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Q & A: Kathryn Getek Soltis

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 12, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

This week at Q & A, we continue our discussion of the contributions Pope Benedict XVI has made to the life of the Church and we are featuring young theologians who participated in the Fordham Conversation Project.

Our first interviewee is Kathryn Getek Soltis who is the Catherine of Siena Teaching Fellow in Ethics at Villinova University.

The question: What is one of Pope Benedict's contributions to the life of the Church?

Kathryn Getek Soltis: Following Pope Benedict XVI?s inaugural encyclical, Deus Caritas Est, several commentators noted a tension between charity and justice, identifying a focus on service that seemed to eclipse social transformation. Yet, with his most recent encyclical, Caritas in Veritate, these tensions have been resolved ? to a point. Benedict appeals to charity for the pursuit of the common good: ?This is the institutional path ? we might also call it the political path ? of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbour directly,? (no. 7). The encyclical leaves no doubt about the Church?s concern for structural change in economic, political, and social institutions. Yet, the tradition of social teaching has typically located structural transformation under the rubric of justice. Why, then, does Benedict principally invoke charity? Does any role remain for justice?

The shift in language, in my estimation, reflects Benedict?s understanding of some fundamental threats to humanity: the supplanting of authentic relationships with impersonal materialism and, even more, the supplanting of a grateful dependence on God with a myth of self-sufficiency. Accordingly, Benedict is clear about the inseparability of justice and charity, or, we might say, of justice, solidarity, and the love of God. In Caritas in Veritate, this becomes apparent by giving charity center stage. In Benedict?s message for Lent 2010, an extended meditation on justice, this inseparability is conveyed through the model of divine justice, relying on gratuitous love to understand what is ?due.?

The inseparability of justice and charity is theologically compelling, but there may be some dangers in the presentation. For example, in Caritas in Veritate, the State has a clear role in pursuing justice through redistribution (nos. 36-38). This assertion has not yet won widespread endorsement, particularly in the United States, and so greater argumentation for the ?minimal measure? of justice remains a pressing need.

Still, Benedict offers important insights by shaking up our charity/justice expectations. I would argue that Benedict, in reaffirming charity, actually reminds us that justice must be understood as a virtue. Justice is not primarily a description of external states of affairs but is an abiding orientation to live out our relationships well. We can only perceive what is ?due? to others when we are properly related to them, and the ultimate model of that relationship is a divine one steeped in mercy and compassion. Indeed, this was very much Benedict?s point when he invoked the virtue of justice in his 2010 Lenten message.

This turn to virtue may also help to explain another feature of Benedict?s moral teaching: its resistance to more commonplace ideological divisions. Caritas in Veritate is broadly inclusive in terms of the scale of our

responsibility (from the personal to the global) and the content of our concerns (from sexuality to the environment). Holding these concerns together is a steadfast commitment to living out our relationships well. And whether he is speaking in the language of charity or justice, Benedict firmly calls us to awareness of our relationality ? with others, with creation, with God.

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