

The Pope Speaks – Who Should Listen?

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By Alvin Clay III

When the Pope expresses an opinion, the reaction of the people of the world invariably ranges from unconditional agreement to automatic rejection – and everywhere in between.

It's no different today as world opinion is starting to filter in on Pope Benedict XVI's new Encyclical Letter, "Caritas in Veritate" (Charity in Truth). Charity in this sense refers to love of humanity – not simply a handout. The letter is a comprehensive analysis of global economic conditions, expressed in the light of historic Church teachings on social justice, human dignity, personal development, charity, and truth.

Some reject it simply because it was written by the Pope. Some of those are motivated by anti-Catholic biases, and others believe that the Pope should stick to matters of faith and morals, and leave the economics to the "experts." Others will accept the letter in parts, quoting those sections that support their own political or social agenda, while ignoring the parts they don't like.

The political left might embrace the comments the Pope makes about the redistribution of wealth, but ignore the statement about the usefulness of profit as a motive. The political right might celebrate the pontiff's call for a reform of the United Nations, but shudder at the suggestion that there is a need for a "true world political authority" to "manage the global economy."

Regardless of one's political bent, there is plenty in this document that will challenge us and provoke deep thought and discussion. And ultimately, that is what Caritas in Veritate means to accomplish. It states: "*The current crisis obliges us to re-plan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future.*" Who can argue with that?

Only the very few who think that there is nothing wrong with our current world financial and economic system, and that we need only to leave it alone and let it run its course. Even if we believe that nothing should be changed, shouldn't we at least re-evaluate things before we reach that conclusion?

Beyond the debatable practical suggestions in the Letter, there is an overriding theme that hopefully we can all take to heart, regardless of our role in society or faith tradition. And that is that we all have a higher calling than our station in life otherwise dictates. It's true that corporate management needs to look out for its shareholders, that unions need to look out for their members, that elected officials need to answer to their constituents, and that we all have our own *micro* responsibilities that can't be ignored.

But in addition to those considerations, there should also be a *macro* dimension to the decisions we make and the institutions we create. That dimension is referred to by the Pope as the “common good,” a concept that is embodied in our own Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution. We are more connected and more interdependent than any time in world history. The Pope is suggesting that we raise the level of our discourse, understand the consequences of our decisions, and act in a spirit of charity.

I'm listening.