

The Compassionate Gaze of Christ: A Christian Context for Development

Zachary M. Mabee
Pontifical Gregorian University

Drawing on the work of Pope Benedict XVI, particularly in his 2006 Lenten address and 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, I develop what I take to be an appropriate Christian context for authentic integral human development. In sketching this context, I aim especially to show how it has surprisingly radical implications—for example, regarding Church-state relations—that challenge various presuppositions and foundational commitments of the increasingly secular contemporary anthropological and political mindset.

Pope Benedict XVI made abundantly clear his desire to continue and further develop the recent trend of papal social thought relating to the issue of integral human development, which was initiated particularly by his predecessor Paul VI with the 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples; hereafter *Populorum*). Benedict magisterially realized this desire with his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, which is officially subtitled (in English translations) “On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth.”¹ It is worth noting, however, that Benedict began treating the topic of integral human development (hereafter IHD) well before the publication of *Caritas in Veritate* (hereafter *CV*). In fact, he devoted his inaugural Lenten address to the topic of IHD. This address, I argue—in conjunction with the more extended *CV*—offers a fundamental Christian backdrop and context for the urgent work of IHD, a backdrop and context without which IHD cannot be properly understood or pursued. In this article, I will unpack this properly Christian context for IHD, and its various implications, by looking especially at these two crucial documents.² Let us begin, though, with a few brief methodological considerations.

Studying and Applying Papal Social Teaching

It seems obvious that one should study the Christian-theological backdrop of papal social teaching. After all, such teaching is proffered specifically as *pastoral* instruction and guidance for the Christian faithful (and all people of good will), by their supreme pastor, and not merely as technical politico-economical advice. In this vein, with regard to the particular issue of IHD, Benedict says the following:

The primary contribution that the Church offers to the development of mankind and peoples does not consist merely in material means or technical solutions. Rather, it involves the proclamation of the truth of Christ, who educates consciences and teaches the authentic dignity of the person and of work; it means the promotion of a culture that truly responds to all the questions of humanity.³

Papal social teaching is self-conceived, in other words, principally as a particular form of the Church's universal, perpetual proclamation of Christ, and him crucified, in season and out of season.⁴ Any teachings contained therein must, then, be read and understood in their proper Christian context, especially those that are of a more applied political or economic character. Therefore we do well methodologically, given the very nature or character of papal social pronouncements, to understand first and foremost their proper Christian context and content, from which we can *then* appropriately deal with their more circumstantial, practical evaluations, and prescriptions.

A Recurring Problem

Perhaps the most recurring problem in popular and academic discussions of papal social documents is a superficial consideration, if not downright neglect, of their properly Christian context and message. Following their publication, such documents too often become enshrouded in popular and academic debate about, for example, which political or economic ideologies and worldviews they align with most closely. They are taken to be liberal or conservative in one respect, for instance, but perhaps rather not in others, or they are touted as being variously supportive or critical of the free-market economy.⁵ Such questions and concerns are of course legitimate and might be particularly helpful when considering, for instance, the role that a papal document or point of teaching could have with regard to popular political discourse or a major political party and the shaping of its agenda and platform. As we have just seen, though, any such discussion or application of papal social teaching must, in order to be complete and fair, have a focal recourse to the proper Christian context and exposition of that teaching.

We must see it, that is to say, in light of the story of salvation, with chief regard to the salvific self-revelation and redemptive work of God in Christ.

With these preliminary concerns in mind, I now proceed to develop what I take to be the crucial Christian context of Benedict's teaching on IHD. More exactly, I will aim to show how Benedict's concept of IHD is in fact a *thoroughly* Christian one, such that attempts to appreciate it in a secular manner, without reference to the work of evangelization or the more general attempt "to bring the whole of life under the Lordship of Christ" would be failed attempts indeed.⁶ Briefly, however, before doing so, I would also like to note a couple ways in which this present project—of understanding the Christian context of IHD—could be helpfully appropriated and applied to certain other, related academic projects. First, given that IHD, as we shall see, is both an individual and communal responsibility (of persons themselves, but also of families, societies, states, firms, and so on), a proper understanding of it, in its Christian-theological depth, could have important implications for a renewed Christian understanding of the Church and its relationship to the state (and other intermediary forms of association and solidarity).⁷ Particular concerns aside, this is, of course, a perennial topic of Christian (and secular) concern—that which is owed to God specifically but then also that which is to be rendered to Caesar.⁸ Second, a richer understanding of the fuller Christian meaning of IHD could yield fruitful comparative discussions with various other more secular and philosophical visions of development that are quite prominent nowadays, for example, those articulated by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum.⁹ I leave such work, however, for subsequent endeavors.

The Gaze of Christ and Its Implications

Shortly into his above-mentioned Lenten Address for 2006, Benedict notes his desire to address anew "the question of development."¹⁰ He then immediately turns to a perhaps surprising, jarringly Christocentric image: the loving gaze of Christ upon humanity, individually and collectively. He notes,

Even now, the compassionate "gaze" of Christ continues to fall upon individuals and peoples. He watches them, knowing that the divine "plan" includes their call to salvation. Jesus knows the perils that put this plan at risk, and He is moved with pity for the crowds. He chooses to defend them from the wolves even at the cost of His own life. The gaze of Jesus embraces individuals and multitudes, and he brings them all before the Father, offering Himself as a sacrifice of expiation.

Enlightened by this Paschal truth, the Church knows that if we are to promote development in its fullness, our own “gaze” upon mankind has to be measured against that of Christ. . . . Thus the “gaze” of Christ upon the crowd impels us to affirm the true content of this “complete humanism” that, according to Paul VI, consists in the “fully-rounded development of the whole man and of all men.”¹¹

What is perhaps most striking about this opening Christological image is its rhetorical placement in this address. I mean by this that Benedict does not open this address with a theoretical take on development, clarifying what it is *conceptually*. Instead, he reminds us, drawing on the gospel image of Jesus’ response to the pitiful multitudes, of a most crucial fact, or better yet, *living reality* of the Christian narrative: Christ, who has made expiation for sins by his sacrificial gift of himself on the cross, (1) *looks compassionately* upon all people, individually and within their respective communities; and that he does so because he is (2) *solicitous* for them, summoning them back to himself and his Father and the communion of life and love they share.

It seems quite crucial that we approach Benedict’s understanding of development with this image of the gaze of Christ in view because he straightaway broaches the topic of development—several years later, in the beginning of *CV*—in a similar, directly Christian manner. Taking Paul VI and his work in *Populorum Progressio* as his foundation and lead, Benedict offers a concept of IHD as a comprehensive vocation of the human person to respond to the loving call of God in Christ. Benedict stresses that IHD is *comprehensive*; it “concerns the whole of the person in every single dimension.”¹² Given this fact, it *must* be approached with “a transcendent vision of the person [that] needs God.”¹³ Otherwise, he notes, attempts at development will invariably devolve into technocratic or materialistic perversions of what they really should be.¹⁴

It is worth pausing here to take stock of this first crucial aspect of Benedict’s vision of IHD, namely, its *necessarily* transcendent, indeed divine, character and aspirations. Such a concept would no doubt nowadays be a generally controversial one, particularly among many development specialists and professionals. Among other things, this demand of IHD—that it be conceived and pursued with an explicitly transcendent view of the human person and his capacities and ends—seems to be a demand not only on individual persons themselves but also on various groups and organizations that work to further development. One thinks immediately here of various (inter)national aid and relief organizations as well as, perhaps most controversially, government and para-governmental organizations. If such organizations truly are to promote IHD, then it would seem that, according to Benedict, they must also truly and robustly promote at least a broadly transcendent, if not more specifically theological, concept of the human

person. Such a contention runs in direct contrast, of course, to many prevailing ideas (and ideologies) about the secular orientation of the state and its separation from the church or religious ideas and institutions. A very interesting debate and discussion about the religious commitments of the state could therefore emerge (as I noted in the introduction), from further engagement with Benedict's vision of IHD. This problem, as already noted, is beyond the scope of this essay.

The comprehensive, transcendent character of IHD, then, is perhaps the first crucial aspect of it, for both Benedict and Paul VI, that we do well to grasp.¹⁵ What is perhaps more remarkable, and distinctly Christian, about their view, however, is that they conceive of IHD as a *vocation*. We saw this quite clearly in Benedict's image from his 2006 Lenten address: that Christ, the compassionate savior, looks on mankind and *summons* us to attain full development ("full stature" in Christ, we could perhaps say)¹⁶ in and through him with his Father in heaven. What does it mean, though, to speak of development, which often conjures images of material realities (the eradication of poverty, improved standards of living, and so on) as a vocation, that is, as a crucially spiritual reality?

We might first note, rather simply, that the word *vocation* traces to the Latin *vocatio*, which means "call" or "summons." According to Benedict, IHD is a call or summons from Christ—who gazes on all people with compassionate love—that is to say, IHD is an *invitation* from Christ to mankind to *find ourselves completely* in the mystery of the solicitous love of God the Father, which is shown us in Christ.¹⁷ The call to IHD is the divinely extended offer for us human beings to find our full meaning and purpose, our complete happiness and fulfillment, in God himself. The call to IHD is, therefore, not simply like any other call (commitment or obligation, personal or social). It is a divinely given call that in and of itself seeks fulfillment outside itself, ultimately in relationship with God. Nonetheless, like any call or summons, it deserves an appropriate response, which is to be made in freedom with responsibility. Benedict notes, "A vocation is a call that requires a free and responsible answer. *Integral human development presupposes the responsible freedom* of the individual and of peoples."¹⁸

This offers another helpful point for pause and reflection on the gravity of Benedict's concept of IHD and its implications. If we encounter IHD principally as a *vocation*, a personal summons or call, that is, as ultimately coming from and finding fulfillment in the Triune God through Christ, then we must approach IHD, at least at some level, as a particularly *Christian* undertaking. That is to say, we ultimately conceive of development wrongly if we attempt to conceive of it in religiously pluralistic, or even generally theological but not specifically Christian terms. Why is this so? Benedict offers the following, first quoting from *Populorum Progressio*, and then later from *Gaudium et Spes*:

“What we hold important is man, each man and each group of men, and we even include the whole of humanity.” In promoting development, the Christian faith does not rely on privilege or positions of power, nor even on the merits of Christians . . . but only on Christ, to whom every authentic vocation to integral human development must be directed. *The Gospel is fundamental for development*, because in the Gospel, Christ, “in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humanity to itself.”¹⁹

We saw initially that IHD demands an openness from individuals as well as from states and various other social and intermediary organizations entrusted with its task to the transcendent aspect of man: to the fact that he needs God and his divine help and life to flourish. What we see here is a more specifically Christian development of this initial point. According to Paul VI and Benedict, IHD is not simply a general or vague transcendent undertaking. Indeed, it is a *Christian vocation*—perhaps simply *the* Christian vocation—to respond in all respects to the invitation to life and happiness that comes from God the Father through Christ his Son. It therefore demands openness to the one true God, revealed to us in Christ, both by individuals and, arguably as well, by the aforesaid institutions, states, and organizations.

We see again here how Benedict’s proposal for IHD is surprisingly, and perhaps even jarringly, controversial. His presentation of IHD is precisely in terms of an intensely personal, eternal encounter with the living, saving God who in the person of Christ looks on us compassionately and, in doing so, summons each one of us to himself and the life of Trinitarian communion. To return to our opening remarks, it is therefore of the utmost importance to Benedict that we approach and evaluate *all* developmental efforts with regard to how well they make space for this most fundamental reality of Christianity: namely, that the personal God of the universe, who has revealed himself in Christ, summons all people back to himself and to abundant life in him. To this effect, in his 2006 Lenten address, Benedict notes, recalling *Populorum Progressio*, that the most complete “antidote” to various painful (apparently material) developmental realities, including abject poverty, abuse of political and other power, exploitative business practices, and the like, will inevitably be the gift of faith and the life of charity that it enkindles. Accompanying the realization of these theological virtues, he notes, will be an evangelical spirit of poverty, a thoroughgoing commitment to the common good, and a sincere desire for peace.²⁰ It is these virtues and fruits of the Christian life and the rejuvenating effect they work in the human person that will be the keystone of development, both at an individual *and* a social level. It is these virtues and gifts, too, that will guard against what Benedict considers, following Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, the greatest

poverty: not knowing Christ, who compassionately looks on us and calls us to life and development in its fullness in him.

Fraternity, Solidarity, and the Common Good

There is one final aspect of IHD that deserves attention here—one that follows, on Benedict’s vision, from the previous two. As we already noted, he and his predecessor Paul VI both understand IHD ultimately to be a vocation, that is, a call from Christ to share in the communion of love and life that he and his Father share. This call, this vocation, however, is never offered to us in isolation. It always comes to us—though with a personal, individual character—as human beings in the greater human family, which is called in justice, charity, and truth to realize and seek after the common good. Echoing a most central plank of Catholic social doctrine, Benedict reminds us that the common good is the good of *all persons*, living and united as we are in society—a good not sought abstractly for its own sake but instead for the real sake of society’s members and the realization of their own good. Pursuing and desiring the common good is a basic demand of justice and charity.²¹

In his discussion of the common good, Benedict takes his readers in a specifically Christian direction, as he has with the issues we have already treated. He notes that our seeking the common good truly with justice and charity helps to prefigure the city of God, to use a basic Augustinian image, here and now while we yet dwell in the city of man. More strongly, though, he reminds us that *only* in life with Christ can we really approach our pursuit of the common good, and thus IHD itself, with the proper frame of mind toward ourselves and others as brothers and sisters. “Only in *charity*,” he says, “*illuminated by the light of reason and faith*, is it possible to pursue development goals that possess a more humane and humanizing value.”²² That is to say, *only* with the illumination of faith and the fire of supernatural charity can we be open and receptive to the “primordial truth” of God’s love and its utter gratuity, which is the exemplary model and formative power that reveals how we are truly to relate to one another.²³ Indeed, it is in and through an encounter with God himself, who is love, and the reception of his very own divine life by grace, that we are able to *see* others as brothers and sisters and not merely as creatures—as unique, individual reflections of the divine image.²⁴ Once we come to live thus, we can “act according to the logic of the gospel, [living] the faith as friendship with God Incarnate and, like him, [bearing] the burden of the material and spiritual needs of [our] neighbors.”²⁵ We, too, can come to share ourselves in the compassionate gaze of Christ and the realization of the summons that the vocation of IHD issues to each and every

person, both individually and as members of the human family, called to live in bonds of true solidarity and brotherhood.

Before transitioning to some final, clarifying remarks, I would like to reflect briefly on the radical, indeed controversial, character of Benedict's vision of IHD, with particular regard to this issue of the common good and fraternal charity. We see yet again that Benedict casts the question of IHD into particularly Christian terms. *Only* in Christ can we see other people in the sort of truly fraternal manner that we must if we are, in justice and charity, to will and pursue the common good. Only thus can we gaze upon them in the loving manner that Christ does, and so come to share the bonds of communion with him and one another to which he calls us. It might once again be the case, therefore, that we can approximate *some* level of development with particular regard to our understanding and pursuit of the common good apart from the grace and life of Christ, but any such approximation will be just that, namely, an approximation, and so will ultimately fall short of *authentic* or complete IHD, which is, as we have emphatically noted, a Christian vocation to be realized through Christ in Trinitarian communion.

Some Clarifying Remarks

Allow me now to synthesize some of my previous remarks into a more unified, closing appreciation of Benedict's vision for IHD, which I will show now to be *both* profoundly human *and* profoundly Christian. We have just seen, in examining Benedict's concept of IHD, that it is ultimately the intensely personal love of God, for each and for all—depicted so beautifully by the compassionate gaze of Christ upon us—that is the source and catalyst of IHD. Therefore he begins the introduction of *Caritas* thus:

Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is *the principal driving force behind the authentic human development of every person and of all humanity*.... It is a force that has its origin in God, Eternal Love and Absolute Truth. *Each person finds his good by adhering to God's plan for him*, in order to realize it fully: in this plan, he finds his truth, and through adherence to this truth he becomes free (cf. John 8:22).²⁶

I have tried to show thus far that Benedict believes authentic and complete IHD to be only realizable if we truly as individuals and within our respective communities and societies are open to its fully Christian dimensions. As I just noted in the previous section, he claims that such a full, comprehensive openness

is only possible by the work of charity in our lives, that is, by our actively receiving the transforming life and love of Christ, which allows us to become partakers in the work of (our and others') IHD and to see this work, so to speak, with his own compassionate eyes. To this effect, I have attempted to show in treating IHD as necessarily (1) transcendent and comprehensive; (2) truly vocational; and (3) authentically fraternal and ordered to the common good the ways in which IHD *must* be robustly Christian, at both a personal *and* a social level in order to be authentic and complete. I have tried to show, if briefly, in the process, how approaches and realizations of it that are less than this will ultimately be wanting.

A danger that could arise here is to think that authentic development is a process that must, for Benedict, have some sort of extrinsic Christian stamp, as it were—that it must be “baptized” by grace or the admixture of Christian practice or doctrine. According to such an approach, Christianity would be something imposed or superadded to authentic development in order to complete or finish it. If we reconsider the texts that have been brought to bear already, we see quite clearly that Benedict's concept of authentic IHD is most certainly not such a superadded one. He believes, as we have seen, that IHD *at its very core and from its very beginnings* is a divine work with Christ himself as its origin, catalyst, and guide. The utter and complete centrality of Christ to IHD raises another crucial, fundamentally Christian point, which Benedict also raises in the introduction of *Caritas*.

Because the *person* of Christ is the source and primary agent of IHD, it is not just a divine calling and process, but it is also, given the hypostatic union of his divine and human natures, a truly, most perfectly *human* process. Christ is *the perfect man*, according to Christian doctrine, like us in all things but sin and defect.²⁷ The summons or vocation that is IHD, then, is a summons and call to *become* perfect persons—that is, to come to share in his life and love, to come to gaze on our brothers and sisters with the compassionate gaze that is only truly and fully his. While we are of course stained by sin, we all have within us, Benedict notes, a desire or “interior impulse to love authentically”—that is, ultimately, to love as Christ loves.²⁸ Anything short of the love of Christ who is the true and perfect man is not, ultimately, authentic love. For Benedict, it is Christ himself who sheds light on this fundamental human desire to love authentically, who purifies and liberates it “from the impoverishment that our humanity brings to it, and ... [who] reveals to us in all its fullness the initiative of love and the plan for true life that God has prepared for us.”²⁹ To put these points rather more pithily, it is *in Christ*, in his very person and his call to IHD that we find the answer, the resolution of our deepest longings and desires that come, in him, to be purified and elevated in ways previously unimagined.

Conclusion

I have attempted to show in this essay the utter centrality of Christian faith and revelation to Benedict's concept of IHD, which he so vividly introduces and illustrates through the image of the compassionate gaze of Christ. My aim in arguing for this centrality is to stress the importance of appreciating *all* his subsequent social teaching, particularly its more particular, circumstantial aspects, in light of its Christocentric core. His exhortation to an economy modeled more thoroughly on relations of gratuity and his insistence on Christian care and stewardship of the environment³⁰—as well as, indeed, many topics in between—are to be approached through the lens of these most fundamental aspects of Christian revelation, which I have attempted to sketch and summarize herein. If we fail to approach such varied topics, which all fall under the broad heading of development, within the framework and light of the Christian message, then we seriously risk misunderstanding ourselves and the work (indeed, the gift) of our development. Although we are mortally wounded by sin and ignorance, we are nonetheless—in fact, all the more—called to communion with God to full, authentic, integral human development in and through his grace and divine life, given to us in Christ. It is only within this Christian context that, for Benedict, IHD will ultimately make sense and cohere. Without it, our attempts at development will ultimately devolve into inflated technocratic programs and pseudo-solutions that lack the hope and vision that only Christ, in his penetrating, supremely loving gaze, can give.³¹ Truly, then, for Benedict, if the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labor.³²

Notes

1. Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Caritas in Veritate* (June 29, 2009); Paul VI, encyclical letter *Populorum Progressio* (March 26, 1967).
2. In a way, what I attempt to do in this essay with particular concern for these writings of Benedict XVI has already been done more broadly and with wider historical application by Manfred Spieker, "Development of the Whole Man and of All Men: Guidelines of the Catholic Church for Societal Development," *Journal of Markets & Morality* 13, no. 2 (Fall 2010): 263–78.
3. Benedict XVI, Lenten address (September 29, 2005), accessed November 30, 2012, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/lent/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20050929_lent-2006_en.html. Cf. also Benedict XVI, *CV*, 16.

4. See 1 Corinthians 2:2 and 2 Timothy 4:2. See also Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), 66–67, on the implicit connection between Catholic social teaching and evangelization.
5. For an insightful analysis of the superficial scrutiny of *CV* in particular, see Ross Douthat, “The Audacity of the Pope,” *The New York Times*, July 12, 2009.
6. On the lordship of Christ in the context of the evangelical ecumenical movement, see Lausanne Movement, *The Cape Town Commitment*, 3, accessed November 30, 2012, <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/ctcommitment.html>.
7. Such a renewed appreciation of a Christian—indeed, specifically Catholic—understanding of Church-state relations could be especially helpful for the current Vatican deliberations with the leadership of the so-called Society of St. Pius X who find the teachings of the Second Vatican Council on such matters to be particularly problematic and discontinuous with the perennial magisterium of the Church. I mention this application because Pope Benedict XVI has emphasized his solicitude for the reconciliation of such schismatic groups with the See of Peter.
8. See Mark 12:17.
9. Cf., for example, Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2011).
10. Benedict XVI, Lenten address.
11. Benedict XVI, Lenten address.
12. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 11.
13. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 11
14. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 11; also, 16.
15. For Paul VI and his development of this point, see *Populorum Progressio*, 14–16.
16. See Ephesians 4:13.
17. See Benedict XVI, *CV*, 18; also, see Paul VI, pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), 22.
18. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 17. Italics in original text.
19. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 18. Italics in original text.
20. See Benedict XVI, Lenten address.

21. See Benedict XVI, *CV*, 8.
22. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 8.
23. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 9.
24. See Benedict XVI, *CV*, 11.
25. Benedict XVI, Lenten address.
26. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 1; italics mine.
27. See Hebrews 4:15.
28. This sentence, as I have drafted it, might appear controversial on further consideration, particularly with regard to debates about grace and nature and the disputed natural desire to see God. I do not intend here to broach such topics, but I do admit that passages such as this one from Pope Benedict could be instructive in engaging them.
29. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 1.
30. See, for example, Benedict XVI, *CV*, 38 and 48.
31. Benedict XVI, *CV*, 34.
32. See Psalm 127:1.