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In preview of new encyclical, Benedict reprises 'dictatorship of relativism' speech

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 29, 2009 NCR Today

BY JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
Rome

tBy the time Pope Benedict XVI?s new social encyclical appears in early July, it may well seem largely anti-climactic. Extracts have already appeared in the Italian press, and yesterday the pontiff actually scooped himself by devoting his remarks for the close of his ?Pauline Year? to the theme of *Caritas in Veritate*, ?Charity in Truth,? also the title of his long-awaited meditation on the economy.

tIn effect, what Benedict laid out last night likely amounts to the theological and spiritual substructure of the encyclical, minus the specific economic prescriptions.

tThe core of what Benedict said, during an ecumenical vespers service at the grand basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, is that building a better world requires forming better people. Structural reform thus presupposes personal moral and spiritual renewal, including a life devoted to prayer and the sacraments.

[Editor's note: For more analysis from John Allen on the new encyclical, see: **Economic encyclical expands on church's 'best-kept secret'** [1].]

tIn a passage evocative of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger?s famous ?dictatorship of relativism? homily four years ago, Benedict urged Christians to be ?non-conformists,? refusing to accept the values of secular modernity. In particular, Benedict XVI rejected a ?do-it-yourself? version of Catholic teaching, insisting upon opposition to abortion and gay marriage as part of what it means to have an ?adult faith.?

Standing just a few feet away from what Christian tradition regards as the tomb of St. Paul, the pope also revealed that carbon-14 testing has confirmed that the fragments of bone contained within the sarcophagus belong to a man of the first or second century ? thereby confirming, Benedict said, ?the unanimous and uncontested tradition? that the sarcophagus contains ?the mortal remains of the apostle Paul.?

tThe vespers service yesterday evening closed a ?Pauline Year? opened last June 28 by Benedict XVI to commemorate the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of St. Paul, the ?apostle to the gentiles.?

tThe idea that a better world must be built on better people is likely to be a core theme in *Caritas in Veritate*, and the pope dealt with it at length yesterday.

t?Paul tells us [that] the world cannot be renewed without new human beings,? Benedict said. ?Only if there are new human beings will there be a new world, a renewed and better world.?

tFrom that premise, Benedict said that personal spiritual renewal requires ?non-conformism,? an unwillingness to ?submit oneself to the scheme of the current epoch.? Doing so, the pope said, requires a new way of thinking

at odds with the values of the world, shaped by encounter with the ?new man? of Jesus Christ.

t?The way of thinking of the old man, the common way of thinking, is generally directed toward possessions, well-being, influence, success, fame, and so on,? Benedict said. ?Thus in the last analysis, the ?I? remains the precise center of the world. We have to learn to think in a more profound manner,? the pope said, based on the desires of God rather than the self.

tBenedict recalled Paul?s insistence upon an ?adult faith,? mocking the use of that phrase to justify dissent from official Catholic doctrine.

t?The phrase ?an adult faith? in recent decades has become a diffuse slogan,? the pope said. ?It?s often used to mean someone who no longer listens to the church and its pastors, but who chooses autonomously what to believe and not to believe ? a ?do-it-yourself? faith. This is then presented as the ?courage? to express oneself against the magisterium of the church.?

t?In reality, however, courage isn?t needed for that, because one can always be sure of public applause,? the pope said. ?What takes courage is adhering to the faith of the church, even if it contradicts the ?scheme? of the contemporary world.?

tBenedict specifically highlighted opposition to abortion and gay marriage as part of that package.

t?Part of an adult faith, for example, is a commitment to the inviolability of human life from its first moment, radically opposing the principle of violence, precisely in the defense of the most defenseless of human creatures,? the pope said.

?Part of an adult faith is also recognizing marriage between a man and a woman for life as part of the design of the Creator, newly reestablished by Christ,? he said.

Those comments came as part of a meditation on chapter four of Paul?s letter to the Ephesians, the same New Testament passage underlying then-Cardinal Ratzinger?s homily just before the conclave that elected him to the papacy four years ago in which he identified a ?dictatorship of relativism? as the central challenge to the faith today.

tYet Benedict insisted that what it means to be a ?new person? in Christ is not primarily about what someone opposes, but what he or she supports. In that regard, the pope said, the test of one?s commitment to truth, or *veritas*, is one's love, *caritas*.

t?Love is the test of truth,? the pope said. ?Ever more we must be measured by this criterion, that truth becomes love and that love makes us truthful.?

tBenedict argued that because Christ?s love extends to the entire universe, Christian concern for the world must likewise have a cosmic dimension. Though the pontiff did not develop the point last night, on previous occassions that insight have provided the basis for a strong environmental message.

t?The crucified Christ embraces the entire universe in all of its dimensions,? Benedict said.

tBenedict closed by urging a life of prayer and participation in the sacraments as a remedy to what he called the ?interior emptiness? of modern life, reflected among other things, the pope said, in drug use.

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