

A NEW SHADE OF GREEN? NATURE, FREEDOM, AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IN *CARITAS IN VERITATE*

MAURA A. RYAN

Caritas in veritate collapses distinctions in Catholic moral theology between “social issues” and “life issues.” This note examines Pope Benedict XVI’s “pro-life environmentalism” and the underlying assumptions concerning the meaning of freedom, the contours of nature, and the significance of sexual differentiation on which the pope relies. While the encyclical powerfully critiques liberal Western preoccupation with rights as noninterference and expands the lens through which we view respect for the environment, the connections between “human ecology” and “physical ecology” are less than convincing. Moreover, the absence of a gender lens limits the encyclical’s treatment of integral human development.

POPE BENEDICT XVI HAS BEEN CALLED the “greenest pope in history.”¹ Recent statements urging immediate action in the face of global environmental threats, coupled with his own well-publicized efforts to “go green” (e.g., by installing solar panels on Vatican roofs and establishing Vatican City as a carbon neutral state) have given the environment a prominent place in his social doctrine. Benedict XVI is not the first pope to identify ecological degradation as a serious moral issue. John Paul II often emphasized the importance of a “growing ecological consciousness” and the need to incorporate appropriate respect for creation into development

MAURA A. RYAN received her Ph.D. from Yale University and is the John Cardinal O’Hara, C.S.C., Associate Professor of Christian Ethics, as well as Associate Dean for Faculty Affairs and the Humanities at the University of Notre Dame. With special interests in moral theology, bioethics, social ethics, and Christian feminism, her recent publications include: “The Introduction of Assisted Reproductive Technologies in the Developing World: Test Case for Developing Methodologies in Feminist Bioethics,” *Signs* 34.4 (2009); and “Toxic Legacy: Why the Environment Is a Life Issue,” *Commonweal* 136.16 (2009). She is completing a book entitled “Health, Development, and Human Rights: New Directions for Christian Bioethics.”

¹ Woodeene Koenig-Bricker, *Ten Commandments for the Environment: Pope Benedict XVI Speaks Out for Creation and Justice* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria, 2009) 8.

theory and practice.² But it is no exaggeration to say that the gradual turn to the environment visible in the literature of Catholic social teaching since the 1980s has gained new momentum in Benedict's writings and public witness. At the same time, as Vatican reporter John Allen points out, this pope's ecological vision is neither a standard "Greenpeace environmentalism" nor simply the echo of his predecessor.³ As we see in his first social encyclical, *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict grounds ecological responsibility in a thick theology of creation, and extends the moral and epistemological relationship between "physical ecology" and "human ecology" to encompass a host of social issues, from mismanaged financial markets to abortion, contraception, and same-sex marriage.

ECONOMY, ECOLOGY, ANTHROPOLOGY

Like Paul VI's *Populorum progressio* which it commemorates, *Caritas in veritate* is concerned principally with integral human development, i.e., development that is more than linear technological progress or gross economic growth. Invoking the indicators of true or authentic development laid out in *Populorum progressio*, Benedict calls for the full and equal participation of all peoples in the international economy, the cultivation of educated, spiritually rich societies working in global solidarity, and the protection of political regimes capable of ensuring peace and fostering participatory governance (see no. 21). He acknowledges that absolute economic growth has occurred in recent decades, billions of people have been lifted out of poverty, and newfound economic stability has allowed some previously marginalized nations to become actors in the global economy. Still, we are far from realizing Paul VI's vision of "real growth, of benefit to everyone and genuinely sustainable."⁴ Rather, Benedict argues, ever-widening gaps between "superdevelopment" and near-subsistence around the world, the emergence of new forms of poverty, mass migration, and the

² See Message of John Paul II for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace (January 1, 1990), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/peace/index.htm; Common Declaration of John Paul II and the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I on Environmental Ethics (June 10, 2002); *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (1987) no. 34. Unless otherwise indicated, all papal and Vatican documents referenced herein can be found at <http://www.vatican.va>; they are readily found via a word search of the Internet. These and all other URLs referenced herein were accessed on March 14, 2010.

³ John L. Allen Jr., "Benedict XVI's Very Own Shade of Green," *National Catholic Reporter* (July 31, 2009), <http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/benedict-xvi%E2%80%99s-very-own-shade-green>. References in this note to *Caritas in veritate* will be given by paragraph number within the text.

⁴ *Ibid.*

uncontrolled exploitation of natural resources are evidence of disordered, indeed *dangerous*, economic growth.

The pope's critique of our contemporary situation picks up a prominent theme in *Populorum progressio* and familiar refrain in postconciliar Catholic social thought:

Progress of a merely economic and technological kind is insufficient. . . . The mere fact of emerging from economic backwardness, though positive in itself, does not resolve the complex issues of human advancement, neither for those countries that are spearheading such progress, nor for those that are already economically developed, nor even for those that are still poor, which can suffer not just through old forms of exploitation, but also from the negative consequences of a growth that is marked by irregularities and imbalances. (No. 23, emphasis original)

That we have yet to resolve the “complex issues of human advancement” facing an increasingly interdependent world is nowhere better illustrated than in the recent global financial collapse and the looming ecological crisis. The financial meltdown that began in 2007 serves not only as an occasion for Benedict to reflect on the moral character of markets but also as an object lesson. The economic crisis is a symptom of a much deeper moral crisis, a crisis of culture rooted in a fundamentally distorted view of freedom. It was not just the greed or hubris of a few individuals that brought down the markets, but a collective failure to reflect on the meaning and purpose of the economy—what Rowan Williams called the triumph of late capitalism as “infinite exchangeability and timeless, atomized desire.”⁵

The widespread destruction of the natural environment is but another, albeit urgent, symptom of this moral crisis. Addressing the Vatican diplomatic corps in January 2010, Benedict expressed the sentiment of *Caritas in veritate* in arguing that the same “self-centered and materialistic way of thinking,” the same failure to acknowledge “the limitations inherent in every creature” that threatened to destroy the global economy continues to endanger the health of the environment.⁶ We need only look to the period following the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union for evidence of the destructive consequences of detaching politics or economics from a transcendent conception of nature and history: “Was it not easy [then] to assess the great harm which an economic system lacking any reference to the truth about man had done not only to the dignity and freedom of individuals and peoples, but to nature itself, by

⁵ Rowan Williams, introduction to *Theology and the Political: The New Debate*, ed. Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 2005) 3.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See for the Traditional Exchange of New Year Greetings (January 11, 2010).

polluting soil, water and air? The denial of God distorts the freedom of the human person, yet it also devastates creation.”⁷

Caritas in veritate gives considerable weight to the proposition that right relationship in any sphere of human activity—economic, political, cultural, or environmental—rests on apprehending “the truth about man.” Genuine respect for the environment, therefore, encompasses *human* ecology, and assumes an understanding of the human person as simultaneously creature and partner in God’s continuing creative activity. It is not enough to have environmentally friendly policies, incentives for ecologically responsible business practices, or even broad and effective environmental education in the traditional sense. Rather, the fate of the environment depends upon our coming to understand how nature communicates God’s design for human life, how it is “prior to us, and . . . has been given to us by God as the setting for our life” (no. 48). Steering a middle path between worshipping the earth and treating it simply as raw material for human manipulation, *Caritas in veritate* argues for the stewardship of nature as “a wondrous work of the Creator containing a ‘grammar’ which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use” (ibid.). It is precisely this capacity to express “a plan of love and truth which is prior to us” that makes protection of the environment not only an esthetic value for Benedict but a moral imperative.

The emphasis on nature as both gift and revelation provides the backdrop for asserting a formative relationship between our treatment of the environment and our treatment of other human beings (see no. 51). In arguing that one influences the other, *Caritas in veritate* suggests more than that it is simply contradictory to profess respect for human life while disregarding or destroying the physical environment necessary to sustain human communities. Nor is the point only that breakdowns in human solidarity exact a terrible toll on the environment, as witnessed, for example, in the ecological fallout of warfare. Rather, in Benedict’s view, it is the same capacity to recognize a divinely given meaning or order in human existence that allows us to apprehend the laws within nature, to honor limits imposed upon us by nature’s own integrity—and vice versa. Addressing a gathering of Italian clergy in 2008, Benedict locates the seeds of ecological destruction in the denial of the “law of being” inscribed by the Creator:

The brutal consumption of Creation begins where God is missing, where matter has become simply material for us, where we ourselves are the ultimate measure, where everything is simply our property and we consume it only for ourselves. The waste of Creation begins where we no longer recognize any claim beyond ourselves, seeing only ourselves; it begins where there is no longer any dimension of life beyond death, where in this life we have to grab everything and take hold of life

⁷ Ibid.

with the maximum intensity possible, where we have to possess everything it is possible to possess.⁸

The antidote for a cultural milieu wherein we have come to regard ourselves as the “ultimate measure” or matter as “simply material” lies in the appeal to human ecology, i.e., in the cultivation of living environments befitting the nature of the human person as created, redeemed, and called to communion with God and other human beings. As John Paul II had earlier argued in *Centesimus annus*, the depth of conversion necessary to address the pressing ecological crisis demands appreciation not only for the earth as a gift from God, which must be used “with respect for the original good purpose for which it was given,” but also for human persons as divine gift, endowed with a “natural and moral structure” that likewise must be respected.⁹

In a move many readers have dubbed Benedict’s “pro-life environmentalism,” *Caritas in veritate* links concern for the environment (usually treated as a “social issue”) with the so-called “life issues,” e.g., embryo research, abortion, and euthanasia:

If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. (No. 51)

At stake here, in part, is Benedict’s concern to elevate bioethics as “a particularly crucial battlefield in today’s cultural struggle between the supremacy of technology and human moral responsibility” (no. 74). The denial of transcendence, the intoxication with technology as salvation—the primordial “anthropological error”—is both more visible and more dangerous in the face of our expanding capacity to manipulate the material basis of human life. In modern reproductive and genetic technologies, we are confronted in a dramatic way with the central moral question, Are we a product of chance, are we the result of our own labors, or do we owe our existence to God?

By tying a “lack of respect for the right to life” to the fate of the environment, *Caritas in veritate* joins other social encyclicals in opposing the kind of population control programs that have often been employed in the name of environmental sustainability and under the guise of development aid.

⁸ Benedict XVI, Meeting of the Holy Father Benedict XVI with the Clergy of the Diocese of Bolzano-Bressanone, Cathedral of Bressanone, August 6, 2008.

⁹ John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (May 1, 1991) no. 38.

But here again, Benedict means to do more than simply reiterate the Church's well-known critique of contraception and abortion and its long-standing resistance to treating development and environmental sustainability as opposing values. Rather, in invoking *Humanae vitae*, *Caritas in veritate* underscores the power of social practices such as abortion (as well as practices such as euthanasia and assisted reproduction) to obscure the proper function of conscience. When people can no longer recognize what is or is not human, and therefore worthy of respect, if the laws they pass fail to protect the most vulnerable or the most marginalized, if the manipulation of human life in its origins has become casual or commonplace, it is not surprising to see a lack of outrage at the wanton destruction of the environment or at the degrading conditions in which countless numbers of people live. It is in this sense that Benedict affirms what he takes to be *Humanae vitae*'s most prescient point, that "*the social question has become a radically anthropological question*" (no. 75). At the same time, he suggests that current environmental challenges and cultural trends such as declining birth rates in Western democracies, prove that the unreflective pursuit of consumer desires, the detachment of freedom from duty, the rejection of life as gift and mystery, eventually exact an objective price—in other words, the social problems with which we are confronted illustrate decisively the reality of the natural law, the wisdom of Catholic sexual morality.¹⁰

Elsewhere, Benedict extends the image of the book of nature as "one and indivisible" to criticize movements to legalize same-sex marriage. In a statement that has elicited both widespread attention and fierce criticism, he characterized the environmental problem as "a multifaceted prism," involving distinct but interrelated threats: "Creatures differ from one another and can be protected, or endangered, in different ways, as we know from daily experience. One such attack comes from laws or proposals which, in the name of fighting discrimination, strike at the biological basis of the difference between the sexes."¹¹ Although the connection between same-sex marriage and climate change or deforestation seems tenuous, arguing that relativizing or nullifying sexual difference has ecological consequences is consistent with the view that the environmental crisis stems ultimately from a failure to respect the "natural and moral structure" of human life. From this perspective, the integrity of the family matters for society not only objectively but also subjectively: Founded on the mutual self-gift of the spouses, the family is the primary site for acquiring the capacity for other-centered love that transforms social, ecological, and economic relationships. Since freedom is

¹⁰ On this point see John L. Allen Jr., "Pope Proposes a 'Christian Humanism' for the Global Economy," *National Catholic Reporter* (July 7, 2009), <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-proposes-christian-humanism-global-economy>.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Address to the Diplomatic Corps.

legitimate only when it corresponds to “the structure willed by the Creator,” denying same-sex couples the right to marry cannot be said to violate their freedom.¹² Indeed, insofar as movements to legalize gay marriage assume the malleability of marriage and, by extension, the fluid nature of kinship, they typify for Benedict the distorted and capricious view of freedom that underlies the broad moral crisis to which *Caritas in veritate* responds.

A NEW HUMANISM

Much has been written on the stylistic and programmatic weaknesses of *Caritas in veritate*. Commentators have criticized the encyclical’s capacious range, its unabashedly theological language, its occasional political and economic naiveté and overly optimistic read of the prospects for global cooperation, and finally its feel as a document “prepared by committee.”¹³ Yet, Douglas Farrow is correct in arguing that the encyclical is best read in light of Benedict’s earlier encyclicals as “one long call to conversion.”¹⁴ His plea to transform a global civilization of indifference into a “civilization of love,” his cry for “new eyes and a new heart, capable of rising above a mechanistic vision of human events,” challenges readers to take seriously the dangers posed by globalization that is merely proximity and integration without solidarity (no. 77). In exposing ideologies of progress that place undue confidence in human technical mastery or the free movement of goods and capital, he issues both a warning and an exhortation to pursue integral human development as *vocation*, i.e., to understand how it “derives from a transcendent call and . . . is incapable, on its own, of supplying its ultimate meaning” (no. 17). Taking the current ecological and economic crises as opportunities for discernment, he invites us to “shape a new vision for the future” (no. 21), to look beyond the mere pursuit of justice or the assertion of rights to embrace “‘the idea of gift’ as a fundamental principle of human existence, operative in all spheres of human life” from bioethics, to economics, to governance (no. 17).

Caritas in veritate issues a forceful critique of postmodern accounts of freedom and our consequent preoccupation in the West with rights understood as negative liberties. Having rejected the idea that we can know and

¹² Ibid.

¹³ See, e.g., David Nirenberg, “Love and Capitalism,” *New Republic* (September 25, 2009), <http://www.tnr.com/print/article/books-and-arts/love-and-capitalism>; George Weigel, “*Caritas in veritate* in Gold and Red,” *National Review Online* (July 7, 2009), <http://article.nationalreview.com/399362/icaritas-in-veritatei-in-gold-and-red/george-weigel?page=1>; and Dennis P. McCann, “Papal Disconnect,” *Christian Century* 126.17 (August 25, 2009) 10–11.

¹⁴ Douglas Farrow, “Charity and Unity,” *First Things* 196 (October 2009) 37–40, at 38.

articulate the nature of the human beyond social construction and lived conventions, that it is possible to speak intelligibly about human flourishing, postmodernism gives rise to a deep skepticism about the meaning and legitimacy of efforts to pursue the common good. David Hollenbach captures well the existential situation faced today by a theory of the common good in the wake of what he describes as “the waning of the aspiration to know what a human being truly is”:

In the face of such agnosticism about what human beings are, the idea that all people share a common good must seem a mirage. Pursuit of the good we human beings share in common is not only unlikely because of distortions of the will, as Augustine knew it could be. Nor is it problematic simply because knowledge of what we share in common is minimal or incomplete. For some postmoderns, it has become, strictly speaking, impossible. . . . Human beings are as different as the languages they speak and as the particularities of the worlds they inhabit.¹⁵

The understanding of freedom—and therefore of the foundation for a theory of rights—that emerges through a postmodern lens is in stark contrast with the meaning of freedom as developed within Catholic social thought and reaffirmed in *Caritas in veritate*. Wrested from its moorings in a teleological account of the person, freedom comes to represent the expression of individual desires and preferences or, in some cases, particular locations within existing power relations. Doubts about the possibility of a common good undermine a natural relationship between rights and duties, leaving rights to symbolize variously contested or accepted spheres of noninterference. Benedict underscores the challenge of the present age: “Nowadays,” he argues, “we are witnessing a grave inconsistency. On the one hand, appeals are made to rights, arbitrary and non-essential in nature, accompanied by the demand that they be recognized and promoted by public structures, while on the other hand, elementary and basic rights remain unacknowledged and are violated in much of the world.” He calls for “a renewed reflection on how rights presuppose duties, if they are not to become mere license.” Duties constrain rights by bringing into view the “anthropological and ethical framework of which rights are a part. . . . Duties thereby reinforce rights and call for their defense and promotion as a task to be undertaken in the service of the common good.” (No. 43)

Bioethics is rightly identified as an arena in which bringing to bear a counternarrative to freedom as “intoxication with total autonomy” is particularly important (no. 70). As I have shown elsewhere, contemporary interpretations of procreative liberty in the context of new reproductive or

¹⁵ David Hollenbach, “The Common Good in a Postmodern Epoch: What Role for Theology?” in *Religion, Ethics, and the Common Good*, ed. James Donahue and M. Theresa Moser, Annual Publication of the College Theology Society 41 (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-third, 1996) 3–22, at 5.

genetic technologies provide a telling example of what happens when we lose an appreciation for freedom as restrained by, and oriented toward, particular moral ends.¹⁶ In the face of newly emerging possibilities in assisted reproductive technology, it is commonly argued, especially in the West, that parents should be permitted to use any means at their disposal to bring about a certain reproductive outcome, whether that entails preventing undesirable characteristics, improving the odds of a healthy child, or determining the sex of a child in advance. As expressed by North American legal philosopher John Robertson, the governing interpretation of procreative liberty privileges the significance of reproduction to individuals and the role of expected or desired outcomes in decisions to reproduce.¹⁷ According to this understanding, a full sense of reproductive autonomy implies the right to control not only the conditions of nurture but all components of reproduction. Therefore, if an individual believes that she would only achieve satisfaction in reproduction from a child with particular characteristics, then she should be free to select offspring with the greatest chance of displaying those preferred traits.

It is easy to see how this conception of reproduction as an individual or personal act would follow from postmodern or post-Christian conceptions of freedom: here the freedom to reproduce is the liberty to enmesh one's own desires, to enact one's conception of the future. Only the thinnest, most instrumental notion of harm (such that it would have been better not to have been born at all) restricts the power of the individual to imprint his or her vision of a fitting offspring. Lacking a substantive understanding of "human nature," this view of procreative liberty cannot say why reproduction is important, not just for individuals but for societies.

We can see as well why it is crucial to advance a conception of procreative liberty that is more than license, but that recognizes reproduction as a decision about our shared human future, and that sets reproductive choice within obligations to the common good. Procreative liberty so understood contains its own constraints. Since human dignity is the foundation for obligations to the common good, duties to respect the fundamental dignity of offspring (as potentially autonomous, and possessing certain physical, intellectual, and spiritual capacities) count against any individual's right to "acquire a child that meets his or her reproductive specifications." Here reproduction is recognized as inherently relational, "other-regarding," not just in a physical but also in a moral sense; it is not just a material act but

¹⁶ See Maura A. Ryan, *Ethics and Economics of Assisted Reproduction: The Cost of Longing* (Washington: Georgetown, 2001) chap. 4.

¹⁷ See John A. Robertson, *Children of Choice: Freedom and the New Reproductive Technologies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton, 1994).

also a spiritual act, expressing our participation as partners in God's creative process. To reproduce is to welcome a new being with equal rights, qua human being, to the basic means for authentic human development, and to incur obligations to act so as to protect the conditions for human flourishing on behalf of the one who has come into one's care. From this perspective, reproductive liberty presupposes both the willingness and the ability to provide for the physical, social, and spiritual needs of offspring. It also encompasses respect for his or her fundamental human uniqueness. Some sense of this is behind arguments against a parental license on genetic engineering. The right to an "open future," as it is often called, is the right to respect for one's given and particular "genetic destiny."

Because consistency and intimacy in nurture contribute to the development of intellectual and emotional capacities in children, reproductive practices that detach interests in creating offspring from commitments to care for them, or social policies that undermine the ability of those adults most closely concerned to act on a child's behalf, are problematic. Viewing reproductive liberty through the lens of the common good recognizes that respect for human dignity takes concrete shape in concern for equitable access to the means for social participation. Therefore, reproductive responsibility includes questioning reproductive practices that ignore existing disparities in access to health care or that reinforce social patterns of discrimination, e.g., sex preselection and certain forms of reproductive eugenics. Finally, placing reproductive liberty in the context of the common good entails examining the impact of reproductive behaviors on the social and material conditions for humane reproduction. It is not only possible but also necessary to ask how adopting particular reproductive practices promises to enhance or diminish the potential for expressing reproduction as a fitting human act.

Caritas in veritate also points to the way a preoccupation with rights as negative liberties undermines the social solidarity needed to address the urgent threats to the environment facing us now and into the future. The much anticipated 2009 Copenhagen Climate Conference failed to yield a legally binding international agreement to combat climate change, in large part because of the unwillingness of participant nations to accept the profound changes in energy, transportation, and manufacturing practices that would result in a meaningful reduction in global emissions. The refusal to support shared sacrifices, to commit to collective action for the sake of present and future generations even at some personal cost, writ large at Copenhagen, is repeated daily in the personal attitudes and behaviors of individuals. Benedict correctly warns that the health of the environment rests not only on an appreciation for the integrity of creation but also on the capacity to see our daily choices as moral choices and to act with a spirit of both accountability and generosity.

Although the encyclical correctly identifies the consumerist mentality that drives the way we develop and use goods, the way we treat the natural environment, and even our appropriation of emerging medical technology, its “whole cloth environmentalism” is ultimately unconvincing. Benedict rightly resists the false opposition between efforts to protect natural habitats and the pursuit of humane living conditions and genuine progress around the globe, and overcomes long-standing antagonisms between development theory and population politics. There is much wisdom in the admonition to see the current ecological crisis, as well as the collapse of the global financial markets, as a lesson about the limits of human hubris and the importance of honoring the “law of being” in all of creation. Yet, it is not obvious that believing in the immorality of abortion or same-sex marriage leads to respect for creation or to a commitment to environmental sustainability. Indeed, our long experience in the United States suggests that those who are most vocal in opposing legalized abortion and same-sex marriage are the least likely to support environmentally friendly policies. As I have earlier argued, in practice we find a strong ideological disconnect between a pro-life political stance and environmental activism.¹⁸ Religious conservatives in the United States broadly supported George W. Bush and his administrative policies. However, the Bush administration’s environmental policy—from its efforts to limit the Clean Water Act and vitiate the Clean Air Act, to its failure to propose standards adequately limiting mercury pollution from coal-fired power plants, to its decision to cut a \$50 million urban lead abatement program—is widely viewed as disastrous. By almost any measure, the Bush administration’s environmental policy set progress on children’s environmental health, an important indicator of how environmental policy protects the most vulnerable, back decades. In 2004, The Children’s Environmental Health Network gave Bush an “F,” citing a consistent pattern of favoring industry interests over increased protection for fetuses and children.

Beyond the practical question of how pro-life or “family values” politics relate to action on behalf of environmental sustainability, the assumption that anyone who accepts the legitimacy of same sex-marriage or contraception—or in some other way disagrees with the Church’s positions on the range of life issues—has therefore fallen prey to “the intoxication with total autonomy” is questionable. As others have pointed out, many people who agree with the pope’s critique of the language of liberal rights and reject prevailing accounts of freedom as exalted self-interest, nonetheless defend same-sex marriage on grounds they believe to be consistent with the broad Christian ethical tradition, e.g., justice, fidelity, and collective support

¹⁸ Maura Ryan, “Toxic Legacy: Why the Environment Is a Life Issue,” *Commonweal* 136.16 (September 25, 2009) 8–10.

for the care of children.¹⁹ In the same way, it is possible to recognize the importance of understanding freedom as “a call to being” while supporting the responsible use of contraception by committed married couples or the appropriate recourse to medically assisted reproduction for infertile couples who cannot realize the generativity to which their marriage is oriented in any other way. To assume that all disagreements with magisterial teachings on sexual ethics or bioethics result from false views of human freedom negates the rich role of individual conscience and the creative character of moral discernment that are hallmarks of the Christian intellectual tradition.

The critique of gender theory underlying *Caritas in veritate*'s subtle concerns about same-sex marriage also raises important questions for its interpretation of “integral human development.” Reasserting the “biological basis for the differences between the sexes” has implications not only for how we view homosexuality as a social and moral question, but also what we make of traditional gendered roles within the family and, by extension, within society. Although implicit here, the magisterium has been vocal in defending an account of the family rooted in gendered complementarity against what it perceives to be threats posed by contemporary feminism and international movements for women's rights.²⁰ In arguing that relativizing or nullifying sexual difference offends the “natural and moral structure” of human life, *Caritas in veritate* affirms a view of women and men as possessing different inborn essences that issue in distinct roles within marriage and distinct contributions to society. While supporting the equality of men and women as persons, a theology of marriage and the family—and ultimately a theory of society—based on different and complementary natures underscores an essentially domestic vocation as intrinsic to women's true nature.

An appreciation of sexual difference does not in itself undermine efforts to create and maintain social conditions that respect and promote genuine equality between men and women. It is rather the elevation of gendered roles without sufficient attention to the social, economic, and political meaning of those roles under given material circumstances that many women's rights advocates—and many Christian feminist theologians—find dangerous. It is possible in principle to imagine a nonhierarchical complementarity, but in practice, women's and men's roles within the family have typically attached to different levels of power and authority, often resulting in inferior social status for women. Whether we can hold together the

¹⁹ See Eduardo Peñalver, “Gay Marriage Harms the Environment. Wha?” *dotCommonweal* (January 12, 2010), <http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/?p=6268>.

²⁰ See, e.g., Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988).

fundamental equality of persons and different roles within society or within the home depends a great deal on the way particular roles are understood and valued and what social goods and opportunities attach to them.

One stumbling block for Catholic social thought on gender equality has been the tendency to separate the public and private realms into realms of “justice” versus “love.” While the Catholic Church has been a powerful voice for justice and equality in the civic arena, it has been late to extend a critical justice lens to the private realm, and slow to call for the mutuality of rights and responsibilities on the domestic front. For example, while affirming the right to education and meaningful employment for women as well as for men, the magisterium has not argued forcefully for men to take full and mutual responsibility for children in the home, a precondition for women’s full participation as social agents. *Caritas in veritate* carefully avoids the false dichotomy of “love” and “justice,” arguing that charity both demands justice and completes it (see no. 6). But it remains to be seen what this might mean for domestic relationships alongside the reaffirmation of gendered complementarity at the heart of the “natural family.”²¹

A more obvious weakness of *Caritas in veritate* is its virtual silence on the role of investments in women’s status regarding achieving human development goals. Since the 1990s, sometimes called the “decade of women in development,” significant international attention has been given to the importance of empowering women (through parity in education, access to adequate health care, and shared political participation) as the cornerstone of sustainable development. In the wake of the AIDS pandemic and evidence of rising rates of HIV infection among women, particularly in very poor areas of the world, there has also been renewed attention to the relationships between gender, social status, and health, as well as to the role that investments in women’s health play in fostering economic growth and social stability. Although the promotion of gender equity is an independent goal, all eight Millennium Development Goals adopted by world leaders in 2000 (which, in addition to promoting gender equity, include eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, achieving universal primary education, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases, ensuring environmental stability, and creating a global partnership for development) touch directly on women’s health and the relationships between gender, access to resources, and the ability to develop and exercise a range of fundamental human capabilities. Taken together, the Millennium Development Goals

²¹ Benedict XVI, Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the World Day of Peace (January 1, 2008) nos. 2, 10.

assume that achieving certain health outcomes (e.g., reducing infant mortality or achieving a sustainable level of population growth) depends upon understanding and addressing intersecting forms of social and economic inequality that influence and constrain behavior (e.g., gender-related gaps in primary education that result in early marriage and premature childbearing). The Goals also recognize that promoting gender equality is not an added benefit, but rather that transforming the conditions under which women exercise their human agency on their behalf and on behalf of their families is integral to achieving all other development goals.²²

It is not surprising that Benedict would attempt to distance his theological treatment of human rights and integral development from familiar and influential arguments for “women’s rights” that privilege a narrow set of reproductive liberties, or that define women’s health principally in terms of access to safe and legal abortion. But by failing to attend to the significance of investments in the status of women for sustainable development, *Caritas in veritate* misses an opportunity not only to bring into relief the limits of some characterizations of women’s rights but also to raise up women’s daily struggles for survival around the world and to recommit the Church to genuine gender equity—in the private and public spheres—as a prerequisite for social justice.

Finally, while *Caritas in veritate* offers a powerful challenge to postmodern tendencies to instrumentalize human freedom, to “make ourselves the ultimate measure,” I would wish for a greater recognition of the contested nature of the “truly human” in a global society and a deeper epistemological humility in expressing “the truth about man.” As Jean Porter argues, we need not give up entirely the ideal of the *humanum*, the richly developed account of human flourishing as nourished by a divine origin and destiny to which Benedict appeals, or the effort to determine what it means for human beings to share certain basic needs, inclinations, and vulnerabilities, to recognize that interpretations of human flourishing are consistent with radically different moral codes.²³ Even if there is something profoundly compelling in the argument that our capacity for moral responsibility is grounded in the divine plan of love inscribed in creation, we ought still to acknowledge the deep and perhaps even intractable disagreements among traditions about the implications of our human nature for moral action and for our social institutions and practices. Though such humility may leave us with less certainty than *Caritas in veritate* holds is necessary to save our planet or to transform our civilization, it is finally an appreciation

²² On the Millennium Development Goals see <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>.

²³ Jean Porter, “The Search for a Global Ethic,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2001) 105–21, at 120.

of the limitations of our language that allows the possibility for genuine dialogue about our shared future across moral and theological divides.

CONCLUSION

As a call to conversion, *Caritas in veritate* offers an ambitious and wide-ranging challenge to a technically sophisticated, increasingly global, but often morally ambiguous culture. Its plea to reclaim the “true meaning of freedom” exposes an ethos of hyper-autonomy, efficiency, and utility that has failed to protect our natural world or to encourage the kind of human solidarity needed to address the serious and growing gaps in human development. Its “pro-life environmentalism” raises more questions than it finally answers. Still, the encyclical invites us to see God in everything, to recognize the connections among all living things, and to find there the inspiration for a new way of envisioning how we might work together to renew the earth.