

The Difference God Makes in our Lives

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Although religion is often looked upon with suspicion in the world today, the Catholic Church still boldly proclaims the Gospel and presents a universal vision of God's plan for humanity. This is evident, for instance, in the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, which state, "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).



In his latest encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* (*Charity in Truth*), Pope Benedict XVI articulates how this Catholic vision pertains to the most pressing social issues of our time and how it ultimately has the power to unite the human race. The pope writes, "The earthly city is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy and communion" (6).

Cardinal Francis E. George, archbishop of Chicago and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), echoes this assessment in his new book, titled *The Difference God Makes: A Catholic Vision of Faith, Communion, and Culture* (Herder and Herder, 2009). Although the book was written almost entirely before *Caritas in Veritate* was released, it builds on the same tradition of Catholic social teaching and thus shares many of the same insights and observations.

In this exclusive interview with *Columbia*, the cardinal discusses the ongoing task of the Church to transform our culture in charity and truth.

Columbia: You begin your book by discussing the Christian understanding of creation, the incarnation and communion. Why are these concepts foundational to how we see God and the world?

Cardinal George: People understand God in different ways, but the constant tendency, if we let ourselves go, is to reduce God to our size and see him as just one more fixture in the universe — bigger and more important, but just one more. Yet, God both transcends his creation and is present within it, as the cause of its very being.

This relationship to God, first of all, brings us into relationship with everyone else and with all of creation. This is done through Jesus Christ, who is God incarnate, and he enables us to understand how our neighbor is also our brother or sister.

Columbia: You also explain that the modern idea of the person is focused on individualism and subjectivism, in contrast to seeing our identity in terms of relationship. How do we see that individualistic worldview play out in our society today?

Cardinal George: If we are individuals for whom relationships are just added on, rather than being persons who are born related, then we start with rights and not with duties or obligations to others. Since rights have to be protected, we get into a legal framework that is almost always adversarial. Society becomes brittle and violent. Natural community, such as marriage, is much weakened. People's mobility

and pursuit of one's own dreams, even in conflict with others, have become something of a priority in our culture. This doesn't foster the kind of relationship that is necessary to live humanely.

You can see it in all kinds of ways. Violence is the most obvious. Modern culture is based upon opposition and contention: the media needs oppressors and victims or there isn't a story; courts are set up for winners and losers; and politics is those in power and those who have lost power. It's all conflict.

The Church's role is to say, while there is conflict to a certain level, the highest level is one of harmony and peace, mutual love and love of God. Our job is to call people to that level, which isn't only higher, but also more global. It is more universal. It is broader. That is what is sometimes missing in the public conversation and in the institutions of our country.

Columbia: How is the relationship between church and state affected by the modern understanding of freedom, rights and voluntary association?

Cardinal George: The relationship between church and state is a constitutional way of talking about what is far deeper, namely faith and culture, which is the way Pope John Paul II used to raise the question. If we forget that man is a social being, first of all, and we begin to think we are antagonistic beings in competition with others in order to establish our rights, then the separation between church and state necessarily becomes antagonistic rather than one of cooperation.

In the beginning there was cooperation because the spheres were delimited, and the church was free to pursue its own life without interference from the state. In the last 50 years there has been more interference by the state in the life of the church, and freedom of religion has been reinterpreted to mean freedom of individuals to express themselves using religious terms — but never to do that publicly because it may somehow infringe the rights of others who want to be free of religion. This has created a situation of antagonism that wasn't there before.

Columbia: There is also a trend in contemporary society to see marriage and family as exclusively voluntary, rather than as natural institutions.

Cardinal George: It is true, in fact, that you choose freely to marry someone, but once you do, that relationship is normative for the rest of your life. Marriage means growing not only to live with someone but also through someone else, having their self-consciousness become part of your self-consciousness.



The same thing is true of the Church, where we bring into our self-consciousness the mind of Christ, as St. Paul says, and therefore everyone whom Christ loves. The Church is a network of relationships, called communion, and the human race is a network of relationships, called solidarity. The two should complement one another. At that point there is no separation; there is cooperation, a recognition of difference — and the difference is important. The Church isn't just a department of state, and the state shouldn't make itself into a kind of church, which is sometimes our temptation here in America.

Meanwhile, many immigrants come to the United States with a sense of family that is still very strong. They come here so they can send money back to their family, not in order to pursue their own goals. Behind this is a sense that the family is the basic unit of society in ways that aren't always true for Americans, who think that individuals and their rights are the basic unit.

Columbia: You go on to talk about the importance of evangelizing culture. How do we proclaim the distinctiveness of the Church's message and the Catholic way of life?

Cardinal George: Pope John Paul II was always interested in seeing how we were fostering a culture that was more Gospel-friendly, because if we had that, many other things would take care of themselves. Evangelization involves not just converting individuals, but changing the culture so that society is transformed into a place that is a little more just, loving and generous.

The message is relational. The Church is not sectarian. It extends beyond every community, even national communities. Pope Benedict XVI made that very clear when he visited the United Nations. The nation-state is not nearly as important as the global human family. That is a sense of catholicity, of universality, of global solidarity that the Church has been talking about for a very long time.

Columbia: How does that concept of global solidarity relate to the challenges and opportunities that are presented with regard to religious dialogue?

Cardinal George: Unlike national identities, all of the great faiths are global. If we can cooperate on a social level, even though we aren't going to believe the same things entirely, then the world will be a more peaceful place. We will be able to create a sense of identity that transcends other divisions. The differences between religions will still remain, but along with that sense of mutual respect comes a conviction that religion can never be used to justify violence. We will become peacemakers even with differences and disagreements.

Columbia: What role can the Knights of Columbus, and the laity in general, have in this new evangelization and the task of transforming culture?

Cardinal George: I think Knights will come up with the right answers, because they are connected to the Church and are men of faith. We have to allow a lot of subsidiarity. Evangelization is a global vision with a lot of actions that take place in homes, in parishes, in cities and in councils. I always count on the Knights to be there when I need them, but more than that, they do good things entirely on their own. They do good things for the Church because they are good Catholic men.

Christ shapes our minds and our hearts if they are open to him in prayer. We should all pray together and pray to understand what our roles are. We also have to study the Catechism, for example, so that we can be of one mind with the Church.

Ordinary people live their lives, and religion is integral to that, but they aren't always thinking about it theoretically. They're living it. People go to Mass regularly, do their best to build up their family and contribute to society. Catholicism is a way of life, a way of thinking and a way of loving.

Columbia: Beyond the contemporary idea of liberal and conservative Catholicism, you say the answer is "simply Catholicism." How would you define this concept, "simply Catholicism"?

Cardinal George: Liberal and conservative are, first of all, political terms, so you have to get behind them to understand Catholicism because it isn't primarily political, although it influences politics like any other realm of human experience.

The "simply Catholicism" part is a community that is formed by sharing the gifts that Christ gives us: the Gospel, the sacraments, the pastoral governance of the successors of the Apostles. The means of Christ's grace that make us truly one are now present.

The way of life can differ within the Church but the goal of life is always sanctity. I see that as I go

around the parishes in Chicago. There are a lot of holy people here. They might not know it and don't always make the headlines, but they are there — fathers and mothers of families, and people dedicated not only to their faith but also to their work in society and to helping others. It's very encouraging.

Columbia: One of the major challenges facing the new evangelization is the disconnect of freedom and truth, of which John Paul II so often spoke and what Pope Benedict XVI refers to as the dictatorship of relativism. How do we share the Gospel message when people are suspicious of claims of truth — especially those that pertain to religion or morality?

Cardinal George: A lot of people do not believe that you can accept a truth that you have not created for yourself and still be free. Yet, I think that people who try to live their own truths and their own dreams recognize, when they reach a certain level of maturity, that this path is a trap. To be ourselves, we have to be something more than ourselves. We come forward with the truths of who we really are in Christ and our destiny for all of eternity, and that is liberating. That is the truth that sets us free.

We have to watch for people when they are ready to hear that message. It may be years, but we have to look for places where we can proclaim it.

We must do what John Paul II always said: "Propose and never impose." Goodness has its own attractiveness. We have to be better witnesses than we have often been, and then enter into dialogue. That's the Catholic way of life, and that will draw some and perhaps repulse others. That's what God expects us to do, and we leave the results in his hands.