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- Screen ▶
- Editorials ▶
- Classifieds ▶

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## EDITORIAL

## In Defense of Politics



## The Editors

Catholics who like the word "solidarity" are sometimes suspicious of the word "subsidiarity." They worry it's a euphemism for privatization. Catholics who like the word "subsidiarity," meanwhile, are often uneasy with the term "solidarity"—unless it refers to a Polish labor movement.

In his new encyclical, *Caritas in veritate* (or "Charity in Truth"), Pope Benedict XVI writes a lot about both subsidiarity and solidarity, and he writes about them together. According to Benedict, not only do the two principles leave room for each other, they are mutually dependent: "*The principle of subsidiarity must remain closely linked to the principle of solidarity and vice versa, since the former without the latter gives way to social privatism, while the latter without the former gives way to paternalist social assistance that is demeaning to those in need*" (emphasis in original).

The encyclical's treatment of subsidiarity, though not always easy to follow, is remarkable in two ways. First, Benedict applies the principle not only to politics but also to economics. If the state should not be allowed to threaten the interests of local communities, neither should the corporation. Economic globalization must not become a way to redistribute wealth from poor places in one part of the world to rich investors in another. "There is no reason to deny that a certain amount of capital can do good, if invested abroad rather than at home," Benedict writes. "Yet the requirements of justice must be safeguarded, with due consideration for the way in which the capital was generated and the harm to individuals that will result *if it is not used where it was produced*" (emphasis added).

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Second, for Benedict subsidiarity is about proper scale. He argues that local institutions should be allowed to solve local problems, but he also acknowledges that international problems may require international institutions. The state is both too big for some functions and too small for others. This will come as a rude surprise to some champions of subsidiarity who despise the United Nations and regard world government as a sign of the apocalypse. To them the pope says: Be not afraid. "The articulation of political authority at the local, national, and international levels is one of the best ways of giving direction to the process of economic globalization," he writes in one place, and in another: "[T]here is urgent need of a true world authority, as my predecessor Blessed John XXIII indicated some years ago."

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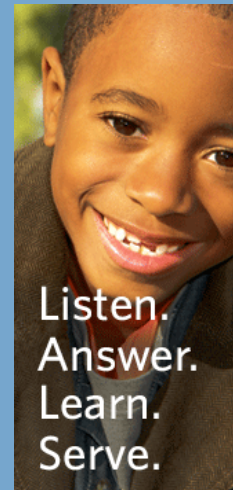
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inattentive to social realities is a contradiction in terms: *caritas* is never careless. "Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality," the pope writes. "Truth frees charity from the constraints of an emotionalism that deprives it of relational and social content."

It is precisely the social content of charity that connects it to justice, which ought to be the first concern of all politics. For the Christian, charity and justice are not rival options: the first informs the second without ever replacing it. Following St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory the Great, and the Second Vatican Council, Benedict insists it is a mistake to try to offer as charity what belongs to people as a right (such as food, water, and basic health care). "I cannot 'give' what is mine to the other, without first giving him what pertains to him in justice," Benedict writes. "If we love others with charity, then first of all we are just towards them." Philanthropy is no substitute for distributive justice.

The pope acknowledges that solidarity always requires more than good laws and policies. It requires financiers who are concerned about more than profit. It requires a vibrant civil society full of noncommercial institutions. And it requires personal virtues that can never be codified or coerced by the state. But though governments are not the origin of charity, *good* government is an important expression of this and other virtues, even a proof of them. Benedict rejects the claim that political power is essentially suspect and beneath the dignity of Christians. "The institutional path—we might also call it the political path—of charity [is] no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly outside the institutional mediation of the *pólis*." For some, this is a hard saying. For all, it's an urgent challenge.

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