NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Econ encyclical 'more on ethics than structure'

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 5, 2009

(CNS photo)

Effectively stealing some thunder from his own forthcoming encyclical on social themes, Pope Benedict XVI insisted last week that underneath the current global economic crisis lurks greed, rooted in original sin, and that reform of global economic architecture will be of little use without the conversion of individual hearts.

?Where there are no just people, there is no justice,? Benedict said. ?For that reason, education in justice must be a priority ? perhaps we could say, ?the? priority. ? Good structures can?t be developed if they?re opposed by egoism, including that of people of great technical competence.?

The comments came in a Feb. 26 Q & A session Benedict held with priests from the Rome diocese, as part of the Vatican?s observance of Lent.

This link connects with the transcript of that session.
[1]----------

Thursday?s ?sneak peak? suggests two insights about the new encyclical:

- It will concentrate less on structural analysis than on the ethical and spiritual premises of economic justice;
- Rather than setting social activism and personal piety at odds, sometimes referred to as ?horizontal? and ?vertical? spiritualities, Benedict seems likely to argue that the two are mutually dependent.

The Vatican is expected to release Benedict?s new encyclical letter, the third of his pontificate, later in March. Titled ?Charity in Truth? (Caritas in Veritate), the document had been set to appear in September 2008, but the eruption of the economic crisis compelled the pope to revisit the text.

Pre-publication materials prepared last fall indicated that the encyclical contains two broad sections: a review of the social teaching of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, and then Benedict?s reflections upon major social concerns such as threats to unborn human life, poverty, issues of war and peace, terrorism, globalization, and environmentalism. In his treatment of those issues, Benedict is said to draw upon natural law arguments, designed to be open to everyone, as well as the Bible.

In his remarks on Thursday, the pope said he has been working on the encyclical ?for a long time.?

?Along the way, I?ve come to see how difficult it is to speak on this subject with competence, because if a given economic reality isn?t confronted competently, [the treatment] won?t be credible,? the pope said.

An encyclical, or ?circulating,? letter is generally used to express the lengthiest and most developed form of papal teaching.

Benedict spoke about the economy on Thursday in response to a priest who works in a poor neighborhood on the periphery of Rome, who asked if the church isn?t obligated ?to denounce an economic and financial system that?s unjust at its roots.?

In his reply, Benedict distinguished between two levels: ?macro-justice,? meaning the ethical dimension of national and international economic systems, and ?micro-justice,? referring to the ethical choices of individual people. His thesis was that while the church is obligated to denounce inequities at the first level, such as ?the fundamental errors now revealed in the collapse of the great American banks,? its unique contribution is promoting change of heart at the second level.

Benedict insisted that the economic crisis cannot be understood simply in technical terms as a breakdown of economic mechanism, but must be seen spiritually as an object lesson in the dangers of greed, self-interest, and privileging the desires of one?s own group over the common good.

?In the end, it?s a question of human avarice in the form of sin, or, as the Letter to the Colossians says, avarice as idolatry,? the pope said. ?We must denounce this idolatry which stands against the true God, as well as the falsification of the image of God with another God, which is ?mammon.??

Original sin, Benedict argued, distorts both human reason and human desires, allowing the tug of narrow interests to prevail over the good of all.

?Maybe it?s pessimism, but to me it seems like realism: as long as there?s original sin, we will never arrive at a radical and total solution,? the pope said. ?However, we have to do everything we can on behalf of at least provisional solutions, solutions sufficient to allow humanity to live ? to prevent the domination of egoism, which presents itself under the pretext of science and the national and international economy.?

In that sense, the pope said, the ?humble, daily work? of pastors and spiritual guides is actually ?fundamental, not just for the parish, but for humanity.?

?If we don?t proclaim macro-justice, then micro-justice won?t grow,? Benedict said. ?But if we don?t do our very humble work of micro-justice, then macro-justice won?t grow either. And always, as I said in my first encyclical, despite all the systems that can grow in the world, charity always remains necessary.?

Source URL (retrieved on *2016-06-28 21:47*): http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/econ-encyclical-more-ethics-structure

Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/12551