

Riccardo Cascioli: Population Growth and the Encyclical

Development Expert Considers Benedict XVI's Innovations

By Antonio Gaspari

ROME, JULY 16, 2009 (Zenit.org).- "Caritas in Veritate" proposes that population growth is needed to bring the world out of the economic crisis. And the president of the European Center for Studies on Population, the Environment and Development agrees.

ZENIT spoke with Riccardo Cascioli of CESPAS about Benedict XVI's contribution to theories on demographics and the methods to truly guarantee development.

Cascioli here explains why the encyclical offers the true solutions to the recession and even why the Pope should be considered for a Nobel Economics Prize.

ZENIT: What is your evaluation of the encyclical?

Cascioli: Extraordinarily positive, because in going deeper into the theme of charity and truth in the economic and social perspective, he considers from the point of view of reason the most controversial issue of our time: the meaning of human presence on earth, our task and destiny. While in the West for decades now, ideologies that tend to disfigure man have taken hold -- the worst of which is "humanism without God," as the Pope recalls -- in this encyclical, the person, with his dignity and responsibility, is again placed where he belongs: at the center of creation. And it shows how the anthropological question is not a philosophical problem; on the contrary, it is determinant for economic and social realities. This is clearly in continuity with the magisterium of Benedict XVI, committed to revalue reason, the faculty specific to man. But it is also in continuity with John Paul II, who back in 1997 clearly said the decisive battle of the third millennium precisely revolves around man, the pinnacle of creation.

ZENIT: The points dealing with the demographic crisis and the environment are quite innovative. What do you think of this?

Cascioli: It is fundamental that he has said with such clarity that "to consider population increase as the primary cause of underdevelopment is mistaken, even from an economic point of view." This is a decisive point, because from the '80s onward, global politics -- under the auspices of organizations like the United Nations -- precisely endow population control, considered as a "negative" for development and for the environment. And also regarding the environment, the encyclical illustrates and shows the actual situation which is already part of the patrimony of the Church's social doctrine and which can be summarized in the phrase: Nature is for man and man is for God. "If this vision is lost," the encyclical says, "we end up either considering nature an untouchable taboo or, on the contrary, abusing it." In this way, it indicates precisely the schizophrenic situation of the secularized Western world.

ZENIT: The economist Ettore Gotti Tedeschi maintains that the Pope deserves the Nobel for economy because of highlighting the relationship between the crisis and the falling birthrate. What do you think?

Cascioli: I think he is entirely correct. There is truly a demographic crisis, and it is that of the developed countries, which for more than 40 years have a birthrate lower than

that of the generational replacement level. The encyclical brings us to see how this is the fundamental factor in the current economic crisis. And the answer cannot be merely "technical." In recent years we have understood how the sinking birthrate influences the problem of pensions, for example, but this is only one aspect of a crisis that is much broader and bound to worsen in the coming years. Governments -- and economists -- need to reflect on this point.

ZENIT: For some decades, international institutions have maintained that to favor development it is necessary to reduce births. What are the results of these policies?

Cascioli: Currently, there are many developing countries whose birthrates have dropped below the generational replacement level. Also in general, all the countries of the world -- except for a few rare exceptions -- have experienced a drastic descent in the number of births in recent decades. But not even one country has overcome poverty and underdevelopment thanks to these policies. On the contrary, controlling births has diverted important resources needed to promote true development projects. Moreover, the savage application of these policies -- as in the cases of China, India and other Asian countries -- has caused grave social disequilibrium, of which the absence of hundreds of thousands of women is merely the most striking aspect. It is not coincidence that this encyclical does not use the concept of "sustainable development," which is based precisely on a negative view of population. This is an important aspect, because even from certain Catholic environments, there is pressure to accept the ideology of "sustainability."

ZENIT: Contrary to the proposal, even from some Catholic circles, that to save the planet, there must be a reduction in development and demographic growth, (and hence, the theories about reductionism), "Caritas in Veritate" explains that development is a vocation to support the common good and that there is no development without demographic growth. What do you think?

Cascioli: Here as well the encyclical brings clarity and dismisses many prevailing norms. Development -- understood as integral development of the person and of populations -- is man's vocation. And this is what we should tend toward. Reduction is not a value, nor the way out for the economy. The true challenge is taking the fundamental dimensions of development. It is not a coincidence that the encyclical puts the right to life and the right to religious liberty as fundamental conditions for true development. Certain elements that seem damaged to us -- like working conditions or the environment in countries involved in a development as rapid as it is chaotic -- are actually the fruit of a concept that reduces development to economic growth, in which man is reduced to a mere instrument of this growth.

ZENIT: Returning to the theme of development, Benedict XVI's encyclical proposes a social revolution that passes from "solidarity" to the concept of "fraternity" and that joins together truth and charity. How do you see this?

Cascioli: It supposes a great novelty on which it is important to reflect. The term solidarity today goes along with a reductionist and sentimental view of charity, which the encyclical wants to turn around. And, coherently, it dedicates an entire chapter precisely to "fraternity." While solidarity highlights a person's actions toward other people, fraternity highlights what we receive, because it presupposes the recognition of one father, without whom we cannot consider ourselves brothers. Once again, it emphasizes the vocation of man as the factor that determines everything, also community life.

ZENIT: For decades, the Catholic world has seemed to be divided between those

who do charity work and those who are dedicated more to bioethical questions, like the defense of life and family. With this encyclical, the Pope maintains that there is no charity without truth and that only in truth does charity stand out. Thus it emphasizes that "without truth, charity is confined to a narrow field devoid of relations. It is excluded from the plans and processes of promoting human development of universal range, in dialogue between knowledge and praxis." What would you say about this?

Cascoli: Life is one and it cannot be divided into sectors. But at the same time, just as with a house, there are foundations, there are walls, partitions, the roof and the trimmings. The right to life and religious liberty are the foundations. Without foundations, even the most beautiful houses are bound to collapse with the first wind. The current economic crisis proves this, but if this lesson is not understood, the crisis will not be halted.

[Translation by Kathleen Naab]