

Charity Begins at Home . . . an Ecclesiological Assessment of Pope Benedict's First Encyclical

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Abstract

This article offers an ecclesiological assessment of Pope Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. It draws parallels with an earlier papal encyclical, also, on charity and suggests that the attention in the latter to the exercise of charity *within* the Catholic church is a much needed supplement to Benedict's attention to what the church might teach the 'world' *ad extra* about charity. Indeed, the article suggests that the Catholic church must strive all the more to be truly a sacrament (both a sign and mediation) of that love that constitutes the very threefold being of God, both *ad intra* and *ad extra*. But, first and foremost, the church must learn to exercise such love within its own confines before it can hope to teach those in the wider human family anything about charity. The promise of applied trinitarian ecclesiology in serving such ends is highlighted.

Keywords

Benedict XVI, charity, ecclesiology, Paul VI, applied trinitarian ecclesiology

It is always good to give due attention to the specific *context* that concerns the themes that one wishes to debate – as much modern and contemporary work in hermeneutics have somewhat made a welcome imperative, at least. So, to set the scene a little: the Roman Catholic church has a new pope – a noted scholar and avid lover of books whom not a few people had predicted would accede to the chair of Peter in due course. His election caused a great deal of debate and excitement throughout the church, coming, as it did, at a crucial turning point in the history of the church, with the church seeking guidance for the pathway it should follow in seeking to live out its mission in the face of the challenges of a very different era of world history. The appointment attracted a great deal of attention in the world media and the new pope's face was seemingly everywhere

across television screens to newspapers to glossy magazine covers. This pope chose his name very carefully, settling upon a name rich with symbolism and ecclesiological significance. Commentators in the know argued that even the new pope's choice of name suggested a particular 'manifesto' for the forthcoming papacy itself.

And so, when the initial fuss over the appointment of this scholarly pontiff had died down the church eagerly awaited his first encyclical to try and perhaps discern from it some hint of the direction in which this pope would take the church. And when that first encyclical was released, the church was delighted for the underlying subject of that encyclical was *caritas* – Christian charity or love. One of the most moving and simultaneously challenging passages of that encyclical was the following,

Charity is the key to everything. It sets all to rights. There is nothing which charity cannot achieve and renew. Charity 'beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things' (1 Cor. 13: 7). Who is there among us who does not realize this? *And since we realize it, is not this the time to put it into practice?*¹

But, lest there be any misunderstanding here, this passage does *not* come from *Deus caritas est* and the pope in questions is *not* Benedict XVI. For Pope Benedict is not the first pope in recent memory to devote his first encyclical to the notion of *caritas*, of charity, of love. Pope Paul VI did likewise, in the midst of the second Vatican council and he was also believed to have penned the document himself, so it reflected his ecclesiological vision throughout. But Paul's reflections upon the Christian testimony to the God of love who *is* love in the depths of divine being were more specifically focused upon the *ecclesiological implications* of this fact, of how Catholics must therefore order their inner and extra -ecclesial relations in the light of the call to unconditional love that the gospel makes. Thus Pope Paul, in the passage just quoted, stated in no uncertain terms that the time had come for the church to put its most fundamental beliefs into practice, to bear witness to the God who is love in the daily life of the church itself.

Hence Paul VI's message in that encyclical, *Ecclesiam suam*, is a heartfelt plea for greater self-examination and so self-awareness on the part of the church itself and those who serve within it, even before they turn to consider how the church might best serve the wider world community and so best fulfil the gospel mission for modern times,

We believe that it is a duty of the Church at the present time to strive toward a clearer and deeper awareness of itself and its mission in the world, and of the treasury of truth of which it is heir and custodian.

¹ Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam suam*, §56. English trans. available from www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_06081964-ecclesiam_en.html

Thus before embarking on the study of any particular problem and before considering what attitude to adopt vis-à-vis the world, the Church must here and now reflect on its own nature, the better to appreciate the divine plan which it is the Church's task to implement.²

The Jesuit scholar, Norman Tanner, notes how this encyclical raised 'high hopes' with regards to the draft schema for what would become Vatican II's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, (*Gaudium et Spes*).³

And so, what might some *comparative* ecclesiological reflections upon the fact that Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*,⁴ also focuses upon the concept of charity in the Christian tradition, reveal for the church today?

I would begin with the statement that there is so much in this new encyclical that I am totally in agreement with. Indeed, what Christian could disagree with the fundamental thrust of this often elegant, if at times elliptical, document? So let us say a little about its merits first of all. The document is laden with vivid and inspiring imagery. It has so much, in particular, to offer in relation to the biblical and theological elements of this reflection upon the God of love, the insights on the relation between love and authentic sexuality, and, of course, how love manifests itself in the very mission of the church in service to others.

Thus Pope Benedict XVI's new encyclical, *Deus caritas est* helps remind the church of the central importance of this theological virtue, for love provides a hermeneutic of the divine being itself. Benedict rightly quotes Augustine's famous saying 'If you see charity, you see the Trinity'.⁵ Thus this first encyclical is mindful of the elements of the Christian tradition that point towards this fundamental truth – that God is love and in our own loving we therefore bear witness to the very Divine being.

But here, also, let us say something about those aspects of Christian love, charity, *caritas*, that our new Pope has chosen *not* to dwell upon

² Pope Paul VI,

³ See Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (eds.), *History of Vatican II*, Maryknoll, Orbis and Leuven, Peeters, vol. IV, 270. And this encyclical continued to inspire many throughout the official church. Here cf., also, Gregory Baum, referring to *Dialogue and Mission*, a document released by the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Christian Missions, in 1984, '*Dialogue and Mission* presents the Church as the living sign of God's love revealed in Christ, with a mission to love humanity as Christ has loved us, towards the full manifestation of God's reign which has begun in him. (#9) The Church is called to dialogue because of its very faith: God is love, and in the trinitarian mystery Christian faith glimpses in God a life of communion and interchange. (#22) This was a theme dear to Pope Paul VI more fully explored in his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (1964), which proposes dialogue as norm and ideal for the Church of Christ on every level', Gregory Baum, *Amazing Church: A Catholic Theologian Remembers a Half Century of Change*, Maryknoll, Orbis, 2005, 114.

⁴ Released in January 2006. English translation available at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben_xvi_enc_20051225_deus_caritus_est_en.html

⁵ §19, c.f. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII, 8, 12: CCL, 50, 287.

in this document and, in particular, the *ecclesiological* implications of the wondrous realisation that *Deus caritas est*: that God is love, is charity.

Biblical and Theological Starting Points – The God of Love

Throughout much of first century, Palestine Jesus of Nazareth preached that radical and transformative gospel of love, justice and *reconciliation*. The gospels reflect his teachings and bear testimony to his ministry – which itself bore witness to the fact that God is love. The earliest Christians further reflected upon this in the New Testament epistles. Thus 1 John 5:12: “*No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.*”

And this reflective tradition continued throughout the ongoing story of the church. Just a glance at the works of some of the great theologians demonstrates how the priority of love (*caritas*, again), ties in with this. Thus St Thomas Aquinas, himself, asserted the priority of *caritas* (love) in our path towards God, both personal and communal.⁶ He saw love as the ‘form’ of *all* the virtues, which depend upon it.⁷ As Jean Porter has illustrated aptly, in Aquinas we see that through making *caritas* our guiding principle in all we do, we become closer to God because all our actions and desires become oriented towards God – *caritas* allows us to participate in the very mind and will of God. The priority of love transforms our whole person and yet it does much more, for it transforms our collective existence, as well, ‘...charity does not just secure the inner unity that is the essence of peace. It is also the only sure foundation for that concord among individuals which is the basis for peace within the community’.⁸

In the twentieth century, Christian theologians came to reflect anew upon the fact that meaningful human existence, i.e. authentic being, has love as its pre-requisite and that love needs the other, whether this be in individual or communitarian terms. Hence, just a glance across the centuries of Christian tradition, then, illustrates that love, *caritas* is at the centre for Christians believe in a God who is love in the depths of divine being.

⁶ Cf., here, also, David Tracy, ‘Caritas in the Catholic Tradition’, in *On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics and the Church*, Maryknoll, NY, Orbis Books, 1994.

⁷ E.g., c.f. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 23 (1a 2ae. 55-67), London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1969, 65.

⁸ Jean Porter, *The Recovery of Virtue*, 1990, 205. Here I draw upon an earlier discussion of the concept in my ‘A Virtuous Community: The Self-identity, Vision and Future of the Diocesan Church’, chapter in Noel Timms (ed.): *Diocesan Dispositions and Parish Voices*, Matthew James, 2001, pp 79-130.

But, having considered, briefly, such examples of the rich tradition of reflection upon the God who is love, along with the rich reflections upon aspects of that tradition in Pope Benedict's encyclical, to some it might seem somewhat odd that *Deus caritas est* does not appear to explore the full *ecclesial* implications of the fact that *God is love . . .*

What the Encyclical Does *Not* Say About *Caritas*:

We may well hope that this encyclical's extended meditation on charity influences further developments in the Catholic church in the years of Benedict's pontificate to come. Of course, as we have noted, the encyclical does say a great deal about the church's teaching on love in general, and the relation of this to Christian theology and anthropology, as well as to the Christian understanding of human sexuality in particular – Benedict here gives a long overdue riposte to Nietzsche's gross misrepresentation of Christianity vis-à-vis sexual love.

So, too, does the encyclical say a great deal about love, charity and the church's Mission. But the focus throughout the encyclical, as with many other writings of Joseph Ratzinger, both as private theologian and whilst as head of the church's doctrinal 'guardian', the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, and, now as supreme pontiff, the focus is more upon the church vis-à-vis the world 'beyond' its confines, than with what actually goes on *within* the church itself. So here, for example, the focus is upon what the church may teach the world about human love and sexuality, what the church may teach the world about charity in practice and the actual realisation of love. There is much about Christian individuals, whether in terms of their living out an authentic sexuality or in terms of their bringing Christian charity to the world in their day-to-day activities. So, too, do the church-linked agencies of social and charitable activity warrant a mention. But there is little about the notion of charity which preoccupied so much of Paul VI's first encyclical – namely the actualisation of Christian love within the confines of the church itself and the need for the church on the whole to be attentive to the need to bear testimony to Christian love in practice in every aspect of its existence, its organisation and its governance. For, as the underlying question behind Pope Paul's encyclical enquired, how can the church seek to bear witness to the God of love, unless, first and foremost, it bears testimony to that love which reflects the divine being *within* its own confines?

And yet, *Ecclesiam suam*, somewhat surprisingly, given their shared themes, is not referred to in Pope Benedict's first encyclical. Paul VI does gain a mention but only in passing in relation to certain ecclesial bodies aimed at Christian social justice which he promoted. This raises a question: does the new encyclical represent a further

example of Benedict's way of confronting the perceived threats of postmodernity in his own distinctive way, a way which, according to some interpretations, is particularly distinctive in comparison with the character and tone of many of the teachings of Paul VI and the documents of Vatican II?

Here it will be instructive to recall one of the most famous passages of all from the council texts and one which is so inspired by the vision of John XXIII in calling the council,⁹

In virtue of Its mission to enlighten the whole world with the message of the Gospel and gather together in one Spirit all men of every nation, race and culture, the Church shows Itself as a sign of the spirits of brotherhood which renders possible sincere dialogue and strengthens it. Such a mission requires us first of all to *create the Church Itself mutual esteem, reverence and harmony, and acknowledge legitimate diversity*; in this way all who constitute the one people of God will be able to engage in ever more fruitful dialogue, whether they are pastors or members of the lay faithful. For the bonds which unite the faithful together are stronger than those which separate them: *let there be unity in what is necessary; freedom in what is doubtful, and charity in everything.*¹⁰

In other words, one might well ask whether there is a somewhat different take on the concept of *caritas* provided by Benedict XVI's encyclical. For *Deus caritas est*, focuses less on the intra-ecclesial implications of the fact that God is love (at least in a Roman Catholic sense), than Paul's *Ecclesiam Suam*. Because Paul VI and John XXIII were both keen to address the need for a charitable disposition to inform all our relations *within* the church – for charity to be the guiding principle of our ecclesial ministries, structures and relations. And yet it might be suggested that Pope Benedict, during his time as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, saw the need, on a number of occasions, to allow disciplinary and institutional priorities to subordinate the Christian call to charity in all things or, as Blessed John XXIII said, 'in *any case*'.¹¹ But we are thus far left in the dark with regard to Pope Benedict's *present* thinking here for, aside from some rather ambivalent passages where there might possibly be an *intra*-ecclesial application to what is being said,¹² the encyclical really does reflect that focus

⁹ Notwithstanding its use of language that today would be deemed non-inclusive!

¹⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, §92 (my italics), transl. Austin Flannery (ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New revised edn., 1992, Dublin, Dominican Publications, 999-1000.

¹¹ For example, the *manner* in which certain theologians were 'investigated' and 'disciplined'. Indeed many commentators have also remarked how uncharitable the censure of Jon Sobrino was in March 2007, almost two years into Benedict's pontificate.

¹² E.g., §19, 'The *entire* activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man: it seeks his evangelization through Word and Sacrament, an

upon the *extra*-ecclesial implications and application of the teaching in hand. It seeks to focus upon what the church can ‘teach’ the postmodern world. It implies the *superior* nature of *Christian* love. Furthermore, the encyclical also seems to reserve, somewhat paradoxically, certain ‘benefits’ of the love of God for Christians alone.¹³

And yet, if the church is to really be in a position to teach the wider postmodern world, the human family, something of value, then the intra-ecclesial implications of the gospel’s call to love must be addressed with equal fervour. For anyone beyond the confines of the church might otherwise look to numerous episodes not simply in the history of the church but also in its recent and present day life where Christians seem to be incapable of even treating their fellow Christians, those with whom they live and work and worship, with anything remotely approximating to the love of which Benedict so eloquently speaks.¹⁴ Hence those beyond the church might pour scorn upon the ambitions in the encyclical for Christians to help ‘purify’ secular reason with Christian love.¹⁵ They would, in pointing to the ways in which the church authorities and institutions linked to the church regularly impinge upon the dignity of its own members, for example, be able to turn to Christians and, quite rightly, to say ‘Physician heal thyself’, in other words, they might well turn to Christians and say ‘look at how little love is practiced on a daily basis in your own church communities and church-linked institutions. And yet you seek to preach to the rest of the world?’

undertaking that is often heroic in the way it is acted out through history...’. Cf., also, §§20, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34, 35.

¹³ §14, which is perhaps the most overtly ecclesiological paragraph of the document. Yet here, as elsewhere in the document (e.g. §15), it is not clear whether the ‘we’ and ‘us all’ mentioned refers to the entire human family or just to Christians (and, even then, only certain Christians). The passage is pregnant with many statements of profound ecclesial and ecclesiological implication (and yet of ambivalent meaning here). Nonetheless, given the numerous other writings of Pope Benedict prior to his election, one might best assume a neo-exclusivistic interpretation of passages that are ambivalent would be the most accurate. See, also, §25, (b), 30 (esp. (b)). On neo-exclusivism, see chapter 3 of Gerard Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity: Questions for the Church in our Times*, Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2007.

¹⁴ Examples would include the procrastination, secrecy and duplicity over the handling of instances of clerical child abuse; again the treatment of theologians deemed guilty of dissent; the tone of documents on other churches and religions, such as *Dominus Iesus*; and the very recent release of the CDF’s ‘Responses to some Questions regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church’ (July 2007). This raises questions about the *caritas* being extended to other Christians or, indeed, to Roman Catholics who offer a differing ecclesiological understanding of the church to that ‘official’ ecclesiology currently in vogue. Further examples are afforded by the general shift back towards a more authoritarian and centralised form of ecclesial governance and, indeed, even, in many ways, the renewed hierarchical organisation and understanding of diocesan, national and curial bodies.

¹⁵ A very ‘Milbankian’ passage in the encyclical.

Paul VI's Ecclesial Meditations upon Christian Love

In Paul VI's first encyclical, we see those in positions of church authority being urged to help the church fulfil its mission both fully and truly. To enable this, the central thrust of that text is a call to the value and necessity of a deeper self-examination for the church. Three principal 'policies' are advocated: firstly, that the self-awareness of the church be informed by the concerns of the age, leading to an ongoing and transformative self-understanding. A mature faith is seen as the key to this greater awareness, a *sensus Ecclesiae*. Secondly, the importance of renewal and reform for overcoming the church's shortcomings. This is not to be understood as reduction or compromise, but rather as a reflective engagement with the world and a *restoration* of the essential features of the church. Thirdly, the importance of *dialogue*, itself, seen here as an all-embracing priority and as a method in itself towards the enhancement of the church and the human family. Dialogue is seen as the *practical extension* of Christian charity. The document stresses the value and importance of Vatican II towards achieving the aims set out throughout the text.

Humanity is there understood by Paul in terms of a series of concentric circles which incorporate the whole human family (as opposed to Benedict seeing the church as the 'family of God' in the world), all those of religious faith, all Christians, all Catholics with, finally, the church itself, at the centre. Hence the document sets out an understanding of the church's authority to enter into dialogue – within and without the Roman Catholic church, aimed at furthering the salvation of all humanity.

But note Paul VI, himself, is not so much here privileging the Catholic church as showing the necessary *stages* of dialogue that need to proceed in order for the gospel mission to be fulfilled in his times. I.e., charity must first begin at home: love those closest to us and we are given the vision and energy to go out and love those beyond. If we cannot even love those in the midst of whom we live, how much harder it will be to love those beyond our immediate confines.

Caritas begins at Home ...?

Thus if the theological implications of the Christian tradition here are to be fully understood, then we must be prepared to challenge those who believe the church is at the centre of the world and of God's priorities. Rather love, *caritas*, *itself*, is at the centre for Christians do indeed believe in a God who is love in the depths of divine being.

However, a major concern is that the writings of Joseph Ratzinger prior to his becoming Pope display an ecclesiological mindset which is similar to that found elsewhere in the works of certain scholars and the ecclesial disposition of particular groups across the Christian church in general. It is an understanding of the church which, contra Vatican II's opening up of the church's doors to the world, would rather accentuate the distinctive nature of the church vis-à-vis the world and therefore fosters an exclusivistic mentality anew in the church.¹⁶ In other words, the church and world are separate entities and the church must work hard to resist being 'tainted' by the ways of the world and so must therefore keep itself 'pure'. John Allen, Joseph Ratzinger's biographer summarises our new pope's position here well,

Ratzinger left Vatican II teetering between optimism about a revitalisation of the church's inner life and pessimism about the church's relationship with the world, and it seems clear which way the cultural winds were nudging him. Rooted in an Augustinian/Bonaventuran outlook, Ratzinger has always stressed the critical distance that must separate the church from the culture. In the 1950s, when ghetto Catholicism seemed safely insulated from the more dangerous currents of modern life, this was chiefly an academic conviction. But during the late 1960s, amid all the chaos inside and outside the church, as Ratzinger watched the 'opening to the world' emerge as seemingly the only thing Catholics understood of the council, his internal alarms became louder and more insistent and his tone increasingly pessimistic.¹⁷

Furthermore, a second concern relates to distinctly uncharitable divisions *within* the church itself. Of course, Pope Benedict's first encyclical warns against dividing into factions and parties or signing up to particular ideologies and yet that document appears to have in mind only political or philosophical factions.¹⁸ Yet Paul VI's first encyclical, as with the teachings and pronouncements of Blessed John XXIII before him, saw that the first problem that must be countered was the existence of any divisions and factions within the church itself. Conversation, then, demands that true dialogue should be aimed towards overcoming polarisations and factionism for example, striving to establish some common ground between 'competing' ecclesiological visions within Roman Catholicism.¹⁹

¹⁶ Again cf. Mannion, *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*, especially Part I.

¹⁷ John Allen, *Pope Benedict XVI*, London, Continuum, revd edn., 2005, 90. Here, as a particularly good example, c.f. Joseph Ratzinger, 'Introductory Thoughts on the State of the Church', in *Two Say Why: Balthasar and Ratzinger 'Why I am Still in the Church'*, trans. John Griffiths, London, Search Press, 1973.

¹⁸ See §31. As opposed to *ecclesial* factions and parties, as well as 'ideologies'.

¹⁹ Karl Rahner, as so often, pre-empts our concerns here, warning that charity can often be all the more difficult to display the closer to home one encounters its need, 'the world of intellectual pluralism is present within the Church herself. And because of this a dialogue

Hence the second worry for many is that Pope Benedict, who as Head of the CDF presided over the ‘policing’ of various theologians deemed guilty of dissent and who criticised heavily certain ecclesologies, theological schools of thought, as well as particular groups and individuals within the church, and yet who has also greatly favoured others to the point of preferential treatment, might further divide the church should his pontificate proceed in a similar fashion.²⁰

But do these times not also call for true charity to be displayed to *all* peoples, cultures, faiths and value-systems? Plurality is the reality we now live and that is perhaps the reality that God wants us to embrace. Turning away from the world is not a charitable act. Refusing to embrace the other *as other* is not a charitable act. The supreme (theological) virtue of charity is, like any virtue (according to Aquinas, following Aristotle), the mean between two points of either excess or deficiency. And, for our church today, the practice of *caritas* *both* within the church and without is surely the mean between, on the one hand, intransigent neo-exclusivist foundationalism and, on the other, meaningless, nihilistic relativism – the devaluation of all values.

It is evident that much fruitful discourse can emerge whenever ontological questions become important again in ecclesiological undertakings, both for the being of the church and its own being-in-relation to the wider communities and societies. Here the true nature of the church as sacrament – as both sign and mediator of God’s loving self-communication to the world – becomes more fully understood. This, in turn, points to the notion of the church as servant: putting into practice that witness to the love of God in the activities to which the church itself, all individuals within it and all institutions connected with it are called.

But, as a well-known hymn, goes, ‘They will know we are Christians by our love’. Even the opponents of the church in the ancient pagan world could not but marvel at much Christians loved *one*

within the Church is inevitable and necessary even if it makes things far more difficult and toilsome for us than formerly, especially since this dialogue is in many respects more difficult than a dialogue with the world outside the Church. This is because however lovingly we may try to behave in a family dispute it still has a special sharpness and bitterness of its own. It is also because this dialogue within the Church is conducted among complex and heterogeneous schools of thought within a single body governed by the same Christian faith and by the one social organisation of the Church. Thus these ‘limits’ offer less possibility of avoiding the dispute than in the case of the dialogue carried on outside the Church’, ‘Dialogue in the Church’, in vol. 10 of *Theological Investigations*, 1973, 109. Cf., also, Bernard Lonergan, ‘Unity and Plurality: the Coherence of Christian Truth’, in his *A Third Collection*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 1985, 239–50. See, also, the discussion by Thomas Guarino, ‘*Fides et Ratio and Contemporary Pluralism*’, *Theological Studies* 62 (2005), 675–700.

²⁰ Note, of course, that Pope Benedict has privileged both John Paul II’s and, indirectly and directly, his own interpretation of the documents of Vatican II.

another. Today we must beware of losing sight of the fact that Christian love must be put into practice as much *within* as *without* the church itself. The practice of charity in neither sphere should be neglected, for did not Jesus condemn both the approach of simply looking after our own *and* those who refused to offer charity to the least of society?²¹ Christian morality is a form of *exemplary* ethics, in other words, in *how* Christians strive to live do they bear testimony to what they believe and, obviously, once more, as Pope Benedict captures so well, Christians believe in a God who we understand to be love in the very depths of God's being. The fact that we seek further to understand and explain the divine being in terms of a radically equal *community* – i.e., the doctrine of the Trinity, is a further attempt to articulate what the nature of God-as-love must be like.

But it is not enough that – as part II of Benedict's encyclical suggests – the church's charitable activities (through the work of the various agencies linked to it, i.e. its charitable work *ad extra*) be a manifestation of Trinitarian love. For activity which reflects the love within God's very threefold being should also be manifested in the relations *within* the church likewise. For, as the Birmingham theologian, David McLoughlin has stated,

The Trinity will not be the luminous centre of Christian life till the life of the Church reflects the mystery of divine life, at the heart of which is a unity without uniformity, distinction without separation.²²

Pope Benedict speaks of learning to look on other persons, 'not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ'.²³ Hence love of God and of neighbour, he writes, 'are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment'.²⁴ The danger for many within the church today, as ever, and for many within church-linked organisations, charities and the like, is that we forget that we, too, must ask the question that was once put to Jesus – 'Lord, *who* is my neighbour?' Note that Jesus' answer, the parable of the Good

²¹ Pope Benedict himself, states that 'in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself and in Jesus we find God', §15.

²² David McLoughlin, 'Authority in the Service of Communion' in Noel Timms and Kenneth Wilson (eds.), *Governance and Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Beginning a Conversation*, London, SPCK, 2000, 135. Cf., also, David Tracy, 'The Christian focus on the event of Jesus Christ discloses the always-already, not-yet reality of grace. That grace, when reflected upon, unfolds its fuller meaning into the ordered relationships of the God who is love, the world that is beloved and a self gifted and commanded to become loving. With the self-respect of that self-identity, the Christian should be released to the self-transcendence of genuine other-regard by a willing self-exposure to and in the contemporary situation', David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 446. Cf., also, Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey*, London, SCM, 1986, 'From God's Love to Love of God', 172-74.

²³ §18.

²⁴ §18.

Samaritan illustrates how it is an ‘outsider’ who most fully bears testimony to the love of God – and puts to shame those who belong to the robbery victim’s own ‘community’ and faith. The message found in the gospels, then, is charity – God’s love – is due to all. Which means that it must also be displayed, must even begin, at home – for only then can it spread outwards and multiply.

Pope Benedict also refers to this parable and rightly notes that, in it, ‘the concept of neighbour is now universalised’ and that ‘The Church has the duty to interpret ever anew this relationship between near and far with regard to the actual daily life of her members’.²⁵ Pope Benedict indeed further inspires us in his words which identify love as ‘a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God’.²⁶ Thus one would welcome further reflections from the Pope here, which perhaps articulate how and why Christian charity must begin *within* the church and would *then* spread its wings further and further afield, taking the love of God and putting it into practice wherever Christians and the church can make a positive difference.

For only if *caritas* is seen to be practised within the church and within every institution, organisation and agency connected to it, can the church hope to fulfil the vision and mission for the church itself vis-à-vis civil society that Benedict’s encyclical describes, not least of all its aim to ‘help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just’.²⁷ If, on the other hand, practical reason can become ethically ‘blind’, as Benedict suggests, ‘by the dazzling effect of power and special interests’, then the application of practical reason *within* the church and church-linked institutions, organisations and agencies can equally fall prey to such ethical blindness. Only if the church attends, *first and foremost* to the ethical blindness (the ‘beam’, as Jesus would have put it), in its own eye, can it turn to secular society and seek to suggest that those there

²⁵ §15.

²⁶ §6.

²⁷ §28. Although I have reservations about the ‘two cities’ picture that many passages seem to imply here – even along Lutheran – perhaps even Erastian lines in one or two parts. Here the ambivalence of Pope John Paul II on the church’s activity vis-à-vis the ‘political realm’ is further continued. My own position here is to affirm the ‘monistic’ view of history and *therefore* the church’s and every Christian’s *duty* to be as politically and socially informed and active as possible. If ‘A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church’ (§28) what, then *is* the task of the church in building the kingdom of Heaven/God? The ambivalence here continues in §29 and 30. Yet the encyclical might enjoy more consistency and coherence if its jettisoned this apparent ‘two cities’ mentality and the inevitable qualification of statements and hence, in effect, tempering of the radicality of the gospel, that such demands. More worrying still are some of those parts concerning welfare that might conceivably lend themselves to minimalist conceptions of the state in general and of welfare provision in particular.

remove the ‘splinter’ in their own. Even in those many parts of the church which suffer less from such moral myopia, Benedict’s words to wider society must also apply, that ‘*caritas* – will always prove necessary, even in the most just society’.²⁸

Hence those who preside over the church’s institutional elements should aspire towards only ever being the embodiment of that love, that *caritas* which Christians believe to be expressive of the very being of God.²⁹ The task for the institutional church, is to bear witness *in its daily operations and fulfilment of its mission*, to the God of love, the love of God. So, too, is that a call for every Christian to strive to do the same and for all institutions connected with the church to bear testimony to Christian charity in each and every aspect of their day-to-day activities likewise. Little wonder, then, that the church, which of course gave rise to the archetypal ‘mission statement’, can do no other than strive to seek to reflect, albeit through a glass darkly, that wondrous love *who* is God. Pope Benedict’s own words thus offer much hope here: ‘The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word’.³⁰ And so, as he continues, ‘God’s presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love’ and hence ‘disdain for love is disdain for God and man alike; it is an attempt to do without God’.³¹

If there can be ‘no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love’,³² how much more true must this prove in the church and all form of church-linked communities themselves? If charity is commended by Benedict as something which ‘must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as “social charity”’,³³ then charity must logically also animate their lives and actions within the church and its linked institutions. So, too, must it animate the lives of all church leaders, clergy and religious for, after all, the original meaning of

²⁸ §28 (b).

²⁹ Did not Joseph Ratzinger speak of the church as ‘A Company in Constant Renewal’, the final chapter of his *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996?

³⁰ §22. Cf., also §18, ‘But if in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be “devout” and to perform “religious duties”, then my relationship with God will also grow arid. It become merely “proper” but loveless. Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well’.

³¹ §31 (c). Here cf., Juan Luis Segundo, who ended his own ‘response to cardinal Ratzinger’s assessment of liberation theology with the following words, ‘In case of doubt, it will always be better to wager on what Cardinal Henri de Lubac expressed in a prayer, “If I lack love and justice, I separate myself completely from you, God, and my adoration is nothing more than idolatry. To believe in you, I must believe in love and in justice, and to believe in these things is worth a thousand times more than saying your name”’, *Theology and the Church: A Response to Cardinal Ratzinger and a Warning to the Whole Church*, London, Geoffrey Chapman, 156.

³² *Deus caritas est*, §31.

³³ §29.

the 'lay faithful' encompasses *each and every* member of the church. Perhaps our church leaders and our church-linked institutions, in this day and age, are also (perhaps especially) in need of that 'formation of the heart' which Benedict suggests will enable charity workers to fulfil their mission more fully.³⁴

Amen, then, that our new Pope suggests that 1 Corinthians 13 'must be the *Magna Carta* of all ecclesial service'.³⁵ For this paper has simply been concerned with suggesting that we append to such sentiments the ecclesial ethos of Benedict's two illustrious predecessors, Paul VI and Blessed John XXIII (an estimation with which Benedict clearly agrees): namely, that we add the words '*ad intra*, as well as *ad extra*' to Benedict's words here. *Caritas* really does begin at home. Such would imply neither ecclesial idealism nor be an aspiration that would prove to be beyond any one individual in the church for, as Benedict states, 'Love is possible and we are able to practise it because we are created in the image of God'. He thus draws his first encyclical to a close with an invitation: 'To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world...'.³⁶ Let us hope the life of the church and that of all institutions linked to it is thus illuminated by the light of the threefold being of the God of love.

What truly transformative ecclesiological fruits might yet come, then, from further sustained reflections upon the Christian faith's fundamental affirmation that God is love and the one who sees love, see the divine trinity?

Love in the Life of the Church: The Promise of Applied Trinitarian Ecclesiology

Attention to the practical implications of the fact that God is love might well provide grounds for great ecclesiological hope across the wider church. Here 'emerging theologies' help point the way forward in a vivid fashion. For one of the most positive and promising ecclesiological themes that occurs in much feminist ecclesiological, just as it does, also in the thinking of much liberation ecclesiology and, so too, in those 'new ways of being church' encountered in Asia, Africa and throughout the globe, is an emphasis upon *communion* that seeks to be truly reflective of the reality of the love of the triune God, the God who *is* radically equal community. In the feminist approaches to such ecclesiological themes and realities, there is a shift, as Natalie Watson has illustrated, from institution to community. Thus,

³⁴ §31 (a).

³⁵ §34.

³⁶ §39.

That women, men and children begin to find spaces in which they can flourish and enable each other to flourish and live in relationships of justice, is rooted in the story of the Triune God sharing God's own being with humankind and in doing so sharing their being. The Triune God became a particular human being so that particular human beings might flourish as the people they are and share their lives with each other as they are sharing in God's life. Such sharing is possible as human beings live in the tension of being fully themselves and transcending the limitations and boundaries of their own lives and they share the lives of others and of God. *This is where being church begins to happen.*³⁷

Of course, the 'social doctrine of the trinity' has its numerous critics, but I feel they some of their number, at least, have missed something very significant with regards to the essential intention behind such approaches to trinitarian theology in contemporary times and perhaps the *ecclesiological* implications of such may help bring these to the foreground. For this is not so much to project human ideals onto our understanding of God, but rather to enable the church to strive, however imperfectly, to be both the sign and mediator of that perfect community of love, the love that is poured out as gracious self-communication to all the world. For, although one finds attention to Trinitarian themes in many writings which influence the 'official' *communio ecclesiology* which is predominant in much official thinking today,³⁸ I suggest that an ecclesiological undertaking to build upon the Trinitarian reflections from such emerging ecclesiologies and, in particular, a move towards greater emphasis upon the church as bearing sacramental witness to the Triune God, would better point the church's ecclesiological thinking and practice in the right direction for these postmodern times.³⁹ Perhaps many of the answers lie within the encyclical's own theological reflections – it is simply that the ecclesiological implications of them need to be brought to the fore.

Let us hope that the church in our times comes to be – more fully – that sacrament of salvation that is both the sign and

³⁷ Natalie Watson, *Introducing Feminist Ecclesiology*, London, Sheffield Academic Press, 2002, 118 (my italics). C.f., also, *ibid.*, 120 and Watson, 'Feminist Ecclesiologies' in Gerard Mannion and Lewis Mudge (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to the Christian Church*, forthcoming, 2007, where Watson, in discussing Letty Russell's work, states that 'The life of the Church is the continuation of the liberating praxis of Jesus and of the life of God's Trinitarian activity'.

³⁸ Indeed, note that one finds a somewhat different employment of trinitarian theology in the ecclesiological writings of Joseph Ratzinger (as private theologian), which, as one key study illustrates well, lends itself to a reaffirmation of a distinctly hierarchical understanding of the church today, see, Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998.

³⁹ I discuss the promise of trinitarian ecclesiology for these times in greater detail in the final chapters *Ecclesiology and Postmodernity*.

mediation of the triune God whose very essence is a radically egalitarian community of love, of *caritas*. Truly, the revelation, the self-communication, the gracious gift of God's very self to humanity, tells us this: a call to communion with God is a call to communion with all others – it is a call to *caritas*.

What does this all this mean for the church today? It means that in its actions and in its being – its daily life, the church, however imperfectly, provisionally and tentatively, the church should always strive to bear witness to, to be the sign and the mediation of the very self-communication of God to the world. To be a sacrament of grace, of salvation, 'for God so loved the world'. Christianity believes in a God whose being is a community of love, of blissful perichoresis, of unity in diversity – celebrating the differing 'modes of being', the 'relational distinctions', the classical understanding of 'persona' (role in the community) which represent our tentative steps towards grasping the nature of God's own very self *and* that self in its salvific activity in the world (in other words, the respective immanent and economic articulations of our theologising).

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