

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace Plenary Assembly

November 5th, 2010

Receiving Caritas in veritate in Europe: some introductory notes

Simona Beretta

Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

Introduction

The following notes are offered as a very initial step in collecting information on how CV was received and is being received in Europe, with a view to the public dimension of receiving. Receiving a gift is a free decision of human heart, and it is above the reach of human judgement; while the public dimension of receiving can be assessed on the basis of observation.

I used two basic sources. First, I used a search engine to see on the internet what happened in different European countries after the encyclical was published, up to now. Obviously, not all that happens goes on the web; but being on the web is an effective way of communicating

Second, I asked for help. I called friends living in different European countries and I had interviews with them. They are either colleagues (university professors) and/or experts in CST, and I trust their judgement. The list of friends includes very diverse people, and I take the chance to thank them collectively here.

Is it too early ... or is it too late for assessing how CV was received?

This question may seem inappropriate, but the first remark is that the immediate response to the publication was quite extensive. The number of copies sold and downloaded was huge – as in regional reports given during the session on CV during the Vicariato di Roma – PCJP June 2010 Symposium: The number of newspapers and periodicals' articles was also quite high; some of them were unusually receptive of some novelties of this document¹. Little in-depth analysis, and just a few attacks; notably, it caught immediate attention in some lay environments (entrepreneurs associations, trade unions, politicians and similar).

The immediate assessment of how CV was received was overall very good. But we all know the public attention was soon attracted by other topics; although our Holy Father – through all His sufferings - has been a true witness of *caritas in veritate*.

Now we may wish to assess if CV has penetrated more deeply and permanently into our European consciences ... but it may be too early for this task. Still, since I have been invited to address this issue, I will offer – humbly, openly and as speaking to close friends – what came out of my investigation.

¹ See for example The Economist: "...despite some lapses into trendy jargon, *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), a 144-page encyclical issued by Pope Benedict XVI on July 7th, is certainly not a banal or trivial document. It will delight some people, enrage others and occupy a prominent place among religious leaders' competing attempts to explain and address the problems of an overheated, overcrowded planet ... Encyclicals are the heaviest ammunition in the papacy's intellectual arsenal. This one was delayed for more than two years as the Vatican's thinkers struggled to keep abreast of developments in the world economy. But the original purpose has remained intact: to offer a Catholic response to a global marketplace that in Benedict's elegant turn of phrase, "makes us neighbours but does not make us brothers.", The Economist, *New sins, new virtues*, Jul 9th 2009.

Receiving CV in Europe

One preliminary remark states a fact: Europe is continent that needs to be evangelized again. As a matter of facts, the Christian experience is totally unknown to many and misperceived by many others. As a rule, it is treated as if it did not belong to public life and to the cultural dimension of living. Hence, a very sensible point in receiving the encyclical is how seriously we take the point that “Christianity is not merely useful but essential for building a good society and for true integral human development” (CV 4)

A second general remark, concerning more specifically the European Catholic milieu. Within it, CV was usually received with reverence, which is a fine sentiment, but obviously insufficient. One overall impression I got from my overview can be bluntly stated as follows: CV was always dedicated a “niche”, or even a large space, in most “catholic” events; it was revered and quoted. But was it really “received” as a challenge to minds and heart, as a vocation to be verified in ordinary, everyday life? Take as an example quoting CV. Selected parts of CV could be quoted to draw attention to a particular dimension of life and development, and this is fine, so long as it does not come at the expense of losing sight of the coherence of the overall text. Coherence, also in quoting, is a sign of “true receiving”. In fact, coherence is “dynamic faithfulness to a light received” (CV 12).

When searching for the expression “CV” on a search engine, the most frequent outcome was related to some form of external communication set up by Catholic medias, which have proved effective in presenting the content of the encyclical and promoting conferences, meetings, occasion of debate; with some interesting experiments as well (Caritas-Ticino TV “spots”, for example). It is obviously harder to assess, as I meant, how CV was received in the public debate

What happened in some European countries?

This is a short summary of what emerged from both “interviews” with friends and colleagues and internet search on the impact of CV on the public debate. No presumption of full representation or adequate interpretation of what really happened on my side: just sharing information and thoughts. Sorry if, at times, I will sound too harsh.

- *Belgium*

The news about the encyclical was overshadowed by the paedophilia crisis; catholic social organizations did not play a strong role in promoting public dialogue on CV.

- *European Union*

I would like to recall two events. The first is an important conference “*Caritas in veritate* from the Perspective of Politics, Economics and Theology”, co-sponsored by COMECE and EPP Group in the European parliament PPE, and held in Sept. 2010. Press coverage shows it was a significant event.

The second is the organization by COMECE, in Gdansk, of the 1st Catholics Social days for Europe, with participants from all member countries. The title was “Solidarity – the challenge for Europe”. I had the privilege to participate in this event, and I must say (sorry for being outspoken) that the days were very much “for Europe”, but not so much engaged in a critical assessment of what it means to be “for Europe” here and now, in truth and charity, after “receiving” CV. The encyclical was presented, in a beautiful “niche”; the assembly works seldom referred to it and the final message makes no reference to it.

- *France*

Many cultural initiatives were organized, in many different places (Bernardins, Centre Sévres, Istitut Catolique...) also reaching economic and social actors. As to the wider impact of CV on public opinion, the outcome of my person-to-person investigation seems less encouraging. I had an interview with a highly reputed scientist I had the opportunity to meet as a speaker in the Conference “*En université, une communauté de personnes passionnées par la vérité*” (Rome, 6 March 2009); hence, a person “sensible to truth”; his judgement on how CV affected the public

debate is rather *tranchant* : “*Quant à ce que les journaux ont pu écrire - que ces journaux soient catholiques ou non -, cela n'a aucune valeur de toute façon.*”.

- *Germany*

The echo of CV on German media was cautious and rather critical, especially on the language of the encyclical (a “catholic soliloquy”, in a Frankfurter Allgemeinen Zeitung editorial). Der Spiegel spoke positively (in its own language, though!) about CV policy implications as “good old Ludwig Erhard transposed into the 21st century”. Not very encouraging as a “receiving” to my eyes!

On the academic side, there were some catholic social ethicists’ discussions where different lines of thought emerged, including one sharply critical of CV because of its language and/or its unrealistic proposals. Academic discussion of CV by social scientists and economists was not extensive, although there was a Conference at the Eichstatt-Ingolstadt University.

- *Great Britain*

The reception of CV in great Britain was extensive and mostly positive; some public commentators and policy makers openly referred to CV in positive terms. There is also a running debate on if and how far the idea of “Big Society” is actually rooted in CST and in CV in particular. Grassroots citizens’ movements also appear to be lively, connecting CST with local community organization (“Faithful citizens”).

On the academic/professional side, conferences and debates were held at University of Nottingham and University of Oxford (Chesterton Institute). The encyclical was also presented to prominent bankers and financiers, by initiative of Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales.

- *Italy*

My information about this country is more abundant, and for this same reason I know it is very incomplete! The press soon forgot it, despite a strong initial outburst of interest/curiosity. The encyclical was officially presented to the Italian Senate. The press was active in discussing CV, often underlying the general relevance of the ethical dimension.

Many state/private and catholic/pontifical universities held public initiatives in which CV was presented; among the state/private universities, I am aware of conferences in Università Bocconi, Padova, Sassari. I am also aware of a (much smaller) number of scientific research initiatives involving interdisciplinary teams. These initiatives seem to me indispensable for truly “receiving” CV. Another important initiative worth mentioning is the VII Simposio Internazionale dei Docenti Universitari, co-sponsored by Vicariato di Roma and PCJ&P. CV was presented in the introductory session, while the rest of the Conference addressed the issue “Towards an economy serving the human family – Person, Society, Institutions” along a variety of specific session (where references to CV were rather limited)

In searching for CV on the web, I have to admit I encountered a considerable number of references to CV that looked like “capturing” CV for specific purposes (of the sort: “See? The Pope says what I am saying!”). This is not exactly “receiving” CV, to my opinion. One possible example could be the document by COREIS (Comunità Religiosa Islamica), which quotes CV and speaks about Islamic finance. That I can understand; I find harder to accept that sometimes the same structure of arguing is used within the catholic milieu.

- *An Addendum on the 46th Social Week of Catholic Italians*

The 46th Social Week of Catholic Italians is more on ongoing process than a single event, although the Week itself has been very recently celebrated, October 14-17 in Reggio Calabria. The title of the 46th Week is “*Catholics in today’s Italy: an Agenda of Hope for the Future of the Country*”

The Preparatory Committee has been working since the summer of 2008; the Invitation Letter, presenting both the topic and the method of work, was issued in April 2009. Then, a widely articulated bottom up work started, with dioceses, groups and movements offering written and oral contributions towards the identification of a relatively small number of “problems with realistic options for solution” that were deemed crucial for the common good of the country. The encyclical letter CV issued in July 2009 accompanied this work of discernment, that was synthesized (.. so to speak!) in a rather long “Preparatory document” issued on may 1st 2010.

The very recent Reggio Calabria event was a *clou* moment in a longer story, still to be concluded with the preparation of the “Final Document” by the Preparatory Committee, to be issued in the early months of next year. In Reggio Calabria 1200 people met for two plenary sessions (one with the Opening Lecture by the President of the Italian Bishops’ Conference, the second with three lectures on the Italian and international political and economic situation); two sessions were dedicated to share experiences and perspectives within five rather large working groups; one to a media event (a sort of talk show) where experiences of then the final session, with reports by the five leaders of group work. Out of the same number of official invitations to Social Weeks, participation to the Reggio Calabria event increased by 30% with respect to the previous Social Week and about other 400 people could not physically participate; plenary sessions were broadcasted in real time. The reason for this diffuse interest is very likely to be the long, diffused and intense preparatory work.

What can be said on “receiving” CV within the Social Week initiative?

Caritas in veritate as a document was *not* formally presented in Reggio Calabria; but it was very much present in the diffused preparatory initiatives that led to the Reggio Calabria event (local conferences, lectures & discussion, formal and informal working groups on specific topics... as documented on the Settimane sociali website, www.settimanesociali.it). That is: a lot of the preparatory work was based on CV – especially with respect to the political dimension, gift/gratuitousness and economic initiative, family as a social and cultural agent. In the group works in Reggio Calabria – as far as I can tell on the basis of my participation and of in-depth conversation with group leaders – references to CV were not very frequent, but substantive (being allowed 3 minutes for each intervention helped people to go to what they really thought essential!).

As a general impression, I can add the following. *Caritas in veritate* is more than a precious document. It is also our personal, real belonging; we belong to *caritas in veritate*. Catholic Social Weeks are useful if they witness such belonging. Both in Reggio Calabria and in participating in the preparatory work in very different parts of Italy I have been impressed by “the power of the powerless”, that is the faith of the simple people who belong to the Church. Confrontation on touchy issues (federalism and national solidarity, working for wage and entrepreneurship, immigration, the “educational emergency”, reconstructing bonds for social mobility) was at times tense, in Reggio Calabria. But the fact of openly talking and listening to each others about these issues, very divisive in Italy, is a tangible sign of hope.

A final remark: the Catholic Social Week actually did not make it through non-catholic media. Italian Catholics seem to hit the news only when they are divided...

- *Lithuania*

The encyclical was presented in many local events, and also on a public event in the Parliament, addressing “Freedom and Responsibility: the Foundations of Economics and Politics in the Light of *Caritas in Veritate*”; local organizers said that interest on the encyclical was “higher than expected”. Which is good... gratuitous, in a sense.

- *Spain*

Immediate reception of CV in Spain was very diverse: enthusiasm in some people/journalists (mostly those committed with the Church), coldness in others, who were mainly interested in checking whether the encyclical was touching single topics they were interested in, and whether there were particular positions they agreed or disagreed with. If I may say, the second attitude is quite diffused (even in some “catholic” milieu, unfortunately) but I think it does not even qualify as “receiving”.

The encyclical had an echo in conferences organized by pontifical/catholic universities and theological institutes. It also affected social pastoral and other church-connected initiatives that referred to CV as “fil rouge” in their usual educational and cultural activities. Nonetheless, the debate at the national, public level has not been extensive, and economic agents have still to “digest” the encyclical, as it emerged at conference at IESE Business School

- *Switzerland*

One of my interviewed signalled immediate public interest on the text, and some lasting interest on the encyclical dealing with specific issues (financial crisis in particular). He noted scarce in-depth debate and some misunderstanding of the issue of a “world political authority” (CV 67) in a country hosting many important international organizations. There is need for clarifying the nature of social encyclicals, for a deeper dialogue with Christians of different denominations.

A second interview dealt about scientific publications concerning CV, signalling a clear “division of labour” between theologians (interested in charity/love as a “new” core principle in CST) and social scientists, who ignored the theological framework and reacted to applied topics (technology, energy, environment...). In a sense, CV remains to be received as whole.

Some provisional final consideration

Among the issues raised in CV that made it through (sometimes controversially) in the public debate there are the notion of gift and gratuitousness – sometimes reduced to a “nice” concept, as an alternative to the dark side of the market. Gratuitousness and gift in market relations and in institutions obviously need further reasoning.

I am struck by the fact that it is quite uncommon to see people receiving the two words “charity” and “truth” – and their lively and dynamic connection – for what they are: they are not “confessional” words, only good for believers. They are the most elementary human words; even children understand them. Actually, children do while adults – especially in Europe – may feel too grown up to take them seriously. Receiving CV seems to me a matter of *ablatis*: purification, finding ourselves in truth, resisting in the faith of the simple people².

Seriously receiving CV calls us to take the challenge of *caritas in veritate*, the Face of His Person (CV 1). Coherence, as dynamic faithfulness to a received light, implies reading CV as whole: charity and truth, charity and justice, the gift and the economy, the social question being an anthropological question, the logic of gift as receiving truth and love... Receiving CV remains largely to be done; as receiving CST as such. It is a never ending calling, because faith encounters the world in the diverse “here and now” of our life.

I see two interconnected fields where it is urgent to invest in actively receiving CV: in the field of education (from child raising to PhD supervising: introducing to reality as whole); and in the more specific field of interdisciplinary theoretical and applied research for “new solutions” (as asked in CV 32).

² I am quoting two recent expressions by our Holy Father. He said: “... we “find” ourselves in Truth” (luncheon for the conclusion of the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East, 23 October 2010). He also said that the good earth that absorbs the currents (the currents that dominate, that impose themselves as the only rationality, as the only way to live) is the faith of the simple people, that does not allow itself to be overcome by these currents (Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops, Meditation of His Holiness Benedict XVI during the First General Congregation, 11 October 2010)