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From the Vatican, a Tough Read

By [PETER STEINFELS](#)

Why is "[Caritas in Veritate](#)" ("Charity in Truth"), [Pope Benedict XVI](#)'s new encyclical on the world economy and authentic human development, so poorly written?

That is meant as a serious, honest question, not a snap way of dismissing a remarkable document, brimming with profound ideas and moral passion and issued at a time when it could hardly be more relevant. The matter is all the more confounding since Benedict has often shown himself a graceful writer, and one who has insisted on the importance of beauty in communicating his church's message.

Of course, not everyone will agree that "Caritas in Veritate" is hard going. Some people, after all, enjoy visits to the dentist, and besides there are many crystalline sentences that can be yanked from the molasses-like text.

But published commentaries are already noting the "dense prose" or warning that "theological reflections usually don't make for light summer reading." The encyclical "can be difficult to read," says one commentator; it is marred by "irritating fits and starts, assertions, qualifications, doubtful formulas and doubling back," says another.

And that is just from Roman Catholics who admire the encyclical.

Those unhappy about it are still blunter. Describing the document as "a duck-billed platypus," [George Weigel](#), the neoconservative biographer of [Pope John Paul II](#), has [derided](#) the language of whole sections as "clotted and muddled."

There are three readily available explanations for the encyclical's ungainliness. The first is simply that this is just the way encyclicals are. They are a genre wielding theology and philosophy to address complex issues that a worldwide church may confront in many very different forms. Thus a tendency toward abstract language and vague or hedged generalizations.

Like [Supreme Court](#) decisions, they are also part of a larger body of thought. Thus the attention to previous church statements.

And what legalese is to those trained in the law, Vaticanese is to the caste of [Vatican](#) officials who work on encyclicals.

Even within that genre, however, encyclicals vary a good deal in tone and readability — or sheer length. "Caritas in Veritate," for instance, is almost five times as long as "[Populorum Progressio](#)," the 1967 encyclical on economic development that the new encyclical commemorates and uses as a point of departure.

A second explanation is that “Caritas in Veritate” is the work of many hands. That can be said of virtually all encyclicals. They are drafted, circulated and redrafted. Popes are personally and intensely involved in the process, but to different degrees.

In this case, the recognizable voice of [Benedict XVI](#) seems to disappear as “Caritas in Veritate” turns from its powerful theological reflections on the links among love, truth and justice to its equally powerful but more mundane reflections on poverty, hunger, greed, corruption and what it sees as the necessity of transforming economic and political institutions.

This shift in tone allows a conservative Mr. Weigel to welcome the parts of the encyclical in line with his own political preferences and culture-war concerns as the true voice of the pope while dismissing the rest — presumably including the encyclical’s statements about unregulated markets, unemployment, the rights of labor, the redistribution of wealth and the strengthening of international governing bodies like the [United Nations](#) — as the left-wing boilerplate of a Vatican body, the Council for Justice and Peace.

“Benedict XVI, a truly gentle soul,” Mr. Weigel writes, “may have thought it necessary to include in his encyclical these multiple off-notes, in order to maintain the peace within his curial household.”

Other conservatives are less dismissive of the encyclical’s many concrete comments on economic, social and political issues but point out, quite accurately, that the pope’s views on quite a number of these issues, including the market economy itself, globalization and new forms of finance, are in fact nuanced. The conclusion seems to be that compared with the broad theological themes about charity, these specifics are far less compelling.

In either case, the failure of “Caritas in Veritate” to blend the many hands and voices evident in its composition has probably diminished its impact and encouraged selective reading.

A third, very down-to-earth explanation for the tough read, however, is offered by the Rev. John A. Coleman, a Jesuit sociologist and theologian who has been studying the trajectory of Catholic social teaching for decades. Father Coleman believes that Pope Benedict simply tried to do too much.

“Caritas in Veritate” is a document about human nature and the Trinity and the current economic crisis and inequality and the energy problem. It argues a link between Catholic teaching on sexuality and life issues like abortion and Catholic stances on social issues like poverty and the environment.

It carries on an internal Catholic debate about continuity versus discontinuity in interpreting church teaching. It even offers a tantalizing glimpse at a new variation on markets, profits and the relationships between economics and politics.

This latter element of the encyclical appears to be based largely on the work of [Stefano Zamagni](#), a noted economist at the University of Bologna. Unfortunately, though, the encyclical presents it in suggestive but obscure language about the “logic of the gift” and “gratuitousness.”

In Father Coleman’s view, what the encyclical gains in potential for further thought it loses in clutter. One legitimate and valuable point is obscured by the next. He notes that like other recent encyclicals, this one is addressed not only to the faithful and their leaders but “to all men and women of good will,” but he doubts that many people, especially economists, even of the best will, will be lured into reading it.

The just-too-much explanation and the too-many-hands explanation are not mutually exclusive. The pope’s

intellectual ambition and the multiple concerns of his Vatican aides and other consultants may well have converged. One wonders if this isn't a case where less would have been more.

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