Deus Caritas est – more than papal lyricism

David Birch

*Ο Θεός αγάπης ἐστίν, καὶ οἱ μένων ἐν τῇ αγάπῃ ἐν τῷ Θεῷ μένει καὶ ὁ Θεός ἐν αὐτῷ μένει. Deus caritas est: et qui manet in caritate, in Deo manet, et Deus in eo.

God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (1 John 4:16b).

Many believe in or claim that they believe and hold fast to Catholic doctrine on such questions as social authority... on the relations between Church and State, religion and country... on the rights of the Holy See and the prerogatives of the Roman Pontiff and the Episcopate, on the social rights of Jesus Christ, Who is the Creator, Redeemer, and Lord not only of individuals but of nations. In spite of these protestations, they speak, write, and, what is more, act as if it were not necessary any longer to follow, or that they did not remain still in full force, the teachings and solemn pronouncements which may be found in so many documents of the Holy See... (Pope Pius XI, 1922).

It is a mistake to state that political, economic, and social liberation coincide with salvation in Jesus Christ; that the regnum Dei is identified with the regnum hominis (Pope John Paul I, 1978).

Introduction: context and heritage

I do not believe we need go much further than these words of Pope Pius XI from his encyclical, “On the Peace of Christ in His Kingdom”, Ubi Arcana Dei Consilio, and those of Pope John Paul I from his Catechetical Lesson on the Theological Virtue of Hope in seeking to understand not only the motivation and rationale for Pope Benedict XVI’s first encyclical Deus Caritas est, but also, importantly, its context and heritage within the Magisterium.

Papal imperative

A few months after the release of this encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI spoke at the ordinary public consistory which elevated 15 new Cardinals on 24 March 2006. There he spoke of the new responsibility now placed upon these new cardinals, called as they now are, he said, “in a new and exacting way”. He summed up this new call with the word caritas, which he placed at the heart of his first encyclical. He said,

I am counting on you, venerable brothers, I am counting on the entire College into which you are being incorporated, to proclaim to the world that Deus Caritas est, and to do so above all through the witness of sincere communion among Christians: by this, said Jesus, “all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

I do not believe that it is coincidental that the Pope addressed the consistory in this particular way. Nor indeed that the addressees of his first Encyclical are “the bishops, priests, deacons, men and women religious and all the lay faithful”, rather than simply “men and women of good will” as in so many of Pope Paul VI’s and Pope John Paul II’s encyclicals. The message of this encyclical is clear – the fundamental truth of Deus caritas est, and what this means for Catholics, is unchanging, non negotiable, absolutely not discretionary.

contingent upon or relative to, changing times and mores. The teaching of the Catholic Church is clear – when we think of caritas we think, not of social imperatives or politico-economic demands, which change with time and circumstances, we think of caritas Christi. And this requires us, as Catholics, to put Christ, not social contingencies and personal and/or organisational preferences and practices, at the centre of our religion in both doctrine and practices.

Reinforcing that imperative

Pope Benedict XVI made this very clear at the consistory, not as some romantic idea, but as an absolutely fundamental principle of Christianity, saying to his new Cardinals,

I am counting on you, dear brother Cardinals, to ensure that the principle of love (caritas) will spread far and wide, and will give new life to the Church at every level of her hierarchy, in every group of the faithful, in every religious institute, in every spiritual, apostolic or humanitarian initiative. I am counting on you... to see to it that our common endeavour to fix our gaze on Christ’s open heart will hasten and secure our path toward the full union of Christians.

Pope Benedict is not inviting the Cardinals to do something if they would like to, he uses the phrase throughout this homily, “see to it”. He is not asking them to think about it, play around with it to suit their different social, cultural, political and economic circumstances – far less their own individual consciences – he is telling them to do it. He repeatedly says to the new Cardinals, “I am counting on you”, and what he is counting on in this Encyclical is for cardinals, bishops, clergy, religious and lay faithful, without debate; without compromise; without political and social cultural renegotiations, to be “a witness before the world to the love of the Father, who wishes to make humanity a single family in his Son”.

Deep principle and practice – not lyrics

Love, caritas, cannot be conceived in any other way for Catholics except in Christ. This is not simply a lyrical understanding of love, as

Pope Benedict XVI in his study signing Deus Caritas est
Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, 2005
(L’Osservatore Romano)
many commentators have suggested this encyclical to be. It is this, of course, but more than that it is a serious challenge. What is expected of these new Cardinals, and all of us - as the Catholic Church - addressed within this Encyclical, is to challenge the world, “with a powerful statement on the civilisation of love”. This ‘civilisation of love’ is not simply the paying of lip-service to a few well chosen words which can be glossed over easily - it is a phrase which demands attention. It is radical. It is, in effect, a call for a return within the Church for all of us, both individually and organisationally, to understand love as the Catholic Church defines it - not as we, driven by divergent politics, social movements and economic imperatives, want to define it in order to make it more comfortable; less demanding; negotiated to suit different circumstances and cultures.

“Caritas Christi” as the foundation and practice of our mission

Everything we do as Catholics has to be “grounded in this love”, and we are all of us responsible to put this love of God in the most absolutely central position in our faith and practices as, “a living relationship with Christ”. Pope Pius XI recognised most clearly what happens when Christ is not at the centre of everything we do, when in establishing the Feast of Christ the King in December 1925, he wrote in Quas Primas, that when Jesus Christ and His holy law are thrust out of people’s lives, and when individuals and states refuse to submit to the rule of our Saviour, “there would be no really hopeful prospect of peace among nations”. Pope Pius XI was referring here to his words, after the horrors of the first world war, in his 1922 encyclical, Ubi Arcano Dei Consilio, seeing around him the denial and the diminution of Christ, both within the Church and outside it, with “the result that human society is stammering to its fall, because it has no longer a secure and solid foundation”.

Think for a moment about what those means. Do we, in whatever role we are performing, in whatever decisions we make, and whatever statements or actions we make in public or private life, measure ourselves and what we say and do through the centrality of Christ - not simply as we choose to define Him and understand Him, but as the Catholic Church understands Him and defines Him through its Magisterium.

Reinstating the demarcation of Church and civil society

Consider, for example, the recent discovery that Boston Catholic Charities have placed several children for adoption with same-sex couples. Here we have a Catholic charity that has clearly compromised its Catholicity in order to be able to fulfil a contract in a context where secular authorities have cleared the way for same-sex couples to adopt. Fear of losing this contract is the proportional reason the organisation has given for totally flouting Catholic teaching on what constitutes a clear moral absolute. The message of this encyclical is clear - this, and the thousands of practices like it in the name of Catholic charity has to stop - and will stop if Caritas Christi is put back, once more, at the centre of all Catholic charitable (and other) organisations. And to be able to do that, this encyclical makes it very clear that there has to be a more definable distinction and demarcation line that divides the separate and independent responsibilities of the Church and the State.

Leadership of religious orders in the Church’s works of charity

It is here, I think, that a return to a greater recognition of the importance of religious orders and their role in effective Catholic charity will be an important consequence of the thinking within this encyclical. We have seen for many years the rise in prominence of many lay organisations (a good number of them perhaps now requiring some close attention to their role and mission in the light of this encyclical and other teachings of Pope Benedict XVI) and with that rise, there has been a dramatic refocusing away from the importance and centrality of religious orders in the life of the Church. This encyclical, I believe, will be a good start for the beginings of a very necessary renewal of the Religious Life within the Church, especially if Orders can show strong leadership in the implementation of the Pope’s teaching here on charity.

This understanding of charity, as the Pope recently reiterated in his address to the members of the Council for Social Communications, requires a commitment which demands principled courage and resolve … to ensure that promotion of the common good is never sacrificed to a self-serving quest for profit or an ideological agenda with little public accountability.”

Restoring all things in Christ in the life of the Church

Pope Benedict XVI makes it very clear, then, that, “it is very important that the Church’s charitable activity maintains all of its splendour and does not become just another form of social assistance.” What constitutes that splendour is not the amount of money given away, or the number of children put out for adoption, or the number of hostels or homes that are opened for the aged - that splendour, first and foremost, is Deus caritas est. And that, to use Pope Pius X’s motto, is the radical challenge in this encyclical - Instaurare Omnia in Christo - to restore all things in Christ.

Sharpening the distinction between love and justice

St Thomas Aquinas - like Pope Pius X or Pope Pius XI - is not cited in this encyclical, but all are quietly influential I think, on Pope Benedict XVI’s thinking, and certainly on his understanding of the continuing legacy of the Magisterium. St Thomas makes the telling, and influential, point, for example, that true peace is much more to do with love than justice. It is this distinction between love (charity) and justice that lies at the heart of Deus caritas est, and as such is an important contribution to the development of Catholic social doctrine following the many encyclicals after Rerum Novarum. Pope Benedict addresses the reasons why, contrary to much of contemporary socio-political thinking, it is still necessary to maintain a clear distinction between charity and justice, arguing for a careful demarcation between the two. This is crucially important in a world where many Catholic organisations have positioned their function to be more about social justice (a political activity) rather than charity (a spiritual activity).
Love as dedication of self

As this encyclical makes clear, “Those who work for the Church’s charitable organisations must be distinguished by the fact that they do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but they dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity.”

To be Catholic, then, we have only one possible interpretation of what constitutes that richness of humanity, and this is that the richness of humanity is only possible in and through Christ; in and through knowing, and acting upon Deus Caritas est. And, despite what many contemporary Catholics (and others) might want to think post Vatican II, “the dictates of conscience grounded in the teachings, precepts, and examples of Jesus Christ... are [still] binding on each and every individual”, not dictates of conscience grounded in some other teaching or philosophy, more comfortable and easier than those of Christ. As such, whatever we do with respect to our work, to our charitable enterprises, and everything else, we “must not be inspired by ideologies aimed at improving the world, but [we] should rather be guided through the faith which works through love.”

This is not simply papal lyricism – it is hard-hitting, and demanding, theology.

Theology and practice

But more than this, “We must be persons moved by Christ’s love, persons whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening within them a love of neighbour.” Dei Verbum, issued 40 years ago from Vatican II, made it perfectly clear, and nothing has changed in the Church’s thinking or doctrine one iota since then, that the Church “is a community that listens to and proclaims the Word of God”, which, as Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in celebrating the 40th anniversary of this document, “is a point that every Christian must understand and apply to himself (herself): only those who first listen to the Word can become preachers of it.”

This is a totally uncompromising position, which for some, (and they are addressed in this encyclical) wishing to speak in the name of Catholicism but with a different version of this Word, is therefore incredibly challenging orthodoxy. But for others – as with the case of all orthodoxy – this is highly liberating. As Chesterton once said when speaking about orthodoxy, it is actually very easy to be a heretic, but dramatically more difficult to be orthodox. A man “only becomes a heretic”, he said, “at the precise moment when he prefers his criticism to his Catholicism”. And so it is with many in the Catholic Church today.

Undiluted love and faith

Do we as a Catholic cabinet minister, for example, in a major national debate about an abortion inducing drug step back from Catholic teaching and say simply “I take advice from many different sources”, or do we as that Catholic cabinet minister say, uncompromisingly, and without embarrassment or blushing, “I cannot support this position because it is against Catholic teaching, irrespective of the consequences to me personally or my position as cabinet minister.” At what point does Belloc’s very clear statement to Ronald Knox in 1923 that être Catholique, c’est tout, start to be watered down? This encyclical is exactly about not watering this down.

Speaking univocally, acting without compromise

Not watering things down requires courage – but this is what being a Catholic is about – this is the courage to which Pope Benedict XVI is calling us all – from his new Cardinals to the humblest of the lay faithful. It is for this reason that such a strong argument is made here for re-establishing a clear separation of responsibilities between Church and State. This separation demands that as Catholics we speak out with a Catholic voice. But, more importantly, we don’t compromise that Catholic voice, or make it more comfortable to us or our organisations, or use arguments about “primacy of conscience” as some sort of new Catholic doctrine, which it isn’t nor ever has been. It is not the role of the Church – as this encyclical makes very clear – to build “a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due”. This is an essential task, “which every generation must take up anew”, but as this encyclical makes clear, “it is a political task and cannot be the Church’s immediate responsibility.”

Church’s mandate, Church’s “business”

This encyclical makes it very clear, then, that the Church’s business is not social justice, even though there is a very important place for Catholic social doctrine as the means, “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”. The Church’s business is love, where that love is very specifically defined not in secular, or social terms, but in clear, Catholic, Magisterial, terms – and that can be hard and extremely challenging and often will come at a huge personal cost to those of us seeking to abide by what appears to be very tough teachings when measured against secular values and freedoms, but, conversely, will come at a huge personal gain to us, and society overall, when measured against Christian values.

Essentially a tough and an essential message

There is a very tough message, then, in this encyclical way beyond its lyricism. What I believe Pope Benedict XVI is doing here is exactly what Popes should be doing, and can be summed up by what Pope Pius XI said in 1922, by clearly teaching that,

The Church alone can introduce into society and maintain therein the prestige of a true, sound spiritualism, the spiritualism of Christianity which both from the point of view of truth and of its practical value is quite superior to any exclusively philosophical theory. The Church [he said]
is the teacher and an example of world good-will, for she is able to inculcate and develop in mankind the “true spirit of brotherly love” and by raising the public estimation of the value and dignity of the individual’s soul help thereby to lift us even unto God. It is, therefore, “a heart that sees”.

This is what Pope Benedict XVI’s first encyclical is about – the Kingdom of Christ – it is fundamentally, and uncompromisingly, about the primacy of regnum Dei not regnum hominis. In the words of an earlier Pope Benedict (XV), following St Paul, we all of us should strive, “Not to please men, but Christ”. And so, as Pope Benedict XVI said to his new cardinals,

For this reason my Brothers … let us commit ourselves to ensure that everything in our personal lives, and in the ecclesiastical activity in which we are engaged, is inspired by charity and leads to charity.

And what is charity? Deus caritas est.

Notes:

1 Pope Benedict XVI, Vatican City March 24, 2006, homily at Consistory, translation from Italian by Holy See, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, posted by ZENIT ZE06032495.

2 Speaking on January 23 2006 at a meeting organised by the Pontifical Council Cor Unum (a Council heavily influential in earlier drafts of, especially the Second Part, of this encyclical most notably by Archbishop Paul Cordes), Pope Benedict XVI in explaining his choice of topic for this encyclical made it clear that “Faith is not a theory one can take up or lay aside. It is something very concrete: it is the criterion that decides our lifestyles.” <http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/attaglio.jsp?id=451555eng-y>

3 # 19, Para 2 Deus Caritas est, 25 December 2005.

4 # 20 Deus Caritas est.

5 # 36 Deus Caritas est.

6 # 1 Quas Primas, 11 December 1925.

7 # 18 Quas Primas.

8 Pope Benedict XVI’s address to members of the Council for Social Communications, 17 March 2006, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, adapted by ZENIT, ZE06031704.

9 # 31 Deus Caritas est.

10 Summa Theologica, Il-II, Q.29 Art.3, Ad.III.

11 # 45 Ubi Arcano Del Consilio, 1922.

12 # 33 Deus Caritas est.


14 # 28 A Deus Caritas est.

15 # 28 A Deus Caritas est.

16 # 28 A Deus Caritas est.

17 # 28 A Deus Caritas est.

18 St Augustine, de Moribus Ecclesiae Catholicae, i, 30.

19 # 42 Ubi Arcano Del Consilio, 1922.

20 # 31b Deus Caritas est.


22 Consistory homily, March 26, 2006.