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A key to reading Benedict's social encyclical

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 2, 2009 All Things Catholic

Also: the Vatican on Galileo, a hidden treasure in Rome, and more

Italians have a wonderful phrase, *chiave di lettura*, which literally means a "key to reading." It refers to some core idea, or perspective, that can help make sense of a complex mass of material. Since Benedict XVI's long-awaited encyclical on the economy is finally set to appear next Tuesday, it seems a good time to float a possible *chiave di lettura* for the document, which I can express in one word: synthesis.

Titled *Caritas in Veritate* (the English title is "Love in Truth,") the encyclical will be presented Tuesday in a Vatican news conference. I'll be on hand for it, as well as for Pope Benedict's meeting with President Barack Obama next Friday.

Though the pope may not spell it out quite this way, much of *Caritas in Veritate* could well shape up as an attempt to synthesize three of the most persistent -- and, Benedict would doubtless say, artificial -- dichotomies in recent Catholic experience:

- Personal conversion versus social reform;
- Pro-life versus peace and justice commitments;
- Horizontal versus vertical spirituality.

All three points can be understood as partial versions of one "grand dichotomy," that between truth and love.

To be sure, that idea is unlikely to figure in many news headlines on Tuesday, which will probably focus on the pope's policy recommendations, and/or his condemnations of greed. On the blogs, meanwhile, a slugfest will almost certainly erupt over whether the encyclical skews closer to the political right or left. (Its release just three days before President Barack Obama meets Benedict will probably fuel that cycle of spin.)

For those interested in drilling down, however, I suspect "synthesis" will prove a helpful way of pulling the document's strands together.

Inspiration for this *chiave di lettura* comes from Benedict himself, in a Q&A session two years ago with priests from the dioceses of Belluno-Feltre and Treviso in Italy. On that occasion, Benedict said: "Catholicism, somewhat simplistically, has always been considered the religion of the great 'et et': not of great forms of exclusivism, but of synthesis. The exact meaning of 'Catholic' is 'synthesis'."

Scrutinizing what's already on the record about *Caritas in Veritate*, it seems this "both/and" spirit is likely to pulsate through the document.

Personal conversion and social change

Perhaps no single idea is likely to loom larger than the insistence that a real fix to the global economic crisis -- which, of course, has to involve looking at structural matters such as trading relationships, tax policies, lending practices, and so on -- must first be rooted in personal conversion. Unless individual human beings act ethically, and see themselves as accountable to the common good, any system can be hijacked, subverted and corrupted, however noble its design.

A few days ago, unofficial extracts from *Caritas in Veritate* were published in the Italian press, and this idea figured heavily in those passages.

"Development is impossible without just human beings, without economic and political leaders who live the appeal to the common good strongly in their own consciences," the pope was reported to have written.

We don't need leaks, however, to get a sense of what's on the way, because most of Benedict's public remarks during the past week have seemed like a preview of the encyclical.

In a homily on Monday, Benedict reflected on the link between the personal and the social: "Lack of care for the soul, the misery of the interior person, not only destroys the individual, but it threatens the destiny of humanity in its entirety. ? Without healing of the soul, without healing of the person from within, there can be no salvation for humanity."

The day before, during a vespers service at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls to mark the close of the "Pauline Year," Benedict offered another version of the same point: "Paul tells us [that] the world cannot be renewed without new human beings," he said. "Only if there are new human beings will there be a new world, a renewed and better world."

To some extent, this emphasis on holding the personal and the social together reprises a key idea from Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, in which he argued that programs of social justice can never eliminate the need for individual acts of charity. In a sense, *Caritas in Veritate* is likely to apply the same insight to the economy: There's no economic justice without individual morality -- rooted, ultimately, in truth.

Pro-Life and Peace-and-Justice Commitments

As he has elsewhere, Benedict is likely to reject any attempt to pick and choose among the church's social teachings, particularly when it comes to the wearily familiar tendency among Catholics to splinter into pro-life and peace-and-justice camps.

During the Sunday vespers service at St. Paul Outside the Walls, Benedict delivered a homily which called to mind his famous "dictatorship of relativism" speech on the cusp of the conclave that elected him to the papacy. Just as four years ago, Benedict on Monday was reflecting on Paul's letter to the Ephesians, urging Christians not to be like infants "tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching arising from human trickery."

In that spirit, Benedict said that spiritual renewal requires "non-conformism," an unwillingness to "submit oneself to the scheme of the current epoch." Benedict recalled Paul's insistence upon an "adult faith," mocking the use of that phrase to justify dissent from official Catholic doctrine.

"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."

"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."

Benedict specifically highlighted opposition to abortion and gay marriage.

"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."

The leaked portions of *Caritas in Veritate* suggest that Benedict will come back to this point in the encyclical.

"Openness to life is at the heart of true development," the pope writes, according to the reports. "If personal and social sensibility for welcoming new life is lost, then other forms of welcome which are also useful for social life dry up."

Horizontal and Vertical Spirituality

A third recurrent tension in Catholic life runs between a primarily "vertical" spirituality, focused on the believer's personal faith life and relationship with God, and one that's more "horizontal," emphasizing the community of the faithful and broader engagement with the world. This tension sometimes ends up putting missionary efforts and social justice activism at odds, as if preaching the gospel were a distraction from building a better world.

On other occasions when Benedict XVI has touched upon social themes, he's argued that not only can vertical and horizontal spiritualities be reconciled, but that the former is a sine qua non for the latter. There can be no just world, the pontiff has insisted, without Christ, who is the source of justice.

That theme came across most clearly during Benedict's 2007 trip to Brazil, when he reflected at length on the idea of Latin America as a "continent of hope."

"Not a political ideology, not a social movement, not an economic system," the pope said, "but faith in the God who is love -- who took flesh, died and rose in Jesus Christ -- is the authentic basis for this hope."

Benedict acknowledged that a vertical spirituality "must not serve as an excuse for avoiding the historical reality in which the church lives as she shares the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor and afflicted." Yet Benedict insisted that social solidarity likewise must not dislodge proclamation of Christ, participation in the sacraments, and the promotion of holiness.

According to the extracts making the rounds, Benedict will make this point too in *Caritas in Veritate*.

The truth and love of Christ, the pope is reported to have written, is "the principal resource at the service of the true development of every single person and of all humanity."

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Two footnotes.

First, the line-up for Tuesday's press conference includes Italian Cardinal Renato Martino, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace; German Cardinal Paul Cordes, president of Cor Unum, the Vatican

office that oversees charitable activity; Bishop Giampaolo Crepaldi, the number two official at Justice and Peace; and Stefano Zamagni, a professor of political economy at the University of Bologna, who was consulted in the preparation of the encyclical. Cordes was perhaps the key Vatican influence on Benedict XVI's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, and both he and Martino were involved in *Caritas in Veritate*. Notably, American Cardinal William Levada of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, who was present at the press conference for *Deus Caritas Est*, won't be on hand this time -- suggesting that even less than Benedict's first encyclical, this one is not seen by the Vatican as treating strictly doctrinal questions.

Second, it would be silly to suggest that the Vatican somehow timed the release of *Caritas in Veritate* to coincide with Obama's visit (which will probably not stop someone from doing it), but even so the coincidence does lend the document a particular relevance. On the subject of that July 10 encounter, one thing seems clear: To say that Obama is going out of his way to see the pope is, in this case, not just a political figure of speech. He'll arrive at the Apostolic Palace directly from the Abruzzo region of Italy, where earlier in the day he'll wrap up a G8 summit and also hold bilateral meetings with other leaders. After his session with the pope, Obama will be wheels up within moments -- en route to Ghana for a two-day visit, his first trip to sub-Saharan Africa since his election.

The White House's determination to put a meeting with Benedict on Obama's calendar on such a complicated day, even before the new U.S. ambassador to the Holy See has been confirmed, is striking. Likewise, the Vatican generally schedules meetings with heads of state in the late morning, so its willingness to accommodate Obama's arrival in the afternoon can also be read as a sign of eagerness.

In addition to seeing the pontiff, Obama is also expected to meet briefly with Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican's Secretary of State, and other senior Vatican diplomats. Those meetings are closed, though typically the Vatican issues a brief statement afterwards.

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The big Vatican stories in early July are the encyclical and the meeting with Obama, which means that everything else tends to fall through the cracks.

Under other circumstances, a press conference on Thursday with Bishop Sergio Pagano to present a new edition of a book on Galileo might have been a hot ticket. Not only is Galileo interesting, but Pagano, the prefect of the Vatican's Secret Archives, is also the point man on the release of documents from the era of Pope Pius XII, the wartime pontiff whose alleged silence during the Holocaust remains an explosive subject in Catholic-Jewish relations and elsewhere.

As things stand, however, "electric" would not quite be the word to describe the event. In fact, it took the vice-director of the Holy See Press Office, Passionist Fr. Ciro Benedettini, to even pop a question about Pius XII, when it become clear that the handful of gathered journalists weren't going to do so.

That said, the news conference still produced a number of insights worth recording -- in part because Pagano is always open and direct, not to mention a world-class scholar who knows his stuff.

He was on hand to present a new edition of *Vatican Documents of the Trial of Galileo Galile*i (1611-1741), the 1984 volume which Pagano edited at the request of the late Pope John Paul II. Pagano said the new edition is the "most complete" and "most careful" collection of material from Galileo's case, including 20 new documents discovered after 1984. (The new material, however, is not exactly a blockbuster; several of the texts are versions of a Vatican edict refusing to grant permission to read Galileo's books. (For the record, Pagano said the requests came from Dominicans.)

The volume has a 208-page introduction by Pagano which steps through the events between 1611 (when Cardinal Robert Bellarmine first asked Jesuit scientists to look into Galileo's scientific theories) and 1633 (when Galileo was imprisoned for two weeks in an apartment in the headquarters of the Inquisition, today the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, while being interrogated. He was eventually sentenced to prison, but allowed to live under house arrest.)

Pagano stressed that his introduction is a work of history, not apologetics, because "the best defense of the church is always the truth." He went on to say that he's not fond of "empty and useless" attempts to paper over the Galileo case. He pointed to a recent book in Germany, which asserted that Galileo was not targeted by the church for his scientific views but rather as a heretic (because he had allegedly denied the omnipotence of God).

Pagano called that claim a "pure fantasy," for which "there's not a shred of evidence" in the documentary record.

Commenting on Galileo himself, Pagano said that the scientist saw himself as a "good and faithful Catholic." Pagano pointed out, for example, that while he was under house arrest, the Netherlands wanted to present him with a fairly valuable gift. Because Holland was a Protestant nation, however, Galileo refused to see the ambassador or to take the gift -- a decision, Pagano said, that was well-received in Rome.

Introducing Pagano, Benedettini had called the Galileo case a "painful chapter for the church." Later on I asked Pagano if he agreed, and if so, what we ought to learn from it.

"Not only was it painful for the church as a whole," Pagano replied, but also "for the people of the church." For example, Pagano said that while some Jesuits at the Roman College had it out for Galileo, probably because of jealousy, other Jesuits were "certainly on his side, but they remained silent" -- out of fear, Pagano said, of the Holy Office.

In terms of what we ought to learn, Pagano said the basic point is to be "very careful" about drawing conclusions about science on the basis of scripture and tradition, without first being sure those points of reference have been correctly understood and interpreted.

That, Pagano suggested, is a point with contemporary relevance.

"When I look at some of what's being said today about stem cells, for example, or about genetics, I sometimes have the impression that it's burdened with the same preconceptions that happened with Galileo."

As for Pius XII, Pagano confirmed what the Vatican has already announced, which is that it's likely to take five to six years to prepare all the remaining material for release, and then it will the pope's decision when to open it up. Pagano called Pius XII "a great pope," and said the Secret Archives a preparing a volume documenting the pope's extensive charitable activity during World War II -- a volume, he said, which will contain "some pleasant surprises."

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On Wednesday I was a guest for lunch at the Lay Centre, a residence for lay students from around the world, Catholic and non-Catholic, who are studying at one of Rome's pontifical universities. It also functions as a center for various meetings, courses, and presentations throughout the year. This week it was hosting a seminar for lay ecclesial ministers from the States, accompanied by Rick McCord, executive director of the U.S. bishop's department for Laity, Marriage, Family Life and Youth.

I gave a presentation focusing among other things on navigating the "cultural gap" between America and Rome.

I'll repeat here a point I made on Wednesday: the Lay Center is one of the "hidden treasures" of Rome. Run by an American lay woman named Donna Orsuto, a professor of spirituality at the Gregorian University, the Lay Centre has no sponsorship by a diocese or a religious order, and thus operates on a shoestring budget. Nonetheless, it manages to carve out a unique space for dialogue and formation for laity in what is still very much a clerical environment.

The Lay Centre is currently moving to a new location, which should allow it some room to breathe. Its Web site can be found here: www.laycentre.org. Anyone looking for a good cause in Rome, worthy of their support, would do well to check it out.

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On Monday this week, I was in St. Peter's Basilica to watch Pope Benedict XVI bestow the pallium, a band of woolen cloth that symbolizes both the authority of an archbishop and his bond with the pope, upon 34 new archbishops named during the past year, including five Americans:

- Gregory Aymond of New Orleans;
- Robert Carlson of St. Louis;
- Timothy Dolan of New York;
- George Lucas of Omaha;
- Allen Vigneron of Detroit.

I've already written a fair bit about the pallium, both on-line and in print, so here I'll simply append two footnotes.

First, the North American College, the residence for American seminarians studying in Rome, does a marvelous job of making Americans who come over for festivities such as the pallium feel at home. After the ceremony on Monday, they hosted a large reception for the various delegations who accompanied their archbishops, as well as for other Americans in Rome. The food and drink were plentiful, and the seminarians and faculty, as always, were infinitely gracious, even though we were essentially ruining their day off. (June 29, the feast of Sts. Peter and Paul, is a holiday in Italy). I repeatedly found myself muttering "God bless the United States," if for no other reason than that the NAC, unlike most ecclesiastical facilities in Rome, has great air conditioning. (By way of contrast, I was in the Sala Regia inside the Apostolic Palace on Tuesday for an event, and nearly got tennis elbow fanning myself.)

Second, if they gave an award for best quip during the pallium event, this year's prize would probably have to go to Vigneron. He's got an intellectual's wit, which didn't happen by accident; he holds a doctorate in philosophy from The Catholic University, where his dissertation was on Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology.

On Monday, the five American archbishops held a brief session with reporters before scuttling off to the NAC reception, where Dolan kicked things off by declaring he was glad Carlson had been in the basilica that morning, because he sweated even more heavily than Dolan did. Then Dolan added that he saw the pope sweating too.

Without missing a beat, Vigneron told Dolan that the pope doesn't sweat: "The Holy Father 'dews,' " he said.

That was a joking reference to debates within the U.S. bishops' conference about whether or not to use the word

"dew" in the new English translation of the Mass. Some people thought it had an appropriately sacral touch, while others found the term obscure and likely to be misunderstood. It was clear throughout that the Vatican is keen on "dew."

Those on hand Monday who'd sat through some of those sessions, which at times could seem endless, found Vigneron's line uproarious.

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