

In The School of Mary

(Papal documents condensed by Deacon William Wagner)

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Pope Benedict XVI

Deus Caritas Est, God is Love, December 25, 2005.

INTRODUCTION

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, encapsulates in a single phrase what he calls the heart of the Christian faith: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16). Being a Christian is essentially an encounter with an event, a person who gives life a new direction. John in his Gospel described the event in this way: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should ... have eternal life" (Jn 3:16). Jesus took the expression of total love of God found in Deuteronomy and the love of neighbor found in Leviticus and forged them into a single commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Since God loved us first (1Jn:10), love is no longer a mere "command." It is the response to the gift of love by which God draws near to us.

In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance and other forms of violence, this message is timely. In the first part of this encyclical, Benedict XVI says that he will treat of love in a more speculative way to clarify this idea of love; the relationship of God's gratuitous love and human love. The second part will be more concrete. In it he wishes to deal with the ecclesial exercise of the commandment of love of neighbor to principally call forth in the world a renewed energy and commitment in the human response to God's love.

PART I: THE UNITY OF LOVE IN CREATION AND IN SALVATION HISTORY: *A Problem of Language*

The Pope tells us that God's love for us immediately raises important questions about *who God is* and *who we are*. At the very onset of this discussion he recognizes the abuse that the term, love, has suffered. Amidst all the misuse, one form of love stands out: the love between a man and woman. All other loves seem to fade in its presence. So the Holy Father asks whether, in effect, all these loves are a single reality or are we using the one word to designate different realities.

Eros and Agape – Difference and Unity

Benedict recalls how the ancient Greeks thought that *eros* seemed neither to be planned nor willed but seemed to *impose itself on human beings*. However, the Greek Old Testament used the term *eros* only twice while the New Testament never used it at all. Of the three words used for love, *eros*, *philia* (*love of friendship*), and *agape*, the New Testament writers preferred the last. It is noteworthy because in Greek usage, *agape*, was used infrequently. John in his Gospel gave added depth to the word, *philia*, in describing the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. The avoidance of the term, *eros*, and the preference for *agape* expressed something distinctive about the Christian understanding of love.

The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, claimed Christianity had poisoned *eros*, which because of all its commandments cause the term to degenerate into a vice.

Part I: The Unity of Love in Creation and in Salvation History:

Eros and Agape - Difference and Unity

The Holy Father questions whether love as proclaimed by the Bible and the Church's tradition has some points of contact with the common human experience of love? Although eros as "worldly love" and agape as love shaped by faith are contrasted, yet eros and agape can never be completely separated. He says that the two in their different aspects find a proper unity the more the true nature of love in general is realized.

Although eros is mainly covetous and ascending to begin with, agape does enter into this love as self-giving and descending. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift. In the account of Jacob's ladder in the Old Testament, the Fathers of the Church saw this inseparable connection between ascending and descending love, between eros that seeks God and agape that passes on the gift received. Pope St. Gregory spoke in this manner of St. Paul who ascended to the heavens to receive of the exalted mysteries of God and then descended to share with others, becoming all things to all men.

Pope Benedict eventually says that fundamentally love is a single reality, but with different dimensions. Biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe but rather accepts the whole man. It intervenes in his search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions. There are chiefly two elements: the image of God and the image of man.

The Newness of Biblical Faith

The Bible presents us with a new image of God in contrast to its surrounding cultures. The Shema of Israel is unequivocal and clear: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. (Dt 6:4) Two facts stand out in this statement: all other gods are not God, and the universe in which we live has its source in God. Benedict says that it becomes absolutely clear that God is not one among many but he himself is the source of all that exists. All comes into existence by the power of his creative word and all creation is dear to him.

Another important element emerges. This God loves man. The Aristotelian God was an object of love but did not himself love. In contrast, the one God in whom Israel believes loves with a personal love. In addition, the Pontiff notes that God's love is elective. Among all the nations, he chooses Israel with a view to healing the whole human race. He further says that God loves with a love that may certainly be called eros, yet it is also totally agape.

The Prophets, especially Hosea and Ezekiel, described God's passion for his people using boldly erotic images. God's relationship with Israel is described using metaphors of betrothal and marriage. Idolatry is thus adultery and prostitution. Here we find specific references describing a relationship of fidelity between Israel and her God. Because he loves her, God gives Israel the Torah thereby opening her eyes to man's true nature and showing her the path to true humanism. Therefore, man, through a life of fidelity to the one God, comes to experience himself as loved by God. As a result he experiences a joy in God that becomes his essential happiness.

We ended the previous installment with the question the Holy Father now addresses: *Did Christianity really destroy eros?* The pre-Christian Greek world saw eros as a sort of intoxication, a divine madness that overpowered reason. Overwhelmed by this divine power man experiences supreme happiness. The poet, Virgil, will say, "*et nos cedamos amori*" (let us yield to love). In the religions of the time this attitude found expression in fertility cults and "sacred" prostitution. Eros was celebrated as a divine power, as a participation in the divine.

The Old Testament firmly opposed this form of religion. It did not reject eros but it declared war on a warped and destructive form of it. The prostitutes in the temple, far from being goddesses, were human persons being exploited. The Pope concludes that an intoxicated and undisciplined eros is not an ascent in "ecstasy" towards the divine but a fall, a degradation of man. Eros needs to be disciplined and purified in order to provide a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that yearned for beatitude.

Benedict notes how this brief overview of eros evidences a certain relationship between love and the Divine. Purification and maturity on the path of renunciation heals and restores this form of love to its true grandeur. The reason for this is that man is a being made of body and soul. Further, he is only truly

himself when his body and soul are intimately united. Attempting to be one or the other alone, body or soul, is an aberration. It is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves. It is the whole person, a unified creature composed of body and soul who loves. When both dimensions are truly united then man attains his full stature and love, *eros*, grows in maturity and authentic grandeur.

The Pope warns us that the modern-day exaltation of the body is deceptive. *Eros*, reduced to pure “sex,” has become a commodity, a thing to be bought or sold. Consequently, the human person as well becomes a commodity. Here we are dealing with the debasement of the human body. It is no longer a vital expression of our total being. Relegated to the purely biological, the exaltation of the body can quickly turn into hatred for bodyliness. Christian faith has always considered man a unity in duality through which he is brought to a new nobility. *Eros* in this context, through a path of renunciation, purification, and healing, tends to take us beyond ourselves, “in ecstasy” towards the Divine.

In the Old Testament, the *Song of Songs*, well known to the mystics and originally a book of love-songs exalting conjugal love, teaches how love can fully realize its human and divine promise. The Greek translates this developed notion of love, *ahaba*, with the similar-sounding word, *agape*. This becomes the typical expression for biblical love. No longer is it self-seeking but it seeks the good of the beloved. It becomes renunciation, a willing readiness for self-sacrifice. It emerges as definitive in a two-fold sense: exclusivity and “for ever.” Love looks to the eternal. It is indeed “ecstasy” as a continuous exodus from inward-looking self, a liberation through self-giving. Jesus said in his time, “Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it.” (Lk 17:33)

The Newness of Biblical Faith

We have seen that God’s *eros* for man is also totally *agape*. His is a love that forgives. Israel committed “adultery.” Hosea shows us that God’s *agape*-dimension of love goes far beyond mere gratuity. God’s passionate love for his people – for humanity –is at the same time a forgiving love. Benedict says that as a result, Christians must realize how great God’s love for man is; that by becoming man he follows him even into his death thereby reconciling justice and love.

Eros is thus supremely ennobled and at the same time purified, so much so that it becomes one with *agape*. The *Song of Songs*, symbolic of God’s mutual relationship with man, became in both Jewish and Christian literature expressive of the essence of biblical faith: that man can indeed enter into union with God – his ultimate aspiration. The Pope says that it is a unity that creates love: a unity in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one. St. Paul’s puts it this way, “He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.” (1 Cor 6:17)

The first new aspect of biblical faith consisted in its image of God. The second, essentially connected to it, is its image of man. Genesis speaks of Adam’s solitude and God’s decision to give him a helper. God forms woman from the rib of the man. Adam rejoices, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” (Gen 2:23) The biblical account finally concludes with a prophecy about Adam: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh.” (Gen 2:24)

The Holy Father says that two aspects are important. First, *eros*, is somehow rooted in man’s very nature. Adam is a seeker abandoning his parents to find woman. Only together in “one flesh” do the two represent humanity complete. The second is equally important. From the standpoint of creation, *eros* directs man towards marriage, a bond that is unique and definitive. The exclusive and definitive love in marriage becomes the icon of the mutual relationship between God and his people. God’s way of loving becomes the measure of human love. The Pontiff makes the critical point that this close connection between *eros* and marriage in the Bible has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature.

Jesus Christ – the Incarnate Love of God

The novelty of the New Testament lies not so much in new ideas, as in the figure of Christ himself. The novelty of the Old Testament rested mainly in the Israelite God’s unpredictable and unprecedented activity. In Jesus Christ it takes on a dramatic turn. Now God himself is in search of the *lost sheep*, *the lost coin*, *the prodigal son*, a suffering and lost humanity. These are not mere words but an explanation of God’s very being and activity. In the death of Jesus on the Cross, God as it were turns upon himself, giving himself in order to raise up and save man. The Pope points to this event saying that this is love in

its most radical form; that by contemplating the pierced side of Christ we behold the starting-point of this encyclical. Here our definition of love must begin. Here we discover the path along which our life and love must move.

Jesus gave his act of oblation (his gift of self on the cross) an enduring presence in the institution of the Eucharist. More than just a static reception of the incarnate Logos (the Word), the Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. This eternal Logos truly becomes food for us as *love*.

The Holy Father explains how the imagery of marriage between God and Israel has changed. It formerly meant standing in God's presence. It now means union with God through sharing in Jesus' self-gift, a sharing in his body and blood. This sacramental "mysticism" lifts us to far greater heights than any human mystical elevation could ever accomplish.

This sacramental "mysticism" has a social character as well. In sacramental communion I become one with the Lord, like all the other communicants. Union with Christ is also union with each of those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ only for myself. Communion draws me out of myself to him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become "one body" completely joined in a singular existence. Love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united. Faith, worship and ethos (distinguishing set of values) are interwoven as a single reality that takes shape in our encounter with God's *agape*. Eucharistic communion includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist that is not converted into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented. The Pope concludes that surely love can be "commanded" because it has first been given.

The Holy Father's conclusion is in fact the principle and starting point of the great parables of Jesus; the rich man and Lazarus, the Good Samaritan; the Last Judgment. Jesus makes two critical points. Neighbor no longer refers just to one's countryman. Neighbor has been universalized (anyone in need whom we can help) and yet this "neighbor" remains very concrete. In fact, Jesus identifies with those in need: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Mt 25:40) Love of God and love of neighbor are one. In the least we find Jesus, and in Jesus we find God.

Love of God and Love of Neighbor

Benedict notes that we are left with two questions concerning our own attitude: can we love God without seeing him and can love be commanded? He begins by reflecting that 1 John 4:20 (*If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.*) seems to emphasize the unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbor. In fact, love of neighbor is a path that leads to the encounter with God. Closing our eyes to our neighbor also blinds us to God.

Benedict XVI says that it is indeed a truth that no one has ever seen God as he is. Yet God is not totally invisible to us. God has made himself visible. In Jesus we are able to see the Father. Further, throughout history and even today, he encounters us ever anew in the men and women who reflect his presence, in his word, in the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist. It is for us to learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives.

God does not demand of us a feeling that we of ourselves are incapable of producing. He makes us see and experience his love. Since he has "loved us first," love can also blossom as a response within us. The Holy Father is well aware that love is not merely a sentiment. Sentiments come and go. Earlier he spoke of how the purification and maturation of *eros* becomes love in the full meaning of the word. Mature love calls into play all of man's potentialities. It engages the whole person, touching both the will and the intellect. The "yes" of our will joined to God's will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in an all-embracing act of love.

The Pope says that love is never "finished" or complete. Throughout life it changes and matures, ever remaining faithful to itself. The love-story between God and man is a communion of wills growing into a communion of thought and sentiment. As a result, our will and God's will increasingly coincide and are no longer alien to one another. The realization comes that God is more deeply present to us than we are to ourself. Self-abandonment increases and God literally becomes our joy.

Thus love of neighbor is shown to be quite possible in the way proclaimed by Jesus. In and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. Seeing with the eyes of Christ I can give that person more than merely his external necessities but the true “look” of love that he craves.

Pope Benedict tells us that if, on the other hand, we have no contact at all with God in our life, we then will be incapable of seeing the image of God in the other. By the same token, our ready encounter with the neighbor makes us sensitive to God as well. Only by serving our neighbor can our eyes be opened to what God does for us and how much he loves us. Love of God and love of neighbor are thus inseparable and form a single commandment.

In a final comment Pope Benedict says that love grows through love. Love is “divine” because it comes from God and unites us to God. It makes us a “we” that transcends our divisions and makes us one, until, in the end, God is “all in all.” (1 Cor 15:26)

Part II: CARITAS, THE PRACTICE OF LOVE BY THE CHURCH AS A “COMMUNITY OF LOVE”:

The Church’s Charitable Activity as a Manifestation of Trinitarian Love

Benedict begins by quoting St. Augustine: “If you see charity, you see the Trinity.” In the previous reflections the Pope focused his attention on the “Pierced One.” St. John tells us that Jesus “gave up his Spirit” anticipating the gift of the Holy Spirit after the Resurrection. The Spirit is that interior power that harmonizes the believers’ hearts with Christ’s heart. The Spirit also transforms the heart of the ecclesial community. The entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man, his evangelization through Word and Sacrament, seeking to promote the good of man in the various arenas of his life. In effect, love is that service by which the Church attends to human needs. Service of charity is the focus of the second part of the encyclical.

Charity as a Responsibility of the Church

Love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, while being the responsibility of each member of the faithful, is also the responsibility of the entire Church. The Church must practice love as an ordered service to the community. The Holy Father says that the awareness of this responsibility was formative in the Church from the beginning. Saint Luke (Acts 2:42) provides a kind of definition of the Church by enumerating its constitutive elements: fidelity to the “teaching of the Apostles”, “communion” (*koinonia*), “the breaking of the bread” and “prayer”. The radical form of material “communion”, holding things in common, could not be preserved indefinitely. Nonetheless, within the community of believers there remained the core concept that there could never be room for a poverty that denied anyone what was needed for a dignified life.

The choice of the seven deacons, marking the beginning of the diaconal office, exhibited a real concern for the needs of the community. These were to be men “full of the Spirit and of wisdom”. The service they were to perform was to be concrete, materially as well as spiritually. The service of this group of seven, “*diaconia*”—the ministry of charity exercised in a communitarian and orderly way- became part of the very structure of the Church.

The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word. Benedict XVI enumerates some examples in the Church’s history. Justin Martyr (+ c. 155) in mentioning the Sunday celebrations also mentions the Christians’ charitable activity, linked with the Eucharist. The Christian writer Tertulian (+ after 220) tells of how the pagans were struck by the Christians’ concern for the needy of every sort. Ignatius of Antioch (+ c. 117) describes the Church of Rome as “presiding in charity (*agape*)”, including its charitable work.

In the mid fourth century there developed in Egypt the “*diaconia*” within each monastery, a ministry of works of relief. Dioceses formed them as well. Pope Gregory the Great (+ 604) mentions the “*diaconia*” of Naples. The “*diaconia*” found vivid expression in the martyrdom of Deacon Lawrence (+ 258). He remains for the Church a great example of ecclesial charity.

Benedict continues his historical summation of the Church's organized charity. He mentions the Emperor, Julian the Apostate, who, upset by what he saw as a failed Christianity, attempted to restore paganism to the Roman Empire. Along side the Church's charity, he attempted to establish an equivalent charitable system. The "Galileans" needed to be imitated and outdone. In his own peculiar way he confirmed that charity was a decisive feature of the Christian Community.

The Holy Father says that the Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility for proclamation of the word of God, celebration of the sacraments and finally, the ministry of charity. These three are inseparable. Charity is not just some kind of incidental, welfare activity but an "*indispensable expression of her very being*". The standard of the parable of the "Good Samaritan" imposes a universal love towards all the needy that we encounter "by chance". In addition, the Church has a specific responsibility within the Church family, to its own, to see that no member suffers through being in need. (cf Gal 6:10)

Since the nineteenth century Marxism, with particular insistence, claimed that the poor did not need charity but justice. Marxists proposed a just social order in which all receive their share of the world's goods. The poor then need no longer depend on charity. In general, there is some truth to this. However, there is also much that is mistaken.

With advent of industrialization in the nineteenth century, the growth of a class of salaried workers provoked radical changes in the fabric of society. It must be admitted that the Church's leadership was slow to realize that the just structuring of society needed to be approached in a new way. There were some individual pioneers of course (Bishop Ketteler of Mainz +1877). Then there followed a much broader and more concerted effort. In 1891, Leo XIII wrote his now famous encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. Pius XI followed with *Quadragesimo Anno* in 1931. In 1961 Blessed John XXIII published *Mater et Magistra* while Paul VI added his encyclical, *Populorum Progressio* (1967). Pope Paul then published the apostolic exhortation, *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) addressing especially the acute social problems of Latin America.

Pope Benedict then recounts how his "great predecessor", John Paul II, left a trilogy of social encyclicals: *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), and *Centesimus Annus* (1991) on the one hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. The Church, although not always heeded, became a forceful voice over those one hundred years.

Marxism had advocated world revolution as the panacea for socio-economic problems. That illusion has vanished. Because of the complex situation in the world today, owing not a little to the globalization of the economy, the Church's social doctrine has set forth fundamental guidelines valid well beyond the confines of the Church. Those with serious concerns for humanity and the world in which we live would do well to pay attention to them.

To define the relationship between justice and charity, two critical situations must be understood. First of all, the just ordering of society is the central responsibility of the State. Fundamental to Christianity is the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. The two spheres of Church and State are distinct but always interrelated. The political has its origin and goals founded in a justice that of its nature has to do with ethics.

An even more radical question concerns the very nature of justice itself. The problem is one of practical reason properly exercised. Faith of its nature is an encounter with God, extending beyond the realm of reason. Faith so constituted remains a purifying force for reason itself. Simply put, Faith cleanses reason of its blind spots thereby allowing it do its work more effectively. Here Catholic social doctrine, whose aim it is to contribute to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just, finds its place.

The Holy Father makes the point that the Church's social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law; that is on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being. Building a just social and civil order is an essential task that every generation must take up anew. Yet, as a political task this cannot be the Church's immediate responsibility. While the Church is duty-bound to offer her own specific contributions toward understanding the requirements of justice, she cannot and must not replace the State. She must play her part through rational argument. A just society must be the achievement of

the political sphere, not the Church. Nonetheless, the Church is deeply concerned about the promotion of justice and the demands of the common good.

On the other hand, love-*caritas* will always prove to be necessary. There is no possibility of ordering the State so justly that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. To the contrary, the State that would provide everything would eventually become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing that every suffering person most needs, a loving personal concern. The Church is that personality alive with a love enkindled by the Spirit of Christ. The claim that just social structures would make works of charity superfluous masks a materialist conception of man.

Benedict reminds us that the direct duty to work for a just society is proper to the laity. As Catholic citizens of the State they are called to participate in public life in a personal capacity. The mission of the lay faithful is to configure social life correctly. It remains a truth that charity must animate the whole of life and therefore of the faithful's political activity lived as "social charity."

Nevertheless, the Church's organized charity is an "*opus proprium*", a task proper to her, in which she functions with direct responsibility. As such she can never be exempt from an ordered practice of charity. The Pope concludes that in addition to justice, man needs, and will always need, love.

Before attempting to outline the Church's specific types of charitable activities, Benedict XVI wishes to speak to the overall situation of the struggle for justice and love in today's world. First of all, our planet has become very much "smaller". The "narrowing of distances" and this "togetherness" at times give rise to misunderstandings and tensions. Yet, these very circumstances present us with the challenge of sharing the situation and difficulties of others.

Despite the great advances in science and technology, there is still much suffering in the world because of poverty, both material and spiritual. The Pope tells us that our times call for a new readiness to assist our neighbor in need. Because of the better means of communication, distances between peoples have virtually been eliminated. Charitable activity therefore can and should embrace all peoples and their needs.

The process of globalization has its positive side as well. Concern for our neighbor transcends the confines of national communities broadening its vista to the horizons of the world. Vatican Council II spoke of this growing and inescapable sense of solidarity between all peoples. Recognition of this situation has led to the growth of cooperation between State and Church agencies bearing much fruit. It is important to note that Church agencies give a Christian quality to the activity of civil agencies.

His Holiness points out the significant growth and spread of different kinds of volunteer work throughout the world. Here he offers a special word of gratitude to all who participate in these kinds of activities. He notes how for young people this kind of service constitutes a school of life. It is one that forms them in a solidarity and readiness to offer not only material aid but also their very selves.

Benedict recalls how his predecessor, John Paul II, had asserted the Catholic Church's readiness to cooperate with the charitable agencies of other Churches and Communities. He pointed out that their goals were similar in nature: a true humanism that acknowledges man as made in the image of God. Their objective ultimately is to help man to live in a way consonant with his dignity.

The Distinctiveness of the Church's Charitable Activity

The Holy Father observes how the increase in the many different organizations involved in caring for common human needs must surely derive from the fact that the command to love the neighbor is inscribed by the Creator in man's very nature. He says that it is, at the same time, the result of the presence of Christianity in the world. Consequently, it is extremely important that the Church's charitable activity maintains its entire splendor and that it does not become just another form of social assistance.

We begin the next segment by treating of what Pope Benedict considers to be the essential elements of Christian and ecclesial charity.

As in the parable of the Good Samaritan, the distinctiveness of Christian charitable activity is first of all the simple response to immediate need. At the same time, the Church's charitable organizations

ought to do everything possible to provide the resources and above all the personnel needed to accomplish the task. Caregivers should be professionally competent. Although competency is important we are dealing with humans. Humans always require more than just technically proper care. They need heartfelt concern. The Church's organizations above all must distinguish themselves in this area. Benedict XVI emphasizes that these charity workers, in addition to the necessary professional training, also need a "formation of the heart." Love of neighbor is no longer an imposed commandment from without but a consequence derived from a living faith.

The Pope insists that Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies. It cannot be at the service of world stratagems. It is a way of making present here and now the love that man always needs. Marxism is a most radical example of a perverse form of a philosophy of progress. Part of the Marxist strategy is a theory of impoverishment. Its claim is that anyone engaging in charitable initiatives is actually serving an unjust system. This in turn makes the system appear, at least to some extent, tolerable. It thus slows down a potential revolution and thereby blocks the struggle for a better world. So it is that charity is rejected and simultaneously attacked as a means of preserving the status quo.

The Pope points out that what we have here, however, is really an inhuman philosophy of sacrificing people of the present for people of the future. One does not make the world more human by refusing to act human here and now. We only contribute to a better world if we personally do good now. The Christian program, the program of the Samaritan, the program of Jesus, is "a heart that sees". This heart sees where love is needed and acts!

Charity cannot be used as a means of engaging in proselytizing. Love is free. At the same time this does not mean that charitable activity must leave God and Christ out. Our charity must always be concerned with the whole man. Often the deepest cause of suffering is the very absence of God. Ultimately a Christian must know when it is appropriate to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and let love alone speak.

Those Responsible for the Church's Charitable Activity

The true subject of the various Catholic organizations that carry out a ministry of charity is the Church herself. For this reason it was most opportune that, our predecessor, Paul VI established the Pontifical Council Cor Unum that would be responsible for focusing and coordinating the charitable activities promoted by the Catholic Church.

The successors of the Apostles, the Bishops, have the primary responsibility of carrying out the Church's program of charity as set forth in Acts 2:42-44. The Church as God's family must always be a place where help is given and received. It must also be a place where we are prepared to help those outside of our communion. In his ordination rite, the Bishop expressly promises to be welcoming and merciful to the poor and to all in need. The Holy Father recalls that the Church recognizes that the work of charity is incumbent upon not only the whole Church but upon each Bishop in his own Diocese. The exercise of charity is an action of the Church and as such is like the ministry of Word and Sacrament. It has been there from the beginning.

Benedict XVI says that those who carry out the Church's charitable activity on a practical level must be persons moved by Christ's love, persons whose hearts have been "conquered" by Christ. The motivation of these special individuals must be the motivation of St. Paul: "*The love of Christ urges us on.*" (2 Cor 5:14) Consciousness of Christ' self-gift, even unto death, urges us to live for him, and with him for others. Whoever loves Christ loves the Church and desires that the Church increasingly be the very image and instrument of the love flowing from Christ himself.

There is a distinctiveness about the service that Christ requested of his disciples. The Pope says that St. Paul's "hymn to charity" as found in 1 Corinthians 13 is the *Magna Carta* of the Church. It teaches us that love is always more than mere activity. "*If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*" (1 Cor 13:3) Benedict says that this hymn sums up the whole of his reflections on love in this encyclical. It teaches us that we must give to others not only something that is our own, but something of our very own selves.

The proper way of serving others leads to humility. The Holy Father notes how Christ took the lowest place in all the world – the Cross. We must realize that being in a position to help others is no merit or achievement of our own. ***This duty is grace*** (my emphasis)! The more we do for others, the more we understand and can appropriate the words of Christ: *“We are useless servants.”* (Lk 17:10) In the end, we are only instruments in the Lord’s hands. In effect, we offer him our service only to the extent that we can, and for as long as he grants us the strength. For so long and thus far is the good servant of Jesus Christ always at work.

“The Love of Christ Urges Us On”

Sometimes because of the great need of others, on the one hand we can be driven to ideological activism while on the other to inertia. At such times, the Holy Father says that a living relationship with Christ is decisive. At times like these, prayer as a means of drawing renewed strength from Christ is urgently needed. Even though the situation may seem to call for action alone, praying is not a waste of time. In Blessed Theresa of Calcutta we have an excellent illustration that prayer is the inexhaustible source of service.

It is time to reaffirm the importance of prayer in the face of a growing activism and secularism by those engaged in charitable work. A personal relationship with God and abandonment to the will of God can be an effective curative. When people build a case against God in defense of man, the Pope questions on whom can they depend when human activity proves powerless.

Job surely complained about the incomprehensible and apparently unjustified suffering in the world. Often we too cannot understand why God refrains from intervening. Yet he does not prevent us from crying out, like Jesus on the Cross: “My God, my god why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46) Our protest is not meant to challenge God. For the believer, it is impossible to imagine that God is powerless. It is for us as it was Jesus the deepest way of affirming our faith in him. Even in their bewilderment Christians continue to believe in the “goodness and loving kindness of God.” (Tit 3:4)

Faith, hope and charity go together. Hope is practiced even in the face of apparent failure, and in humility, trusts God in the mystery of dark times. Faith tells us that God has given his Son for our sakes and this gives us the victorious certainty that it is really true: **God is love!**

Our impatience and doubts are transformed into a sure hope that God holds the world in his hands. Faith that sees the love of God revealed in the pierced heart of Jesus on the Cross gives rise to love. Love is the light, and Benedict XVI says that, in the end, the only light. Love is possible and we are able to practice it because we are created in the image of God. The Holy Father says that to experience love in this way, and thereby to cause the light of God to enter into the world, is the invitation that he wishes to extend to all through this encyclical.

Conclusion

Finally, the Holy Father considers the saints as great examples of the more perfect form of charity. He begins by holding up St. Martin of Tours (+ 397) as virtually the icon of irreplaceable and individual testimony of charity. Yet in the history of the Church many such testimonies could be quoted.

The entire monastic movement beginning with St. Anthony the Abbot (+ 356) expresses an immense service of charity toward the neighbor. Having come as it were “face to face” with God who is love, Anthony’s whole existence is transformed necessarily into one of both service of the neighbor and of God. Thus there arises the great monastic emphasis on hospitality especially to the very poor. Benedict then enumerates numerous additional individuals such as Francis of Assisi, Vincent de Paul, and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta whom he considers to be lasting models of social charity. These are true bearers of the light, men and women of faith, hope and love.

Most outstanding among the saints is Mary, the Mother of God, “mirror of all holiness.” The Holy Father points out how the words, *“My soul magnifies the Lord,”* (Lk 1:46) express her whole program of life. Mary’s greatness consists in the fact that she wants nothing more than to magnify God, not herself. She is lowly, a handmaid of the Lord. (cf Lk 1:38, 48) Mary knows that she can only make a contribution to the salvation of the world if she places herself completely at the disposal of God’s initiatives.

Mary is a woman of hope only because she believes God's promises. She is a woman of faith because believing she is completely at home with the Word of God. Since the Virgin is totally imbued with the Word of God, she is able to become the Mother of the Word Incarnate. Mary is a woman who loves. Believing she thinks with God's thoughts and wills with God's will and thus cannot fail to be a woman who loves.

When the disciples flee, Mary will remain beneath the Cross. At Pentecost it will be they who gather around her to await the Holy Spirit. The lives of the saints include their being and working in God after death as well. Having drawn close to God, they have not withdrawn from men.

The words, "*Behold your mother,*" (Jn 19:27) have been fulfilled anew in every generation. Mary has truly become the Mother of all believers. Testimonies of gratitude come from every time, continent and culture. So it is to Mary, Virgin and Mother, that we entrust the Church and her mission in service of love.