

DEUS CARITAS EST – POPE BENEDICT XVI

1. Historical Context

Perhaps no Pope in history has come to the office as well known to the Catholic public as Benedict XVI. As head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was often referred to as Pope John Paul II's "lightning rod" and "God's Rotweiller". He had responsibility for reining in theological excesses within the Church and under his direction a number of leading and controversial theologians had been called to task on their writings. The public persona of Cardinal Ratzinger was that of a harsh disciplinarian, dedicated to keeping the Church doctrinally correct. He also published widely and his works often displayed pessimism about the world and its plight. Many found in his work a retreat from the more optimistic approach of Vatican II. However even his critics acknowledged that he was a very cultured man of great theological depth and personal gentleness.

With the impending death of John Paul II speculation grew as to who would be the new pope. Many thought that his age and long history as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith would count against him, but even his critics were impressed with the way he performed during the ceremonies surrounding the death of the pope. In the end he was elected after only three rounds of voting among the gathered cardinals.

News that Benedict was preparing a new encyclical prompted speculation as to its content. During the funeral rites for John Paul II Cardinal Ratzinger has spoken about the "dictatorship of relativism". Would the new encyclical be a launching pad for a critique of this problem so prevalent in the secular world? Would it reflect the more pessimistic approach evident in his previous writings? Or would he take the opportunity to present a new face to the world, in keeping with his new office?

In its preparation period it emerged that in fact John Paul II had commissioned some preparatory material for an encyclical to deal with questions concerning the Church's charitable activities. In particular what is distinctive about the work of Catholic welfare activities? How are they different from the activities of secular agencies? Are they essential or peripheral to the life of the Church? How does their work impinge on the political dimension of society? It is widely acknowledged that the draft material addressing these questions was prepared by the Pontifical Council *Cor unum* under the direction of Archbishop Josef Cordes.

Benedict XVI decided to bring this initial work to completion. In doing so he indicated his commitment to the legacy of John Paul II. However it vastly extended the range of the new encyclical by writing his own major section to the encyclical, a reflection on the nature of love. This reflection was then to provide the context for the later concerns of the document on Catholic charitable agencies. Thus the final document comes in two parts, the first written by Benedict on the nature of love, the second, bringing to completion the project initiated by John Paul II. While the second part is a continuation of the Church's tradition of Catholic Social Teaching, the first breaks new ground and displays the personal interests and contribution of Benedict. It is the work of a profound theological mind.

2. Overview of the document

As noted above, the document has two major sections, together with an introduction and conclusion.

The first major section presents us with an understanding of the nature of love in light of the Christian message that “God is love” (in Latin, *Deus caritas est*). This phrase from the First Letter of John (4:16) provides a stepping stone for an account of the phenomenon of love, in its human and divine aspects. Benedict is taking up a debate within Christianity about the relationship between eros (from which we get the term erotic) and agape (the word used in the New Testament to speak of love). Some Christian writers (notably Anders Nygren) have sought to oppose eros and agape arguing that Christian love is not compatible with desire-driven eros. This mirrors critics of Christianity (notably Friedrich Nietzsche) who claim that Christianity kills eros. What is notable in this encyclical is the argument put forward by Benedict that both eros and agape are aspects of the one reality of love. Both need one another to be truly human loving. Without eros, agape becomes cold and formal; without agape, eros is easily turned aside from its true end which is personal union with the other. Eros needs the healing and purifying power of agape to be true to its proper goal. Benedict compares the relationship between eros and agape as that between the body and the soul. The soul is made for the body, and the body needs the soul to live.

Benedict goes so far as to suggest that God himself manifests eros. The biblical witness reveals God’s passionate love for human beings, often through the symbolic language of marriage. This is very evident in the Song of Songs, a biblical love poem which both Jewish and Christian commentators read as a symbol of God’s love for us. This passionate love of God for us is most manifest in the incarnation whereby God takes on human existence in its fullness (apart from sin) to reveal the fullness of God’s love for us.

The second section of the encyclical takes up the question of the Church’s charitable activities. It argues that these activities are an essential part of the life of the Church, together with its proclamation of the Gospel (*kerygma* or preaching) and the celebration of the sacraments (*leitourgia* or liturgical life). It traces through a brief account of that activity in history.

However the main argument of this section concerns the relationship between justice and charity, between politics and faith. Benedict is concerned that the welfare activity of the Church not be subsumed by some political ideology or goal. Justice is the goal of political life and he repeatedly asserts that the Church has no direct role in that life. He does not want a return to Christendom, that era in the Church’s history where it exercised fairly direct political control. On the other hand the Church does have an interest in promoting justice, but its way of doing so is indirect, through its social teaching, through the formation of consciences, and through the activity of the laity, acting in their own right. For Benedict there is no straight line between Christian faith and social program. Nonetheless faith purifies the political realm allowing it to achieve its own proper goals. This is similar to the argument put forward by John Paul II on the relationship between faith and reason, though now it is one between faith and practical reason. In the introduction Benedict himself notes that this argument has “vast implications”.

In seeking to identify distinctive characteristics of the Church's charitable activity Benedict identifies the following three:

- a) Christian charity is first of all the simple response to immediate needs and specific situations;
- b) Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies. Rather it is a way of making love present here and now.
- c) Charity cannot be used as a means of engaging in proselytism (seeking converts). Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends.

3. Key points of document

The name of the encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, is Latin for “God is love” a quote taken from 1 John 4:16. In choosing this title Benedict is emphasizing the centrality of love to the whole Christian life.

A major theme of the encyclical is the unity of eros (desiring love) and agape (self-giving love).

Whereas some have contrasted the two, Benedict views them as intimately related. In particular, eros without agape is subject to serious distortions:

The Old Testament firmly opposed this form of religion [i.e. one based on eros], which represents a powerful temptation against monotheistic faith, combating it as a perversion of religiosity. But it in no way rejected *eros* as such; rather, it declared war on a warped and destructive form of it, because this counterfeit divinization of *eros* actually strips it of its dignity and dehumanizes it ... Evidently, *eros* needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns. (n.4)

Eros and agape are related as body and soul in the unity of the one person.

Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united; the challenge of *eros* can be said to be truly overcome when this unification is achieved. Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness. (n.5)

Agape allows eros to achieve its true dignity:

By contrast with an indeterminate, “searching” love [*eros*], this word [*agape*] expresses the experience of a love which involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier. Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice. (n.6)

Eros is found even in God’s own being, as a passionate lover of creation:

God is the absolute and ultimate source of all being; but this universal principle of creation—the *Logos*, primordial reason—is at the same time a lover with all the passion of a true love. *Eros* is thus supremely ennobled, yet at the same time it is so purified as to become one with *agape*. (n.10)

The second major theme is the charitable activity of the Church.

The expression of love of neighbour is not just an individual responsibility, but something for the whole Church:

Love of neighbour, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local

community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community, the Church must practise love. Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community. The awareness of this responsibility has had a constitutive relevance in the Church from the beginning. (n.20)

Should the Church seek justice or charity? Or justice through charity?

Since the nineteenth century, an objection has been raised to the Church's charitable activity, subsequently developed with particular insistence by Marxism: the poor, it is claimed, do not need charity but justice. Works of charity—almsgiving—are in effect a way for the rich to shirk their obligation to work for justice and a means of soothing their consciences, while preserving their own status and robbing the poor of their rights. Instead of contributing through individual works of charity to maintaining the status quo, we need to build a just social order in which all receive their share of the world's goods and no longer have to depend on charity. There is admittedly some truth to this argument, but also much that is mistaken. (n.26)

The Church does not seek to control the political order (as in Christendom). Rather through its social teaching, through the formation of conscience, through the work of the laity it seeks to shape society:

The Church's social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being. It recognizes that it is not the Church's responsibility to make this teaching prevail in political life. Rather, the Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest. Building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew. As a political task, this cannot be the Church's immediate responsibility. Yet, since it is also a most important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically. (n.28)

The work of justice is primarily the work of the state, not the Church. But the Church has an interest in the common good and the promotion of justice:

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. n.28.

Benedict identifies three distinctive features of the Church's charitable activity:

1. Christian charity is first of all the simple response to immediate needs and specific situations: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for and healing the sick, visiting those in prison, etc (n.31)
2. Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies. It is not a means of changing the world ideologically, and it is not at the service of worldly stratagems, but it is a way of making present here and now the love which man always needs. (n.31)
3. Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends. But this does not mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside. For it is always concerned with the whole man. Often the deepest cause of suffering is the very absence of God. (n.31)

4. Reception

The initial response to the encyclical was overwhelmingly positive. People had expected the former head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to produce a sterner document, to take up some of the interests he had previously shown, such as the “dictatorship of relativism”. Instead the newly elected pope issued a “love letter”, particularly evident in the first part of the encyclical. This first section displays the great learning of Benedict XVI and is a beautifully written reflection on the meaning of love. It also lacked possible condemnations that may have found a place in the document. For example he could have explored the issue of contraception as an instance where agape has not fully purified eros. But he chose not to focus on possible condemnations, but to put before the world a positive and attractive vision of the meaning of Christian love. The darker pessimism characteristic of various earlier writings is not evident in this encyclical.

The second half of the encyclical has generally proved less accessible to the general public. As Benedict himself notes, the argument in the second half has “vast implications”. It is dealing with the major question of the relationship between faith and politics, between Church and state. This issue has plagued Christian history since the era of Constantine when Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The model by which Benedict proposes that the Church relate to the secular order is complex and demanding: through its social teaching, through the formation of conscience, and through the harnessing of spiritual energies among the laity. This is a far cry from direct intervention or even direct influence that the Church has enjoyed in many places during its history. Nonetheless it is a model which respects the (relative) autonomy of the secular realm as taught by Vatican II in *Gaudium et spes*.

It is perhaps still too early to identify what the impact of all this will be. The first part of the encyclical may well prove foundational for Benedict’s entire pontificate. He has already issued another major document, *Sacramentum caritatis* (The sacrament of love), dealing with the Eucharist. Benedict may be signalling a shift from a focus on social justice which has been present in much Catholic social teaching to a more overtly religious focus on love. If the second half of the encyclical is taken up as a blueprint for the operation of the Church’s various welfare agencies by the Bishops of the world, then there will be an impact over time. In third world countries where agencies may be influenced by the writings of liberation theology, there is a challenge not to be captured by various political ideologies. In first world countries Church agencies are facing questions about their Catholic distinctiveness. Are they still Catholic when a large proportion of staff are not Catholic? Under what circumstances and with what constraints can they accept funding from government bodies?

At the time of writing this material we know that the pope is working on another encyclical which will take up the “social question”, that is, a further contribution to the Church’s social teaching. In this new encyclical we may see some further exploration of this question of Church and state, faith and politics, with some concrete reference to pressing social concerns.

5. Discussion Questions

(7 questions)

1. People often view the Church as oppressive of the “erotic” or “eros” aspect of love. Yet Benedict is affirming of it as an essential part of human love. How does this change our understanding of human sexuality?
2. Benedict speaks of agape as purifying eros. Why does eros need purification and what are the signs of an eros in need of purification?
3. There is a saying, “as cold as charity”. How does this help us understand the ways in which agape needs eros to be truly human?
4. What are the consequences of the position that our faith demands works of charity, not just as individuals but as a Church?
5. The relationship between faith and politics are complex. How do you understand their relationship and how does the encyclical shed light on that relationship?
6. Benedict argues that the Church has no direct role in politics and the promotion of justice. But he does allow for an indirect role. How might this work in practice?
7. Catholic welfare agencies often do the same sort of work as other welfare agencies such as the Smith Family or the Benevolent Society. What makes their work distinctively Catholic?

6. Bibliography

(7 references)

Paul Collins, *God's New Man*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2005.

Cardinal Avery Dulles, "Love, the Pope, and C.S. Lewis", *First Things* (Jan, 2007).

Charles M Murphy, "Charity, not justice, as constitutive of the Church's mission", *Theological Studies*, 68 (2007), 274-86.

Neil Ormerod, "God and politics", *Australasian Catholic Record*, 84 (2007), 3-10.

Robert Tilley, *Benedict XVI and the Search for Truth*. Strathfield: St Paul's, 2007.

George Weigel, *God's Choice*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

7. Weblinks

For the full text of the encyclical visit the Vatican web site:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html

This Wikipedia article is full of useful information and links:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus_Caritas_Est

http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2006/print2006/schall_encyclical_jan06.html

<http://www.zenit.org/article-15295?l=english>

This Australian reflection by Francis Sullivan, director of Catholic Healthcare Australia is helpful on the implications for Catholic welfare agencies:

http://www.centacarebrisbane.net.au/news/story.php?Item_Id=293

<http://catholiceducation.org/articles/facts/fm0055.html>