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Did the 2005 Synod Duck Issues of Hunger and Poverty?

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Some observers have been keenly disappointed with the October 2005 Synod of Bishops in Rome, particularly in that it missed the opportunity to issue a resounding call to tackle the great problems of world hunger and poverty. Many bishops did speak strongly on these issues, as is summarized in the final Synod document, but there were sharp differences with those arguing for a return to 'traditional' devotional practices. This was deeply disconcerting and frustrating to those bishops alarmed about the desperate struggle against poverty and hunger in many countries. Many people expected that the Synod would have taken up urgently themes relating to the UN Millennium Development Goals, since millions of lives hang in the balance. Yet there seemed to be little real engagement with this unprecedented global effort, which is surely one of the most significant and hopeful signs of our times.

Indeed the call of the United Nations to support the Millennium Development Goals to eradicate hunger and the grossest forms of poverty within twenty years amplifies magnificently the core of the Christian message. It is deeply disturbing that every hour 1200 children die as a result of poverty, especially as eminent economists assure us that hunger can be eradicated if nations contribute the needed resources. About half the human race is still living in conditions of severe poverty, with over a billion people in extreme poverty. Would not Jesus expect his Church to be stirring mightily to rouse the conscience of the world to alleviate such cruelly unnecessary suffering?

The world is crying out for leadership from the Catholic Church on the great contemporary social issues of hunger and poverty, environment and peace. At a Synod on the Eucharist, what could be more obvious than Christ's call to share our bread with the hungry? Yet where was the overwhelming and urgent endorsement of global efforts to eradicate hunger and the worst poverty? How ironic that it is the pop singers like Bono and Bob Geldof who elevated these issues of hunger and poverty into the mass popular consciousness.

The issue points to the fact that the episcopal leadership in the Catholic Church as a whole is not articulating powerfully how the love of God must inspire,

stimulate and insist on love for our neighbor in distress, particularly in the struggle for social justice. As the noted US Catholic social commentator, Professor John T. Pawlikowski, wrote after attending the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in early 2005: 'I kept asking myself where are the religious leaders that are currently addressing the issues of global poverty, AIDS, ecology, etc. with the gusto and force of some of the political leaders who addressed Davos'.¹

Millennium Development Goals

In the year 2000, 189 countries signed the Millennium Declaration committing them to halve the number of people in hunger and the most acute poverty (living on less than US\$1 a day) by 2015. This reflected intense planning and research over many years by hundreds of development experts coordinated through the United Nations. The eight Millennium Development Goals set clear targets to achieve. Each country was to draw up its own detailed planning on how to achieve these goals.

The UN Millennium Goals are grouped under eight headings:

1. To halve the number of people in chronic hunger – currently about 800 million - and extreme poverty by 2015.
2. Achieve universal primary education for both boys and girls.
3. Promote gender equality and empower women, especially in secondary schools.
4. Reduce under-five child mortality by two-thirds.
5. Improve maternal health, and reduce maternal mortality by three-quarters.
6. Halt or reverse the spread of infectious diseases, including HIV/Aids, malaria and TB.
7. Sustain and improve the environment, and halve the number of people without potable water.
8. Develop a global partnership for development with
 - open trading and financial systems
 - good governance
 - debt relief or cancellation for impoverished countries, more generous aid and trading opportunities
 - access to affordable drugs
 - and the benefits of new technologies.

Just imagine the difference it could make to international relations and the dialogue among the major religions if the whole world, with the vigorous support of the richer countries, focused its energies and resources on alleviating hunger and poverty everywhere. This would send a much more humane and appealing message than any pre-emptive strikes or wars for democracy. The Development Goals aim to save the lives of 30 million children in the next ten years, and lift hundreds of millions out of the most severe poverty.

No doubt, there will be critics of aspects of the Goals and room for improvements, but the general intention behind them is profoundly moral, and an

astonishing sign of the times, of practical solidarity on a world scale. We have never seen anything like this before in history. Most of the work must be done in developing countries themselves of course. However, this effort to reduce hunger and poverty rapidly is likely to fail unless public opinion swings more strongly behind the Millennium Goals, and forces governments in richer countries to make available the needed funds and resources.

The fundamental message is one of amazing good news. Many leading economists and international organizations tell us that the world has the resources and know-how to reduce the extent of hunger and inhuman poverty relatively quickly everywhere. If this is possible, it is morally obligatory on us. Hence we must do our best to inform people about these astonishing opportunities, and to rouse the public conscience to ensure widespread political and economic support for governments to do what is necessary. Not only are the Goals eminently achievable, but the funding needed is relatively modest. The shortfall in funding could be met by shifting a mere 5 per cent of global arms spending into the development effort. It is simply incomprehensible that the world spends 20 times more on arms than on development assistance. Some writers consider this issue of global hunger and poverty of such immense historical significance as to rival the abolition of slavery.²

As Pope John Paul II said on World Food Day, 16 October 2003: 'How can we keep silent when confronted by the enduring drama of hunger and extreme poverty, in an age where humanity, more than ever, has the capacity for a just sharing of resources?' And in his World Day of Peace message in 2000, John Paul insisted that the poverty of billions of men and women is 'the one issue that most challenges our human and Christian consciences'. He repeatedly called for a vast mobilization of social conscience so that the world will support the effort behind the Millennium Goals.

Assessing the 2005 Synod

This was hardly the message coming resoundingly through the Synod. An unexpected difficulty stemmed not just from debates about how to respond to current social problems, but from some failure to understand the Eucharist in its fuller context in the Scriptures and the history of the Church. According to the Australian theological expert at the Synod, Fr Frank Maloney, the standard of many speeches revealed a 'very mediocre' level of theological understanding, particularly in Scriptural foundations and the history of Church practice and doctrine. Maloney has been dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America, but was recently elected provincial superior of the Salesian Order in Australia. He lamented that some bishops wanted 'to canonize the fact of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist by use of the term "trans-substantiation".' Maloney preferred returning to New Testament terminology, with the understanding that the Eucharist is more than simply a ritual performance like spinning a prayer wheel. It commands the disciples to 'break their own bodies and spill their own blood for the redemption of others'.³ This was a point Benedict himself stressed: 'the Eucharist urges the Christian to be the "broken bread" for others, to commit oneself for a more just and brotherly world.'⁴

Maloney was not of course challenging the Church's teaching on the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. But the point is that the reserved Sacrament must always be understood in the context of the Mass and, as the Second Vatican Council insisted, be seen within historical developments from the early Church. We need to situate post-Tridentine devotional practices in their context, and not over-emphasize them to the point that devotions to the Blessed Sacrament distance us from immediate social responsibilities. The setting of the Last Supper meal emphasized Jesus' presence not just in the bread itself, but in the *sharing* of the bread, which resulted in what we would today call solidarity with those in need, the widows and orphans, the sick, hungry and distressed. These early Christians shared goods and resources, and held goods in common. Indeed, the ancient phrase, 'the body of Christ', referred not to the Eucharistic bread, but to the body of believers. Moreover, the very words of the Our Father pray: 'Give us this day our daily bread', bringing not just spiritual but material sustenance to the center of our relationship with God. Sharing our daily bread from the first was accepted as absolutely central to the Christian message.

This is what the Church today needs to bring into clearer balance: that Christ identifies profoundly with the poor, and that any Eucharistic devotion that neglects this is deficient. This is precisely the message implied in the Last Judgment scene from Matthew 25: God spurns and rejects a piety that neglects the social needs of our neighbors. How surprised are the people in the parable, in consternation demanding to know 'when did we see you hungry, sick, in prison!' The Gospel insists that religious practice not divorce believers from their social responsibilities. Especially is this so today where Catholics are not suffering political, social or cultural exclusion, and are free to make their voices heard in the public forum as citizens.

The message that needs to be shouted from the rooftops is that God is not disinterested in human wellbeing, but is passionately concerned about how the poor are treated, the 'poor' being shorthand for all those who are distressed, sick, marginalized, dispossessed, or suffering in some way. The practice of true religion rests on recognizing that God identifies profoundly with all those struggling in hardship, and that he expects believers to show practical concern for the 'poor' around them. As St James wrote, 'Pure, unspoilt religion, in the eyes of God our Father is this: coming to the help of orphans and widows when they need it, and keeping oneself uncontaminated by the world' (James 1:27). In short, God is not impressed with pious sentiments without genuine concern for others in distress.

Nowhere is the message more startling than in the life of Jesus himself, who lays down his life for us as the ultimate act of God's self-revelation. It is God's unimaginable act of solidarity with all those suffering pain and injustice. The death of Jesus dramatizes how truly passionate is the concern of the Father for human wellbeing. This is what is so decisively original and unique in the Christian message. Without a doubt, this is how the Gospel must be conveyed today. In this light, the Eucharist can be seen as an insistent motivating force and inspiration energizing us to join with others in the tasks both of charity and social transformation, believing in the promise that our work is prefiguring God's gift in the coming of the Kingdom.

Social concern is something that resonates profoundly in the depths of thinking

people today, and is a privileged vehicle of access into the larger questions of meaning and the great Mystery of a God so desperately loving human beings. It would be an enormous tragedy if social concern were misinterpreted as some sort of secular rival to the Gospel when it can open such an inviting path to faith. The life and death of Jesus reveal what is in the depths of God's own heart, and the intensity of his concern for people in their pain and struggles. By an amazing paradox, Jesus' Jubilee vision of God as passionately concerned about the wellbeing of all people, particularly of the weakest and most vulnerable, is a vision that people of all religions and of none can readily embrace.

The final message of the Synod on 23 October 2005 rightly insisted that the sufferings of the poor 'cannot remain extraneous to the celebration of the Eucharistic Mystery which summons all of us to work for justice and transformation of the world in an active and conscious fashion'. It added that our care for those in need is 'the criterion that will attest the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations.'

Amen to that. This is precisely the connection that needs to be reinforced, that devotion to the Eucharist must always urge us to accept our social responsibilities and love of neighbor. About the great drama of world poverty, the Synod document declared: 'All this suffering cries out to God, and challenges the conscience of humanity. It challenges us all... For our part, we will continue to participate actively in a common effort to generate lasting conditions for genuine progress for the whole human family, where no one is lacking his or her daily bread'.⁵

Benedict's response?

Maloney has been nearly 20 years on the International Theological Commission and he is well known to Cardinal Ratzinger. He thinks Pope Benedict will also have been very disappointed with the standard of discussion in the Synod, and will produce a much better written reflection. Some of the Synod propositions highlighted the social significance of the Eucharist, but Benedict is likely to link the Eucharist more immediately with our obligations to feed the hungry and care for the afflicted.⁶

However it is not yet clear how closely Pope Benedict will follow John Paul II in his advocacy of efforts to tackle world hunger, and specifically through the Millennium Development Goals. Vatican representatives to the United Nations and other international organizations have given striking support to these efforts, especially Archbishop Celestino Migliore at the United Nations.⁷ But Benedict has seemed hesitant or uncertain at key moments, notably when the eyes of the world were fixed on the meeting of the leaders of the G-8 most important world economies at Gleneagles in Scotland in July 2005. One cannot imagine John Paul II missing such an opportunity to throw all his moral weight behind these efforts with a landmark public statement or gesture. Yet Benedict sent only a very brief message through Cardinal Sodano, Vatican Secretary of State, to Cardinal Keith Patrick O'Brien, archbishop of Saint Andrews and Edinburgh. It supported debt reduction for the heavily indebted poor countries and called for 'a more just distribution of the world's goods'.⁸ Given the unprecedented world attention, the Pope's message greatly disappointed many, but they wished to give Benedict, who

was new to his role, more time to find his feet to lead on these issues.

Cardinal Sodano again gave strong support to the Millennium Development Goals in an address to the UN General Assembly on 18 September 2005. He insisted that it was 'an obligation in justice in the service of human dignity to attain and even to surpass the Millennium Development Goals'.⁹ But Benedict's comments on such themes have generally been short and without the sharp focus of John Paul II.

Benedict is rightly concerned about moral relativism in western culture, but the irony about the Millennium Development Goals is that they are fleshing out in very concrete terms the objective requirements of the common good, and meeting with a widespread and enthusiastic reception. Surely this is fertile ground for a fresh and lively conversation about the objective ground of moral norms, bypassing condemnations of relativism expressed in abstruse philosophical language. It would be an immense service both to western culture and the poorest countries if Benedict could help promote this conversation, which is so concerned about the future of human wellbeing and values. The opportunity could easily be lost.

Part of the task for Pope Benedict will be to relate the Synod on the Eucharist to the writings of his predecessors, especially Pope Paul VI's 1975 encyclical, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, which talked of the Gospel message in terms of liberation. The Redemption that Christ offers is not simply a spiritual deliverance, but liberation from everything that oppresses man but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One, in the joy of knowing God... (#9). Reflecting on the 1974 Synod of Bishops, Pope Paul continued:

Peoples, as we know, [are] engaged with all their energy in the effort and struggle to overcome everything which condemns them to remain on the margin of life: famine, chronic disease, illiteracy, poverty, injustices in international relations, and especially in commercial exchanges, situations of economic and cultural neo-colonialism sometimes as cruel as the old political colonialism. The Church, as the Bishops repeated, has the duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings, many of whom are her own children – the duty of assisting the birth of this liberation, of giving witness to it, or ensuring that it is complete. This is not foreign to evangelization (#30).

Between evangelization and human liberation – development and liberation – there are in fact profound links... since one cannot dissociate the plan of creation from the plan of Redemption. The latter plan touches the very concrete situations of injustice to be combated and of justice to be restored... how in fact can one proclaim the new commandment without promoting in justice and in peace the true, authentic advancement of man? We ourselves have taken care to point this out, by recalling that it is impossible to accept 'that in evangelization one could or should ignore the importance of the problems so much discussed today, concerning justice, liberation, development and peace in the world.' (#31)

According to Pope Paul, the 1974 Synod furnished 'principles for a proper understanding of the importance and profound meaning of liberation, such as it was proclaimed and achieved by Jesus of Nazareth and such as it is preached by the Church' (#31).

After exhorting people against the use of violence, Paul VI continued that the Church 'is trying more and more to encourage large numbers of Christians to devote themselves to the liberation of men.'

She is providing these Christian 'liberators' with the inspiration of faith, the motivation of fraternal love, a social teaching which the true Christian cannot ignore and which he must make the foundation of his wisdom and of his experience in order to translate it concretely into forms of action, participation and commitment... The Church strives always to insert the Christian struggle for liberation into the universal plan of salvation which she herself proclaims (#38).

Pope John Paul II fully endorsed these views, and constantly urged Christians to tackle the great social problems of our time. In 1979 he declared that 'one of the great contemporary theologians, Hans Urs von Baltasar, is right when he demands a theology of liberation on a universal scale.'¹⁰ His extensive social commentary and interventions can be seen as his attempt to do this. During the Great Jubilee of 2000 he brought these themes into sharper focus. His 2001 letter, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, called us to a new sense of prayer, but with eyes wide open to the needs of others and the social reality around us, so that we could *help shape history*: 'Intense prayer, yes, but it does not distract us from our commitment to history. By opening our heart to the love of God it also opens it to the love of our brothers and sisters, and makes us capable of shaping history according to God's plan' (#33).

The Pope vigorously developed the Church's critical encounter with contemporary life and again highlighted the importance of the social dimensions of faith. He saw concern for social justice as a core requirement of faith, reflecting God's own astonishing identification with the poor and suffering.

The ethical and social aspect of the question is an essential element of Christian witness: we must reject the temptation to offer a privatized and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity, to say nothing of the implications of the Incarnation and, in the last analysis, of Christianity's eschatological tension. While that tension makes us aware of the relative character of history, it in no way implies that we withdraw from 'building' history. Here the teaching of the Second Vatican Council is more timely than ever: 'The Christian message does not inhibit men and women from building up the world, or make them disinterested in the welfare of their fellow human beings: on the contrary it obliges them more fully to do these very things' (#52).

John Paul called all to make clear 'to what length of dedication the Christian community can go in charity to the poorest.'

We must learn to see Christ 'especially in the faces of those with whom he wished to be identified: 'I was hungry and you gave me food...'. This Gospel text is not a simple invitation to charity. It is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ. By these words, no less than by the orthodoxy of her doctrine, the Church measures her fidelity as the bride of Christ... there is a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the Church to make a preferential option for them (#49).

Pope John Paul did not downplay practical solidarity with the poor in favor of correct doctrine, but insisted doctrine demanded social responsibility, and both were equally badges of fidelity to the Gospel.

Cardinal Ratzinger was of course closely involved with the debates over liberation theology in the 1980s. While rejecting views too uncritical of Marxist

ideology, the two Instructions on liberation theology (of 1984 and 1986) vigorously commended the struggle against social injustice in developing countries. But global social and economic issues were not then part of Ratzinger's responsibilities in the Vatican, and so the world has been waiting to see how he would respond to these great challenges.

In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI powerfully highlighted how our experience of the love of God impels us to respond to the urgent needs of others. 'God's passionate love for his people' is so great that he lays down his life (#10). In the Eucharist, he continues, we enter into Jesus' act of self-oblation, but this 'mysticism' of union with Christ is 'social in character'. "Worship" itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented' (#13-14). According to the Last Judgment scene in Matthew 25, 'love becomes the criterion for the definitive decision about a human life's worth', with Jesus identifying with those in need, the hungry, thirsty, the stranger. Indeed 'in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God' (#15).

'Saint John's words ["he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" - 1 John 4:20] should rather be interpreted to mean that love of neighbor is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God' (#16).

'But if... I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be "devout" and to perform my "religious duties", then my relationship with God will also grow arid... Only if serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me.' 'Love of God and love of neighbor are thus inseparable, and they form a single commandment.' Benedict instances how the Eucharist increases our capacity to love, but acquires its realism and depth' in service to others (#18).

From its first days, he continues, the Church felt this outpouring of love for the poor. 'The awareness of this responsibility has had a constitutive relevance in the Church from the beginning.' As St Luke wrote, they 'had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need' (Acts 2: 44-45) (#20). The exercise of 'charity' became an essential mark of the Church: 'love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel' (#22). 'The parable of the Good Samaritan remains a standard... For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being' (#25).

However, he warns that charitable work must never be used for 'proselytism'. 'A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak.' Members of Church charitable organizations must show this love in 'their activity - as well as their words, their silence, their example' (#31).

Benedict recognizes that the Church was slow to respond to the problems posed by the industrial revolution, but has since developed a rich body of teaching and thought on social issues. 'In today's complex situation, not least because of the

growth of a globalized economy, the Church's social doctrine has become a set of fundamental guidelines offering approaches that are valid even beyond the confines of the Church: in the face of ongoing development these guidelines need to be addressed in the context of dialogue with all those seriously concerned for humanity and for the world in which we live' (#27).

On the relationship between the Church's ministry of social charity and the pursuit of social justice, Benedict sketches the position of Vatican II and John Paul II, and following Maritain and others he distinguishes between the role of the Church and that of the State, affirming the legitimate autonomy of the temporal sphere. 'Rather the Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice.' The political task is not the 'immediate responsibility' of the Church, but it must help clarify the requirements of justice and how to achieve them politically (#28).

The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply (#28).

While the Church as such is not directly involved in ordering society, 'it is proper to the lay faithful', acting as citizens, 'to configure social life correctly, respecting its legitimate autonomy and cooperating with other citizens according to their respective competences...' (#29).

Benedict knows that today we have new responsibilities to people once distant. He affirmed the Church's readiness to collaborate in joint enterprises with other Christians, 'since we all have the same fundamental motivation and look towards the same goal: a true humanism, which acknowledges that man is made in the image of God and wants to help him to live in a way consonant with that dignity.' Christians need to speak with a united voice in defense of the rights of the poor (#30).

Thus *Deus caritas est* reiterates standard Catholic views on these issues, but in very cursory fashion, and largely avoids the major economic questions connected with equity and globalization. It concentrates on the implications of the Church's charitable work rather than on explicit social transformation and a vision of what social justice means in the contemporary situation. The encyclical comments briefly on the errors of Marxism, but inexplicably omits a critique of neoliberalism, or 'economic liberalism' as it is usually termed in earlier Church documents. The document pays only marginal attention to global problems of poverty and hunger, the concentration of economic power, the environment, and makes no mention at all of the 'Make poverty history' campaigns or the Millennium Development Goals.

In his message for Lent 2006, Benedict again highlighted 'our responsibility towards the poor' by quoting Pope Paul VI that the 'scandal of underdevelopment was an outrage against humanity'. Paul denounced the 'lack of material necessities for those without the minimum essential for life, the moral deficiencies of those

who are mutilated by selfishness', along with 'oppressive social structures', exploitation and 'unjust transactions'. Benedict continued: ' Thus, the "gaze" of Christ upon the crowds impels us to affirm the true content of this "complete humanism" that, according to Paul VI, consists in the "fully-rounded development of the whole man and of all men".' Again he stressed that the primary contribution of the Church is not in supplying technical solutions, but in educating consciences. 'In the face of the terrible challenge of poverty afflicting so much of the world's population, indifference and self-centered isolation stand in stark contrast to the "gaze" of Christ. Living the Gospel means bearing 'the burden of the material and spiritual needs' of our neighbors.'¹¹ Elsewhere the Pope stressed that the commitment to promote peace was part of the Church's evangelizing mission, and he urged bishops to be 'prophets of justice and peace.'¹²

This is fine as far as it goes, but it suggests a lack of confidence in addressing these issues in a more substantial way, instead largely reiterating the views of Paul VI. Given the urgency of global problems, and the decades of strong Church commentary and involvement, one might ask if Benedict has stepped back from such compelling advocacy on these social questions. Or despite the creditable advocacy of Vatican and other Church bodies in international forums, and the lead given by recent popes, especially John Paul II himself, one might wonder if some groups in the Vatican are resolutely opposed to such social interventions.

For instance, how might one explain the inadequate presentation of Catholic social teaching in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. John Pawlikowski lamented 'the most striking failure of the Catechism to present the quest for justice as absolutely central to the authentic proclamation of the gospel... This stands in sharp contrast to the emphasis on human liberation through social commitment as part of the very core of the genuine gospel preaching and evangelization in such documents as the 1971 Synod of Bishops' statement on "Justice in the World" and Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.'¹³ The 1971 Synod had famously declared that 'Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel...' (Introduction). The *Catechism* also eliminated any mention of liberation as a key social category, despite the many Church documents commending it.¹⁴

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, which was carefully vetted by Cardinal Ratzinger's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, offered a new opportunity to amplify the Church's role in debates about world poverty and hunger, but these issues astonishingly only received a few pages in the text, though other chapters summarized themes on the environment, peace and economic and political life.¹⁵ Liberation theology found no place in the document, and I could find only six occasions when even the word 'liberation' in the social context is mentioned at all, despite the claims of the index. Perhaps the translators preferred other words.

What is going on here? Why do these documents seem so studiously to avoid any mention of 'liberation', despite the prominence recent popes have given this theme? And why does the Vatican, despite the splendid initiatives of Popes Paul VI and John Paul II, and the expertise available to it, seem so reticent to focus purposefully on the leading global issues of economic justice, the ethics of the

distribution of wealth and opportunity, and debates about economic policies and social values?

Perhaps Benedict is preparing a more thorough review of these critically urgent themes. Certainly the bishops will be expecting a significant endorsement of the social justice concerns. It will require Benedict to follow more closely down the path of John Paul II, offering encouragement and guidance in addressing the grave social problems. Platitudes and generalizations are not enough. Coming generations will scrutinize the Church's current views closely to determine if they were faithful to the Gospel and impoverished peoples. For many millions of distressed people, this is a question of life or death.

Notes

1. John T Pawlikowski, Letter to Friends, 9 February 2005, from Catholic Theological Union. See www.ctu.edu.
2. For an outstanding treatment of the Millennium Development Goals, see Jeffrey Sachs, *The End of Poverty: how we can make it happen in our lifetime* (London: Penguin, 2005).
3. Quoted in John L Allen, *National Catholic Reporter*, 5, 8 (21 October 2005), at nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/pfw102105.htm
4. Pope Benedict XVI, 'Pope's homily at close of Year of the Eucharist', 23 October 2005, www.zenit.org: ZE05102301.
5. 'Message of Synod on Eucharist', 23 October 2005. www.zenit.org ZE05102220.
6. Maloney, *op. cit.*
7. See Archbishop Migliore, Address on Social Development to the 44th session of the Commission for Social Development of the UN Economic and Social Council, 10 February 2006, www.zenit.org ZE060021028.
8. 'Pope asks G-8 nations to ease scourge of poverty', 3 July 2005, on www.zenit.org ZE05070305.
9. Cardinal Angelo Sodano, 'Address to UN Summit', 18 September 2005, www.zenit.org ZE005091821.
10. John Paul II, General Audience, 21 February 1979.
11. Benedict XVI's Message for Lent 2006', 31 January 2006, www.zenit.org: ZE06013104.
12. 'Evangelization includes promoting peace, says Pope', 6 February 2006. www.zenit.org: ZE06020601.
13. John Pawlikowski, 'Catholic Social Teaching in the Catechism', in *Ethics and the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (ed. Michael E Allsopp. Scranton: University of Scranton Press), 148-49.
14. See Bruce Duncan, 'A schizophrenic process in the Church? The conservative retreat from the social dimension of the Gospel', *Compass: a Review of Topical Theology* 37, 4 (Summer 2003), 32-28.
15. See Bruce Duncan, 'A new Catholic social manifesto? *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, *Compass* 39, 2 (Winter 2005), 38-44.