The Catholic Social Science Review 16 (2011): 17-25

CARITAS IN VERITATE AND THE ALLOCATION OF SCARCE RESOURCES

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The allocation of finite resources is a pressing concern at all levels of government. Such decisions are not only, of necessity, moral ones, but are in many cases, directly or indirectly, literally matters of life and death. As such, they are a proper and important concern for Catholic social thought. Previous researchers have explored what insights and principles may be gleaned from Catholic social teaching, as principally expressed in formal pronouncements of the Magisterium, with regard to the theory of resource allocation. The purpose of this short article is to explore what Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 Caritas in Veritate *might add to, modify, or take from, what has gone before.*

We live in a world of finite resources. At one extreme, globally, there are finite and non-renewable quantities of coal, gas and oil. There are also resources that are, at least in principle, replenishable, but which are nevertheless finite at any given time—the world's fish stocks, for instance. At the opposite extreme, as individuals, we are likewise subject to finite resources. I have, for example, only so much time, money, and patience with undergraduates. Issues of how best to allocate scarce resources affect all aspects of our personal, social, economic, and political lives. And they are, as one might expect, of particular concern for those at all levels of governance, from the highest echelons of international diplomacy to every aspect of public sector management. In the words of C. M. Fisher:

> [Resource allocation] can be found in the annual process of public expenditure management in Whitehall, [...] in the decision of the regulators of utility companies about the controls they wish to place on the companies they oversee, in contract negotiations between care managers in social services and the providers of care, and in the decision of a library assistant in the public library who chooses to spend ten minutes shelving returned books rather than updating membership records on the computer. (1998, 1)

Decision-makers are faced with competing, legitimate demands upon the resources at their disposal, and due to scarcity certain ones must be prioritized at the expense of others.

Such decisions are, in many cases, necessarily *moral* ones, and fall under the aegis of distributive justice. Moreover in certain cases they are, directly or indirectly, matters of life and death. This is most evident in the fields of healthcare and bioethics, and it is here that much of the research into both the theory and practice of allocation has been focused.[1] Resource allocation is, therefore, a clear and proper object of the Catholic Church's social concern. According to Fisher and Gormally, "Healthcare allocation is a theological matter every bit as much as it is an issue for philosophy, medicine or public policy—for it goes to the heart of attitudes toward the dignity of the human person, the nature of community, and right relations between people under God" (2001, 146). The same is true in myriad other spheres also, from housing to nuclear armament.

I am not a bioethicist, a military economist, or a political scientist. I have, therefore, no practical suggestions to make. But what I am is a dogmatic theologian who has a particular interest in Catholic social thought and action. Scholars with similar expertise have identified key emphases within Catholic social teaching, as principally expressed in formal pronouncements of the Magisterium, which are relevant to the theory of resource allocation (e.g., Langan 1996; McCann 2000; Fisher and Gormally 2001, 145-61). Some of these are, to summarize the work of John Langan: 1) a *de facto* endorsement of the western European 'welfare state' model;[2] 2) the State's duty to oversee the pursuit of the common good; 3) the importance of genuine subsidiarity as a complement to this; 4) solidarity, arising from the interdependence of *all* individuals and groups; 5) the need for authentic development; and 6) the (qualified) right to private property (1996, 402–3). In this short article, I would like briefly to explore what further insights may be gleaned from Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*.

While not an explicit theme of the encyclical, resource allocation nonetheless looms relatively large in the Holy Father's proposals. Most strikingly, it occurs in his discussion of the fact that, in his words, "Life in many poor countries is still extremely insecure as a consequence of food shortages, and the situation could become worse" (no. 27). He links this problem not only to the ethical imperative to "feed the hungry," but also to "the elimination of world hunger [as] a requirement for safeguarding the peace and stability of the planet." Benedict does not, however, believe that food shortages are the result of any global lack of food resources *per se*. Instead, the problem is one of the just *allocation* of resources which the world has, or could have, in plenty:

> Hunger is not so much dependent on lack of material things as on shortage of social resources, the most important of which are institutional. What is missing, in other words, is a network of economic institutions capable of guaranteeing regular access to sufficient food and water for nutritional needs […]. The problem of food insecurity needs to be addressed within a long-term perspective, eliminating the structural causes that give rise to it and promoting the agricultural development of poorer countries. (Ibid.)

The primary issue, then, is not overpopulation, or the inability of the earth to provide for all its inhabitants; as he puts it elsewhere, "On this earth there is room enough for everyone" (no. 50). Rather, it is a social and political issue, and one that ought therefore to be rectifiable. But how?

In the encyclical's introduction, we are informed that "The sharing of goods and resources, from which authentic development proceeds, is not guaranteed by merely technical progress and relationships of utility, but by the potential of love that overcomes evil with good (cf. Rom 12.21)" (no. 9). For Benedict, it is love—*caritas*—that must guide both our "micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups)" and our "macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones)" (no. 2). Whatever its virtues in terms of wealth creation and efficiency—and Benedict, following John Paul II (cf. *Centesimus Annus*, no. 34), is by no means blind to these—it can scarcely be said that the free-market economy is one that has love at its center.

Central to Benedict's understanding of love is the concept of *gift*. Indeed, he goes so far as to state that "to love is to give, to give what is 'mine' to the other" (no. 6). It is this that is *Caritas in Veritate's* primary insight on the subject of resource allocation. As the Pope quotes from Paul VI, "the peoples in hunger are making a dramatic appeal to the peoples blessed with abundance" (no. 17, quoting *Populorum Progressio*, no. 17). In a similar vein, he later decries the assumption of "a 'right to excess' […] within affluent societies, and the lack of food, drinkable water, basic instruction and elementary health care in areas of the underdeveloped world and on the outskirts of large metropolitan centers" (no. 43). Furthermore, in a perhaps surprising affinity to the Servant of God Dorothy Day, the Pope does not shrink in his own critique of what she famously termed "this filthy, rotten system," from referring to the poor nations as those "who, like Lazarus, are not permitted to take their place at the rich man's table" (no. 27).

With regard to the theory of resource allocation, the key point here is both simple and profound. Allocators must be prepared to look beyond their own, traditionally-defined potential beneficiaries. At the level of national government, for instance, what seems an equitable distribution of resources *within* an already affluent society may in fact be gravely unjust, if far greater needs exist *outside* that society. Often, the parameters of allocation are too narrowly set. To return to the earlier example, the question is perhaps not how best to divide up £15 billion or more between the army, navy, and air force, but whether at least part of such a sum might better serve the common good—whether national or global (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 26; *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 67)—outside of a military context. Needless to say, such a principle is more easily stated than applied, and *need* is not the only relevant consideration for allocation decisions (see Fisher 1998, 7), even if it is, or ought to be, the most important, especially from a Christian point of view (see Fisher and Gormally 2001, 158-9).

Significantly, the concept of gift has ethical implications not only for those who do the allocating, but also for those to whom resources are, or could be, allocated. This is a crucial point. Almost all the literature on allocation focuses on the *allocators*, rather than on the (potential or actual) *allocatees*. Yet very rarely are the latter groups or individuals purely passive in the allocation process—and rightly so, given the importance of subsidiarity. Two considerations are relevant here. First of all, it must be recognized that various stakeholders seek to influence allocation decisions. In itself, of course, this is no bad thing. But it carries certain dangers and difficulties with it. Worthy and urgent causes, when they are not backed by well-funded lobbying or are not media-friendly, tend to lose out to those that are. In healthcare, for example, a great deal of funding (rightly) goes to cancer research and paediatrics, relatively little (less rightly?) to geriatric care. Furthermore, the possibility is there for lobbying, under the guise of serving the common good, by those who stand to gain financially from allocation decisions. When the media reports on respected 'military top brass,' calling for increased defence spending, for example, they do not usually note that these former generals and admirals are often shareholders or paid consultants within the arms industry (see Hughes 2010).

Secondly, and in more detail, the fact that resources have been *justly* allocated to a person does not guarantee that he or she acts *rightly* in taking all or even some of them. Recent scandals surrounding British politicians' expenses leap to mind here.[3] There are very good reasons for allocating a certain budget to cover the expenses incurred by public servants as they serve the common good. But the fact that a certain amount has quite properly been set aside for this purpose, does not mean that all claims—even those which they are perfectly entitled, legally, to make—are moral. And this is a far wider issue. Within healthcare, and perhaps in all public services, there is a tendency for people to claim everything to which they are *entitled*. This is not necessarily a bad thing. But it should be remembered that for, say, every treatment I accept on the National Health Service, I am using up resources that might perhaps be better spent elsewhere or on other people (although whether, if I do not take them, they would in fact be better spent, is of course a different question entirely). If "to love is to give," then we should at least be open to its converse: "to not love is to take" (at least, to take something you do not need—to *take it away* from benefiting someone else—even though you may be entitled to it).

My choice to *accept* resources that have been properly allocated to me is a genuinely moral decision. By the same coin, so too is my choice to *limit* how much of my own resources are allocated to funding such things as the NHS (e.g., through making my savings optimally tax efficient). I like to think, of course, that I can more efficiently and directly serve the common good with my gains from tax-efficient saving schemes, than can the Treasury. And I may well be right; but then again, perhaps not. The difficulty, of course, is that my interactions with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC, the British equivalent of the IRS) do not naturally *feel*, however indirectly, like a relationship in which I "give what is 'mine' to the other." And, no doubt, they probably never will. This too is an issue that the Holy Father touches on. He stresses that "more economically developed nations should do all they can to allocate larger proportions of their gross domestic product to development aid, thus respecting the obligations that the international community has undertaken in this regard" (no. 60). One way to do this, he suggests, is by making current taxation more efficient and less prone to abuses: "A more developed and organic system of social solidarity, less bureaucratic but no less coordinated, would make it possible to harness much dormant energy, for the benefit of solidarity between peoples" (ibid.). He continues:

> One possible approach to development aid would be to apply effectively what is known as fiscal subsidiarity, allowing citizens to decide how to allocate a portion of the taxes they pay to the State. Provided it does not degenerate into the promotion of special interests, this can help to stimulate forms of welfare solidarity from below, with obvious benefits in the area of solidarity for development as well. (Ibid.)

It is worth remarking briefly on one further allocation issue to which *Caritas in Veritate* turns its attention: global energy resources. *Gift* is again central here, as also is the universal common good:

> The environment is God's gift to everyone, and in our use of it we have a responsibility towards the poor, towards future generations and towards humanity as a whole. […] In nature, the believer recognizes the wonderful result of God's creative activity, which we may use responsibly to satisfy our legitimate needs, material or otherwise, while respecting the intrinsic balance of creation (no. 48).

This view of the environment as "God's gift to everyone" has important ramifications for allocating energy resources, especially given the role of these in economic development. Thus:

> The fact that some States, power groups and companies hoard non-renewable energy resources represents a grave obstacle to development in poor countries. Those countries lack the economic means either to gain access to existing sources of non-renewable energy or to finance research into new alternatives. The stockpiling of natural resources, which in many cases are found in the poor countries themselves, gives rise to exploitation and frequent conflicts between and within nations (no. 49).

As such, he continues, "The international community has an urgent duty to find institutional means of regulating the exploitation of non-renewable resources, involving poor countries in the process, in order to plan together for the future" (ibid.). Benedict advocates here a commitment to finding both alternative, renewable sources of energy, and more efficient ways of using the non-renewable resources we already have. But this is, he urges, by no means enough. Rather, "What is also needed […] is a worldwide redistribution of energy resources, so that countries lacking those resources can have access to them. The fate of those countries cannot be left in the hands of whoever is first to claim the spoils, or whoever is able to prevail over the rest" (ibid.). Note that there is no mention here of the market, free or otherwise, as an appropriate agent for such a redistribution. While Benedict does not say so in this section, it sounds very much like a job for what he later refers to as "a true world political authority" (no. 67)—that is, a reformed United Nations.

The purpose of this article was a very modest one: to offer a reading of selected aspects of *Caritas in Veritate*, and to offer some tentative comments on these with a view to the ethics of resource allocation. These comments are, in almost all cases, little more than first impressions. I offer no *Caritas-in-Veritatean* theory or framework; still less have I any practical suggestions. But I have argued that Benedict's encyclical is an important addition to the Church's "social magisterium" (*Centesimus Annus*, no. 3) on this topic—as, of course, on so many others. In summary, he stresses the possibility that an apparently insolvable *lack* of material resources may in fact be a solvable lack of social or political resources. It is perhaps worth remarking here that patience, trust, goodwill, and hope are often themselves scarce resources in the political and international arenas. Secondly, he argues that *caritas* must be given a more central place in allocation decisions, especially because "to love is to give" (no. 6). (I also noted, inferentially, that *caritas* must inform not only the allocators, but also the allocatees.) Finally—and this topic, in particular, is one that requires a great deal of further thought, reflection, and indeed application—the burgeoning energy crisis requires a radical, redistributive solution. This is a global problem, and requires a global response, beyond the parochial interests of multinational corporations and even national governments. Of course, as the Holy Father would no doubt agree: *Caritas in Veritate* has only interpreted the current situation; in various ways, the point is to change it. But that, like so much else, is well beyond the scope of this short note.

Notes

1. The ideas presented in this paper have been greatly informed and refined through conversations with Prof. David Jones at St Mary's University College, Twickenham, UK, and by the Centre for Bioethics and Emerging Technologies' working paper 'Preliminary Notes on Healthcare Resource Allocation and Catholic Social Doctrine,' written by Fr Ashley Beck. This has led to the important document *Healthcare Allocation and Justice: Applying Catholic Social Teaching* (Gateley, Beck and Jones 2011).
2. See, however, John Paul II's warnings against the 'malfunctions and defects' to which such a model is susceptible, not least from the State's failure to respect and promote true subsidiarity (*Centesmius Annus*, no. 48).
3. In May 2009, leaked documents relating to the expenses claims of MPs (i.e., members of the House of Commons) and peers (i.e., members of the House of Lords) were published in a series of articles in the *Daily Telegraph*. These revealed scandalous levels of claims, the great majority of which were perfectly well 'within the rules', which had previously been hidden from public scrutiny. In light of the public outcry, a number of cabinet ministers resigned, and many more MPs did not stand for re-election in 2010. To date, criminal proceedings have been launched against three (former) MPs, and one peer. Needless to say, the affair has had grave repercussions for public trust and confidence in British politicians. (For further details, see BBC 2010.)

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