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## **The Theology of *Deus Caritas Est***

**By Michael Sweeney, O.P.**

On Christmas Day, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI issued his encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*. I am sure that we all remember the anticipation that preceded the encyclical: the speculation, especially in the media concerning which of the significant “issues” confronting the Church that the new Pontiff might address, and then the astonishment when he chose to speak to the Church and world about —love. Some of the pundits even had the grace to admit to a sense of discomfiture, as if to say, “Ah yes, that....”

What, after all, are we to make of an encyclical letter on love? And how are we to speak of it theologically?

You have assigned to me the task of commenting upon the theology of the encyclical. In undertaking this task, I am immediately confronted with a problem: an encyclical letter is not a work of theology. In other words, one might say in strict truth that there is no theology of *Deus Caritas Est*. The encyclical is not merely a product of theological reflection; rather, it is a source for theological reflection.

This being the case, then in what sense might we speak of a “theology” of *Deus Caritas Est*? I want to propose a sort of reversal, one that I think would be very close to the heart of Joseph Ratzinger: in our attempt to bring a theological resource to the encyclical we will discover that it is the theological enterprise itself that is cast into relief. We might say that the “theology” of *Deus Caritas Est* consists in what happens to theology when we apply it to the encyclical.

I propose, therefore, to address two questions: what is the work of theology in the light of the encyclical, and what theological questions become urgent as we attempt to receive the encyclical?

Before we proceed further, I hope you will excuse a brief digression: In the press I have noted the practice of referring to Pope Benedict XVI as “Pope Ratzinger.” To do this is to misunderstand the papal office in a manner that has a direct bearing on our topic.

It is true that Joseph Ratzinger was elected to the see of Peter. But as Bishop of the Catholic Church he is properly addressed as Benedict XVI. My concern is not merely one of etiquette: as Pope, his office is to teach and to confirm his brothers and sisters in the faith; in the exercise of his magisterium, the Pope speaks to and for the whole Church. The encyclical letter that he has written is not merely an elucidation of elements of the tradition so that we might understand that tradition better (the work, that is, of a theologian); rather, it takes the tradition further and, as such, it addresses, not only our understanding, but also our faith. The faithful are to receive the letter by means of “a religious submission of intellect and will.” When he invokes his magisterium, Benedict XVI is no longer Joseph Ratzinger, Cardinal and theologian. While it is fitting to speak of the “theology” of Joseph Ratzinger, it is not appropriate to speak of the “theology” of Benedict XVI. In these remarks, I will count upon the assistance of Joseph Ratzinger to receive the encyclical letter of Benedict XVI.

### **What is the work of theology, and how is that work illumined by the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*?**

Cardinal Ratzinger, on the occasion of being honored by the University of Navarre, offered his reflections on the work of theology. Theology, he suggested, proceeds in an entirely different way than any other discipline. In the sciences, for example, we form ideas based upon our experience, and those ideas are expressed by means of words. The theologian, on the other hand, begins with the revealed Word, a Word that he or she does not fully comprehend:

[Theology] can only be based on starting from an answer that we ourselves have not devised; yet in order for this to become a real answer for us, we have to understand it, not to resolve it. That is what is peculiar to theology, that it turns to something we ourselves have not devised and that is able to be the foundation of our life, in fact it goes before us and supports us; that is to say, it is greater than our own thought.<sup>1</sup>

In other disciplines, we begin with questions and proceed to an answer; in theology, we begin with an answer that is greater than our own thought, and then proceed to ask questions. Whereas in other disciplines we rely upon the authority of our senses and of reason, for theology, reflecting upon an answer that reason has not –indeed, could not–devise, reason is insufficient authority:

“Credo ut intelligam”: I accept what is given in advance, in order to find, starting from this and in this, the path to the right way of living, to the right way of understanding myself. Yet that means that theology, of its nature, presupposes *auctoritas*. It exists only through awareness that the circle of our own thinking has been broken, that our thinking has, so to say, been given a hand and helped upward, beyond what it could achieve for itself. Without what was given in advance, which is always greater than we can devise ourselves and never becomes part of what is just our own, there is no theology.<sup>2</sup>

These are not new ideas. St. Thomas Aquinas held that theology is the attempt to understand, through human reason, a Word that is, in its source, beyond our understanding. Theology is a subaltern science that does not "see" and cannot defend its own ultimate foundations. But if the Word that theology seeks to understand proceeds, in principle, from a source beyond our understanding, then how can we understand it?

Relying upon Aquinas, Joseph Ratzinger insists that theology is based upon a real seeing, but a seeing that is not, at first, our own. Theology, rather, is dependent upon what Jesus sees, and what the Saints see:

“Jesus, he who knows God directly, *sees* him. This is why he is the true mediator between God and mankind. His human act of seeing the divine reality is a source of light for all.... Theology depends upon the "science of the Saints", on what they see: the act of seeing is a reference point to theological thinking and the guarantee of its legitimacy. It follows that the work of the theologian is "secondary" with regard to the real experience of the Saints.”<sup>3</sup>

It is in this sense that theology must be a work of faith. In faith we trust what others see in such a way that their seeing becomes our own:

By means of my act of trust, I become a sharer in the knowledge of another. Thus is in its most intimate nature, faith is therefore a way of "being with" someone.... Faith is necessarily an ecclesial act. It lives and moves in the "we" of the Church... The wall separating myself and the others collapses... I become a contemporary of Jesus, and all the experiences of the Church belong to me. They have become my own experiences.<sup>4</sup>

The work of theology, then, is to attempt to understand what Jesus and, to a lesser degree, the Saints see, and what can become, in faith, my own experience. Theology proceeds first by positing what faith sees and experiences, and then by referring ordinary human experience to this revelation to be corrected. The challenge of theology consists, through faith, in giving greater authority to the revelation than to our ordinary human experiences; it acknowledges a seeing that is higher than our own. This means that there is a sort of test that we can apply to the encyclical: taking very seriously our ordinary experience in the world, the points at which our experience can no longer sustain what the Holy Father teaches are precisely the points that require theological elucidation. What, then, is the theological work that the encyclical invites?

The encyclical begins in an appeal to ordinary experience: there are many ways in which we speak of love, but one that stands out more than all the others: the love of man and woman. In the first instance, this love (eros) is experienced as a kind of "intoxication", "overpowering reason." It "tears man away from finite existence" and seems to promise "supreme happiness" (*Deus Caritas Est* 4). It is a love that is "insecure, indeterminate, searching" (6). This is the love that, in Hellenic civilization, was divinized: Eros was considered to be a divine power celebrated in the fertility cults. But it was a counterfeit divinization, for "intoxicated, undisciplined eros is a degradation of what is human," and the temple prostitutes of the fertility cults were, not goddesses, but merely women, victimized by men (4). In the place of the supreme happiness that it promises, eros, if it is not disciplined or purified (4), reduces the human person to a commodity (5).

Nothing has been said thus far that human experience cannot support. But the Holy Father next speaks of love as it is revealed in the Old Testament. Over against "dodim", the love that is "insecure, indeterminate, searching" there is "ahabà", the love that is translated into Greek as agape. This love involves a real discovery of the other, seeks the good of the other, and is prepared for renunciation and sacrifice (6). It is a love that is not indeterminate or searching but definitive: it is exclusive, designating "this one" and indissoluble, lasting forever. This is the love that is grounded in and shaped by faith (7). It is the love by which God loves, and is, in fact, the measure of human love (11).

Notice that, at this juncture, the Holy Father is no longer appealing merely to human experience: human experience merely promises such a love as he now describes. This, then, is the first theological challenge of the encyclical: where, and under what circumstances, does agape enter into human experience? Is it truly the case that human love seeks renunciation and sacrifice finding its fulfillment in self-offering?

As the measure of human love, agape is not the antithesis of eros as it has sometimes been presented (descending versus ascending love; oblation versus possessive love); rather, eros that is mature becomes concerned for the other, making way for agape. Otherwise, eros loses its own nature (7). For its part, agape must also be incarnate and received (8). God is Creator, source of all that is, and all that is, is dear to him. God loves with a personal love, an "elective love," a "forgiving love," in such a way that "God's love may certainly be called eros, yet it is also totally agape" (9).

Clearly, to speak so securely of the love of God is to depart from investing exclusive authority in everyday human experience. Even most believers find it difficult to rest in the assertion that they are loved, designated, chosen by God. Once again, the work of theology is suggested: in what manner is the personal, elective, forgiving love of God accessible to human experience, and what are the elements of our human experience that make it so difficult to invest confidence in the idea that there is such a love? We must keep before us the fact that the Holy Father is not proposing an ideal, but is speaking descriptively: he is not elucidating what love ought to be, but what love is.

Pope Benedict goes on to consider love as it is revealed in the New Testament. Immediately he makes an assertion that is very interesting theologically, if not downright astounding: the uniqueness of the New Testament, he says, "... is not so much in ideas as in the figure of Christ himself—an unprecedented realism" (12). Let us notice what he has said: we are not committed to find new ideas about love in the New Testament; rather, love as reality is revealed in the person of Christ.

Here we have, perhaps, the central theological challenge of the Encyclical: How, we might wonder, are we to speak of the "unprecedented realism" in the figure of Christ himself, apart from ideas that are new, or unique? The Holy Father directs us to what he calls a "sacramental mysticism" that is the only adequate communication of love: "in sacramental communion I become one with the Lord, like all the other communicants." Union with Christ, which is celebrated and effected in the Eucharist, "... is also union with all those to whom he gives himself; I cannot possess Christ just for myself: I can

belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or will become, his own" (14). Accordingly, the love that is revealed in the person of Christ can only be expressed in the love of neighbor:

... In God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend.... Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave (18).

Here we have arrived to the center of the encyclical letter. I would, in fact, suggest that the Holy Father has structured the encyclical as a chiasm: the letter begins with a consideration of eros as the natural experience of human love (sections 1 through 5). Paralleling the beginning of the letter, the letter ends with the experience of the saints who are the living witnesses of the divine love manifested in the world (sections 40 through 42). Moving toward the center of the chiasm: having considered the natural love that is eros, the Holy Father speaks of the revelation of agape, God's love, especially through the people of the Old Testament (sections 6 through 11); moving out from the center of the chiasm, beginning the second half of the letter, the Holy Father speaks of the revelation of the love of God through the people of the New Testament, the Church (sections 20 through 39). At the center of the chiasm is found the mystical union with Christ in the Eucharist, which is simultaneously a sacramental union with all to whom he gives himself, a union that is effected in us through the power of the Holy Spirit (sections 12 through 19).

This being the case, then we can begin to see that *Deus Caritas Est* is really an encyclical about the Church: the theological work that the encyclical invites is to contemplate the union with Christ that is sacramentally effected, especially in the Eucharist, and which, in turn, becomes the instrument of the communication of God's love to the world. The chiasmic shape of the encyclical suggests a series of juxtapositions: human love experienced as a seeking answered in the caritas of the saints; the Old Testament revelation of agape as the love that eros seeks, realized in agape as the Caritas of the People of God which elects and designates -- and therefore effects -- the unity of the whole human family that God intends.

Here, also, we arrive at the assertion that is most to be remarked in the encyclical: the assertion that the love of God *is* the love of neighbor, and that the love of God and neighbor are not two Commandments, but one:

Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me. The Saints – consider the example of blessed Teresa of Calcutta – constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbor from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others. Love of God and love of neighbor are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love of God who

has loved us first. No longer is it a question, then, of a "commandment" imposed from without and calling for the impossible, but rather of a freely-bestowed experience of love from within, a love which by its very nature must then be shared with others. Love grows through love. Love is "divine" because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a "we" which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is "all in all" (18).

## **What theological questions urge themselves upon us as we attempt to receive the encyclical?**

Theology is ordered to understanding something to which we have already, in faith, given our assent. The act of faith is an act by which we submit our intellect and will to what God reveals to us—in this case, through the papal magisterium. *Credo ut intelligam*: I believe in order that I may understand the communication of God and, as the theologian Joseph Ratzinger has reminded us, our assent necessarily precedes our understanding. The theologian must place his or her intelligence at the disposal of the revelation in order, I have suggested, not only to receive what God has spoken, but also to illumine human experience, and to correct it. What, therefore, might stand as impediments to receiving the encyclical?—impediments that theology should address.

The first impediment that we might offer is one suggested by Joseph Ratzinger. It is that the Enlightenment culture of the West "is substantially defined by the rights to liberty. Its starting point is that liberty is a fundamental value and the criterion of everything else."<sup>5</sup> Hence, our contemporary concern with the individual: contemporary men and women seem to be incapable of thinking beyond the individual and his or her rights and prerogatives. There is little sense of being a people, a communion, because individual right and liberty is everywhere preferred to what we hold in common. We seem to be incapable of thinking beyond a collectivity. The very idea of union with another in love would seem to be inaccessible to many of our contemporaries. That we are called to be "... a "we" which transcends our divisions and makes us one" appears to be difficult even for some believers to receive.

A second impediment is one that Benedict XVI has himself reflected upon in the light of the encyclical. He has said that he wanted particularly to insist upon the fact that God acts in time, in history. Against this assertion, once again, stands the tendency of the Enlightenment, this time towards Deism. As then Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, "there is something of the deist hidden deep down in all of us: we no longer envision God as a subject who is really active in history—perhaps in the subjective, but even then in nothing but the subjective."<sup>6</sup> The result of this is a moralism that renders God a monster:

When this happens, when we finally stop assuming that God really enter into history and—all the laws of nature and everything we know and everything we can do notwithstanding— stop assuming that God is still the subject of history, acting in history; when we transform God into an indeterminate horizon, which somehow solemnly makes up the whole: then we are the only ones left to act. That is when moralism—the

placement of moral demands on men and women— takes on the form that cannot but overwhelm us, which we ascribe to God and against which we rebel.<sup>7</sup>

A third difficulty consists in our tendency to politicize every aspect of our lives. Even in the community of the Church people speak of themselves and of each other as "liberal" or "conservative", terms that have no meaning whatsoever apart from their political application (and that are possibly of little utility even in politics). Clearly, love cannot be rendered in political categories in any of its manifestations, whether of eros or of agape. One does not love as a liberal or as a conservative. It has become necessary to insist that there is a dimension of human life and of human activity that eludes political characterization.

*Deus Caritas Est* concerns the mission of Christ -- and therefore of the Church -- to the world. Certainly a very significant impediment to receiving the encyclical is the tendency within the Church to turn away from engagement with the world and to limit attention, instead, upon the Church. This turning inward often, ironically, is justified by an appeal to what the world needs. By way of example, and to complete these reflections, I would like to contrast the theological approach of Johann Baptist Metz and Joseph Ratzinger:

On October 27, 1998, in celebration of Metz' 70th birthday, the faculty of the University of Münster sponsored a theological symposium to which they invited Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. To invite the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a theological symposium would seem to be a perfectly reasonable thing to do, save for the fact that, nineteen years earlier, as Archbishop of Munich, Ratzinger had successfully opposed the appointment of Metz to the chair of theology at Munich. One can imagine that the atmosphere of the symposium was a trifle uncomfortable, at least at first. The theme for the symposium was entitled, *The End of Time? The Provocation of Talking About God*. Both Metz and Ratzinger, along with the other presenters, addressed some of the difficulties in confronting contemporary society with the gospel.

Johann Metz has articulated what he calls "political theology." By this term he does not at all mean "political" in the manner that we might use the term here in the US. He means, rather, to focus attention upon the actual condition of men and women in the world, and particularly in the light of the human phenomenon of suffering:

Christian talk about God and God's Christ is not based on a metaphysics of salvation that is blind to situations and devoid of memories; it is itself shaped by a historical remembrance and can only be responsible for its talk about God in critical correspondence with the situation that presses itself on theology at a given time. This is the only way that it can know and communicate what it is talking about when it says, "God." Neither can talk about God simply be something that is ecclesologically enciphered. Either the God of the Church's message is a theme for humanity or it is no theme at all. The God proclaimed by the Church is neither the Church's private property nor faith's... Thus, the sphere of the Church is really too narrow and too small to accommodate the full breadth and depth of the God that it proclaims.<sup>8</sup>

There was certainly nothing heterodox in any of Metz' assertions. Metz spoke with wonderful insight about the situation of man and woman in contemporary, "postmodern" society. However, in the end, the final focus of his concern is what he calls "the sphere of the Church." His concern is that the Church must somehow change in order to be relevant to the modern world; the measure of the Church will be the manner in which the Church addresses the suffering of mankind.

In contrast, Joseph Ratzinger's focus has been, first and last, the world, rather than the Church. This is precisely because he asserts an identification of the Church with the person and work of Christ, and Christ came for the sake, not of the Church, but of the world. Ratzinger is equally concerned with the problem of human suffering, but his conclusion is rather different:

You have spoken of being aware of others' suffering. With good reason.... I am always moved by this wonderful saying of Origen's: God cannot suffer, but God can suffer-with. Yet is it not also a part of the memory of suffering that we recognize the God that suffers-with: a God whom we cannot systematize but who nonetheless is moving us in the depths of our hearts? If it is only unresolved suffering that we perceive, then the only thing left is the cry of anger and despair in one's own existence. The only reason we can expose ourselves to being aware of suffering at all is that, in all suffering, one who suffers-with is present.... we can keep our eyes open only because it is possible to be aware of God within suffering.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of *Deus Caritas Est* is, in the end, pastoral: it concerns the communication of God's love to the world which, conscious or not, cries out for it. I have no doubt that the reason Joseph Ratzinger opposed the appointment of Johann Metz to the chair at Munich was, in fact, a pastoral one. The understanding that theology seeks is for the sake of the salvation of the human person that is opened up by the passion, death and resurrection of Christ and the love that, thereby, is showered upon the world. Certainly, there is in the encyclical the urgency that the Church become more conscious of her mission in order more decisively to take up the work of Christ. In this sense, the encyclical is addressed to the Church, and the Holy Father is doubtless eager to see the church transformed. But that transformation will only occur with our eyes fixed firmly upon the Lord and upon the world that he loves.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Address to the Theology Faculty of the University of Navarre*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Culture*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2006, p. 107.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31

<sup>6</sup> Ratzinger, Metz, et. al., *The End of Time? The Provocation of Talking About God*, tr. By J. Matthew Ashley, Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 2004, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50,51.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.