

Community Organizing and Social Change in Light of *Caritas in Veritate*, 11/13/09

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1.1 The twentieth-century North-American tradition of community organizing for social change has, since the 2008 presidential campaign of Barack Obama, taken front and center in public debates on national policy and on faith-based social action. Because Mr. Obama's rise as a community organizer in Chicago from 1985 to 1988 was partially supported by eight far South Side Catholic congregations in the Developing Communities Project (DCP), and because of his later work as a trainer for the sometime Church-supported Gamaliel Foundation, it is useful to consider the place of community organizing for social change in light of Catholic social teaching, and from the perspective of *Caritas in Veritate* in particular.

Community organizing, while often associated with radical traditions going back to the American Revolution and figures like Thomas Paine, to late Nineteenth Century union activism, to European Marxism and American radical movements, to early Twentieth Century radical and Progressive traditions, has since the New Deal of the late 1930s been financially supported and sustained at critical points by Christian congregations, and by Catholic parishes and dioceses in particular. The stereotypical paradox of 1960s community organizing was that the mites of pious widows eventually made their way from the parish collection basket into the pockets of chain-smoking, cursing, hard-drinking organizers. But as community organizing has professionalized like other fields over the decades, oftentimes today one finds among such organizers idealistic and committed young professionals with or seeking master's degrees, with experience in service work overseas, and with a lifetime commitment to their religious beliefs or studied personal political philosophies.

The Catholic Church in the United States has since the 1950s invested hundreds of millions of dollars in community organizing through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, its predecessors, and through the generosity of individual bishops and pastors. The relationship between houses of worship and community organizing is at least symbiotic, if not saprophytic. It is clear from the

autobiographies and handbooks of leading organizers that their preferred source of funding is from congregations and individual donors, and not from foundations or government, since there is a perception that congregation-supported organizations are closer to the citizens and independent from government and from the machinations of wealth. There is thus a strong attraction on the part of community organizations to seek “church money.” Had the fortunate circumstance of established American congregational wealth not persisted since the 1950s, community organizing as we know it today would not exist.

Since this paper is constrained to serve as a conference presentation, I will focus on the unique perspective of Caritas in Veritate (henceforth CIV) on questions of social justice, social action and organization. At various steps I will then refocus the discussion on community organization and social change in light of this marvelous and foundational encyclical.

Secular traditions of community organizing face an immediate challenge with the first sentence of CIV: "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." (CIV, 1) This “Charity in truth” cannot be reduced to the “speaking truth to power” which reappeared as a catch-phrase in 1955 in Quaker parlance (it may have had 18th century roots) and spread throughout the political world, but is a recognition that love and truth are both gifts, and that both are expressed in the person of Christ.

Benedict XVI’s characteristic Augustinian turn implying both action and reception expresses this relational mutuality in love: "Charity is love received and given. It is 'grace' (cháris)." (CIV, 5). From these two sentences, Benedict’s argument unfolds throughout the encyclical.

The word “charity” has had a mixed reputation in the traditions of social change. The critical education textbook writer Joel Spring characteristically treats charity as social control on the part of the rich for the poor. The charitable acts listed in the biblical Corporal Works of Mercy from the Gospel of Matthew—to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, etc.—are often seen as not enough, as not producing fundamental social change, if not producing dependency. The leading Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) community organizer Edward T. Chambers—himself a trainer of Mr. Obama—described his frustration working in the clothing room of the Catholic interracial apostolate Friendship House in New York City in the 1950s and his determination to seek a change in society that would not make such clothing rooms necessary.

But for Benedict, charity cannot be so narrowly defined as simply a list of charitable acts. We do well to return and to dwell upon Benedict’s starting point, which takes us in a renewed direction: "In Christ, charity in truth becomes the Face of his Person, a vocation for us to love our brothers and sisters in the truth of his plan. Indeed, he himself is the Truth (cf. Jn 14:6)." (CIV, 1).

If community organizing is in part speaking truth to power, then to the extent that community organizing avoids speaking of Christ, it therefore avoids speaking the truth.

Community organizing, in the “relational” rubric described by Edward T. Chambers, treats each conversation outside of friendship or intimate love as public, potentially political, and as an open expression of citizenship. The IAF’s approach, developed over several decades, weaves together a web of hundreds if not thousands of “relational meetings” among congregants and citizens. These meetings combine story-telling, personal testimony, and information-gathering into an accumulated Gestalt leading to concerted public action of potentially thousands of persons. A number of IAF-organized campaigns have led to new laws, and to governmental reforms. 8

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