justice to the scope of this bulky and convoluted encyclical here, but it is important to highlight some of its many insights and analyses which pertain to the current economic crisis, the conditions which contributed to it, and the transformation of political, social and economic institutions which it calls for. The different chapters of the encyclical address a vast range of challenges including “The Message of *Populorum Progressio*”, ‘Human Development in Our Time’, ‘Fraternity, Economic Development and Civil Society’, ‘The Development of People, Rights and Duties, The Environment’, ‘The Cooperation of the Human Family’, and ‘The Development of Peoples and Technology’,

The encyclical begins by stressing the centrality of love – *caritas* – to justice and peace, and it emphasises the relationship between love and truth. ‘Love is God’s greatest gift to humanity, it is his promise and our hope.’ (#2) This gift of love is the only authentic basis for all truthful human relationships and interactions, from the intimacy of marriage and the family to the sphere of global politics and economics, and when it is neglected or sacrificed then various forms of relativism, exploitation and injustice proliferate. Thus ‘love in truth – *caritas in veritate* – is a great challenge for the Church in a world that is becoming progressively and pervasively globalized.’ (#9)

⁹ See George Weigel, ‘*Caritas in Veritate* in Gold and Red: the revenge of Justice and Peace (or so they may think)’, *National Review Online* July 7, 2009 at <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NTdkYjU3MDE2YTdhZTE4NWlyN2FkY2U5YTFkM2ZiMmE=>.

¹⁰ Richard McBrien, ‘The Pope’s Social Encyclical – Part 1’, *National Catholic Reporter*, August 10, 2009 at <http://ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/popes-social-encyclical>.

It takes up the theme from *Populorum Progressio* of integral human development and seeks to interpret that in the light of present circumstances, particularly the economic crisis. (Publication was delayed to allow for analysis of the changing economic situation). However, it positions all its arguments in the context of the transcendent horizon of human life, so that it insists repeatedly that the meaning of human existence and the endeavour for authentic development can only be approached in the light of the Gospel.

The second chapter of the encyclical – ‘Human Development in Our Time’ – offers a wide-ranging and highly critical analysis of the economic practices and values which led to the current crisis so that, even although economic growth has brought some benefit, it ‘has been and continues to be weighed down by *malfunctions and dramatic problems*, highlighted even further by the current crisis.’ (#21) The interconnected nature of the problems confronting humanity calls for ‘new efforts of holistic understanding and a *new humanistic synthesis*’, (#21) which go beyond simply economic and technological solutions to meet the manifold challenges of a global order in which new forms of injustice and exploitation have proliferated since the time of Paul VI’s encyclical, including the diminution of the power of public authorities, deregulation, and the rise of powerful corporations which has undermined social security systems, neglected the interests of citizens and workers, and caused ‘great psychological and spiritual suffering’. (#25) At the same time, the mobility of modern life brings with it a mingling of cultures in a way that encourages relativism and a loss of the transcendent perspective.

The most inspiring sections of the encyclical – and the ones which I suspect Benedict himself had a hand in drafting – are those which rise above the minutiae of economics and politics to offer an eloquent vision of the meaning of human life – even if the exclusive language in the English translation is unfortunate: ‘Man is not a lost atom in a random universe: he is God’s creature, whom God chose to endow with an immortal soul and whom he has always loved.’ (#29)

Yet for all its many insights, radical challenges and profound visions of the meaning and purpose of human life, *Caritas in Veritate* is a conservative and even a reactionary document when compared with *Populorum Progressio*. While the latter made justice and peace the basis for the social order, *Caritas in Veritate* subordinates these to *caritas* – interpreted either as love or as charity. This is significant, if we bear in mind that, as Head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the then Cardinal Ratzinger was one of the most zealous opponents of some aspects of liberation theology and justice and peace movements. Many liberationist arguments were based on a critique of the concept of charity, claiming that charity served to maintain the status quo while justice demanded a revolutionary transformation in the institutions and structures of society. Dom Helder Camara expressed something of this conflict in his widely-quoted saying, ‘When I give bread to the poor they call me a saint, when I ask why the poor have no bread, they call me a communist.’ *Caritas in Veritate* acknowledges that the idea of charity is open to abuse, but nevertheless insists that it is the indispensable foundation for truth and justice. Benedict XVI also situates his reading of *Populorum Progressio* in the context of two other, far less liberal documents – *Humanae Vitae*, and John Paul II’s 1975 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. The encyclical is marked by a

pervasive anxiety about the effects of relativism and materialism on human well-being, and it is also very different from its predecessor *Pacem in Terris* in its treatment of human rights. *Pacem in Terris* subordinates duties to rights, whereas *Caritas in Veritate* subordinates rights to duties. *Pacem in Terris* includes among its list of duties a duty to claim one's rights: 'if a man becomes conscious of his rights, he must become equally aware of his duties. Thus he who possesses certain rights has likewise the duty to claim those rights as marks of his dignity, while all others have the obligation to acknowledge those rights and respect them.' (#44) *Caritas in Veritate* is far more circumspect in its discussion of rights. It cautions that '*rights presuppose duties, if they are not to become mere licence*' and goes on to argue that 'The sharing of reciprocal duties is a more powerful incentive to action than the mere assertion of rights.' (#43)

The marked shift in the tone and emphasis of the social teaching encyclicals between the 1960s and today can in no small measure be attributed to the growing emphasis on women's rights and on sexual and reproductive rights in the United Nations and the international community.

I have already referred to the fact that *Pacem in Terris* identified the role of women as one of the three most significant issues in modern society. Although it might surprise some to hear me say this, in my view Pope John Paul II has been the only modern pope to recognize this and make it a central feature of his teaching. Throughout his papacy he showed a serious and sustained willingness to engage with questions of women's rights, even if this never persuaded him to modify his position on reproductive rights. Time and again, he called for a 'new feminism' in recognition of the role played by women in the making of history, culture and society and, if this was often rooted in a naive romanticism about motherhood and so-called 'feminine genius', it was also I believe the fruit of a genuine attentiveness to what women were saying. So, for example, in his papal message to the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, he wrote:

Development and progress imply access to resources and opportunities, *equitable* access not only between the least developed, developing and richer countries, and between social and economic classes, but also *between women and men*. Where certain groups or classes are systematically excluded from these goods, and where communities or countries lack basic social infrastructures and economic opportunities, women and children are the first to experience marginalization. And yet, where poverty abounds, or in the face of the devastation of conflict and war, or the tragedy of migration, forced or otherwise, it is very often women who maintain the vestiges of human dignity, defend the family, and preserve cultural and religious values. History is written almost exclusively as the narrative of men's achievements, when in fact its better part is most often molded by women's determined and persevering action for good.¹¹

In his Angelus address on International Woman's Day in 1998, he said that

¹¹ 'Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Mrs Gertrude Mongella, Secretary General of the Fourth World conference on Women of the United Nations, 26 May 1996, #6, available at the website http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_19950526_mongella-pechino_en.html.

We are unfortunately heirs to a history of enormous conditioning that has hindered the progress of women: their dignity is sometimes ignored, their special qualities misrepresented and they themselves are frequently marginalized. This has prevented them from being truly themselves and has deprived the whole human race of authentic spiritual riches. While recalling that the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is being celebrated this year, I wish to make an appeal on behalf of women whose basic rights are still denied today by the political regimes of their countries: women who are segregated, forbidden to study or to exercise a profession, or even to express their thoughts in public. May international solidarity hasten the due recognition of their rights.¹²

So, although he was deeply unconvinced by and increasingly hostile towards many of the claims of secular feminism, John Paul II was consistently mindful of the fact that the human race is made up of women as well as men, and it is often women who suffer most acutely the consequences of injustice, poverty and oppression. Even on the question of abortion, although vehement in his opposition to any justification of abortion, he was careful to acknowledge the wider social context in which abortion decisions are made. So, in *Evangelium Vitae*, he carefully evaluates the arguments used to justify abortion before saying why he thinks they are wrong. He acknowledges that

the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as the decision to rid herself of the fruit of conception is not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place. (#58)

He acknowledges that the woman does not always bear sole responsibility for the decision to have an abortion, which might also result from pressure by the father, a refusal by him to accept responsibility for the child, or from wider family and peer group pressures. He attributes responsibility to 'an attitude of sexual permissiveness and a lack of esteem for motherhood', to the lack of social provision for the needs of families, and to wider international policies relating to abortion. He also addresses himself to women who have had abortions, acknowledging that, although abortion is always wrong, the women themselves may have made 'a painful and even shattering decision', and he encourages them to face what they have done honestly, to ask forgiveness, and not to give in to discouragement or to lose hope, but rather to use their experience to help others in similar situations to avoid abortion. (#99). John Paul II's absolute condemnation of abortion therefore went hand in hand with an acknowledgement of the personhood and experiences of women themselves, even if it failed to acknowledge the full complexity of reproductive decisions and their capacity to affect the health, well-being and survival of women if they have no access to effective contraception and health care provision in pregnancy.

¹² John Paul II, *Angelus Address*, 8 March 1998, available at the website http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/angelus/documents/hf_jp-ii_ang_08031998_en.html.

The overall aim of *Caritas in Veritate* is to reinstate the human at the heart of economic and political structures, so that the latter become the servants rather than the masters of the former. Yet if we ask just how inclusive its vision of the human is, we might come to the conclusion that it has an unfortunately restricted view of the conditions necessary for human flourishing, and this is largely because of its failure to offer a realistic and ethical engagement with the different forms of poverty and misery which inflict themselves with particular intensity on the lives of child-bearing women. As a result, it is pervasively androcentric in its values and concepts, and it completely ignores some of the most virulent threats to human well-being, such as HIV/AIDS and maternal mortality.

Perhaps more than any other document, *Evangelium Vitae* was responsible for dissolving any distinction between the church's social teaching and its teaching on questions of sexual and reproductive ethics. In *Caritas in Veritate*, this trend continues, and *Humanae Vitae* is cited approvingly early on in the document. The organisation Catholics for Choice issued a press release in which they criticised the encyclical for its failure 'to show a true compassion for women, who often are the last to benefit from development aid.'¹³ The press release continues to point out that Benedict XVI 'never mentions maternal mortality [and] fails to fully address the impact of HIV and AIDS on developing economies'. I think this is a valid criticism, and I want to say why.

Referring to 'the problems associated with *population growth*', the encyclical points out that 'This is a very important aspect of authentic development, since it concerns the inalienable values of life and the family.' (#44) However, it immediately goes on to discuss the problems created by *declining* birth rates, and it insists that the solution to population problems lies in 'the primary competence of the family in the area of sexuality'. (#44) When I read that, I thought, 'try telling that to Josef Fritzl's daughter.' It goes on to develop its argument that declining birth rates contribute to economic problems, and concludes by arguing that it is 'becoming a social and even economic necessity once more to hold up to future generations the beauty of marriage and the family, and the fact that these institutions correspond to the deepest needs and dignity of the person.' (#44) It reiterates John Paul II's reference to the 'culture of death', evident in the 'tragic and widespread scourge of abortion' and in 'the systematic eugenic programming of births'. (#75) So let me consider this in more detail.

In its references to abortion and population control, the encyclical situates these in the context of economics and politics rather than focusing on issues of personal morality. Paradoxically, its closest allies in this might be some radical feminist theorists, who would share its concerns about the use of enforced sterilization, abortion and mandatory birth control policies in population control programmes. However, *Caritas in Veritate* promotes the rights and competence of the *family* and of parents over and against state-controlled population control policies, while feminists would promote the rights and competence of *women* in these issues, and would insist that reproductive choice – including access to effective contraception and abortion when necessary – are intrinsic to the defence of justice and women's rights in these areas.

¹³ For the full text of the press release, see 'Catholics for Choice Statement on "*Caritas in Veritate*", 7 July 2009, at the Catholics for Choice website: <http://www.catholicsforchoice.org/CaritasinVeritate.asp>.

The difference between these two approaches is that *Caritas in Veritate* has a highly idealised idea of the family which offers no acknowledgement of the fact that the family, like other social, economic and political institutions, can be destructive and violent as well as benevolent and nurturing. In other words, families and marriages also suffer the effects of sin. Moreover, the greatest threat women face to their well-being and capacity to flourish is in the areas of domestic violence, sexual abuse and, more widely, the use of rape as a weapon of war.

This is not to deny that stable and loving families provide the best environment within which to raise children, and our own society gives ample evidence of the extent to which children themselves are the most vulnerable and afflicted of all human beings when family life disintegrates. Nor is it to deny that women are just as capable as men of destructive and irresponsible behaviour. But the Church's credibility on moral matters is increasingly undermined by its failure to engage with the perspectives of women scholars who have now amassed a wealth of ethical reflection which draws on the combined resources of theology, philosophy, sociology and women's own experiences to develop moral responses to the complex challenges surrounding reproduction and sexuality. *Caritas in Veritate* emphasises the importance of dialogue in relation to truth, arguing that ‘

Truth, in fact, is lógos which creates diá-logos, and hence communication and communion. Truth, by enabling men and women to let go of their subjective opinions and impressions, allows them to move beyond cultural and historical limitations and to come together in the assessment of the value and substance of things. (#4)

But if this is indeed true, then the encyclical's own claim to truth is seriously undermined by its lack of dialogue with women.

In *Caritas in Veritate* we see no acknowledgement of the changing role of women in society, no recognition of the extent to which the family can be violent and abusive as well as nurturing and sustaining, and no engagement with the issues of justice that arise if one considers that, in the vast majority of social, economic and cultural contexts, women are not equal partners with men in parenting and sexual relationships but are far more likely to be victims of sexual violence, abuse and overt and subtle forms of domination and manipulation. In other words, defending the equality, dignity and rights of women is absolutely integral to the promotion of social justice and indeed of the kind of equal and responsible family life which Benedict seeks to defend, and this entails recognizing that families and marriages, like cultures and societies, are imperfect institutions.

This week, a statement by Amnesty International described maternal death rates in Sierra Leone as ‘a human rights emergency’.¹⁴ The report stated that Sierra Leone has one of the highest maternal death rates in the world, with one in eight women dying during pregnancy or childbirth:

¹⁴ See the Amnesty International website at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/report/maternal-death-rate-sierra-leone-quot-human-rights-emergencyquot-20090921>.

Thousands of women bleed to death after giving birth. Most die in their homes. Some die on the way to hospital; in taxis, on motorbikes or on foot. In Sierra Leone, less than half of deliveries are attended by a skilled birth attendant and less than one in five are carried out in health facilities.

Some of you might remember that, two years ago, the Catholic bishops urged Catholics to withdraw all their support from Amnesty International because it changed its constitution to include among women's human rights the right to abortion, largely in response to the widespread use of rape in conflicts such as Bosnia, the Sudan and the Congo.

So, let me conclude. The church's social teaching is, let me suggest, 'a vision for our times' which deserves to be much more widely read, discussed and implemented. But it is increasingly rooted in a highly androcentric and romanticised fantasy about the power of the family to resist the evils of society, without recognizing that the family is just as vulnerable to sin, corruption, violence and abuse as the societies of which it is a part, and women and children are overwhelmingly the victims of such violence and abuse. If the church truly wants to promote values of human dignity, equality, participation and flourishing across the frontiers of social, economic, sexual, domestic and political life, then perhaps it could learn a great deal from feminists as to how to go about that. In the meantime, I want to add an eighth sin to that list of seven mortal sins which was introduced last year. I want to say that 'denying women full and equal participation in church and society' is a deadly sin, a sin whose deadly effects are not experienced just in the hereafter because every day women suffer Dante-esque torments at the hands of husbands, fathers, neighbours, friends, strangers and soldiers. And the penance? Let women write the next papal encyclical.