

THE UNITY OF LOVE AND THE FACE OF MAN: AN INVITATION TO READ *DEUS CARITAS EST*

• Angelo Cardinal Scola •

“Love is one. *Eros* and *agape* cannot be set against each other.”



In his first encyclical, Benedict XVI, who served the Church as a cardinal for more than two decades in the burdensome task of safeguarding *truth*, tackles the theme of love—a choice that has probably surprised quite a number of people. It will have been no surprise, however, to anyone who remembers the eucharistic celebration of the Day of Forgiveness on the first Sunday of Lent in the Great Jubilee Year 2000. On that occasion, as a stirring echo of the tender embrace with which John Paul II, already quite ill, was wrapping up the celebrated crucifix of St. Marcellinus, there rang out the prayer spoken at the Altar of Confession by the then-Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: “Let us pray that each one of us, recognizing that at times even men of the Church have resorted to un-Christian methods in the nonetheless obligatory task of defending the truth, is able to imitate the Lord Jesus in his meekness and humility of heart.” In the meek and humble Heart of the Lord Jesus—the Heart *ablaze with love*, as the wisdom of tradition has taught us to invoke him—is found the full manifestation of the truth of God and man, the center of our faith: Truth-Love.

1. *The “fundamentals” of love*

This is the very first time that the question of *love* has been confronted *in recto*—in a direct and explicit form—in itself and for itself by an encyclical, by a pontifical document. This claim may come as a surprise to some, but it is true. Before this encyclical letter the papal Magisterium had never tackled the subject of love organically and head-on, and this constitutes a first datum to guide our reading. The interventions of the Magisterium of the Church do not in fact correspond either to pre-established programs or to the particular sensitivities of their authors. They always arise at the Spirit’s prompting from a consideration of the concrete need of the Christian people. They emerge because an opportunity is perceived to offer an aid to the evaluation of crucial aspects of human experience (stealing a term from the language of calculus, we might speak of *fundamentals*) whose meaning has become confused or even sometimes completely lost or twisted. In offering us his authoritative teaching on love, therefore, the Holy Father encourages us to ponder this particular fundamental of human and Christian experience. What is the image of love that is prevalent in modern culture? How does it affect us, the people of God? Do we know how to account for the Church’s teaching on love? Reflection on these and similar questions may help us to read the encyclical with a sharper awareness and to treasure the teaching of the pope.

2. *Understanding love*

Our second premise is that the magisterial teaching is offered to all Christian people. This might sound obvious but it is not. The great force of the language and the style of Pope Benedict—indeed a feature of his genius—is his ability to speak in a way that is accessible to young and old alike. A young lad who takes up this encyclical can begin to understand something of love, while someone who appreciates just how much labor underlies Benedict’s meditation will be all the more aware of the profundity of the pontifical teaching. The text will evoke a response in a very wide range of readers, and each will receive the teaching on a different level. The encyclical speaks in a simple manner to the simple person who will treasure it from his first reading, while at the same time it offers original and perceptive answers to a series of questions that

have always been a crucial element of the human quest for understanding.

The encyclical helps everyone to *understand* love.

3. *The unity of love*

In this short introduction I do not intend to draw up a synthesis or present a compendium of the teaching of *Deus caritas est*. The reader can find elements useful to that end in the commentaries (in section 7, below) on the individual paragraphs of the encyclical. Here, however, I would simply like to suggest some points of a general character that may facilitate the reading of the encyclical by bringing out certain fundamental themes or preoccupations that recur throughout the text.

The first point I want to mention is *the unity of love*. The pope affirms this very clearly in Part I and provides evidence for the idea in Part II. Brushing aside every objection that the history of thought (including Christian thought—one need only think of the names of Geiger and Nygren in the last century) has raised against the thesis of the unity of love, Benedict XVI affirms with clarity that *eros* and *agape* are inseparable. He thereby lays a firm foundation on which to build the way to sound the mystery of love. The thesis of the unity of love offers both the possibility of working back from the experience of human love to the mystery of trinitarian life (*ana-logia*), and the possibility of casting light on our experience of human love (*kata-logia*) on the basis of this mystery, manifest fully in Jesus Christ. The consequences of the thesis are truly impressive. It is enough here to emphasize a single crucial one. There is no separation between *human* and *Christian*. Christianity is in the highest interests of man. The Christian faith is significant anthropologically, socially, and cosmologically, and the recognition of this fact has huge potential for the renewal of ecclesial communities.

4. *Jesus Christ: unity of eros and agape, of love of self, love of one's neighbor, and love of God*

The second datum that needs to be emphasized is the centrality of Jesus Christ, dead and risen, in the pope's teaching about love. Ultimately he is the fount of the unity of *eros* and *agape*,

of love for God and love for one's neighbor. In his redemptive oblation he continues to be available through the Eucharist, which is offered to the freedom of every man at all times. Every man is loved by him first and each person who meets him can therefore respond to love and learn love if he wishes to do so. He who, with the Father, gives us the Spirit brings the Church into being as a subject of love and sends her into the great field of the world to make trinitarian love present there. The centrality of the event of Jesus Christ reveals the intrinsic unity between the two parts of the encyclical. Without the second part, the first could be relegated (as some commentators have not failed to do) to the private sphere.

5. The drama of man as drama of love

Finally, I would like to say a word about the vision of man that underlies the pope's teaching. I want to stress two features in particular. First of all, we are confronted with an anthropology that takes account of the integral unity of man. A vision of man as *one* made up of *body and soul*, of *man and woman*, of *individual and community*, to use the celebrated constitutive polarities of Balthasar. But this integral unity—and this is the second datum—is the unity of *homo viator*. Man, as the pope speaks of him, is not an abstraction but the individual concrete man—as *Redemptor hominis*, 13, teaches us boldly: “Accordingly, what is in question here is man in all his truth, in his full magnitude. We are not dealing with the ‘abstract’ man, but the real, ‘concrete,’ ‘historical’ man.” This is the pilgrim drawn out of nothing for love, redeemed by love, called to the fullness of love. A man who has a journey to make, who is not spared the drama of freedom. Hence the indivisible bond between *eros* and *agape*, a bond that—thanks to the event of Jesus Christ—is no longer an enigma; it involves a readiness for purification on the part of the individual. Love reveals that man is always in action. His existence is “dramatic” (*in action*). It is not an accident that the term “purification” appears on different occasions in both Part I and Part II.

Unity of love, centrality of Jesus Christ, integral anthropology of the *homo viator*: these three themes, clearly visible on every page of the encyclical, bring out many other elements of the rich teaching it contains.

6. *Elements of Christian method*

In the comments that accompany the individual paragraphs, I have not attempted “to explain” the text, although quite a number of the observations will be helpful towards understanding it better. My thoughts amount rather to emphases, signposts, incentives, and meditations prompted by my reading of the encyclical. They are connected with the pastor’s role, that is, with the desire that this precious teaching should become an occasion for the regeneration of the Christian people. They are *elements of Christian method* applicable to the imperative educative task incumbent upon the Christian community, which “feels” steadied (*retta*), supported (*sorretta*), and even “corrected” (*corretta*) by the Magisterium of Pope Benedict in the encyclical *Deus caritas est*.

7. *Commentary on the encyclical*

1. In a sense the first paragraph of the encyclical has the same function as the *preludes* of the great lyric or symphonic operas: to give a brief indication of the main themes to be tackled and developed in the course of the piece’s execution. The prelude thus immediately galvanizes the curiosity of the listener.

Pope Benedict does just this in his Introduction. He sets out the themes of the encyclical—some essential elements of love in Part I and a discussion of the ecclesial exercise of love in Part II—placing them within the horizon of a great affirmation: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a Person, which gives life a new horizon and with that its crucial direction.”

The beginning of the Christian life is not about a moral choice. Nor is it about the natural religious inclination of the human heart: the religious sense as such does not explain a person’s being a Christian. Nor is being a Christian about a theory such as the idea of the good or the idea of salvation. At the heart of Christianity lies an encounter with an event. Or, better, with a Person who gives life a new horizon and crucial direction.

Such a small proportion of those who have been baptized as babies take the trouble to figure out the true nature of Christianity: an event born of an encounter. It is perfectly right and proper, and indeed crucial for maturity in faith that we should cultivate an

awareness of that “particular moment” in our own life when our baptism became real to us through an encounter with the Christian event. There is such a moment in the life of all Christians, just as there was for the first Christians (think of Peter, Andrew, James, and John on the shore of the lake). For many it will have coincided with a clear perception of a personal vocation. It is most important for every believer to go back to the moment when he had this experience of an encounter with the event of the Person of Christ. I am not talking about a mental or devotional exercise, but about the concrete possibility of grasping what is at stake when we talk about Christianity. After Confirmation, so many young people drift away from the Church because they do not consciously have this crucial experience of a personal meeting with Christ. A Christianity that is reduced to ethics or pure theory, a Christianity that is not event, does not interest people. The reason is basically the same as what Camus suggested when talking about love in his *Notebooks*: “You have to encounter love before you encounter morality. Otherwise it’s agony. It’s not by force of scruples that a person becomes great. Greatness comes to a person, if God so wills it, like a beautiful sunny day.”

It is clearly very significant that the Holy Father prefaces his teaching on love with such a clear statement of the essence of Christianity. Let us consider why he did so. One reply might be that the experience of love is precisely what makes it possible for us to grasp what an event is. In its origins, love possesses this character of being an event of encounter with another. Christianity is given in the life of men as love is given: it begins with an event of an encounter that surprises us and opens up a way for us. Independent of us and completely gratuitous (for it defies the logic of reciprocal exchange), it involves us in the first person like nothing else can do and gives us a foretaste of the fulfillment of our self.

Hence St. John’s statement that “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16) not only reveals the face of God and consequently the face of man, but also speaks of our journey and its ultimate direction.

2. To make a point of “the difficulty of language” in speaking of love does not mean that we simply have to talk contingently in connection with a particular historical situation like the present day, when to use the word “love” is to run the risk of saying everything and nothing at the same time. These limitations help us to grasp the fact that love confronts us with one of the most imposing pieces of evidence to the effect that man is the *magna*

quaestio of man himself.¹ In this connection Evdokimov wrote in his famous volume *The Sacrament of Love*, “None of the great thinkers or poets has ever found an answer to the question: ‘What is love?’ . . . If one imprisons the light, it slips through the fingers.”

And yet there must be a way to know love, a way to give unity to the multifarious experiences that fall under this term. Great Christian thinkers have indeed already shown us the way: from a classic spiritual writer like William of Saint Thierry to our shrewd contemporary C. S. Lewis.

The pope poses the question explicitly: “are all these forms of love basically one, so that love, in its many and varied manifestations, is ultimately a single reality, or are we merely using the same word to designate totally different realities?” Affirming the former, the Holy Father indicates the main road to the discovery of the unity of love: “Amid this multiplicity of meanings, however, one in particular stands out: love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness. This would seem to be the very epitome of love; all other kinds of love immediately seem to fade in comparison.”

Following in the footsteps of John Paul II in his famous (though not greatly studied) *Catechesis on Human Love*, Benedict XVI affirms this with clarity: the love that can arise from the amorous encounter of a man with a woman is in a sense the paradigm of love. It is a model for every other form of love, and if we want to learn what love really is, then we should study the love relationship between man and woman. This is a courageous stance and one that is anything but obvious; it is worth remembering, for example, that great thinkers like St. Augustine and St. Thomas carefully refrained from using the analogy of the family—the most imposing human realization of love—to speak of the Trinity. Understandably then, the Church does not cease to guard and preach to all the truth of the difference between the sexes, of the gift of self, and of openness to life. To learn love, it is absolutely essential that we hold these three elements of the “nuptial mystery” firmly united!

3. The paragraph begins by emphasizing a datum of present-day culture that is as widely cherished as it is misunderstood. *Love imposes itself* in some way on the human being. The phenomenon of

¹Cf. Augustine, *Confessions* IV, 4.

love can be described as the absolutely gratuitous and unanticipated imposition of an attention to “my” person that is able to provoke a total mobilization of my self without a call for anything in exchange. It is not, therefore, in the first instance a fruit of my decision or my reasoning. Displaying a very profound psychological acumen, St. Thomas said that love begins with a *passio*, and he goes on to give a reasoned description of the nature of *passio/amor* as something that in a certain sense I undergo. Yes, it is something that happens to me, it is an event, and this *passion* is powerful for the reason that it encounters my *desire* to be loved. Both the dimension of desire and the dimension of passion belong to the experience that is identified with the term *eros*.

We might think of an adolescent who falls in love (bearing in mind that the phenomenon of falling in love is fairly ambiguous): something changes in him, to the point that he becomes the target of ironic jokes from all and sundry because he has started to behave differently from the way he behaved before.

The impact of this experience of love as passion is so powerful that, in a move that was to have subsequent deleterious consequences, Romanticism likened love to a malady. The Latin phrase *affici aegritudine* (*affici* being related to the English “affect”) means to be affected by an illness. For the Romantic vision—think of Goethe’s Werther or Foscolo’s Jacopo Ortis—love is like a malady that can be nothing less than mortal (hence the polarity of love and death, love or death).

The questions that the pope poses lead to others: is the Christian faith respectful of this dimension of *passion* that is proper to love, or does it mortify it? Is the Christian faith the ruination of passion? These are fundamental questions that we cannot neglect if we want to educate ourselves and others in the Christian sense of reality. How can we really suggest to a young person that he follow Jesus without also helping him to grasp that every aspect of human experience—and *a fortiori* the fundamental ones, as in the case of love and falling in love—is a good if (like all that is human) it is taken on freely and seen through to its fulfillment? We have to invite people to follow a way: the experience of man bears the marks of a wounded freedom that all too often makes us lose the deeper meaning of our selves and the horizon of our own fulfillment.

4. The reference to the Greek conception of love and to practices like sacred prostitution and fertility cults in ancient religions

introduces one of the fundamental keys to the pope's teaching about love.

Eros is the route for man to a *certain foretaste of the summit of existence*, when he reckons the price of the enjoyment of his freedom. The fulfillment promised by amorous experience has nothing automatic or magic about it; it cannot be produced by ritual gestures or magic practices that avoid our having to commit our personal freedom.

We have need of a way, and the Holy Father offers us a simple but unequivocal criterion for evaluating the truth and goodness of a way: if it deprives the person of his dignity or if it dehumanizes him, *eros* is no longer "ecstasy" and ascent to the divine, but the fall and degradation of man.

5. Adopting an anthropological perspective, the Holy Father goes deeper into the two fundamental elements set out in the preceding paragraph: the relationship between *eros* and the divine, and the need for a way.

First of all he takes aim at one of the most widespread temptations in our world, at least in the West, i.e., that of a certain disincarnate spiritualism. In the teeth of all the evidence, the dominant culture of today considers man not as a dual unity (*corpore et anima unus*, as defined in *Gaudium et spes*, 14), but as one-dimensional. Having paid lip service to the spirit, it proceeds to concentrate almost exclusively on the body, which is reduced at the same time to being a mere instrument. The body is to be "used," i.e., just as we use a car. Nothing could be further from the Christian vision of the body as the *sacrament* of the whole person. What is the consequence of such a dualistic or "mutilated" vision of the human being? The fact that the body is not considered necessary to express all the freedom of man. In a sense it is not considered fully "human" at all, but is reduced to a mere biological-material component. This is one of so many paradoxes of modern culture: while exalting the body to the point of mania (we need only think of the "health cult" so excessively widespread today), ultimately it regards the body as less than human.

The real path to the fulfillment of *eros* starts out, however, from a profoundly unitary vision and experience of what is human, which is able to recognize the dual unity of soul and body constitutive of each man. This dual unity is granted to the freedom of man to be assumed and lived harmoniously, and hence we speak of maturing and purification! Not out of reservations about *eros*, but

simply out of a realistic perception of the fascinating path which *eros* opens up to us precisely for our fulfillment.

6. On the basis of biblical revelation—in particular the Song of Songs and especially the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ—we can identify the milestones on the path of love that allow it to mature.

More concretely, we are talking about the path that leads *eros* to its own fulfillment in *agape*. It is not that in order to live true love we have to give up *eros*, but that *eros* does have to be purified to allow the unavoidable dimension of need/desire characteristic of love to open up to that of self-giving. The erotic element must find fulfillment in the agapic without the profound unity between the two components being broken.

The Holy Father speaks of a progressive growth and interweaving of *eros* and *agape*. The erotic dimension of love, which does not ask my permission to happen, is fulfilled only in the agapic dimension of gratuitous self-giving. Real ecstasy—literally “going out of oneself”—is not something exclusive to possessive *eros* and enclosed in the fortress of the I, but something actually gained through *agape*, in the permanent gratuitous *exodus from oneself* to go to meet the other, who, however, does not annul the I.

Love—as St. Thomas writes so shrewdly in pages as up-to-date as those of the most perceptive psychoanalysis²—begins with *affectio* as *passio*, but calls to my freedom to be invested with my choice. *Affective love* becomes *effective* through *elective love*. Since this choice brings into play the other as other (who is always “different from me”), it cannot fail to imply, intrinsically, an element of “purification,” sacrifice, and renunciation. Therefore sacrifice, renunciation, purification—in a word: duty or the task—are not extrinsic relative to desire, but constitute the truth of desire. In a sense, Freud himself says this when he speaks of the need for the child to “accept” the presence of the father as the “third” with respect to himself and the mother. Far from extinguishing desire, sacrifice empowers it!

7. The Holy Father confronts head-on the historical polemic about the nature of love that has been a feature of Christianity since the Middle Ages. This polemic was born out of the Christian worldview (cf. the medieval dialectic between monastic and scholastic theology in this connection, or the accusation made by the

²Cf. *ST I-II*, q. 22, 1–3 and q. 26, 1–2.

Lutheran bishop Nygren that Catholicism is “intrinsically egoist,” or the dispute between Geiger and Rousselot). There is a logic in this dispute since, in the face of the grandeur of love revealed to us in Jesus Christ dead and risen, i.e., in the face of the fullness of agapic love, there has been a persistent temptation to undervalue the importance of erotic love.

A certain unilateral emphasis on the *theologia crucis* has led to thinking of love as, in essence, pure *agape* in radical opposition to *eros*, and this carries the implication that we should renounce the erotic, “possessive” dimension of love. The idea is that, without such a renunciation, love cannot become capable of gratuitousness, of ecstasy as complete departure out of oneself. Nygren suggests that the Crucified One is the quintessence of love precisely by virtue of this radical ecstasy which attains to the absolute denial of self. Jesus crucified shows that true love is only this absolutely ecstatic type, that type which does not aim at the fulfillment of self.

This brings us back to the central theme of the unity (or otherwise) of love and hence the necessity of holding together the erotic or physical dimension—the one for which love is also the fulfillment of need/desire—and the ecstatic or agapic dimension, for which love is identified with oblation.

The pope cuts through this dispute by giving an authoritative and masterly answer: love is one. *Eros* and *agape* cannot be set against each other. Jesus, immolating himself innocently in the total gift of himself (agapic renunciation) entrusts himself to the Father but in this way “fulfills” his unique persona. In fact he is risen and alive.

8. The importance of the pope’s teaching on the unity of love becomes clear if we keep in mind above all that this unity dispels any kind of suspicion with regard to *eros*: erotic love in its original impulse is willed by God.

This unity of love—“O amor, a quo omnis amor cognominatur etiam carnalis ac degener” (O love which remains love even when it becomes completely degenerate), wrote William of Saint Thierry, the friend of the great St. Bernard, in his commentary on the Song of Songs. He invites us to nurture the imperative dynamism of desire/need. We are led from the familiar terrain of natural affection to that of the gift of self, mysterious and irresistible, because open to the infinite, accepting the inevitable way of sacrifice. The Trinity, creating man, impresses onto his most elementary biological dynamisms and down to his most recondite psychological recesses of

affectivity an ascending movement that presses him on towards his transcendent nature.

The claims in this paragraph are fundamental. They help us to understand that the experience of falling in love—even in its structural ambivalence—is the most important natural means with which God has endowed us to learn the way of love. The erotic movement opens me to the irresistible promise of happiness disclosed to me by the other; the agapic assumption, fruit of a free choice, purifies the movement and makes me capable of loving the other for the other's sake. In this way my fulfillment is realized. The difference between the two aspects which are forever interwoven is clear, but the two aspects come together in the unity of love. They are not in contradiction, nor does the one exclude the other. In the experience of falling in love properly so called—and this often implies renunciation, as in the case of the celibate or the consecrated virgin—we are immersed in a perspective of openness towards the other, which, if invested with the agapic dimension of love, leads to a progressive ascent towards the truth of ourselves.

There is an indivisible bond, a dual unity between *eros* and *agape*; they are the two foci of the ellipse of the human experience of love.

And there is more. The affirmation of the unity of love contains the evidence for the profound “suitability” of Christianity for man in every age. If *eros* finds the way of its own fulfillment in the giving of *agape*, and if this has been revealed definitively in the redemptive event of Jesus Christ, then we can understand that for each man to encounter Jesus and follow him is in his best interest. It is the greatest grace that he can receive.

9–10. By using the language of love, the Holy Father illuminates magisterially and precisely the image of God in these two paragraphs, gathered under the title “*The newness of biblical faith.*” God is the Creator of every thing and all reality finds consistency in him. But not only that: he is the lover of man. The pope writes at the beginning of paragraph 10: “God’s *eros* for man is also totally *agape.*” Benedict XVI is quite unafraid to speak of *eros* in relation to God.

Recognizing in the experience of love the potential for illuminating the value of all beings endowed with spirit—beginning with the relationship between man and woman and reaching to the unsoundable mystery of the trinitarian God—the pope goes deeper into the great theme of *analogy*, which is so crucial for the under-

standing of faith. In doing this, he is not, of course, situating God and man on the same level! He is taking up and actualizing the claim (which is of capital importance for the history of thought) that it is possible for man to recognize God because he is manifest in all of reality, and because he is revealed in a special way in the history of election and salvation on which he has opted to embark with all the human family through the Chosen People.

In this story the two dimensions of love meld in a fiery center that glows with adamant light: it is the experience of the mercy of a loving God towards his sinful, indeed adulterous people. In compassion, love, as the pope says, “goes far beyond the aspect of gratuity.” Why? Because it breaks *definitively* with any invitation to reciprocity. There is no question here of a relation of exchange in which the people who receive something give something in exchange and vice versa. Such an exchange of gifts is not extraneous to love, yet it does not express love to the depths. The ultimate depth of love is affirmed only in the total oblation which affirms the other for himself, even beyond his alienation and betrayal. It is the abyssal experience of love-pardon.

In a sense, far from “pacifying” the relationship with the One who loves us, this makes it all the more “dramatic,” that is, it stretches our freedom even more in the will to respond to so much love. For the love with which God loves man does not annul his identity but enhances it. The experience of unity with God that man, participating in love, is called to fulfill does not involve the dissolution of the I in the divine Thou. It is no accident that Christian spirituality speaks of *the mystical wedding* or *the spiritual marriage*. And in marriage, even in the most elevated moment of the *una caro*—the conjugal act of (both corporal and spiritual) union of the spouses—the two remain always two, and the *third*, the child, who is always present as the potential fruit of fecundity, is a permanent indication of this.

In this connection it must not be forgotten how fertile the lives of the saints have been, who have had the grace to live the experience of the “mystical wedding”: this gift they have received has always been given as a function of the edification of the Church. God does not love in order to annul men in his abyss of love, but to make them fruitful and to ensure that through them others can come to recognize the love of the Trinity.

11. Introducing this radical newness into our conception of the image of God, biblical faith also reveals a new image of man. It

is no longer possible to think of him as a being complete in himself without reference to the other. Gender difference itself—man-woman—has come from the hands of the Creator to prevent that. Alterity does not appear as extrinsic to the individual person and therefore there is no danger of its being regarded as accidental, yet the autonomous consistency of the I remains completely unaffected. This paragraph renews the teaching of John Paul II in *Mulieris dignitatem*, 7, recognizing that the *imago Dei* may be found fully only in communion. The *imago Dei* possesses a communion quality.

Man and woman are identical as persons but sexually they are different. This difference pervades all of the human being and so presents itself at one and the same time as internal and external to the I. While on the one hand it reveals that alterity is in some way internal to the person himself, on the other it marks the person's structural insufficiency, opening him to "that which is outside of himself." The *other* is outside my control but necessary for me.

God's original plan in creating us always and only either male or female persons educates us to understand the real "weight" of the I and the real "weight" of the other. Gender difference is revealed thus as the most elementary school for teaching man. It is a question of understanding the I through the other and the other through the I. The need-desire (*eros*) of the other that the I, as man and woman, experiences is not therefore the mark of a *handicap* or deficiency, but rather the echo of that fullness of love which lives in the Trinity and the point of departure for the way that leads to the depth of love (*agape*).

For this reason, from an anthropological and cultural point of view, even before a moral one, the "androgynous mentality" that tends to declare that gender difference can be overcome is radically mistaken. This mentality tries more or less consciously to prevent *eros* from making its way towards *agape*, thereby closing off to man the possibility of maturing in love.

As a public bond that is stable, faithful, and open to life, the marriage of a man and a woman habitually reveals itself as the high road, inscribed in our very being as men and women, to the attainment of the maturity of love. It is a way that is offered to every generation and safeguarded in every area of human communal existence.

12. The biblical image of God and man centered on love as the indissoluble bond of *eros* and *agape* has been concretely realized in history. It acquires *an unheard-of realism* in Jesus Christ dead and

risen for us. In the Crucified Risen One the possibility is definitively opened up to man of fulfilling the way of love in the first person.

In a perfect act of *agape*, Jesus abandons himself to the Father on the Cross and gives himself to man. To affirm this fullness of the *agape* of Christ, the pope is not afraid to use an expression typical of the most radical *theologia crucis*. He affirms that “his death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself.” It is the *consummatum est*. The last effective action of Jesus on the Cross is the total consignment of himself in absolute obedience to the Father. After the *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* there is the *consummatum est*. Yet even at this point the Crucified knows that in giving himself to the Father, loved in the extreme giving of death, he does not destroy himself. The perfect ecstatic love of Jesus is not self-destruction. The Cross is his fulfillment rather than his annulment. And so the urgent desire that each man has in his heart to be definitively loved and to love definitively even beyond death (*erotic dimension*) was definitively realized in Jesus. The extreme sacrifice of the Cross reveals love as the permanent positive (*agapic dimension*).

Thus, contemplating the pierced Heart of Jesus, man can see how *eros* and *agape* are composed and how they concretely penetrate each other in the exalting experience of love. Jesus fulfilled himself by allowing himself to be crucified. In the total gift of his innocent life he realized himself, and the Father raised him from the dead. We can say that in the Crucified Risen One *eros* and *agape* coincide.

Here the possibility is opened up of going deeper into the nature of Christian virginity.

The contemplation of Jesus Christ dead and risen offers us, moreover, the best way to handle the educative implications of an anthropological datum that is as crucial as it is confused in contemporary culture. I am referring to the need to overcome the false opposition continually flaunted in the prevalent mentality of today between desire and duty, between “wanting to” and “having to.” This polarity prevents man from journeying, from being able “*to want his own duty*,” from finding the fulfillment of his own desire in obedience to the task assigned him by the Father. It is a polarity that cannot imagine the fullness of humanity embodied in the profound affirmation of Claudel in the play *The Satin Slipper*. “Joy alone is the mother of sacrifice.”

13. There is a very familiar objection to all this. How is it possible for me, living as I do two thousand years after Jesus Christ, to follow the way of love opened up by him? How can I follow and

imitate the One who has left earthly life to live in the definitiveness of the new aeon at the right hand of the Father? The pope replies clearly: it is possible for us to live today the fullness of love realized in Jesus by virtue of the relationship which the Eucharist, the present-day perennial presence of the Easter of the Lord, establishes between the freedom of God and the ever-historically situated freedom of each man.

In the Eucharist the Lord makes us participate in his self-giving and he opens us to love in such a way that our desire can be fulfilled in oblation. The eucharistic celebration, which for two thousand years has physically defined the reality of the Christian people, is the simple, regular, and permanent school of love. We are here faced with the *kata-logica of love*. We have seen that the human experience of love is the concrete possibility of going back (*ana-logia*) towards the very mystery of God. Now the Holy Father explains how from the mystery of the self-abasement (*kata-logia*) of God—inaugurated with the Chosen People and brought to completion once for all in the Incarnate Son, dead and risen and present throughout history by the power of the Spirit in the Eucharist—the way of love is definitively illuminated. For love, in history, has a name: Jesus Christ. He is love incarnate.

14–15. The contemplation of the sacrament of the Eucharist brings into play another fundamental datum. The Eucharist as the mystery of love is essentially fruitful, and the eucharistic fruit *par excellence*—the *res* as the scholastics would say—is the communion of the Church. The total gift of himself, assured eucharistically by Christ to man in every age, is for the salvation of all. This means that the way of love which the Eucharist makes concretely traversable in history is the way of encounter with the other, and indeed of that radical encounter which recognizes the other as a member of the same body. In this way my *neighbor* becomes crucial for the knowledge that I have of myself. We can then understand in what sense we can speak of a commandment in relation to love, something which is at first sight paradoxical. Love “can be ‘commanded’ because it has first of all been given”: “The only thing you should owe to anyone is love for one another” (Rom 13:8). This is the context for the emergence of the social dimension of charity and the Eucharist, to which the pope will turn his attention in Part II of the encyclical.

16–17. In these two paragraphs the pope faces two crucial objections to the invitation to love which the eucharistic Jesus directs to the Christian. Even if I can live true love, even if I can

purify the affective love of *eros* in continuity with the elective love of *agape*, how can I love God if I do not see him? And how can I command myself to love my neighbor, if love begins with an event that cannot be produced by me?

Faced honestly, these objections can help us to focus on two fundamental elements of the Christian life that are two pillars of education for faith and two cardinal points of the *method* of the Christian life that ought to characterize every community.

First, then, we need a reply to the question: Where can I meet God? Or rather, where does this God whom I do not see offer himself to be met by me so that he can be recognized by me and therefore loved? Speaking of the Eucharist, the pope has already set out the reply to this question. But before attending to the reply, we must first recognize the scope of the question. It actually raises *the problem par excellence*: either Christianity is an event that I can encounter here and now, of which I can have concrete experience, or it will inevitably be reduced to a theory, to ethics, or to practices of piety. Kierkegaard has a brilliant insight into this in his *Diary*: “The only ethical relation there can be with greatness (thus too with Christ) is contemporaneity. A relationship with someone dead is an aesthetic relationship: his life has lost the power to be a stimulus, it does not judge mine, it allows me to admire him . . . and allows me to live in quite other categories: it does not oblige me to make a decisive judgement.” And so we find ourselves back with the theme of paragraph 1: the horizon of love is Christianity as event.

To this first objection the pope replies by describing concretely the life of the Church: therein lies the *proof* that Jesus is not absent. It becomes crucial therefore to take part in this life; and to communicate the Faith means to offer the possibility of sharing the life of the ecclesial community to the freedom of men and women. It is in this life in fact that man can perceive the presence of God and learn to love him. This is the concrete way—the method—to live love for God and one’s neighbor and to love one’s own true good at the same time.

In a sense, this also gives us the reply to the second objection. Can love be commanded? For surely love is something that first of all happens, it happens to me. But this is precisely the experience offered within the ecclesial community: the experience of being loved first. In the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, in which we participate in the community born of the Eucharist, unity is given between *eros* and *agape*. Hence the total offering of one’s own life

allows Jesus to “command” love as the great way of salvation and liberation, a way that man can follow. “Since he has ‘loved us first’ love can also blossom as a response within us.” The unitary commandment of the love of God and neighbor is within our reach because Jesus makes our response of love possible. This response involves all of the person, *it brings into play all man’s potentialities*—reason, will, sensibility, temperament, etc.—in a word, it involves freedom, which is emblematic for all of man. The central point then is that each man can encounter the coming of love, which brings his freedom into play and makes a response possible and mandatory. But as long as we remain in history, this process—the pope affirms with great insight—is always open-ended: love is never “finished” and “complete.”

This elementary instruction as to method contains the antidote against all moralism. At the same time it helps us to understand faithfulness as necessary to the truth of love. A profound aphorism of Hans Urs von Balthasar echoes this: “Where there is unfaithfulness there is no love. Where there is faithfulness it is not necessary that love still be there. The heart can say: ‘Even if I cannot love you, I want at least to be faithful to you.’ But the bond of fidelity always takes us to love or at least contains at bottom, though all unconscious to the ear and to the feelings, the knot of love which is tied beyond time.” The genius of Shakespeare had already intuited the same thing: “Love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds / Or bends with the remover to remove.”³ Love is not a feeling but an uninterrupted response—and a faithful one!—to the One who loves us first.

18. The possibility of living love for God and love for our neighbor in unity takes shape in our concrete identification with Jesus Christ, which realizes true love of self perfectly. This identification is not first of all the result of some ascetic labor on our part. It is rather the flowering of the welcome by our freedom to the free gift of the love of God, as Dante put it so brilliantly: “If I knew your mind as you know mine.”⁴

So it is that we are called by the Father, who in Christ Jesus says to us: “Set out on my way, the way of love.” On this way there are no contradictions, nor is there any choice to be made between

³Shakespeare, “Sonnet 116,” 2–4.

⁴Dante, *Paradiso* IX, 80–81.

love for God and love for neighbor. In the event of the prevenient love of God, every circumstance and every relationship becomes an occasion to recognize and fulfill the experience of love.

Romano Guardini made this point very effectively in *Das Wesen des Christentums*: “In the experience of a great love, all that happens becomes an event within its sphere.” In the event of the encounter with Jesus and of following him, every relationship becomes an event, quite apart from the degree of emotion it can have or arouse. Thus in the bitterest difficulties, by virtue of following Christ, every relationship becomes lovable. Jesus Christ does not impose an impossible duty on us but he involves us with himself: “Follow me on the way of love, imitate me in my manner of loving.” In our meeting with him, in our experience of love, there flourishes in us the desire to identify with him and to love as he does. And thus, as the pope says in concluding Part I, “love grows through love.”

19. At the beginning of this second part of the encyclical, which the Holy Father dedicates to the practice of love by the Church as a “*community of love*,” we are confronted with the central mystery of our faith: the intimate Life of God, one and triune. It is neither an accident nor a reference to be taken for granted. It is to be perceived above all in light of what has been said about the Spirit, lavished by the Father and the Son as paschal gift. In the life of the Trinity, the Spirit—the “Person-gift” as the Servant of God John Paul II calls him in *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 10—constitutes the bond (*nexus*) between the Father and the Son and, at the same time, the fruit (*fructus*) of this bond. For this very reason the Spirit shows the essential dimensions of love: He unites (bond, *reciprocal gift* of self) the two (*difference*), revealing the fruit (*fruitfulness*) of this union.

The three essential dimensions of love living in every expression of the nuptial mystery are present in the ecclesial community, which, as Vatican II says, quoting St. Cyprian, is “a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 4). We could not therefore speak of the Church and her service of charity without first of all fixing our gaze on the source of this same Church as sphere of charity. In the life of the Church, to speak of the Trinity is never excessive; it is not a “theoretical question” that has nothing to do with life. The Trinity is the permanent origin of the ecclesial communion, of the Church as place of “a fellowship of life, charity, and truth” (cf. *Lumen gentium*, 9).

A final element is particularly important in this paragraph. I am referring to the insistence on testimony. By virtue of the gift of the Spirit, the Church is constituted as testimony of the love of the Father in the history of men. The service of charity is an integral part of the testimony to which the ecclesial community is called.

The witness is *the third person who is between the two*. The Church is a bridge thrown between the Risen One and all our fellow men.

20. Every single baptized person is called to serve charity, personally and as a member of the ecclesial community. This means that charity, as the pope affirms, “is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community.” Here we see manifest another crucial constitutive dimension of each individual Christian: the person-community polarity. The duty to take on for good the communitarian dimension of the service of charity as something of one’s own, whatever the sphere of potential activity—the parish, an aggregation of the faithful, a charitable organization, the diocese—is not a “generous concession” that the individual Christian makes to the life of the community! It is a question rather of the maturing in him of *communion* as the principle of the “material organization” of existence. *Koinonia*, which is spoken of in the passage in Acts quoted in the text (Acts 2:42–45) is not the task of just some members of the Christian community, but the vital lifeblood of the whole, the fruit of the direct involvement of all the baptized. This perspective enables the organizational element that is necessary at all levels of the Church to lose its tendency to “bureaucratization” and become a concrete proof that *koinonia* can inform existence down to its material aspects.

21. The reference to the institution of deacons (Acts 6:1–6) highlights a fact of great importance. Speaking of diaconal service as a “truly spiritual office, which carried out an essential responsibility of the Church,” the pope repeats a crucial principle of Christian method, that of the unity of life. Even when circumstances and daily situations make necessary a distribution of responsibilities within the Christian community, this must not compromise the unity of the person and the community and must not lead to the fragmentation of the Christian experience of the believer, regenerated in baptism and called to the fullness of love. The unity of the Christian life cannot be broken: the various offices, responsibilities, services, etc., however specific, cannot be fulfilled apart from the complete horizon of faith, for otherwise the essential principle of testimony

would be lost, and instead we would see the introduction into the community of the inadequate practice of “delegation.”

The reflowering of the ministry of permanent deacons after Vatican II provides a special opportunity to show to all of the ecclesial community this beneficent interlinking of the general horizon and specific forms of service.

22–24. The history of the Church testifies to the ways in which the faithful have always taken on the service of charity both individually and as a community—not as a “consequence” of their being Christians, but as an expression of the very identity of the Church. Proclamation of the Gospel, celebration of the sacraments, and service of charity are the fundamental features of the identity of the Christian community. These are simply the diverse expressions of the life of the Church in which Christians take part with regularity: they are not activities to be carried out or duties to be fulfilled, they are the means by which Christians deepen their awareness of being Christians.

History offers us superabundant proof of the (so to speak) “public” or “social” fruitfulness of the service of charity. The example of the *diaconie* of the monasteries or the particular churches is illuminating. The service of charity becomes physically perceptible and identifiable, like the Christian community itself.

It is a testimony that can be seen, it can be pointed out, and it can be identified among the everyday events of the world. This is an eloquent testimony too to those regarded as outsiders or indeed as downright hostile to the Church.

25. As it was for Jesus Christ, in whose mission his person was luminously expressed, so it is for the Church. In her, nature and mission in a certain sense coincide. The service of charity is not a simple activity—but together with testimony and the liturgy it affirms the very nature of the Church.

This is also true for each individual believer, and this way a fruitful unity of life is open to each. The idea that the pope is offering us is not the dualistic one of “recharging” in order to be able to “give out,” but rather that of charity lived as the fount of humanity. Vatican II refers to this way when speaking of *pastoral charity* in the decree on the life and ministry of priests (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 14).

In this paragraph the pope also puts before us a precious reflection on method. The horizon of the service of charity has to be the whole world, because “God wants everyone to be saved and

reach full knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). But we educate ourselves for this universal horizon through the law of proximity: concrete charity with respect to the family of God in the world, the Church. Ecclesial charity—between brothers in the Faith—becomes a paradigmatic instrument for a 360-degree openness.

26–27. Is there perhaps a danger that charity will become an alibi for an evasion of the duty of works of justice? If the Holy Father confronts what is perhaps the most powerful objection of these last two centuries to the service of charity, it is obviously not for purposes of theoretical reflection. He is trying to face up to a difficulty which is still strongly present—though to a more or less conscious extent—in our Christian communities. The pope wants to offer us concrete assistance for our education into “the mind of Christ” (cf. 1 Cor 2:16).

He does it in the first place by welcoming the part of truth that is present in the objection: the requirement of justice as a fundamental criterion proper to an adequate civil society and as the extremely urgent duty of every state institution. It is possible to tackle the question of the justice-charity relationship on the basis of this premise.

We must first of all be careful to recognize that this relationship has always been historically conditioned. We need to distinguish between the first period of the industrial revolution, the period of its development, the era of technologies, and today’s panorama of economic—and at least in part cultural—globalization. We shall pay particular attention to the process of transition that is underway today at all levels.

The pope begins by reminding us that the *Compendium of Social Doctrine*, which contains the century-old tradition of the Church in this area, is a privileged instrument for evaluating this objection and, more generally, questions relating to social, economic, and political life.

In her *social doctrine* the Church offers us a series of principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and directives for action that can become an occasion for comparison and collaboration in every field.

28. The reply to the objection that counterposes justice to charity is given by the Holy Father via a structured reflection on the relationship between faith and politics.

In the first place, following the healthiest tradition of Catholic doctrine, the encyclical “gives back” to politics all of its dignity. Politics has as its aim *the just ordering of society*. The radicality

of the expression *just ordering* in the tradition of Christian thought is well-known. The pope reminds us in this connection of the extremely trenchant expression of Augustine: “a State which is not governed according to justice would be just a bunch of thieves.”

Showing great realism, the Holy Father does not, however, forget that politics is an activity of man, a being whose freedom is not only limited and historically conditioned but also concretely wounded by sin. So the encounter with Jesus Christ, faith lived in the ecclesial community, is offered to man as a way to and a force for *purification*. Terminology that was used several times by the pope in Part I of the encyclical reappears at this point. This purification is needed not only for interpersonal love (*eros-agape*), but also for social love (justice–charity). A significant correspondence is thus created between *eros* and *agape*, on the one hand, and justice and charity, on the other. Not only does each one of the two couples have to stand in a *dual unity*, but there is no full love (*caritas*) that does not have to do simultaneously with the personal and the social dimension of human existence. Here the anthropological and social importance of faith is evidenced: “*The truth is that only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light*” (*Gaudium et spes*, 22). Faith comes to meet man to develop his reason fully. The perfection of the “just” is found in charity. Charity no more absorbs justice than faith substitutes for reason. The Church collaborates with and sustains politics but does not replace it. This is a service that the Church renders permanently to men of every generation; it cannot be considered fully developed or completed once for all. She does not formulate theories which are then applied to reality, and every utopian temptation is rejected. Keeping a critical eye on historical processes, men are from time to time called to rethink the just ordering of society, and there is no historical era that can prescind from the necessary purification of the (inevitable) ideology of the day.

On top of all this, the pope then adds two considerations of noteworthy importance.

On the one hand, he refers to one of the basic principles of the social doctrine of the Church: the principle of subsidiarity. This focuses on the primacy of the person and of intermediate bodies in the life of society, which state institutions must serve. The equation of political life with the state is not admissible as an absolute.

On the other hand, the pope helps us to understand that there is a level of service of charity that has to do specifically with

love and that is not reducible to the always contingent order of a just society. “There is no ordering of the state so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love.” As Part I of the encyclical carefully illustrates, the urgent need to be loved, to be acknowledged in one’s own dignity, is inalienable for every man and becomes an unavoidable duty towards every other, in particular for the one who bears any sort of authority. In this way the service of charity highlights the specifically human and exalts the necessary order of justice.

Using a very apt expression coined by Paul VI, we can say that the pope shows us once again how the Church is an *expert in humanity*.

29. The Church offers her specific contribution to civil society and political society in different ways and above all through the medium of the educative role that is proper to her. It is what the pope calls *her indirect duty*, while “the direct duty to work for a just ordering of society, on the other hand, is proper to the lay faithful.” The whole ecclesial community is called to develop this refinedly anthropological task in all its multifarious forms: families, parishes, schools, aggregations, cultural centers, and so on.

The second level of ecclesial action involving the specific vocation of the faithful laity in the world will depend to a great extent on *how* and *how much* the Christian community commits itself seriously to this task. It is the laity who are the protagonists in the exercise of *social charity*. Thus, the reference the encyclical makes to no. 1939 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is significant, since in this number *social charity* is identified with *the principle of solidarity*, co-essential with that of subsidiarity. The faithful live their task sufficiently by educating themselves and educating others to charity while at the same time realizing social charity concretely in the thousand forms that circumstances, situations, and the creativity of individuals and communities suggest. They raise questions, problems, and challenges that the Church, *mater et magistra*, must resolutely tackle.

A third way of performing the service of charity involves the charitable organizations of the Church. In a sense these combine both the educative function—inasmuch as they ought always to be paradigmatic of charity—and that of the exercise of social charity on one’s own responsibility. The creation of works of charity is thus revealed as a significant expression of the maturity of a Christian community.

The space for the production of such works in civil society must be constantly looked for and guarded.

30. In recent decades the potential for communication and intervention at the global level has increased dramatically. For the pope this datum constitutes a privileged opportunity for a recognition of the growth of the *responsibility* of each man and of every believer. Nobody can claim ignorance as an excuse any longer.

The multiple forms of active voluntary activity in the service of charity both within and outside the Church are a demonstration of this. In particular, the encyclical emphasizes a constitutive characteristic of voluntary charitable activity: its educative capacity. The commitment to charity can constitute a real school of life in which to learn that the ultimate law of existence is the gift of self, that is, gratuitousness. The Holy Father makes a forceful reference to this antidote to *the anti-culture of death*, which constantly seeks to ensnare the young in particular. Innumerable charitable initiatives implemented by our Christian communities form a veritable ocean of love. To realize their vocation even more faithfully, these works must develop their own educative content, consciously assimilated to the testimonial dimension of the Christian life.

At the same time, every journey of education to faith—sacramental catechesis, courses that develop a post-baptismal faith, schools of Christianity that seek to deepen the reasons to believe for adults, and so on—will not fail to propose to participants systematic concrete gestures of charitable action through which they learn the law of love. Education in a charitable outlook is an essential part of the way to a mature faith.

If the way of the Church is man (cf. *Redemptor hominis*, 14), Catholics are happy to work side by side with all those who are ready to collaborate with them in any area. By virtue of faithfulness to the gift received, which allows them to recognize the image of God in every man, Christians are ready for full collaboration with all, but in particular with those who have received the inestimable good of baptism, so as to follow resolutely the way of true humanism.

31. We have already stated that the service of charity, perceived and put into action by the Church as an essential part of her nature and her mission and as a privileged expression of her testimony, takes a concrete form. In this paragraph the pope sets out the constitutive elements of this kind of service.

First of all it takes the form of a precise and prompt reply to concrete need: “Do what has to be done!” Here we are faced with the weight of the immediate *present* in experience and in the Christian conception of life. The present time, the *hodie* that the liturgy has us celebrate daily, is the vehicle for the call of Providence to the freedom of the believer: therefore we cannot wait. There is no plan for the future that exempts us from the work of compassion that is asked of us today. But to understand this urgent need properly, professional competence, though necessary, is not enough. The charity worker has to be personally committed to the way of purification—which the pope calls for unceasingly and which is so necessary for the fullness of love. It is a way made possible by the love of the Father, who is forever taking the initiative and re-inspiring us to respond to love.

In this horizon is situated the critique, elaborated here, of the idolatrous ideology (the pope defines it as a *moloch*) of the “future.” The papal teaching offers us another precise criterion to measure the health of our Christian communities and their activity: How much are they rooted in the present? How much do they take into consideration what is happening here and now? How much do they try—insofar as they know how and are able, of course—to respond to the present needs of their fellow men? The determination to cling to ideological positions or indeed to party positions, ultimately always conceals a surrender to the temptation described in a masterly fashion by the poet Eliot: “They constantly try to escape / From the darkness outside and within / By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”⁵

The “project” of charity—and we must not be afraid to recognize that the service of charity as the work of the Christian community always has an element of precariousness, precisely because it is rooted in history—is the Church’s best calling card, the real opportunity for her to be credible in her testimony. But the dynamism of charity cannot be circumscribed within the bounds of fixed actions or activities. Rather, charity traverses every dimension of life as its internal law, or *ratio*, as the ancients would have said: works of charity express this profound truth and educate towards it.

32–33. If the Church is the proper subject of the service of charity, in which she expresses her intimate mission, we must ask

⁵T. S. Eliot, *Choruses from the Rock*, VI.

ourselves about the *who* of this service. First of all, because it is necessary to recognize that the Church must be *born again from souls* (today we would say from the person), as Romano Guardini anticipated. The Christian community lives and is embodied in individual believers: by the power of grace it possesses an autonomous nature that is prior to the baptized, but ultimately it exists always and only in personal subjects and communicates its salvific power through their testimony.

Nobody, therefore, is exempt from the service of charity, beginning with the bishops, who, inasmuch as they are pastors of their churches, are themselves called to live this essential service and to educate the Christian people in it.

Each person is challenged as a member of the one people that is the Church. The ecclesial subject is communal. This is why these paragraphs speak both of those who assume specific responsibilities and of the beneficent interweaving of the various responsibilities: the service of charity expresses ecclesial communion. In fact, as the pope says, *whoever loves Christ loves the Church, and desires the Church to be increasingly the image and instrument of the love which flows from Christ*. We could not continue to speak of the service of charity if this compromised ecclesial communion in some way.

The basic criterion for those who are committed to charity must be the one taught by St. Paul, *the urgency of love*: “*the love of Christ overwhelms us*” (2 Cor 5:14). This urgency is the expression of the inevitable striving to make manifest to all men and in all things the love we have received.

34. Naturally there has to be a reference here to what the Holy Father defines as the *Magna Carta* of all ecclesial service: the Pauline hymn to charity. In this connection two significant details are useful to point out.

In the first place, the pope refers to *all ecclesial service* and not just to the service of charity, as if to reinforce his preoccupation with the integrality of Christian experience and with the penetration of charity into all of the life of faith. Each action of the believer and of the community is called to express the charity of the Triune God, because each action is ultimately a response to that love.

In the second place, it is important to remember the verse that precedes the famous Pauline hymn: “And now I am going to put before you the best way of all” (1 Cor 12:31). As the encyclical tirelessly reiterates, love has the character of being a *way*, a *path*, and it appeals to the freedom of each believer to follow this way both

personally and together with the believing community. This way of the gift of self, this way of the offering of our own person, is one that we are to follow up to our dying breath.

35. If the discussion of humility, to which an entire paragraph is devoted, constitutes an exercise in profound realism, it also reveals the guarantee of the “durability” of love.

It is an exercise in realism because the pope reminds us that in the end I am as needy as the other whose need is before me, and that only the Lord can answer my need and the other’s need perfectly. Once again the service of charity is thus given first of all as the superabundance of a gift received. It passes by way of testimony. If we can share the lives of those who are in need, it is only because Someone has taken care of us and has called us to share in his charity. Here again the service of charity reveals all its educative force: at the moment when the inalienable dignity of the person I meet appeals to me, I also remember that I too am a beggar.

But humility is also the guarantee of the “durability” of love. Who can hold up in the face of his own limits and the immensity of human need all around us? How not to despair in the face of such disproportion? Only the certainty that there is One who takes on himself the in-depth care of all can protect us from letting our pain be transformed into cynicism in the face of suffering or from simply giving up.

36–38. The Holy Father develops a wide-ranging and structured reflection on prayer, which is born from within charity, pointing to its intrinsic pertinence to such service. Prayer in fact is neither a “preparation” for charity nor the expression of a motivation that does not affect action. It rather constitutes the source of charity and, for this reason, of the believer’s attitude in the face of need—his own and that of others.

Prayer acknowledges the One who can take care of men. It enables the believer to abandon himself to Providence and to let go of the infantile presumption that he can “save the world.” Salvation is in fact and will always remain a free gift: nothing can produce it or provoke it. Like love, it *happens*, it has the nature of an *event*. At the same time prayer introduces us into the intimacy of the heart of Christ and thus enables us to share in his “feelings.” It leaves no space therefore to the scepticism that says, “There is nothing to be done anyway.”

The pope calls all of us to avoid the temptation of a life divided or fragmented, a life in which it is not possible to trace the

unity of faith, hope, and charity. The risk of activism or secularism in charitable action is a very real one in the life of many communities, but we are not to be scandalized by this. Christians are children of their time, and the present time smacks of a culture that believes it can keep the tree of charity alive even while uprooting it from the fruitful terrain of divine love. A great work of education is needed to enable us to return to the way of unity of life, the only one that can make believers credible witnesses.

Such a credibility begins with a refusal on our part to respond to the drama of suffering on a shallow and superficial level. It simply is not admissible to ignore the dramatic nature of life and its dark and incomprehensible aspects. Not even their meeting with the Lord spares Christians the duty of living the drama of existence in the first person. Which of us can say that Job's complaints have never been on our lips? The Father does not spare us the dramatic test that leads to fulfillment, though he does of course give us the possibility of facing up to it. Then even our impotence in the face of suffering and evil, as the pope puts it, becomes a confession of faith, a dialogue of prayer.

39. This final paragraph of Part II is a hymn to the fullness of the Christian life, a fullness that is the fruit of the gift of the Spirit, which conforms us to the Lord Jesus. Let us not forget that faith, hope, and charity are "infused" virtues, that is, they are given by God to his sons and daughters. They are the reflection in history of the splendor of the glory of the Trinity. Men and women who believe, hope, and love: they are the protagonists of the way Benedict XVI invites us to follow with this, his first encyclical.

40. As we come to the end of our reading of the encyclical, a suspicion might occur to us: When put to us in this way, love is undoubtedly fascinating, but is it really feasible? Can I really live this way here and now? The pope's reply is limpid: charity is possible because it really has been given and because it can be traced as a fact that is present in the history of men. Hence the crucial importance of the testimony of the saints, which gives us such powerful and luminous evidence of the practicability of the way of love the encyclical has illumined. Saints of every era, of every geographical and social context, with diverse temperaments and charisms, men and women, young and old . . . The list the pope puts forward aims to make it absolutely clear that beautiful love is possible for all.

41–42. Mirroring herself in the life of Mary Most Holy, the Church can contemplate the mystery of risen humanity and discern the goal of the way of charity.

The themes tackled in the course of the encyclical are in a certain sense gathered up and delicately restated in these last paragraphs dedicated to the Mother of the Lord. She is the lady who has been able to follow that path which leads to the full maturing of love. In her Immaculate Heart the interweaving of *eros* and *agape* was lived as the way of maturing to the glory of the Assumption. Mary also completed the *pilgrimage of faith* (cf. *Redemptoris Mater*, 26) as the *path of charity*, in loving discipleship of the Son, firm and faithful to the end: *stabat Mater*. At the foot of the Cross, before the lifeless Body of the Son conceived and borne by her, Mary believed, hoped, and loved, suffering in her own flesh the potent warning of Augustine: *Si comprehendis non est Deus* (if you think you understand him then he is not God).

Precisely in this, her supreme act of charity, abandoned to the plan of the Father, Mary becomes fruitful: “‘Woman, this is your son.’ Then to the disciple he said, ‘this is your mother’” (Jn 19:26–27). Here we see revealed the summit of love, which is not fully perfect until it is fruitful. In Mary, through the gift of the Spirit, the love of Jesus Christ, dead and risen, generates a new kinship: the Church, the family of the children of God.

And so it is that as we come to the end of the encyclical, the pope invites us to look at Mary. The Virgin Mary, the Immaculate One, who, not refusing to be the Woman of Sorrows, became the *Maria Assumpta*, the Assumed One, is the perfect figure of the Church. She is our Mother, and as such she leads us into the adventure of life; she urges us on to love.—*Translated by Cyprian Blamires.* □

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