

WASHINGTON, D.C., JULY 7, 2009 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Benedict XVI's latest encyclical offers a unique vision by using traditional principles to enlighten today's societal issues such as globalization, the economy, technology and the environment, affirms a university president.

Vincentian Father David O'Connell is president of The Catholic University of America. He is a consultant for the Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, and a national spokesperson on Church issues and Catholic higher education.

In this interview with ZENIT, he shares his perspective on Benedict XVI's encyclical, "Caritas in Veritate," which was released to the public today.

ZENIT: What is your general impression of the new encyclical?

Father O'Connell: We have come to expect brilliance from the lips and pen of Pope Benedict XVI. His third encyclical letter, "Caritas in Veritate," will not leave us disappointed.

Drawing from the ecclesiastical magisterium of the past half-century, the Holy Father offers a theological prism developed through long reflection upon the relationship of faith and reason, truth and freedom, and the primacy of the human person in a communion of love through which we must view the social teaching and doctrine of the Catholic Church.

This encyclical is, truly, a celebration of the Church's social teaching, with a special emphasis on Pope Paul VI's landmark post-Vatican II social encyclical "Populorum Progressio" (1967). In that encyclical, Pope Paul VI presented an exposition of the promotion of integral human development as the responsibility of the Church and all humankind in every dimension of their lives.

ZENIT: What does Benedict XVI mean when he talks about the Church's social doctrine and integral human development?

Father O'Connell: The Church's social doctrine and teachings are the fruit of a long ecclesial reflection upon the person of Jesus Christ, the proclamation of his Kingdom in the Gospels, the unfolding tradition of the Church and the claims this reflection makes upon the community of believers.

It has as its subject and object the "human person."

It is clear in Pope Benedict's writing that the human person is not merely a sum of his or her parts, so to speak, but, rather, an integral -- the word is used throughout this text -- whole: physical, spiritual, social, psychological, emotional, sexual, etc.

Our social doctrine addresses the whole human person in himself or herself but also within the context of a community of persons striving for justice in and through service of the common good.

ZENIT: Is this encyclical stating something new regarding the Church's social doctrine, or it is emphasizing certain points that have been made in previous documents on this topic?

Father O'Connell: The Church's social doctrine -- of which papal encyclicals have become an incredibly important part -- and the whole of Church teaching are developmental, building upon what has come before.

While the Holy Father, once again, displays a mastery of the Church's theological and ecclesial traditions, he makes a genuine contribution to the unfolding of Catholic belief by incorporating his own writings and vision into the text.

Most important, I believe, is his awareness of and ability to address contemporary society in all its complexity by relating the Church's doctrine to the world in which we live: globalization, the economy, life issues, technology, the environment, etc.

His theological perspective reveals a vision and a beauty that is "ever ancient, ever new."

To speak of charity as the heart of the Church's social teaching reflects the ancient mandate of the Lord Jesus himself to love our neighbor.

To adapt that teaching to contemporary issues makes this encyclical new, fresh and especially relevant.

ZENIT: Why did Benedict XVI title the encyclical "Caritas in Veritate?" What kind of dynamic between charity and truth is he highlighting for the Church?

Father O'Connell: Papal encyclicals have historically taken their names from the first few words of the text and this one is no exception.

Pope Benedict XVI's letter sees charity in truth as a Gospel theme drawn from the special witness of Jesus Christ.

They are the hinges of a message that places the human person, human dignity and human progress at the center of a list of priorities rendered meaningless, indeed, impossible without a connection to the Creator.

Truth as a light and charity as its logical consequence become for humankind the path to justice and realization of the common good.

As universal teacher, "truth" is of great significance to our Holy Father. As universal pastor, "charity" is of no less consequence.

"Charity in truth" becomes a Gospel and ecclesial imperative, and an apt way to introduce a teaching encyclical that relies on both to make its point.

ZENIT: Is this encyclical mainly written for economists and world leaders, or what message is important for the ordinary Catholic to take away from it?

Father O'Connell: The Holy Father addresses this encyclical to the hierarchy, the clergy, religious women and men as well as the lay faithful of the Roman Catholic Church but also indicates that his message is directed toward "all people of good will."

The letter itself, just released today, has been over two years in preparation. It has a substantial message that will require a careful reading and re-reading, good analysis and commentary, and some prayerful reflection.

Hopefully, it will be a subject of homilies and other preaching throughout the Catholic world as well as a topic in both theology and economics classrooms so that its principle themes can become accessible to the widest possible audience.

ZENIT: Does the Holy Father say something about the role of technology in human development?

Father O'Connell: Benedict XVI writes that the challenge of human development today is "linked to technological progress," calling technology "a profoundly human reality" related to "the autonomy and freedom of man."

He calls technology "the objective side of human action," ; but cautions that technological advancement "can give rise to the idea that technology is self-sufficient."

His message advocates that both fascination with and development of technology must be accompanied by "decisions that are the fruit of human responsibility [...]" there cannot be holistic development and universal common good [themes of this encyclical] unless people's spiritual and moral welfare is taken into account, considered in their totality as body and soul."

ZENIT: What does the Pope have to say about protecting the environment?

Father O'Connell: The Holy Father relates his consideration of human development to our "relationship to the natural environment."

He writes that "nature expresses a design of love and truth." As a consequence of this relationship and reality, the human person is called to a "responsible stewardship over nature" that includes both use and protection of the environment.

As he affirms the Church's "responsibility toward creation," the Pope writes, "the way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself and vice versa."