

Stratford Caldecott: Metaphysics Has Returned

And More Overlooked Themes of New Encyclical

By Stratford Caldecott

OXFORD, England, JULY 9, 2009 (Zenit.org).- There are four particular elements of "Caritas in Veritate" on "integral human development" that are worth mentioning because they have so far not been widely noticed.

First, this encyclical is closely connected to the Pope's two previous encyclicals -- on love and on hope -- and forms with them a triptych on the Christian faith, in both its theoretical and its practical dimensions, namely, love and hope grounded in truth.

Second, the encyclical takes Catholic social teaching to a new level by basing it explicitly on the theology of the Trinity and calling for "a deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation." Metaphysics is back.

Next, it introduces a new principle -- that of "gratuitousness" and "reciprocal gift," which enables us to break the "hegemony of the binary model of market-plus-State" (38, 39, 41).

In other words, economics as a human activity is not ethically neutral and must be structured and governed in an ethical manner; that is, in accordance with the highest ends of man.

Economics and politics are not to be separated, because justice must enter into the economy from the outset, and justice is made perfect only in "giving and forgiving."

The radical implications of this principle for the market economy will need time to unfold.

Finally, those in the Distributist, Green, and "alternative economics" movements will be encouraged that the encyclical opens the door to the development of alternative "economic entities" that act on principles other than pure profit, or which treat profit merely as a means to a social end, including cooperatives, credit unions, micro-finance, and the "economy of communion" (46).

In fact, it hopes that new "hybrid" forms of commercial behaviour will emerge in the marketplace in the future (38). It insists that the "weakest members of society should be helped to defend themselves against usury" (65), and insists that use of technology be subordinated to the "holistic meaning" of the human (70).

It consolidates the strong environmentalist emphasis of John Paul II within Benedict XVI's vision of integral human development, linking human to environmental ecology and the natural law (51).

Man is called to be the wise steward of creation, defending earth, water and air as "gifts of creation that belong to everyone," and helping to prevent mankind from destroying itself (51).

The Pope writes that it is "incumbent upon the competent authorities to make every effort to ensure that the economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources are recognized with transparency and fully borne by those who incur them, not by other peoples or future generations: the protection of the environment, of resources and of the climate obliges all international leaders to act jointly and to show a readiness to work in good faith, respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet" (50).

But all this is set against a spiritual horizon, for we cannot achieve true solidarity with others without transcending our own selfish and material concerns in the "experience of gift" (34).

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