

17th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (July 26, 2009)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

Even though our formal celebration of the Year of St. Paul ended about a month ago, it is still necessary and enlightening to pay attention to his writings. Sometimes his letters are direct and straightforward; at other times they seem rather complex and confusing. Then again, Paul can also soar to new and inspiring heights; our reading today from his letter to the Ephesians is a good example of that. He urges his readers to grow in love and especially in unity: ‘striving to preserve the unity of the Spirit...one body and one Spirit...one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...’—a beautiful and powerful hymn and prayer for unity among the followers of Jesus.

That plea for unity resounds throughout the New Testament and throughout Christian history as well. The saints and other leaders of the Church have re-echoed that call in a variety of ways for unity within humanity under the headship of Christ. Earlier this month, Pope Benedict made an important contribution to that tradition in his new encyclical Caritas in veritate—‘Charity in truth.’ The wonder of the internet makes it possible to access such things almost immediately, and so I have been able to read it over the last couple of weeks (it is available on the Vatican website—vatican.va; I’m sure that other Catholic websites have the text by now as well).

If you have read any of Pope Benedict’s writings, you know he writes clearly but also profoundly. He is a brilliant theologian and scholar, but he is also a thoroughly faithful and loving disciple of Jesus Christ. This new encyclical demonstrates these qualities very well. There is no way I can summarize this document today—there is so much material for reflection and prayer, and for future homilies as well. Today I simply want to give you a brief introduction to its content.

We know that Jesus Christ and his gospel are ultimately about our salvation—the hope for eternal life and joy in heaven that comes through Jesus’ death and resurrection. But the gospel is not only about eternity; it is also meant to direct and give meaning to our lives here on earth: how we conduct ourselves, how we relate to God and to one another. Jesus reminds us that we are first to love God with our whole mind, heart and soul...but also that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. And so to that end, a very important element of the gospel is the social teaching of the Church, what the pope describes as ‘the proclamation of the truth of Christ’s love in society.’ We are all certainly called and challenged to develop a personal, one-on-one relationship with Jesus, but we cannot thereby ignore our necessary relationship with the rest of the human family, our fellow children of God. Over the last hundred years or so, the popes have issued a whole series of encyclicals (beginning with Rerum novarum by Leo XIII in 1891) that have highlighted and developed this social teaching. This has been especially important as economic, political and cultural realities have changed more and more rapidly during this time.

Caritas in veritate is Pope Benedict’s own contribution to this social teaching. As I noted before, he covers a very broad range of subjects: everything from poverty to unemployment, globalization to outsourcing, environmental concerns to respect-life issues. But first he reminds us of some very important fundamental truths that necessarily underlie everything else. The encyclical’s very title—Caritas in veritate—gives us the first foundation stone. The Church’s social teaching is all about caritas—charity (or love), which the Holy Father says is ‘the heart of the Church’s social doctrine.’ But what is this charity; what does love mean? If you ask 50 different people what ‘love’ is, you will

probably get 50 different answers—some of which may be disconnected with the rest or may even conflict with them.

That's where the second part of the title of this new encyclical comes into play: veritate (truth). The pope reminds us that the love God calls us to live must be grounded in the truth that God has revealed—charity must be linked with truth if it is to be lived authentically and effectively. Among these truths with which charity/love must be linked:

--we come from God, we are made for God, and Jesus Christ is the way we can hope to attain that eternal union with God. This has direct implications for us in confronting the increasingly secular and indeed 'anti-God' character of so much of modern culture and thinking.

--every person is made in the image and likeness of God, and therefore has an inherent dignity, value and worth given by God that cannot be removed, reduced or ignored by man. This has direct implications regarding many current issues—e.g. the status of the human embryo, the unborn child, the immigrant, the person at the end stages of life. This also reminds us that economic and political structures and new technologies are not ends or goals in and of themselves. Rather, they need to be set up and used in ways that protect and promote that God-given worth and dignity of the individual person as well as the common good of all.

If charity/love is not connected with these and other truths, then it is not what it is called to be. In Pope Benedict's words: "without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way. * * * Without truth...there is no social conscience, responsibility, and social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power." How very true! If love is not grounded in truth, the truth given and revealed by God, then it can mean whatever is desired. And it is all too obvious what can happen and what has happened throughout history when those in power misconstrue charity or redefine it for their own selfish or even evil purposes.

This is hardly even scratching the surface of the content of this encyclical; as mentioned, I will be referring to it in the future as it connects to specific issues of current interest and concern. In the meantime, may we all take to heart St. Paul's call to love in unity with God and with our neighbors. And may we imitate Jesus who fed the crowds out of love for them and who lived and spoke the truth to them out of that same love: love, charity in truth—caritas in veritate.