

1-1-2015

Profit Maximization and the Death of God: Theology and Economics in Benedict XVI's *Charity in Truth*

D. Stephen Long

Marquette University, d.stephen.long@marquette.edu

Published version. "Profit Maximization and the Death of God: Theology and Economics in Benedict XVI's *Charity in Truth*," in *Jesus Christ: The New Face of Social Progress*. Ed. Peter J. Casarella. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015: 91-98. [Publisher link](#). © 2015 William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. Used with permission.

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Responses to Benedict XVI's encyclical on the economy came fast and furious, initiated by George Weigel's controversial editorial in the *National Review*.¹ He found parts of the encyclical capitulating to the Peace and Justice Pontifical Commission established by Pope Paul VI in his 1967 encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. In response, Weigel attempted a quest for the historically authentic Benedict by dividing the encyclical between the "gold" written by Benedict himself and the "red" sponsored by the Peace and Justice Pontifical Commission. For Weigel, the latter was a capitulation by Benedict not to be taken seriously.

All the usual suspects then rose up to claim either that this posed no significant challenge to the capitalist economic order or called it decisively into question. Those on the left emphasized Benedict's "economy of communion," his advocacy for government interference, his critique of globalization, and his challenge to letting the free market alone determine wages. They often neglected the sexual and reproductive issues. Those on the right neglected or dismissed the language of gift, the "economy of communion," and the call for government interference, but emphasized the sexual and reproductive issues, reminding those on the left of Benedict's affirmation of the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. But perhaps what both sides missed in this give and take is the profound and *particular* theological convictions that inform this encyclical. Instead, we were regularly told that behind this letter is a doctrine of personalism, or a doctrine that notes the significance of the human person. And this is true, but what is even more important is the Christological foundation for this anthropology. Unlike other encyclicals on the economy, beginning with *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and following, Benedict's encyclical is the most thorough *theological* approach to economic matters in that grand tradition. He does not prescind from essential Christian teachings in an attempt to make common cause between those in and outside the Church. He unapologetically establishes a Christological and Trinitarian context for how we should think about economic exchange.

What makes Benedict XVI such a fascinating pope and theologian is that his exercise of the Church's teaching office is, in many ways, the fruit of some profound shifts in Catholic theology in the mid--twentieth century, particularly in understanding the relation between nature and grace. Benedict, following in the footsteps of theologians like Henri de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar, is not enamored with the rigid distinction between nature and grace fostered by nineteenth--century neoscholasticism and often still shared by neoconservatives and progressives, both of whom seek to engage in the broader so--called culture wars by thinking of politics and economics fundamentally in terms of the natural law. That approach emerges from the neoscholastic distinction that assumed the human person had a twofold end, one found in nature and the other in supernature. Politics and economics were understood primarily in terms of that natural end. For this reason, the natural law sufficed to direct all people to the natural end that could make them happy. It allowed the Church to speak to all people of good will without necessarily proclaiming more particularist Christian convictions, especially the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation and the necessary mediating role of the Church. Indeed, true happiness was found in the supernatural end, and for that one needed the Church with its mediation of Word and sacrament, and its teachings about Jesus and the Triune God, but these were not necessary for the natural end, and therefore only tangentially related to economics and politics. For that the law of nature gives us what we need. This could easily be translated into an affirmation of the autonomy of reason via the social sciences, whether that meant Hayek on the right or Marx on the left. But Benedict XVI has repeatedly stated that the natural law has become nothing but a "blunt instrument," and that this division rendered Jesus too tangential for Catholic social ethics. He seldom uses the natural law when he addresses political and economic matters. Instead, he is unabashedly Christological and Trinitarian in his counsel to Catholics, Protestants, Muslims, Jews, secularists, and others.

Benedict does not deny that nature has a "law" or "grammar," that is to say, an order that God gives to it and that we can discover.² This order is what makes "truth" possible, and such an order, as he has repeatedly stated, requires both truth and charity to be rightly discerned. But truth is for him personal because, following the Gospel of John, Truth is a Person. I hope to show first how the connection between charity and truth is an inextricably Christological claim. Christology provides the theological foundations of creaturely existence. I then want to show how this makes Christianity a factor in economic life — a factor that gets lost in the modern era and must be retrieved. Finally, I contrast Benedict's "Christocentric anthropology" (the term comes from Tracey Rowland's work) with some contemporary ethicists and economists and discuss what it might demand of us.

1. Truth and Charity: The Theological Foundation of Existence

Benedict XVI unapologetically claims that Christ's life establishes the foundation for human existence. It is basic to his argument in *Caritas in Veritate* (CV). He writes, "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 development of every person and of all humanity" (CV, no. 1). Read in comparison to *Populorum Progressio* (PP), on which *Caritas in Veritate* comments, this is a startling claim. It stated, "To be authentic, [development] must be well rounded; it must foster the development of each man and of the whole man" (PP, no. 14).³ *Populorum Progressio* tended to explain this development primarily in terms of the human creature's natural end. All that was necessary was a doctrine of creation. Therefore, Paul VI wrote, "Just as the whole of creation is ordered toward its Creator, so too the rational creature should of his own accord direct his life to God, the first truth and the highest good. Thus human self-fulfillment may be said to sum up our obligations" (PP, no. 16). Note how the "rational creature" here directs himself to God and the good "of his own accord." Our obligation is "human self-fulfillment," and the call for "development" makes no explicit reference to Jesus, God's gifts, or even the Triune God. This is not to argue that Paul VI did not think they mattered; of course he did, but they remained implicit.

Benedict, on the other hand, states explicitly that the "principal driving force behind authentic development" is Jesus. That, I think, provides the intelligibility to language such as "gift" and "communion" in this letter. It is not some capitulation to leftist thought, but the *theological* affirmation that creation takes place in, through, and for Christ. Benedict's explicit reference to particular Christian dogmas in comparison to Paul VI's appeal to a more generic anthropology also shows the post-Christian and post-secular reality of Western politics and economics in the twenty-first century. It reflects a post-Christian reality in that basic Christian teachings must now be explicitly heralded. We no longer assume a stable Christian civilization or culture, a patrimony tacitly or otherwise acknowledged, within which something like an appeal to the "natural law" might be intelligible. It is post-secular in that supposed common universals within secularism that seemed to make common cause with the natural law, such as Habermas did in his "Dialogue" with Cardinal Ratzinger, also no longer provide a compelling patrimony.⁴ The Church's role in the world has changed markedly since 1967, which in some sense reflects a failure of Catholic social teaching. No one has been listening. The arguments were set forth in such a way that they actually contributed to secularization. Benedict takes the Church back to its roots while at the same time reminding us of the Christian patrimony that we neglect to our peril.

Those claiming Benedict speaks for their side in the culture wars too often neglect his "Christocentric anthropology." But this has been a consistent emphasis throughout his work.⁵ It is important for understanding the place of "development" in *Caritas in Veritate*, for "development" can quickly underwrite a secular program where the "dignity of the human person," another of the supposed secular universals, suffices for an anthropology. The 1967 *Populorum Progressio* lent itself to such an interpretation as did the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes*. For all of the good it has accomplished, the sharp distinction between nature and supernature in some Catholic social teaching contributed to the secular marginalization of Christian teaching. Without losing that good, Benedict charts a different course.

As early as 1969, Joseph Ratzinger wrote an essay critiquing some implications of the kind of language arising from Vatican II that marginalized Christology. For instance, he found *Gaudium et Spes* "still based on a schematic representation of nature and the supernatural viewed far too much as merely juxtaposed."⁶ This fostered an anthropology that still "divided" the doctrine of the human person too much between "philosophy and theology." He then asked, "why exactly the reasonable and perfectly free human being described in [*Gaudium et Spes*'] first article should suddenly be burdened with the story of Christ."⁷ He recognized that the way of arguing for Catholic social ethics marginalized Christology. "Burdening" anthropology with Christ best characterizes Benedict's approach to politics and economics. A clear example of this is his undelivered address, "The Truth Makes Us Good and Goodness Is True." In 2007 Benedict XVI was invited to present a lecture at La Sapienza University in Rome. Because of student protests against the pope's visit in the name of free speech, the lecture was not given, which is more than ironic. Benedict's lecture was about the need for universities to have a requisite freedom to seek truth. But a genuine freedom to seek truth should not police against revelation, against receiving something more than what an immanent philosophical approach alone could provide. To explain this, Benedict drew on the doctrine of the incarnation to describe how nature and grace, or philosophy and theology, should relate.

I would say that St. Thomas's idea of the relationship between philosophy and theology could be expressed in the Council of Chalcedon's formula for Christology: Philosophy and theology must relate to each other "without confusion and without separation." "Without confusion" means that both of them preserve their proper identity. Philosophy must truly remain an undertaking of reason in its proper freedom and proper responsibility; it must recognize its limits, and

precisely in this way also its grandeur and vastness. Theology must continue to draw from the treasury of knowledge that it did not invent itself, that always surpasses it and that, never being totally exhaustible through reflection, and precisely because of this, launches thinking. Together with the “without confusion,” the “without separation” is also in force: Philosophy does not begin again from zero with the subject thinking in isolation, but rather stands in the great dialogue of historical wisdom, that again and again it both critically and docilely receives and develops; but it must not close itself off from that which the religions, and the Christian faith in particular, have received and bequeathed on humanity as an indication of the way. Various things said by theologians in the course of history and also things handed down in the practice of ecclesial authorities, have been shown to be false by history and today they confuse us. But at the same time it is true that the history of the saints, the history of the humanism that grew up on the basis of the Christian faith, demonstrates the truth of this faith in its essential nucleus, thereby making it an example for public reason.⁸

Philosophy has an independence from theology. It is an “undertaking” of reason. But it is never “pure.” It does not begin anew in each generation. Its grandeur arises both from what it can accomplish and from a humble recognition of its limits. Such limits make it open to receive wisdom both from a historical patrimony and from faith. True reason need not fear the gift of faith any more than faith spurns reason. The grandeur of reason is found in both what it can accomplish and in a humble acknowledgment of its limits that makes it open to both “historical wisdom” and “faith.” This theme of gift, that Weigel appears to have colored in red, is actually a longstanding commitment of Benedict.⁹

We see this Christological reading of the relation between philosophy and theology, and nature and grace, repeated, incorporated, and developed in *Caritas in Veritate*. Benedict writes, “Reason also stands in need of being purified by faith . . . religion always needs to be purified by reason” (CV, no. 56). Faith and reason, grace and nature, should no longer be relegated to separate realms. There is a “porosity” between them that will inevitably entail “border--crossing” despite the academic policing that takes place on the left and the right.¹⁰ Faith needs reason. It must engage the best that philosophy and the sciences offer. But reason also needs faith. It needs that openness to something beyond its own immanent borders. For this reason, economics cannot proceed as an insular discipline cordoned off from faith, theology, and metaphysics. The latter represent a necessary openness to history and being that will always be something more than “human self--fulfillment” through its own natural resources, albeit those natural resources are necessary for the ongoing “purification” of faith. For this reason Benedict calls for a “new humanistic synthesis” with regard to the economy that requires “faith, theology, metaphysics and science to come together in a collaborative effort in service to humanity” (CV, no. 31). Economics must do its work as a “philosophical discipline.” But if it is to do this well, it will need to be open to something more than rational choice theory, profit maximization, utilitarian calculation, marginalism, and the like. Faith, theology, and metaphysics must also play a role. This is a profound challenge to the study and practice of economics that would require an interdisciplinary approach that few secular universities would permit.

If we are to take Benedict’s teaching seriously, then the goal of economic life would be seen primarily as arising from and returning to the Eucharist. Its goal is, as he puts it, “true communion.” Notice how when he explains what this is, he relates grace and nature, faith and reason, in an interesting way: “Today humanity appears much more interactive than in the past: this shared sense of being close to one another must be transformed into true communion. *The development of peoples depends, above all, on a recognition that the human race is a single family* working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who live side by side” (CV, no. 53).¹¹ We have the natural reality of our close proximity and dependence on each other. But this proximity requires “true communion” if we are to have the kind of development that suits us as the human race. The natural reality of close proximity requires the grace of “true communion,” if that globalized proximity is to achieve its true end. This requires transformation. What is this “transformation” into “true communion”?

Again, this language has precedence in Benedict’s earlier work. It is found in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, where he argues that the politics of Christianity is of a “different order of reality.” That work addresses the question of a Christian politics, which Benedict claims, is found in “every Eucharistic assembly” for it is “a place where the King of peace reigns in this sense.”¹² If we do not have this politics, we cannot offer to the world “charity in truth.” For this reason Benedict argues, “The Christological (theological) argument and the social argument are inextricably entwined.”¹³ Christology defines the social, even the place of the nations. This does not mean God wishes “to abandon the nations to themselves” for Jesus “has brought the God of Israel to the nations . . . brought the gift of universality.” This could easily be misunderstood in a Kant-ian trajectory if we lose sight of the claim that for Benedict, this universality is intimately linked to “communion with Jesus.”¹⁴ Communion is the key here. This universality is a *theological* catholicity — a common life that exists transnationally, found primarily in the Catholic Church existing across space and time. Its task is to bring this “communion” to all the nations, and all nations into this communion.

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict states that for this “communion” we need “new thinking” that is not just concerned with the “social sciences” but also draws on “metaphysics and theology” for the development of an adequate “category

of relation” (CV, no. 53). In order to do so, he first draws on the doctrine of the Trinity (CV, no. 54) and then on marriage (CV, no. 55). These specific Christian teachings do not mean wisdom is not found elsewhere. Benedict recognizes that “other cultures and religions” also “teach brotherhood and peace.” Those teachings also provide a direction for an “integral human development” (CV, no. 55) that has as its end “true communion.”

Why then is Benedict’s theological engagement with *Populorum Progressio* called “Charity in Truth”? Because the latter is Christ, and creation is in, through, and for him. What then is truth? “Truth is the light that gives meaning and value to charity. That light is both the light of reason and the light of faith through which the intellect attains to the natural and supernatural truth of charity: it grasps its meaning as gift, acceptance and communion” (CV, no. 3).

2. The Loss and Retrieval of the “Christian Factor” and Its Concomitant Economic Practices

We lose the central role of truth and charity in economics when “the sole criterion of truth is efficiency and utility.” Once reason or nature is construed solely in their terms, then “development is automatically denied” (CV, no. 70). This is no small challenge to economics. On the whole, “pure” economic reason only uses “efficiency and utility” as the criterion for truth. It has no place for theology, metaphysics, and the goal of true communion. Take, for instance, the Acton Institute’s Jay Richards. He explains how we are to think about the relation between a business owner and his or her employees solely in terms of a purely economic reason. He writes, “To a business, employee wages are costs. . . . A wage is a price on a commodity — labor.”¹⁵ Richards then argues that it must not be understood as anything more than that. If it is, the system will not work. For this reason, we must not have any minimum wage let alone a just wage. This is of course classic liberalism, which only knows “efficiency and utility” and polices out any theological or metaphysical uses of reason. As much as the left adopted a secular social science alone in Marxism to explain economics, so the right adopts Hayek’s or Weber’s analysis without any “transformation” of that rationality by faith and the goal of “true communion.” How did this secular reasoning cordon off the “Christian factor” from economic analysis? How can it be retrieved? Benedict’s work gives insight into both.

We can begin to see this with an important claim made in *Caritas in Veritate*. A properly theological development gets thwarted when life gets fragmented. This occurs when business gets defined solely by “maximization of profit,” politics by “consolidation of power,” and science by “findings of research” (CV, no. 71).¹⁶ Then life gets trapped in an immanence that is not open to anything beyond itself. Managers find their only constituency to be shareholders. We lose theology and metaphysics, and especially the importance of “gift” in our economic analysis. Of course, this poses a significant challenge to contemporary capitalist arrangements. At least in the United States, corporate law enshrines profit maximization. The 1919 Supreme Court ruling *Dodge v. Ford Motor Co.* stated the legal obligation a CEO has is only to his or her shareholders to maximize profits. Economists and ethicists are in ready supply who defend this principle. As Elaine Sternberg put it, “business organizations which seek anything but long-term owner value are guilty not of socialism, but of theft.”¹⁷ Life gets fragmented because managers, owners, shareholders, and others are trained only to respond to the question of profit. We no longer find economic exchange also to be a response to the transcendental predicates of being such as beauty, the true, and the good. Nor do we think it is a matter of a response to God. The natural and theological orders, as well as their mutual relation, get ignored solely for a materialism that finds that the “real powers” that shape history are “politics and economics” devoid of metaphysics or theology.¹⁸

The latter is a reference to Ratzinger’s 1968 *Introduction to Christianity*, where he took on the privatization of Christianity and its catastrophic effects for our understanding of the human person. Ratzinger then asked the question whether God’s irrelevance for everyday life was not something already present in the Christian West. “We all have to behave now *etsi Deus non daretur* (as if there were no God).”¹⁹ Ratzinger then wrote, “But as Nietzsche describes it, once the news really reaches people that ‘God is dead’ and they take it to heart, then everything changes. This is demonstrated today on the one hand, in the way that science treats human life: man is becoming a technological object while vanishing to an ever greater degree as a human subject, and he has only himself to blame.”²⁰ The science that treats the human subject this way includes economics.

In *Introduction to Christianity*, Ratzinger traced this dominance of the technological approach to our understanding of the human person through a variety of stages, but he primarily traced it through Vico’s variation on an Aristotelian metaphysical theme. He wrote, “Following formally in Aristotle’s footsteps, [Vico] asserts that real knowledge is the knowledge of causes. I am familiar with a thing if I know the cause of it; I understand something that has been proved if I know the proof. But from this old thought something completely new is deduced: If part of real knowledge is the knowledge of causes, then we can truly know only what we have made ourselves, for it is only ourselves that we are familiar with.”²¹ This notion of truth is what traps us in an immanent world of our own making. Vico turns away from the scholastic “*verum est ens*” to “*verum qui factum*” — a move away from truth as a “transcendental predicate of being” to the true as the made. Truth is what we make. This introduces the “scientific” age, and the dominance of the

factum, or the fact. The result is a materialism that assumes that the “real powers” that shape history are “politics and economics.”²² Ratzinger found Latin American liberation theology adopting this materialist assumption through its primacy of “praxis.” This did allow for some positive movements: Marx’s claim that the point is not to interpret the world but to change it was a positive influence, but this primacy of praxis meant “God had nothing to do.”²³ That is to say, even the theologians who were attempting to overcome the privatization of theology did it in such a way that God did not matter.

If this 1968 book recognized and challenged any immanent, secular basis for Latin American liberation theology’s social analysis, the 2009 *Caritas in Veritate* recognizes and combats a similar problem in capitalist economic analysis. Both materialist analyses should be ruptured by the “gift” of faith. Ratzinger differentiates this understanding of the relation between theology and philosophy from a philosophy informed by the modern version of “the true is the made.” He writes, “faith is not something thought up by me but something that comes to me from outside; its words cannot be treated and exchanged as I please; it is always foreordained, always ahead of my thinking. The positivity of what comes toward me from outside myself, opening up to me what I cannot give myself, typifies the process of belief or faith. Therefore, here the foregiven word takes precedence over the thought, so that it is not the thought that creates its own words but the given word that points the way to the thinking that understands. With this primacy of the word and the ‘positivity’ of belief apparent in it goes the social character of belief, which signifies a second difference from the essentially individualistic structure of philosophical thinking.”²⁴ Benedict makes a similar argument in *Caritas in Veritate*. The “ultimate source” for “truth and love” is not humanity but God. He writes, “This principle is extremely important for society and for development, since neither can be a purely human product; the vocation to development on the part of individuals and peoples is not based simply on human choice but is an intrinsic part of a plan that is prior to us and constitutes for all of us a duty to be freely accepted. That which is prior to us and constitutes us — subsistent Love and Truth — shows us what goodness is and in what our true happiness consists. *It shows us the road to true development*” (CV, no. 52).

3. Economic Consequences

So what would Benedict’s theological economics require of us? First, it requires that we acknowledge that economics is never an independent, autonomous exercise. It is always situated in a larger, political, metaphysical, and theological context. The political context is ruled by the requirements of justice. For this reason, Benedict argues, “The market is subject to the principles of so-called *commutative justice*, which regulates the relations of giving and receiving between parties to a transaction. But the social doctrine of the Church has unceasingly highlighted the importance of *distributive justice* and *social justice* for the market economy, not only because the market belongs within a broader social and political context, but also because of the wider network of relations within which it operates” (CV, no. 35). That larger context also includes a natural and metaphysical order — truth, beauty, goodness. Citing John Paul II, Benedict writes, “What is needed is an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of *new lifestyles* ‘in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments’ ” (CV, no. 51, citing *Centesimus Annus*, no. 36). Finally, it includes a theological order, one already alluded to in this metaphysical order; it is an order that acknowledges that our being comes as gift and has its true purpose in communion.

Let me conclude by attempting to place economic analysis in terms of this larger natural, metaphysical, and theological structure. Think of the natural, metaphysical, and theological not as three discrete, autonomous circles, but as a single layered reality. We can begin with the “natural” — with our basic animality, its needs and desires. But that “natural” always opens up to a yet greater reality, a metaphysical one where the unavoidability of goodness, beauty, and truth gives the natural its shape. Without that metaphysical quest, the natural loses its own basic reality and becomes nothing but a materialist order defined by technological calculations. But that natural and metaphysical reality is not the only reality for we are by nature oriented to something yet even greater — to a desire for God. This is a desire that cannot be satisfied naturally, but seeks something more — the gift of charity and true communion. In order to explain this I return to the theme of work and ask what is required of us if we think of economic relations in terms of this larger structure.

Any relation to workers exists first within a natural structure. We have biological needs and desires that must be fulfilled for “authentic human development,” needs for food, rest, clothing, shelter, health care, security, play, and the like. We cannot survive without the satisfaction of these basic needs and desires. But what regulates them? Commutative justice might suggest that legal contracts alone provide proper regulation. If I enter freely into an economic arrangement and agree to provide or purchase goods and services at market prices, then that is the only “natural” context that should determine “value.” Catholic social teaching never accepted this. Since Leo XIII’s *Rerum*

Novarum it has claimed that market forces alone cannot determine just wages. As Leo XIII put it, “there underlies a requirement of natural justice higher and older than any bargain voluntarily struck: the wage ought not to be in any way insufficient for the bodily needs of a temperate and well--behaved worker. If having no alternative and fearing a worse evil, a workman is forced to accept harder conditions imposed by an employer or contractor, he is the victim of violence against which justice cries out.”²⁵ Benedict XVI continues this longstanding Catholic teaching when he says that foreign workers “cannot be considered as a commodity or a mere workforce” (*CV*, no. 62). The natural order alone cannot be truly represented by claiming that market value alone constitutes what is “natural,” let alone that the market, as a “natural” reality, identifies or responds properly to the metaphysical and theological ordering of our basic animality.

I already mentioned Jay Richards’s argument that a purely natural economic reason would treat wages as nothing but a commodity. But this overlooks the layered reality within which economics takes place. For some reason, theological voices that defend the “free” market overlook this basic teaching. Take, for instance, the work of William McGurn. He questions the role of government to legislate against child labor based on the real possibilities afforded an Asian child who works in a garment factory sewing clothes for Wal--Mart. He by no means defends child labor, but he wants to make his “American” audience aware of the market realities this child faces. He writes, “An Asian audience would immediately recognize that the real alternative for that Bangladesh girl would not be trundling off to class but scavenging through garbage heaps or prostituting herself.”²⁶ And he concludes, “To our sensibilities, this is not an attractive trade--off. But in real life poor people typically do not have the choices we wish them to have, and the market sometimes brings better choices even when that is not its intention. While it might soothe Western consciences to ‘eliminate’ child labor through regulations, in reality we may — if successful — be forcing children into something worse.”²⁷ What is troubling about this statement is that McGurn claims it is “our sensibilities” that make the option between child labor and child prostitution an “unattractive trade--off.” But this has nothing to do with “western consciences”; it is a matter of what justice demands based on the natural human desires that well up in us, pointing us to their proper ordering that can only be known once we examine metaphysics and theology. To be outraged by such a reality is to begin to have one’s basic desires properly ordered. To be told that it is a false sensibility is to disorder desire. If the unregulated free market is recommended because it gives an Asian child a choice between prostitution and child labor, then it does not have much to recommend it. It is not “natural,” but an unnatural situation that calls for remedy.

For Benedict, natural justice demands not just commutative justice, but also distributive and social. He writes, “In fact, if the market is governed solely by the principle of the equivalence in value of exchanged good, it cannot produce the social cohesion that it requires in order to function well” (*CV*, no. 35). What would it mean to function well? Not only distributive and social justice, but also metaphysics and theology will be determinative factors that must be taken into account if it is to function well. What would this entail? It requires God to be considered in economic exchanges, for they are always forms of communion that implicate our lives in those of others. Economic exchange is not a bare act of will two people perform when they trade with each other. It is an act that always presumes something that came prior, which Benedict identifies as “subsistent Love and Truth” (*CV*, no. 52). Perhaps the English version capitalizes these terms for a reason. Subsistent relations are relations among the Triune Persons. The Father shares his essence with the Son, who is Truth. The Son only is the Son because of his relation to the Father. He “subsists” in the Father. Likewise, the Father and Son share their common essence with the Spirit, who is Love. The Spirit “subsists” in them. This means that the Persons are not individual substances who have some autonomous “I” that constitutes their being. They are who they are because they subsist in another, and they do so immediately.

We are made in and for this “image.” We are not God so our relations do not have the same immediacy as the Triune Persons, but we are nonetheless implicated in each other’s lives such that without acknowledging that implication we will fail truly to develop as we should. This order comes before us and we neglect it at our peril. Oliver O’Donovan nicely explains this when he encourages us not to think in terms of “economic exchange” at all, but to think of these relations in terms of “communication.” He finds the term “exchange” to be inappropriate as a reference to God’s relations with creation. He writes, “‘Exchange’ imports the idea of closure to a transaction, restoring the parties to the independence of the status quo ante, each strengthened by the return of value in a different form.”²⁸ He rightly cautions against any such contractual use of exchange in theology. “The concept of exchange is not fundamental to community. It is a device, abstract and formal, created together with the institution of trade, the market. To trade is to effect an exchange of goods between two otherwise equal and unrelated agents.”²⁹ Instead, “communication” (from *koinonia*) is a more basic theological term. He quotes Althusius, who defines communication as goods held in common such as “things, services, and common rights (*iura*), by which the numerous and various needs of each and every symbioate are supplied, the self--sufficiency and mutuality of life and human society are achieved, and social life is established and conserved.” Communication is, then, to give anything “meaning” and thus has as its “paradigm object” the word.³⁰

So let us not even use the term “economic exchange.” When I purchase goods and services I am “communicating”;

my life becomes a mediated subsistent relation intertwined with others. Purchasing and consuming are more like language, sharing a meal together, or engaging in sexual intercourse than they are isolated discrete acts that are nothing but a bare “exchange.” This is why economics, language, and sex are always related, why it is right to be obsessed with sex — if we are always at the same time obsessed with economics and language. Stanley Hauerwas tells of a Jewish friend who states, “Any God who will not tell you what to do with your pots and pans and genitals isn’t worth worshipping.” Sex, language, and economics are all forms of communication that cannot be reduced to bare forms of exchange without thwarting our humanity. They must all be open to something beyond them if we are to be truly human. Sex should be open to life, to the gift that comes through procreation. Language makes us open to the gift of community, for none of us has a private language. Economics opens us to the metaphysical and theological order that antedates our existence, an existence founded on a generous act of *creatio ex nihilo* where God creates solely out of the Love and Truth that defines God’s being. This theory of relations must be present whenever economic calculations are made.

1. George Weigel, “*Caritas in Veritate* in Gold and Red,” *National Review* online, July 7, 2009.

2. He writes that nature is “a wondrous work of the creator containing a ‘grammar’ which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation” (CV, no. 48). Translation follows Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (Washington, D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009).

3. Translation at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html.

4. See Joseph Ratzinger and Jürgen Habermas, *Dialectics of Secularization: On Reason and Religion*, trans. Brian McNeil (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006). In this dialogue, Habermas suggested that the Roman Catholic natural law tradition “has no problem in principle with an autonomous justification of morality and law (that is, a justification independent of the truths of revelation)” (p. 25). Ratzinger found less help in the “natural law” for addressing this question than did Habermas. He wrote, “Unfortunately, this instrument [natural law] has become blunt. Accordingly I do not intend to appeal to it for support in this conversation” (p. 69).

5. Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith: The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 34.

6. Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith*, p. 34.

7. Rowland, *Ratzinger’s Faith*, p. 34.

8. Translation available at <http://www.zenit.org/article-21526?l=english>.

9. Weigel wrote, “Now comes *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth), Benedict XVI’s long-awaited and much-delayed social encyclical. It seems to be a hybrid, blending the pope’s own insightful thinking on the social order with elements of the Justice and Peace approach to Catholic social doctrine, which imagines that doctrine beginning anew at *Populorum Progressio*. Indeed, those with advanced degrees in Vaticanology could easily go through the text of *Caritas in Veritate*, highlighting those passages that are obviously Benedictine with a gold marker and those that reflect current Justice and Peace default positions with a red marker. The net result is, with respect, an encyclical that resembles a duck-billed platypus. . . . But then there are those passages to be marked in red — the passages that reflect Justice and Peace ideas and approaches that Benedict evidently believed he had to try and accommodate. Some of these are simply incomprehensible, as when the encyclical states that defeating Third World poverty and underdevelopment requires a ‘necessary openness, in a world context, to forms of economic activity marked by quotas of gratuitousness and communion.’ This may mean something interesting; it may mean something naïve or dumb. But, on its face, it is virtually impossible to know *what* it means. The encyclical includes a lengthy discussion of ‘gift’ (hence ‘gratuitousness’), which, again, might be an interesting attempt to apply to economic activity certain facets of John Paul II’s Christian personalism and the teaching of Vatican II, in *Gaudium et Spes* 24, on the moral imperative of making our lives the gift to others that life itself is to us. But the language in these sections of *Caritas in Veritate* is so clotted and muddled as to suggest the possibility that what may be intended as a new conceptual starting point for Catholic social doctrine is, in fact, a confused sentimentality of precisely the sort the encyclical deplores among those who detach charity from truth. There is also rather more in the encyclical about the redistribution of wealth than about wealth-creation — a sure sign of Justice and Peace default positions at work. . . . Those with eyes to see and ears to hear will concentrate their attention, in reading *Caritas in Veritate*, on those parts of the encyclical that are clearly Benedictine, including the Pope’s trademark defense of the necessary conjunction of faith and reason and his extension of John Paul II’s signature theme — that all social issues, including political and economic questions, are ultimately questions of the nature of the human person.” Weigel, “*Caritas in Veritate* in Gold and Red.”

10. The language here is that of William Desmond. He writes, “We can plot a border between territories and insist that faith and reason only travel to the other’s country under proper visa. Then they will enter illegally, without certification or passport. There are no univocal borders in mind and spirit which bar trespass or illegal entry; there is a porosity more elemental than all passports and academic policing. . . . Where is the pure faith relative to which thought is excluded? Where is there pure reason that entirely excludes all trust?” *Is There a Sabbatical for Thought? Between Religion and Philosophy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 98-99.

11. Our global proximity is not necessarily good. Globalization, Benedict writes, “makes us neighbors but does not make us brothers” (CV, no. 19).

12. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. 84.

13. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 115.

14. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 116.

15. Jay Richards, *Money, Greed, and God: Why Capitalism Is the Solution and Not the Problem* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 38.

16. Benedict writes, “Once profit becomes the exclusive goal, if it is produced by improper means and without the common good as its ultimate end, it risks destroying wealth and creating poverty” (CV, no. 21). He then challenges a basic premise in contemporary corporate law by arguing that “grave risks” occur when businesses are “exclusively answerable to their investors” (CV, no. 40). He states that a significant problem in the present economy is a “new class of managers” who are “often only answerable to shareholders generally consisting of anonymous funds” (CV, no. 40).

17. Elaine Sternberg, *Just Business: Business Ethics in Actions* (London: Little, Brown, 1994), quoted in Andrew Hartopp, *What Is*

Economic Justice? (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007), p. 168n23.

[18.](#) Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 2nd ed., trans. J. R. Foster (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004 [1968]), pp. 14-15.

[19.](#) Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 16.

[20.](#) Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 17.

[21.](#) Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 61.

[22.](#) Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, pp. 14-15.

[23.](#) Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 17.

[24.](#) Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 92.

[25.](#) Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, no. 45. Translation at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html.

[26.](#) William McGurn and Rebecca M. Blank, *Is the Market Moral? A Dialogue on Religion, Economics & Justice* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2004), p. 131.

[27.](#) McGurn, *Is the Market Moral?* p. 132.

[28.](#) Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), p. 246.

[29.](#) O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, p. 246.

[30.](#) O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, p. 250.