

“*Deus Caritas Est*”: Pope Benedict XVI’s Encyclical Letter

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“God is love,” and “we have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us.” These words from 1 John 4:16, according to Pope Benedict XIV’s encyclical letter,¹ summarize the heart of the Christian faith and life. Although the pope justifies the choice of the subject for his encyclical by reference to the hatred and violence of our times, the subject of love may reflect the foundations of the kind of theological thinking that will guide his papacy.

I. *Analysis*

In the first part of the encyclical the approach is speculative and somewhat philosophical. The analysis begins with the nature of love. The author grapples with the question whether the different usages and manifestations of love belong to a single reality. Does the New Testament’s preference for *agape* and its failure to use the word *eros* denounce this kind of love and therefore lead Christians to “poison” the term as they have often been charged?

While acknowledging a certain relationship between love and the Divine, Pope Benedict XVI points out that what Christians denounce is the counterfeit deification of *eros* that is rooted in a dualistic view of man. If humans aspire to be only spirit, *eros* degenerates into pure sex. What is needed is a call “for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing” of *eros*, whose tendency is “to rise ‘in ecstasy’ toward the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves” (*Deus Caritas Est*, p. 4, par. 6). The pope concedes that love is indeed “ecstasy,” namely, it is in its essence to go “out of the closed inward-looking self toward its liberation through self-giving, and thus toward an authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God” (p. 6). Once *eros* is purified of its counterfeit tendencies, it becomes evident that it is of the same reality as *agape*. *Eros* (ascending love) without *agape* (descending love) is impoverished, while *agape* without *eros* is not functionally complete. A purified love is a practicing love. As he puts it, “love is the service that the church carries out in order to attend constantly to man’s sufferings and his needs” (p. 11).

Having established the idea that the essence of love is “to go out” the pope carefully grounds it in the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ. In Him “the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move” (p. 8). But this act of Christ, to which the pope refers as an “act of oblation” (p. 8), has been given an *enduring presence* in the Eucharist. Here then is an attempt to objectify Christ’s sacrificial love. Thus, the pope makes the Eucharist the *efficient means* that “draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation” (p. 8), not just statically, but into a dynamic of self-giving. The service of love, then, is made sacramental, and the pope indeed calls it a “sacramental ‘mysticism’” (p. 8) which is grounded in God’s condescension toward us. Furthermore, he argues that this sacramental mysticism is *social* in character, by which he means church communion. As far as the pope is concerned, it is only on this christological and sacramental basis that Jesus’ teaching on love can be understood. Indeed, he argues that Jesus’ command to love our neighbor is not simply a matter of morality, but something which can only happen in a “sacramental re-actualization” (p. 8, par. 14).

The second and more practical part of the encyclical underlines certain principles by which the practice of this mystical sacramental love should proceed.

- The service of love (charity) is a responsibility which the church cannot disregard. Since the church seeks to evangelize the world by word and sacrament, and since the essence of charity is sacramental, “the church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word” (p. 12).

- The call for the church to take up the service of love does not necessarily lead to the neglect of seeking justice. The encyclical provides insights into the Catholic thought on Church and State relations. (1) The just ordering of society is a responsibility of the State which is carried out through practical reason. (2) Practical reason, however, is always in danger of blindness. (3) Therefore, the church's involvement is needed to (a) purify reason through faith, (b) help form consciences in political life, and (c) awaken spiritual energy.
- The service of love in the context of globalization means co-operation between Church and State agencies and inter-church agencies. The church's service of love, however, must be characterized by (1) the touch of Christian love which is not just another form of social assistance, (2) independence from parties and ideologies, (3) freedom from proselytizing, and (4) activity at all levels of the church.

II. Evaluation

The encyclical is impressive both from the perspective of the subject matter as well as in the manner in which the argument is structured and developed. While the secular world has parsed the word "love" to the point of trivializing it, love remains the rallying theological point and center in an increasingly ecumenical, postmodern, and doctrine-averse religious climate. The effort on the part of the pope to emphasize the true nature of Christian love in such a climate is indeed commendable. As far as the structure of the argument is concerned, the systematic move from theory to the practice of love is done brilliantly.

The encyclical should also be commended in terms of the principles that are suggested to guide the church's delivery of the service of love. In particular, the emphasis on the need to guard the church against a service of love that is reduced to just another form of social assistance is a welcomed corrective.

In spite of the overall positive appeal of the encyclical, a few particular observations need to be made. It appears that the pope takes pains to emphasize the sacramental and indeed mystical nature of the service of love so as to establish a *necessary* connection between it and the church. This seems to be in line with the trend in the Catholic community to see the church itself as a sacrament. One wonders whether this is the view being reflected in the encyclical. The efficacy of the service of love (in the context of Catholic understanding of sacraments) in presaging and making the kingdom available is an idea about which Protestants may need clarification. If it is indeed the case that in the context of globalization the Catholic Church stands ready to co-operate with charitable agencies of other churches and ecclesiastic communities, will the contribution of these other Christian communities in such endeavors be qualitatively different from that of the Catholic Church? Or what is the status of the service of love of these ecclesiastic communities who have different ideas about the sacrament?

The issue of Church and State relations appears in the context of the encyclical's discussion on justice and poverty. There are very clear statements in the encyclical in which the distinction between the temporal and spiritual realms is acknowledged. Yet the encyclical senses a relatedness of the two spheres because of the "ethical blindness" of practical reason by which justice is pursued. The encyclical sees politics and faith meeting on this particular point. In this encounter, faith, which opens up horizons beyond reason, has the role of purifying reason. How will the practical reason of the practitioners of politics be purified? One would have wished to know in clearer terms how the church may put this ideal into practice, because in spite of the encyclical's effort to express the separation of Church and State, the idea is also conveyed that "the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution toward understanding the requirements of justice and *achieving them politically*" (p. 15; emphasis mine). Within what political arena will this contribution be achieved? It may be that the strategy for the political achievement of this ideal may vary from political situation to situation, but at least knowing its basic

principles could be helpful. Since this is an issue that goes to the foundation of Church and State relations, ultimately, a great deal of the encyclical's value, at least for Seventh-day Adventist, rests on what this strategy entails.

¹ The 25-page full text of the encyclical may be seen at the Vatican's website, <http://www.vatican.va>.

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