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The $64,000 question from Benedict's encyclical, and other Vatican goings-on

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[**Note:** John Allen is in Rome covering the visit Friday of President Barack Obama to Pope Benedict XVI. Watch the *NCR* web site for his breaking news reports.]

Now that Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical on the economy, *Caritas in Veritate*, is finally out, the predictable war of spin is well underway. Partisan reactions on both the Catholic left and right already seem clear, which might be referred to as the "Khrushchev letter" and the "Blue Meanies" strategies respectively.

In many cases, the left seems to be approaching *Caritas in Veritate* much like the Kennedy administration approached communication from Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis -- responding to what they liked, and disregarding the rest. Hence liberal commentators have hailed what Benedict had to say about labor unions, global redistribution of wealth and a planetary form of governance, but have largely glossed over his treatment of the "life issues," including abortion, birth control, gay marriage, and population control. Reading some progressive Catholic commentary, it's as if sections 15, 28 and 74-75 of *Caritas in Veritate*, devoted to the defense of human life and bioethics, simply weren't there.

The Khrushchev letter strategy also describes a fair bit of media coverage of *Caritas in Veritate*, intrigued by the irony of "conservative pope issues liberal document" and willing to overlook whatever doesn't exactly fit that script.

On the right, meanwhile, another game is afoot -- finding a cabal of "Blue Meanies" to blame for the sections of *Caritas in Veritate* that conservatives find appalling. The clearest example has come from George Weigel, who distinguished between "gold passages" in the encyclical, which he believes come from the pope himself, and "red passages," which Weigel ascribes to a "peace and justice" crowd in the Vatican, still smarting from the blow their anti-capitalist agenda took with the late John Paul II's 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*.

Of course, the main obstacle for any such "Blue Meanie" exegesis is to explain how a brilliant scholar-pontiff could have failed to notice that whole sections of a major teaching document, upon which he's been laboring for years, somehow misrepresent his own thinking. (It's a tribute to Weigel's influence that a senior Vatican official pulled me aside Thursday morning in the hallway outside the pope's apartment, maybe ten feet from where Benedict was conducting a meeting with the President of South Korea, to ask me if I had seen Weigel's piece ? even if he went on to say that he found it unpersuasive.)

In the end, it's hard to avoid the sensation that both these readings, in the words of Ned Flanders of "Simpsons" fame, feel like they're strainin' to do some explainin'.

The $64,000 question

Over time, after this entertaining but probably ephemeral round of spin dies down, experts may begin to sink

their teeth into some of the truly interesting questions raised in *Caritas in Veritate*, but not really settled by it. Such points might include what Benedict XVI has in mind by new global "synergies" among labor unions, and if the pope's dismissal of "abstract subdivisions" in Catholic social teaching -- chiefly, between pro-life and peace-and-justice advocacy -- can be translated into a more unified spirit at the Catholic grassroots.

Yet if there's a $64,000 question left hanging by *Caritas in Veritate* -- a point where Benedict's teaching seems interesting and important, but cries out for more meat on the bone -- it's probably this: What exactly would the "true world political authority" urged by the pontiff actually look like?

In keeping with papal social teaching as far back as John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, Benedict XVI argued that the development of a global system of governance is an urgent priority, both "to avoid any deterioration of the present crisis" and "to bring about integral and timely disarmament, food security and peace; to guarantee the protection of the environment and to regulate migration."

Yet for a bit of counsel that's been around at least for 46 years, the outlines of what popes mean by a "true world political authority" are notoriously fuzzy.

Popes themselves -- including, it must be said, Benedict XVI in *Caritas in Veritate* -- often don't seem terribly clear what they have in mind. Sometimes it seems like they're talking about a formal, constitutional one-world government -- a sort of United Nations on steroids. Yet in the same breath, popes usually invoke the principle of subsidiarity, which implies a devolved system of decision-making at the lowest possible level. How to square these two points remains a bit of a mystery.

To take just one example, John Paul II wrote in his 2003 message for the World Day of Peace that Catholic social teaching doesn't necessarily point to a "global super-state," but rather to "continuing and deepening processes already in place to meet the almost universal demand for participatory ways of exercising political authority, even international political authority." What precisely that means was never really explained.

Many experts regard the idea of planetary governance as perhaps the most glaring gap between the promise of Catholic social teaching and its delivery. As American Jesuit sociologist Fr. John Coleman has put it, Catholic social doctrine on this point remains "much too vague and moralistic."

Noted ethicist Fr. Bryan Hehir once explained the problem this way: Catholic social doctrine arose in an age in which the primary actors were nation-states and mediating institutions within nation-states, especially families, civic associations, and churches. Formally speaking, Catholic social teaching has relatively little to say about inter-governmental organizations such as the World Bank or Interpol or the World Trade Organization, or the burgeoning sector of Non-Governmental Organizations. In the age of globalization, those non-state actors seem destined to carry an increasing share of the load in terms of governance.

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI refers to the "governance of globalization," not "government" -- suggesting that the pope is aware that there are a variety of ways to exercise control over economic life other than a souped-up UN, or some other new planetary bureaucracy.

In that light, the following are two possible lines of reflection that academics, activists and others interested in fleshing out the promise of Catholic social teaching on this point might want to pursue.

1. A nuncio to Standard and Poors

First, in the 21st century a great deal of governance is not carried out by traditional states, or even groupings of states such as the G8 (which is meeting this week in Italy), but rather what experts call "global policy networks." These networks may be exclusively private or a mixture of public and private actors, but in either

case they exercise enormous influence over global economic life.

Two examples help make the point. As Coleman has observed, Standard and Poors is by no means a government; it's a private research firm (a division of McGraw-Hill) that analyzes stocks and bonds. Despite that, it has a remarkable degree of power to regulate the international bond market. As of 2007, over $4.5 trillion of international investments were linked to Standard and Poor's family of ratings services.

Similarly, the private Internet Corporation for Assigned Agencies, headquartered in Marina del Rey, Calif., oversees the assignment of domain names and IP addresses on the Internet. In effect, it's the closest thing cyber-space has to a "government," even though it's certainly not a public authority in the traditional sense.

Fleshing out what a "true world political authority" would look like in a 21st century would inevitably means taking seriously the role of these global policy networks -- encouraging them where they're able to perform governance more efficiently than traditional states, but also insisting that they're inspired by a sense of the common good rather than exclusively the interests of their clients or stakeholders.

Here's a possibility to ponder.

One could make the argument that by concentrating much of its diplomatic energy on the United Nations and its member states, the official structures of the church are not yet in sync with where the emerging "action" is these days in terms of global governance. Perhaps what the Vatican really needs in the 21st century is a nuncio, meaning a papal ambassador, to Standard and Poors! Whether a private financial ratings agency might be open to such an appointment is another question, but the point is that the church needs to think creatively about how to develop what Benedict XVI called for in *Caritas in Veritate*: "New forms of engagement" with global governance.

2. Horizontal Catholicism

In an October 2004 lecture at Loyola Marymount University, Coleman pondered the paradox that Roman Catholicism should be the religious actor best positioned to engage the issues raised by globalization, but aside from debt relief, its impact so far has been marginal. How to explain it?

Citing a 1998 study by Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink called *Activists Beyond Borders*, which concludes that successful global activism is "non-hierarchical, involves wide partnerships and remains truly flexible," Coleman floated the hypothesis that the official structures of the Catholic church "may lack the inner organizational flexibility for rapid and networked response to global issues as they arise."

As a result, Coleman suggests that "semi-autonomous and more local Catholic sub-groups will be the major actors in activist global networks."

Whether his diagnosis of Catholic officialdom is correct or not, Coleman was certainly onto something in highlighting the importance of what might be called "horizontal Catholicism," meaning a host of movements, associations, ad-hoc networks, and religious communities, engaged in the issues raised by globalization in a staggering variety of ways. These malleable, rapid-response forms of Catholicism will exercise a steadily more important role in framing Catholic social activism as the century unfolds.

One indicator is recent expansion in Catholic NGO's in and around the United Nations. According to a 2005 study by Kevin Ahern, when the UN first began accrediting NGO's in 1947, there were two Catholic groups: the International Union of Catholic Women's Leagues, and the Catholic International Union for Social Service. As late as 1989, fewer than thirty Catholic NGOs were recognized by the UN's Economic and Social Council. In 2005, Ahern reported, there were 63, so the total had more than doubled. Three of these Catholic NGO's hold

"general status," signifying the most important and influential non-governmental bodies: Caritas Internationalis, the Congregations of St. Joseph, and Franciscans International.

In the Catholicism of the future, NGOs, international Catholic organizations, new movements, religious orders, and a variety of ad-hoc networks without formal leadership or structures may often shape the church's public role more effectively than its official leadership.

As the church elaborates its vision of a world political authority, its own NGOs and other informal activist networks ought to have a central place at the table. The experience and insight of this horizontal Catholicism might also become a fertile locus teologicus, meaning a valuable foundation for new trajectories in Catholic social doctrine.

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The old joke about Rome in the summer is that the only things stirring are *cani e americani* ? dogs and Americans. Usually the one-two punch of intense heat and lengthy Italian vacations mean that it's a pretty sleepy place.

This week, however, has been a rare exception, packed with drama on the Vatican beat. In addition to the release of *Caritas in Veritate* on Tuesday during a packed Vatican news conference, we've also seen a shake-up in the Vatican office that handles relations with Catholic traditionalists, and papal sessions with a flock of heads of state -- including, of course, the highly anticipated first meeting between Benedict XVI and U.S. President Barack Obama tomorrow.

Given everything else happening, Benedict's overhaul of the Ecclesia Dei Commission, created in 1988 by John Paul II to oversee relations with the followers of the late French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, to some extent fell through the cracks. In any other week, however, it likely would have been the big Vatican headline, for two reasons.

First, by bringing Ecclesia Dei directly under the control of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Benedict has made clear that "rehabilitating" the traditionalists isn't just a matter of finding the right political and canonical solutions to reabsorb the Society of St. Pius X founded by Lefebvre. It's about dealing with the doctrinal questions that still "remain open," as a statement on Wednesday from American Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and now president of Ecclesia Dei, put it.

Those open questions pertain not simply to the old Latin Mass or other liturgical questions, but also the heart of the traditionalist critique of the church since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), especially with regard to ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, and religious freedom -- all now articles of official Catholic teaching about which many traditionalists harbor serious reservations. In effect, Benedict has signaled that those differences can't be glossed over or put on hold while a process of reconciliation moves ahead.

Second, Benedict's move is noteworthy because it meant the previous leaders of Ecclesia Dei have lost their jobs. Colombian Cardinal Dario Castrillon-Hoyos, the previous president, and Msgr. Camille Perl, the longtime secretary, are both now out of work. (Castrillon-Hoyos is 80 and thus at the normal retirement age for cardinals.)

Since Ecclesia Dei played a lead role in preparing Benedict's decision last January to lift the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops -- including one, Richard Williamson, who has questioned the Holocaust -- most people in and around the Vatican tended to assign the lion's share of blame for the furor that followed to Castrillon-Hoyos and Perl. Fairly or unfairly, Benedict's decision this week has thus been read as a gentle way of cleaning house.

In an institution where it's rare for anyone to lose a job over reputed mistakes or failures, the pope's nod toward accountability -- however oblique and indirect -- has raised some eyebrows.

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As noted above, the Vatican is the world's original globalized institution. In that regard, it's worth noting that while Vatican personnel certainly grasp that Obama's visit has a special significance, it's hardly as if other business has come grinding to a halt.

Earlier this week the pope met the Prime Minister of Japan, Taro Aso, himself a Catholic. On Thursday, the day before Obama's visit, Benedict XVI met with both the Prime Ministers of Australia and the President of South Korea, and on Saturday, the day after Obama, Benedict will host the Prime Minister of Canada.

All that activity may help explain why the pope and his Vatican advisors approach the Obama administration from a different, more global perspective than many American Catholics, understandably more focused on the domestic scene.

On Thursday, I had the opportunity to go up to the fourth floor of the Apostolic Palace to watch the pope receive President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea -- a businessman and former Seoul mayor who, his official biography tells us, has vowed to donate everything he owns except his family's residence to the Korean state. Myung-bak is also a Presbyterian who had overwhelming support from the roughly 30 percent of the Korean population that's Christian; in 2008, some Buddhist monks in South Korea actually took to the streets to protest what they called his "pro-Christian" policies. (He later apologized for any appearance of discrimination.)

The pope was in good form, spending considerable time looking at the books and photos that Myung-bak had brought, and listening carefully to the explanations of the gifts offered in Italian by an interpreter. Msgr. Georg Gänswein also seemed upbeat, spending a few moments in the hallway chatting with reporters while the pope and the Korean president were behind closed doors.

At the end of the meeting, those of us in the press pool for the event had the opportunity to say hello to the pope. Here's one sign that the Vatican realizes the Obama meeting is on people's minds: As I walked up, Benedict XVI looked at me and said, "Ah, an American ? we'll see you tomorrow, then!"

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