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Pope Benedict invites all to think boldly in Love

Douglas W. Kmiec | Jul. 7, 2009

Barack Obama is headed to Rome to visit with the Holy Father. If in place of the in-flight movie, the president reads the Holy Father?s latest encyclical, *Caritas on Veritate*, he will be inspired in two ways.

First, he will see how natural is his collaboration with the Holy See in support of economic and social reforms, be they to restore fairness to the market or to provide access to healthcare.

Second, he will be reading a papal document that because of Benedict?s expected, and I daresay fulfilled, freedom to speak in a spiritual idiom far broader than that of public policy and everyday politics, the justifications for the reforms the president and his like-minded international counterparts seek lie in the truth of the human person and not just Pareto optimal moves measured by cost-benefit or other economic analysis. Obama will be asked to see the ultimate antidote to a sick economy as love or what Benedict styles as the ?the gratuity of gift.?

We are so far from the recognition of this gratuity, that there is a risk for the president to concede the similarity of his ideas to that of the Holy Father. Nevertheless, I suspect in the presence of his Holiness, he will find it hard to resist. The reason for this excitement will be the president?s own faith commitment. A person lacking that would find the new encyclical to be far more radical than anything modern economic commentary would tolerate or imagine.

Catholics should not be distressed by this any more than the president. Benedict writes to reveal, not to describe. His discernment is that of the theologian pulled like magnetic force by the nature of the human person created in God's image. The papal insight is thus entitled to be understood as intended to meet the needs ? not just of mere national citizens of even one of the finest systems of economic governance devised by man, but of us -- creatures whose meaning lies in a mind we cannot fully know, yet by revelation, believe are destined for something and some place far greater than the most prosperous world capital.

For these reasons, the encyclical would in ordinary moment be criticized as utopian or ignored as otherworldly and impractical. No doubt the unqualified defenders of the free-market at the president?s former academic home, the University of Chicago, whose devotion to market answers always finds clever vocabulary to blinker enormous economic disparity, the misuse of created environment, and even the disregard for the labor of the human person will likely give the Holy Father's teaching a smug dismissal. ?Contrary to the economic sciences,? they will proclaim, ?dismissive of private property,? they will harrumph.

Even some of the president?s advisors will urge caution, and they should. Yet, I know this: because the

president is fully aware of the misery of poverty, of lack of shelter, health care, the political instability bread by economies without the capacity to produce food or even clean water, that he will take to heart the spiritual instruction and turn his intelligent open-mindedness for which he is now well regarded for how the core of the encyclical might be made practical.

No doubt the Holy Father was writing for the church universal, but let me suggest with insufficient humility perhaps, that capturing this president?s attention can lead to the type of alliance on the economic front that we fondly associate with John Paul II and Ronald Reagan in the defeat of cold war political oppression.

All of us have much to gain from the study of this work. The pope has written not as political figure, economist, or even mere student of human culture -- though he is that ? but with the voice of the Holy Spirit. In that voice, he asks us to appreciate how little is understood without love and how with love what we thought we understood is comprehended more fully.

To illustrate the agreement in practical terms between the president and the pontiff let me quote just a few direct passages below to entice you to read them comparatively and more completely. As I do, I am not unmindful that certain political actors in our society will merely stress the tragic divergence between the president and the Holy Father on the issue of life.

I have already urged an uninhibited give and take on this between the men on abortion and stem cell research, for I have confidence that the truth that none of us have license to destroy human life within the womb from the moment of conception will emerge. It does not understate that social and juridical ideal, however, to urge that the balance of the Holy Father?s writing not be ignored.

What is synthesized from the magisterium here, and what is written anew, illustrates the interconnectedness of all efforts to acknowledge the truth of human life and how all are to be encouraged. At whatever point we are vocationally inspired to enter the effort we become life?s protector, and we commit ourselves to the charity that rests in truth.

In Benedict?s thoughtful, and thought-provoking, words (in bold typeface):

?Only in truth does charity shine forth, only in truth can charity be authentically lived. . . .Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality.?

The president has likewise conceded, albeit incompletely, the existence of moral absolutes, even as man struggles to grasp them with certainty. His lesson of the importance of the Declaration of Independence to constitutional meaning this past July 4 reiterated this point.

To desire the common good and strive towards it is a requirement of justice and charity.
The president has made his every day prayer ?That Americans Will Respect the Faith of Many for the Good of Us All.?

?The conviction that man is self-sufficient and can successfully eliminate the evil present in history by his own action alone has led him to confuse happiness and salvation with immanent forms of material prosperity and social action.?

The president?s own journey of faith has related how even service of others in community fails to fulfill if one does not act ought of a genuine ethic of concern for others.

?The scandal of glaring inequalities continues. Corruption and illegality are unfortunately evident in the conduct of the economic and political class in rich countries, both old and new, as well as in poor ones. Among those who sometimes fail to respect the human rights of workers are large multinational companies as well as local producers.?

Most of the president?s work has been devoted to a response to these far too obvious, and disappointingly obvious, realities of sinfulness.
The Holy Father concludes in hope. The president began there.

?At the conclusion of the Pauline Year, I gladly express this hope in the Apostle's own words, taken from the Letter to the Romans: ?Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honour? (Rom 12:9-10).

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