

## Reflections on *Deus Caritas Est* A Tour Through the Casbah

MICHAEL SHERWIN, OP  
*University of Fribourg*  
*Fribourg, Switzerland*

TRAVELERS TO Algeria have long been captivated by the narrow streets and exotic inhabitants of the ancient district in the heart of Algiers known as the Casbah, a word synonymous with mystery.<sup>1</sup> Those who study the nature of love enter a similarly ancient and exotic inner fortress: the Casbah of human culture, a place where the attentive traveler encounters all the varied realities that commonly bear the name of love. In his brief encyclical, Pope Benedict does not explore all the twisted lanes of love's topography. Instead, he introduces its essential features. Benedict is an experienced guide who chooses the points of interest with care.<sup>2</sup> He traces his itinerary by means of the questions he asks, explicitly posing twelve of them (six in each of the encyclical's two parts). It is the answer he gives, however, to an unexpressed thirteenth question—Why write an encyclical on charity?—that reveals the encyclical's particular relevance for Christians today. Indeed, in relation to the pope's implied question, the experience of Algeria offers more than a mere metaphor for love. It can serve to illustrate the pope's primary concern. Specifically, the witness of the Trappist monks of Tibhirine, who were martyred during Algeria's most recent civil war, embodies Benedict's conception of Christian love. This essay will consider the pope's questions and sketch the theology of charity he develops in answer to them. It will then offer in

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this essay was delivered as the Charles Cardinal Journet Lecture, April 7, 2006, at Ave Maria University, Naples, Florida.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, his encyclopedia article on the history of love: Joseph Ratzinger, "Liebe: III. Geschichte der Theologie der Liebe," in *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, vol. 6, eds. Josef Höfer and Karl Rahner (Freiburg: Herder, 1961), 1032–36.

conclusion the example of Algeria's martyred monks as a model of the charity Pope Benedict is calling us to live.

## I

### *The First Question: Love's Plurality*

The pope begins his exploration of charity by posing the age-old question of love's plurality. We speak of loving God and of loving our neighbor. There is romantic love and also the physical act of "making love." People even speak of loving their dogs or a horse or a good glass of wine. In light of this plurality, Benedict asks: "[A]re all these forms of love basically one, so that love, in its many and varied manifestations, is ultimately a single reality, or are we merely using the same word to designate totally different realities?"<sup>3</sup> Josef Pieper calls this question the "true difficulty" confronting the student of love.<sup>4</sup>

The pope will subsequently answer his first question on the side of unity, discerning a single reality underlying all our loves.<sup>5</sup> Before doing so, however, Benedict focuses on two types of love, employing the Greek terms *eros* and *agape* to distinguish them. This narrowing of focus is justified because these loves seem to signify opposite extremes.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, some authors even present them as mutually exclusive.<sup>7</sup> *Eros* signifies the passive aspect of love, which is proper to romantic love and is conveyed by such expressions as "falling in love" or being "love sick." It is powerfully experienced in the "love between man and woman which is neither planned nor willed, but somehow imposes itself upon human beings."<sup>8</sup> *Agape*, on the other hand, expresses the active aspect of love proper to the biblical conception of love and conveyed in such expressions as "love seeks not its own" (1 Cor 13:5). While *eros* is a desire to possess the other, *agape* is a concern for the other that seeks the other's good even to the point of renunciation and self-sacrifice. Although some accuse Catholi-

<sup>3</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope and Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 145. In the early sections of *Deus Caritas Est*, the pope follows Pieper's analysis closely.

<sup>5</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Josef Pieper explains his own focus on *eros* and *agape* in words that Pope Benedict could have used to explain his similar focus on them: "*Eros* and *agape* remain more important, as the words that with presumably mutually exclusive intent rally the sides and determine the character of the philosophical and theological disputation in which we mean to intervene vigorously in the course of the following pages." Pieper, *Faith, Hope and Love*, 156–57.

<sup>7</sup> Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (London: SPCK, 1953), 51–52.

<sup>8</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 3.

cism of corrupting biblical *agape* by mixing it with pagan *eros*, Benedict first addresses the opposite critique: that Christianity denigrates and suppresses *eros*. This leads Benedict, even before he has answered his first question concerning love's plurality, to ask another.

### *The Second Question: Christianity's Attitude Toward Eros*

Pope Benedict cites Friedrich Nietzsche's aphorism that "Christianity gave *Eros* poison to drink—but he did not die of it. He degenerated into a vice."<sup>9</sup> The pope then asks, "But is this the case? Did Christianity really destroy *eros*?"<sup>10</sup> To answer this question he turns to the pagan experience of *eros*, which enables him to clarify further the distinction between *eros* and *agape*. Although the Greeks recognized the presence of *eros* in the passionate love between a man and a woman, they never reduced *eros* merely to sex.<sup>11</sup> They regarded it as a phenomenon similar in its effects to intoxication and as a reaction provoked by the beauty and goodness of the beloved. *Eros* draws the lover out of himself toward union with the beloved and ultimately toward union with the divine—toward the source of the beloved's beauty and goodness. The promise of *eros*, therefore, is happiness through union with the divine. It is the love that inspires the poet to search for his ideal of beauty, and the mystic to search beyond created things for their creator.<sup>12</sup> Benedict notes, however, that pagan

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, part 4, no. 168.

<sup>10</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 4. The pope describes the notion that Christianity destroys *eros* as a "widely held perception" expressed in questions such as: "Doesn't the Church, with all her commandments and prohibitions, turn to bitterness the most precious thing in life?" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 3); "Doesn't she blow the whistle just when the joy which is the Creator's gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine?" (*ibid.*). The pope's own second question is thus a summary of these concerns.

<sup>11</sup> Josef Pieper cites with approval the following observations by Rollo May: "The curious thing to our ears is how rarely the Latins speak of *sexus*. Sex, to them, was no issue; it was *amor* they were concerned about. Similarly, everyone knows the Greek word *eros*, but practically no one has ever heard of their term for 'sex.' It is *phýlon* . . . a zoological term" (Rollo May, *Love and Will* [New York: Norton, 1969], 73); "We are in flight from *eros*—and we use sex as the vehicle for the flight" (*ibid.*, 65). See Pieper, *Faith, Hope and Love*, 157–58. Although anyone who has read Ovid might hesitate to affirm too great a distinction in the Roman mind between *amor* and *sexus*, May's point is well taken and accords well with the pope's critique of the contemporary tendency to reduce *eros* to sex. See also C. S. Lewis's observations on the relationship between sex and *eros*, especially the patently obvious but often overlooked fact that the former can exist without the latter. C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (London: Harper Collins, 1960), 111–40.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, St. John of the Cross's description of his bittersweet encounter with created things, all of which whisper to him, "Pouring out a thousand

religion too often expressed this insight by means of fertility cults and “sacred” prostitution, thereby misunderstanding the true nature of the divine fellowship that *eros* desires. Human experience teaches that *eros* must be purified if it is to attain its goal: “[E]ros tends to rise ‘in ecstasy’ towards the divine, to lead us beyond ourselves; yet for this very reason it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification, and healing.”<sup>13</sup> Benedict offers here his initial response to the notion that Christianity destroys *eros*. Although there have been currents in Christian history that have denigrated the bodily aspects of *eros*, the true goal of the Gospel message is to purify, not destroy *eros*. “Purification and growth in maturity are called for; and these also pass through the path of renunciation. Far from rejecting or ‘poisoning’ *eros*, they heal it and restore its true grandeur.”<sup>14</sup> Up to this point Pope Benedict has said nothing that Plato, Plotinus, or any of the neo-Platonists could not have said as well. They too were dismayed by the vulgarities of pagan ritual. They too sought to purify *eros* and ascend to union with the divine.<sup>15</sup> The uniquely Christian contribution to our understanding of *eros* emerges when one considers the nature of the purifications that *eros* requires. It is in this context that Benedict introduces his third and fourth questions.

### *The Third and Fourth Questions: Christianity and the Purification of Eros*

After affirming the need to purify *eros* in its ecstatic assent toward the divine, the pope asks two related questions: “Concretely, what does this path of ascent and purification entail? How might love be experienced so that it can fully realize its human and divine promise?”<sup>16</sup> Benedict dedicates the bulk of the remaining first half of his letter to addressing these

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graces,/he passed these groves in haste;/and having looked at them,/with his image alone,/clothed them in beauty,” which only leaves John desiring God all the more, and no longer satisfied by his created messengers: “Do not send me/any more messengers;/they cannot tell me what I must hear” (*Spiritual Canticle*, vv. 5 and 6, in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D., and Otilio Rodriguez, O.C.D., rev. ed. [Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991]). John’s description of his experiences is also influenced by the *Confessions*, where Augustine affirms that whoever cultivates internal silence will hear the transient things of this world whisper: “We did not make ourselves, but He made us who abides forever.” *Confessions*, 9.10.

<sup>13</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> See John Rist, *Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus and Origen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961).

<sup>16</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 6.

two questions. He first turns to a literal reading of the *Song of Songs*. As “love-songs” written “to exalt conjugal love,”<sup>17</sup> the book contains insights into the nature of marital love. Here again we find two different words for love. There is the overtly sexual word, *dodim*, with which the book begins (Sg 1:2: “Let him kiss me with kisses of his mouth! More delightful is your love [*dodim*] than wine”), and there is the more general biblical term for love (*ahabah*) that is often used to express God’s love for his people and is employed here in such key texts as “stern as death is love [*ahabah*], relentless as the nether world is devotion” (Sg 8:6). The pope sees these poems as portraying passionate love in the context of a mutual self-revelation that leads the lovers to seek each other’s good, even to the point of renunciation and self-sacrifice. This aspect of love’s dynamism reveals the true sense in which love is an ecstasy. It is an ongoing and liberating journey from “the closed inward-looking self” toward a self-giving concern for the other. As such, it is also a movement toward “authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.”<sup>18</sup> In this movement, love becomes “finalized,” in the sense that it attains a definitive object and duration. It is an exclusive and unending love for this particular person.<sup>19</sup>

In his analysis of love’s purification Benedict is simply summarizing the experience of faithful lovers throughout history. Their love often begins with romantic infatuation that leads the lovers together. The beloved becomes the all-consuming object of the other’s attention; yet at this stage the lover’s knowledge of the beloved remains superficial. In a sense, the lovers are in love with being in love, and the beloved is viewed in many ways from the perspective of the pleasure he or she produces in the lover. In other words, romantic love often begins with a powerful element of self-love (even though this element may be unperceived by the lovers themselves): The beloved holds me enthralled partly because of the joy she brings me, because of the ways in which she completes what in me is lacking. There is much in this initial stage that is illusion. We are in love with an ideal type that no creature can fulfill. The very force of romantic infatuation, however, pushes the lovers toward learning more about each other and, thus, toward a truer understanding of the other. Eventually, through the crises and trials of the relationship the lovers come to see each other more truly, and a shift occurs. While romance will always have a place, an element that was present in the beginning begins to grow in prominence. It is the celebration of the other: the affirmation through word and deed that “it is good that you exist, that you are in this

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

world.”<sup>20</sup> There is also that element of finalization, where each is led to choose the other as an exclusive partner for life. Once again another shift in emphasis occurs, and an element that was already present acquires new prominence. Mature human love is not so much two gazing into each other’s eyes, as two people shoulder to shoulder focused on the common object of their love.<sup>21</sup> In the economy of the family, this entails the lovers’ common concern for their children. Their love, however, also naturally tends toward a common concern for the ultimate source of their love, which is in God. Like spokes on a wheel that converge at the center, the lovers draw closer as they focus on God by making him the center of their lives. In all of this, the romance and power of *eros* leads faithful lovers to the mature celebration of the other in the affirming love of *agape*.

At this point in his analysis, the pope answers his first two questions. He begins by sharpening the distinction between *eros* and *agape*. *Eros* signifies a “worldly,” “possessive,” and “ascending” love, while *agape* is a faith-shaped, “oblative” (that is, sacrificial), and “descending” love.<sup>22</sup> Benedict notes that both in theology and in philosophy the distinction between these two loves has often been radicalized to the point of establishing “a clear antithesis” between pagan *eros* and Christian *agape*.<sup>23</sup> The logical consequence of this antithesis would be to detach Christianity from the fundamental relationships and experiences of human life.<sup>24</sup> The pope counters that “*eros* and *agape*—ascending love and descending love—can never be completely separated. The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized.”<sup>25</sup> Thus, just after he has contrasted these two loves most sharply, Benedict begins to blur the distinction between them. First, true *eros* always contains an element of *agape*. Second, true *agape* always also has an element of receptive *eros*.

Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous and ascending, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other, it is less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, is concerned more and more with the beloved, bestows itself and wants to “be there for” the other. The element of *agape* thus enters into

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<sup>20</sup> See Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, 167–69.

<sup>21</sup> Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Terre des Hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1939); Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 73.

<sup>22</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 7.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* This is no doubt a reference to the views of Anders Nygren in his classic study *Agape and Eros* (London: SPCK, 1953).

<sup>24</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive. Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift.<sup>26</sup>

Through affirming the interconnectedness between *eros* and *agape*, the pope is able finally to answer his first question concerning love's plurality by affirming an underlying unity:

Fundamentally, "love" is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly. Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love.<sup>27</sup>

The recognition of this underlying unity also enables Pope Benedict to respond to his second question concerning Christianity's attitude toward *eros*: "Biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe, or one opposed to that primordial human phenomenon which is love, but rather accepts the whole man; it intervenes in his search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it."<sup>28</sup>

Although Benedict has already begun to sketch answers to his third and fourth questions, it is only when he turns to "the newness of biblical faith" that he develops the features of these answers. Thus far in his analysis, even though he has frequently included proleptic references to the role of Christ and the theology of the early Church, the pope has remained close to the general human experience of love. Now, however, his "somewhat philosophical reflections" have led us "to the threshold of biblical faith."<sup>29</sup> It is by crossing this threshold that we discover the deeper meaning of the relationship between *eros* and *agape*.

### *The Newness of Biblical Faith*

Biblical faith brings to the human experience of love the radical discovery that God loves us with a personal and passionate love. God is not merely the object of *eros*, as Aristotle held; he is also a lover. He loves humanity with *eros*. To understand what this means for Benedict, we must turn to the work of the patristic author whom he cites to justify this claim. Pseudo-Dionysius was a sixth-century theologian who attempted to convey the Christian message to the pagan and neo-Platonic culture in which he lived.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., no. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., no. 7.

In a work dedicated to studying the divine names, he asserts that both *agape* and *eros* are proper names for God.<sup>30</sup> Although he recognizes that *eros* appears nowhere in the New Testament, Pseudo-Dionysius affirms that the two terms are synonymous.<sup>31</sup> The goal of this identification is not to reduce *agape* to *eros*, but to reveal in neo-Platonic language an essential and revolutionary feature of God's love that is at the heart of biblical revelation.<sup>32</sup> The pagan philosopher Proclus had already developed the view that there was a "descending *eros*" exhibited by a particular group of gods in their providential care for humans.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Plotinus had already characterized the first principle of all things as Eros.<sup>34</sup> As such, Eros provoked ecstasy in all things, an ecstatic *eros* whereby they moved toward the Eros/One because of its beauty. Pseudo-Dionysius reworks these neo-Platonic elements to make a very un-neo-Platonic affirmation: God himself is an ecstatic *eros*. Unlike Plato's notion of *eros*, which always implied a lack, God's *eros* springs from the superabundance of his goodness.<sup>35</sup> God, freely from the riches of his goodness, loves and cares for his creation.<sup>36</sup> Thus, as the pope underlines, God's *eros* is entirely *agape*.<sup>37</sup> It is gratuitous in the sense that it is unmotivated and freely given. It is not a response to the beauty and goodness of creation, but is the cause of it. God's love is said to be passionate by analogy with the intensity of human passion. Divine passion, however, is not based on a lack existing in God, but rather on the unfulfilled character of human existence. God passionately desires that we attain the fulfillment for which the human community was created: perfect union with him in the community of the Trinity. Ultimately, the character of this passionate love is revealed in the Incarnation and cross of Jesus who suffers to make this fulfillment possible.<sup>38</sup> The cross also points to the second agapic feature of God's *eros*, a feature already

<sup>30</sup> In this identification he is following the example of Origen (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, prologue [PG 13, 70D]), who also cites Ignatius of Antioch's affirmation in an apparent reference to Christ: "My *Eros* is crucified." *Letter to the Romans*, 7, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, 4.12 (709B).

<sup>32</sup> See John Rist, "A Note on Eros and Agape in Pseudo-Dionysius," *Vigiliae Christianae* 20 (1966): 235–43; A. H. Armstrong, "Platonic Eros and Christian Agape," *Downside Review* 79 (1961): 105–21.

<sup>33</sup> Proclus, *Commentary on Alcibiades*, 56, 2–6, p. 25 (Westerink). Rist, "A Note on Eros and Agape," 239.

<sup>34</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6.8.15. Rist, "A Note on Eros and Agape," 239.

<sup>35</sup> See Plato, *Symposium*, 211. Rist, "A Note on Eros and Agape," 243.

<sup>36</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius, *On the Divine Names*, 4.13 (712A and B). Rist, "A Note on Eros and Agape," 241.

<sup>37</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 9.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 10.



revealed by the Old Testament prophets: God's love is forgiving. God not only loves us, he overcomes our infidelity by forgiving us our sins. It is here that the *Song of Songs* emerges in a new light.<sup>39</sup> According to their fuller meaning (*sensus plenior*), the book's poems describe God's love for his people and the Church's response of love. As such they point to the deeper interconnection between *eros* and *agape*. The people's desire for God leads them to a mature worship of God whereby they affirm his goodness, and love and desire what He loves and desires. At the same time, however, their generous and sacrificial love is possible only because of the love God himself has poured into their hearts.

Benedict notes that biblical revelation not only offers a revolutionary understanding of God's love, it also reveals the unique beauty of human love. As a created participation in God's *eros*, *eros* is a positive and holy part of human nature that is called to grow ever more deeply agapic in character. This occurs in a unique way through marriage. Human *eros* "directs man towards marriage," which by its monogamous character is a visible sign of God's permanent and faithful love for his people. From this perspective, family life and the daily ordinariness of marital love acquire a dignity and a relationship to God that "has practically no equivalent in extra biblical literature."<sup>40</sup> In the sacrament of marriage, couples are called to love each other in ways that reflect and participate in God's generous and forgiving love.

### *Jesus Christ—The Incarnate Love of God*

Benedict underlines, however, that God reveals the fullness of his love for humanity in the Incarnation. The life, death, and resurrection of Christ give "flesh and blood" to the biblical conception of love.<sup>41</sup> It is especially by Christ's death on the cross that we encounter "love in its most radical form."<sup>42</sup> Indeed, it is by "contemplating the pierced side of Christ" that the Christian learns what it means to affirm that "God is love."<sup>43</sup> Benedict even goes so far as to assert that the cross of Christ is the true starting point of the Christian definition of love. It is here that the pope offers his fullest answer to his third and fourth questions. Initially the pope affirmed, in answer to the fourth question, that it is by living "a life of fidelity to the one God"<sup>44</sup> that love can fully realize its human and divine

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., no. 11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., no. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> 1 Jn 4:8; *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 12.

<sup>44</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 9.

promise. The pope has also, in answer to his third question, traced the general features of the purifications required of human love. Now he portrays the cross of Christ as the concrete path of ascent and purification through which Christian love must pass. "In this contemplation [of the pierced side of Christ] the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move."<sup>45</sup>

When the pope portrays Christ as the way by which the ascent of love must pass, he is echoing the famous passage from the *Confessions* where Augustine describes how his attempts at mystical ascent failed because they were not rooted in the humility and charity of Christ.<sup>46</sup> Augustine describes how, following the advice of the Platonists, he was able to ascend to a fleeting mystical union with God, but fell back because of his weakness. Lasting ascent only becomes possible by embracing Christ who is the "Mediator between God and Man" and "the way, the truth, and the life." It is by descending with Jesus that we are able to rise to the heights with his rising. Augustine confides that this led him to see the vast difference between seeing the goal and seeing the way to it.<sup>47</sup> In a passage that will subsequently shape Dante's description of his own plight at the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, Augustine concludes:

It is one thing to see the land of peace from a wooded mountaintop, yet not find the way to it and struggle hopelessly far from the way, with hosts of those fugitive deserters from God, under their leader the lion and the Dragon, besetting us about and ever lying in wait; and quite another to hold to the way that leads there, a way guarded by the care of our heavenly General, where there are no deserters from the army of heaven to practice their robberies—for indeed they avoid that way as a torment.<sup>48</sup>

The delights of human *eros* are like the heights of a wooded mountaintop. They offer a glimpse of our goal, but not the way to it. C. S. Lewis explains the implications of Augustine's analogy by distinguishing between "near-

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., no. 12.

<sup>46</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.9–21. For an excellent analysis of this experience at Milan and a comparison of it in relation to Augustine's experience at Ostia (ibid., 9.10), see Thomas Williams, "Augustine vs Plotinus: The Uniqueness of the Vision at Ostia," in *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism, and Christianity*, ed. John Inglis (New York: Curzon Press, 2002), 169–79.

<sup>47</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.20. The pope also portrays St. Benedict as having passed through an analogous purification and ascent. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 159–61.

<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.21. Cf. Dante, *Inferno*, 1.1–60.

ness-by-likeness” and “nearness-of-approach.”<sup>49</sup> All human loves are near to God by likeness, for God is love. This is especially true in their most noble expressions as in family affection, friendship, or devotion to one’s community. These loves are near to God the way one mountain peak is near the next, through a nearness-by-likeness. Being on the top of one is *like* being on the top of the other. It is not, however, the same as being on that other peak. To be there requires “that slow and painful approach which must be our (though by no means our unaided) task.” This nearness-of-approach, Lewis explains, is “an imitation of God incarnate.”<sup>50</sup>

The pope has long placed “great weight” on this section of the *Confessions* not only because of its focus on Christ, but also because of the way Augustine presents the centrality of Christ in an ecclesial and Eucharistic context.<sup>51</sup> The Christ who strengthens Augustine is the Eucharistic Christ: “who brought into union with our nature that Food which I lacked the strength to take: for ‘the Word was made flesh’ that Your Wisdom, by which You created all things, might give suck to our soul’s

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<sup>49</sup> Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 5. Lewis reworks Augustine’s metaphor, making it a more prosaic mountain walk where one is close to the village while above it on an outcrop, but to arrive there one must follow a long trail (*ibid.*, 5–7).

<sup>50</sup> Lewis draws his study to a close through words that mirror the pope’s teaching closely and also reveal some hint of the sufferings Lewis had recently experienced during the first onset of his wife’s cancer: “Man can ascend to Heaven only because the Christ, who died and ascended to Heaven, is ‘formed in him.’ Must we not suppose that the same is true of a man’s love? Only those into which Love Himself has entered will ascend to Love Himself. And these can be raised with Him only if they have, in some degree and fashion, shared his death; if the natural element in them has submitted—year after year, or in some sudden agony—to transmutation. The fashion of this world passes away. The very name of nature implies the transitory. Natural loves can hope for eternity only in so far as they have allowed themselves to be taken into the eternity of Charity; have at least allowed the process to begin here on earth, before the night comes when no man can work. And the process will always involve a kind of death. There is no escape. In my love for wife or friend the only eternal element is the transforming presence of Love Himself.” Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 165–66.

<sup>51</sup> With regard to this passage, Aidan Nichols in his 1988 study of Joseph Ratzinger’s thought affirms that, “Ratzinger places great weight on a text of the *Confessions* where Augustine laments that a momentary vision of God which once came to him could not be sustained or re-created in memory, owing to human ‘infirmity.’ Because of such weakness some means of help beyond the self must be sought. . . . Since he cannot bear the divine ‘food’ in its pure form, the divine Word has mingled itself with flesh so that man may be able to enjoy it. In the Church, the divine humility has provided a medicine by its own example for the sickness from which none is immune.” Aidan Nichols, *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (London: T&T Clark, 1988), 32.

infancy.”<sup>52</sup> Not surprising, therefore, the pope links our following of Christ to the Eucharist and develops its ecclesial implications. Echoing the language of St. Augustine, the pope affirms that Jesus gave his sacrificial love “an enduring presence through his institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. He anticipated his death and resurrection by giving his disciples, in the bread and wine, his very self, his body and blood as the new manna.”<sup>53</sup> Once again, the pope underlines how God’s action is the fulfillment of the deepest aspirations of the human heart: “The ancient world had dimly perceived that man’s real food—what truly nourishes him as man—is ultimately the *Logos*, eternal wisdom: this same *Logos* now truly becomes food for us—as love.”<sup>54</sup> The Eucharist is not something static that we receive passively. Instead, through the Eucharist “we enter into the very dynamic of [Christ’s] self-giving.”<sup>55</sup>

Here we find the pope’s fullest response to his third question. Our love is purified through the “sacramental mysticism” of the Eucharist, which exceeds both in height and in breadth anything that human culture could imagine on its own. Not only does this sacramental mysticism raise us “to far greater heights than anything that any human mystical elevation could ever accomplish,”<sup>56</sup> it also goes out to all people, uniting us in the one bread, the body of Christ. As such, the Eucharist was rightly called *agape* by the early Church, because “there God’s own *agape* comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us.”<sup>57</sup> This means on the one hand that the Church’s good works can never be separated from the life of grace, faith, and the sacraments, while on the other hand the reception of the sacraments always implies an ethical commitment to works of charity. As a consequence, “Faith, worship, and *ethos* are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God’s *agape*. Here the usual contraposition between worship and ethics simply falls apart.”<sup>58</sup> In language reminiscent of Dom Virgil Michel’s insistence on the social implications of the Eucharist,<sup>59</sup> the pope explains that “‘worship’ itself,

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<sup>52</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.18.

<sup>53</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 13; cf. Jn 6:31–33.

<sup>54</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 13.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 14.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> See Virgil Michel, “The Liturgy the Basis of Social Regeneration,” *Orate Fratres* 9 (1934–35): 536–45 (reprinted in *American Catholic Religious Thought: The Shaping of a Theological and Social Tradition*, ed. Patrick W. Carey [Marquette: Marquette University Press, 2004], 424–33).

Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn.”<sup>60</sup> Consequently, “a Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented.”<sup>61</sup> Through living the reality of the Eucharist in our lives, Christian love extends out to all people. All people become our “neighbor” through a love that “is now universalized, yet remains concrete.”<sup>62</sup> It is here that Pope Benedict poses the last two questions of the encyclical’s first part.

*The Fifth and Sixth Questions:  
On Loving God and Neighbor*

The pope’s fifth and sixth questions enable him to probe more deeply what it means to love God. He first ponders whether we can “love God without seeing him.” Then, in reference to the biblical commandments to love God and neighbor, he inquires whether love can be commanded.<sup>63</sup> The pope begins with the observation that although no one has ever seen God as he is in his essence, nevertheless, “God is not totally invisible to us.”<sup>64</sup> First, he became visible to a particular historical generation in Israel through the incarnation of Christ. Second, the incarnate Christ remains visible to us in word and deed through the Scriptures and the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Third, God is visible to us through the lives and example of the people we meet who share his love. “In the Church’s Liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we perceive his presence, and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives.”<sup>65</sup> This encounter with God’s love enables us to love God in return: “He loves us, He makes us see and experience his love; and since He has ‘loved us first,’ love can also blossom as a response within us.”<sup>66</sup>

Notice that Benedict does not proceed here in the way one might have expected. In responding to the question of how to love an invisible God, the pope refuses to reduce the love of God to the love of neighbor. Although he accepts the Johannine insight that we cannot love God if we hate our neighbor, he refuses to say that the way to love the unseen God is simply and solely by loving the neighbor we can see. Instead, the pope

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<sup>60</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 14.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 15.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 16: “[C]an we love God without seeing him? And can love be commanded?”

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 17.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

keeps the focus on God by partially denying his question's premise. We can love the unseen God, because God has in a certain sense made himself visible. He reveals his love for us, and it is by experiencing this love that we can learn to love him in return.

In his description of how we grow in the love of God, the pope considers the ways in which love is a choice. As we have seen, the pope follows a long tradition of employing the term *eros* to describe those aspects of love that do not seem to be voluntary. It is a passion that comes over us or something we fall into. As love grows, however, an element of freedom enters into it. Indeed, at the core of love's purification is its deepening presence in the spiritual heart of the person: in his intellect and will. The experience of being loved by God "engages our will and our intellect,"<sup>67</sup> and thus empowers us freely to love him in return. In a free act we both acknowledge God and accept his will for us in an act that "unites our intellect, will, and sentiments in the all-embracing act of love."<sup>68</sup> Moreover, all mature human love entails a union of wills over the essentials, and our love for God is no exception. "The love-story between God and man consists in the very fact that this communion of will increases in a communion of thought and sentiment, and thus our will and God's will increasingly coincide."<sup>69</sup> The result of this affective communion is that God's will and his commandments are no longer experienced as "an alien will" or as "something imposed on [us] from without."<sup>70</sup> These two features of our mature love for God—its freedom and interiority—are what make love something that God can command of us. He can command it because by loving us he both gives us the ability to fulfill the command and the desire to do so.<sup>71</sup> As the pope states in the encyclical's introduction, "Since God has first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10), love is now no longer a mere 'command'; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us."<sup>72</sup> We can thus make Augustine's prayer our own: "Give what you command, and command what you will."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., no. 18. Benedict develops this theme in subsequent sections of his letter. First, "the command of love of neighbor is inscribed by the Creator in man's very nature" (ibid., no. 31). Second, for those who have encountered the love of God in Christ, "love of neighbor will no longer be for them a commandment imposed, so to speak, from without, but a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love (cf. Gal 5:6)" (ibid., no. 31).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., no. 1.

<sup>73</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.29.

It is only at this point, after considering how the mature love for God involves the whole person (intellect, will, and emotion) and entails a communion of heart and mind with God, that the pope sketches how the love of neighbor is “possible in the way proclaimed by the Bible.”<sup>74</sup> Because of God’s loving initiative, which is communicated to us through the liturgical and communal life of the Christian community, we can begin to see all people as our neighbors whom we are disposed to love—even those whom we do not “like,” do not know personally, or even those who are our enemies. In the gift of faith we can see them “with the eyes of Christ,” and in the gift of charity we can love them with the love of Christ.<sup>75</sup> The patristic aphorism that “His friend is my friend,” becomes true to such an extent that we can even treat our enemies from God’s perspective: as those called to be our intimate friends in heaven.<sup>76</sup> This last feature of our love of neighbor has important implications for how Christians organize their charitable acts and their social and political engagement in the world, which is the subject of the encyclical’s second part.

## II

Although it is true that the second part of the encyclical draws on material already in preparation before Joseph Ratzinger’s election as pope, the final product is very much crafted according to his own deepest concerns.<sup>77</sup> In his 1954 doctoral dissertation on the ecclesiology of St. Augustine, Ratzinger already emphasized that works of charity are an

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<sup>74</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 18.

<sup>75</sup> The pope also underlines how the two objects of our love interact: “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” (ibid., no. 18). In other words, our love for God pushes us to love our neighbor and our encounters with our neighbor deepen our love for God.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., no. 18.

<sup>77</sup> Pope Benedict explains elsewhere that, “A first reading of the Encyclical could possibly give the impression that it is divided into two parts that are not very connected: a first part, theoretical, which speaks about the essence of love, and a second, which speaks of ecclesial charity and charitable organizations. I was particularly interested, however, in the unity of the two themes that are well understood only if seen as a whole.” “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants at the Meeting Promoted by the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*” (Monday, 23 January 2006), [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/january/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060123\\_cor-unum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060123_cor-unum_en.html).

essential feature of the Church's mission.<sup>78</sup> The pope reiterates this truth in the introductory sections of the encyclical's second part. By means of a quick historical sketch of ecclesial practice that begins with the Acts of the Apostles and continues to the Church at Rome under Gregory the Great, the pope underlines "two essential facts."<sup>79</sup> First, "ecclesial charity,"<sup>80</sup> which Benedict describes as a "well-ordered love of neighbor" administered communally,<sup>81</sup> is an expression of the "Church's deepest nature."<sup>82</sup> Specifically, in an activity that flows from the Triune economy of God's action in the world, the Church expresses itself in the threefold activity "of proclaiming the word of God [*kerygma-martyria*], celebrating the sacraments [*leitourgia*], and exercising the ministry of charity [*diakonia*]."<sup>83</sup> Benedict emphasizes that the ministry of charity is as essential to the Church's life as is the celebration of the Eucharist and has consequently always been associated with it.<sup>84</sup> Second, ecclesial charity has a twofold character: It is directed toward the needs of its visible members (because no Christian should go without the essentials of life), and it is a universal love that goes out beyond the visible Church to all those in need.<sup>85</sup> After these introductory remarks, Benedict considers charity's relationship to justice.

### *The Seventh Question: What Is Justice?*

In his study of Augustine's ecclesiology, Ratzinger underlined the role of faith and the role of charity in the Church's life.<sup>86</sup> Pope Benedict does the same here. First, he emphasizes the importance of faith in helping secular society discern the requirements of justice. The Church acknowledges the "autonomy of the temporal sphere," and thus also the distinction between Church and State. The State must not impose a particular religion upon its citizens, but neither must it exclude the legitimate freedom of religion to exist within society.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the just ordering of society is the responsibility of politics. Secular society, therefore, cannot

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<sup>78</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (People and House of God in Augustine's Doctrine of the Church) (Munich: Herder, 1954). See, Nichols, *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*, 27–50.

<sup>79</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 25.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 23.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 21.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 25.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, nos. 22 and 32.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 25.

<sup>86</sup> See Nichols, *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger*, 32–33.

<sup>87</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28.



avoid the question of Justice. “What is justice?”<sup>88</sup> The issue here is not the definition of justice, but its application to particular situations. Each society is faced with the question, What does justice entail in this specific situation? Benedict does not intend to answer the question, but to underline that the answer requires a judgment of practical reason. Reason, however, is constantly threatened by the temptations of power and self-interest. To function properly, practical reason must continually be purified. This is where the contribution of faith emerges. The gift of faith purifies and strengthens reason, enabling reason “to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly.”<sup>89</sup> From this perspective, the Church’s role in political life is not to control the State or to take its place. Instead, through its social teaching, which appeals to reason and the natural law, it seeks to persuade the citizens of secular society concerning the requirements of justice. This process of persuasion seeks both to form consciences and to instill a “greater readiness” to act according to the dictates of conscience.<sup>90</sup> The pope is concerned to show, as he has argued elsewhere, that Christian faith is not irrational but seeks to strengthen reason in its quest for truth and justice.<sup>91</sup> Far from being a threat to society, the Church’s efforts to form consciences about the requirements of justice can help society protect itself from irrational enthusiasms and destructive special interests. Nevertheless, even the most just society needs charity.<sup>92</sup> This is true because even when material needs are satisfied people still experience suffering and loneliness, challenges that can only be met through a “loving personal concern” that offers them “refreshment and care for their souls.”<sup>93</sup> This leads the pope to ask his eighth question.

### *The Eighth Question: On Christian and Ecclesial Charity*

The pope begins his analysis of ecclesial charity by distinguishing it from the charity that animates the political engagement of individual Christian citizens. Although “charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faith-

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> See, Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 138–258. This was also a theme in the pope’s controversial address at Regensburg. “Meeting with the Representatives of Science: Lecture of the Holy Father, Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg” (September 12, 2006), [www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060912\\_university-regensburg\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html).

<sup>92</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

ful, and therefore also their political activity,” this activity is not the sum total of the Church’s charitable action. There is also “ecclesial charity” administered by the Church’s “charitable organizations” as an “organized activity of believers” and constituting an “*opus proprium*” of the Church.<sup>94</sup> After considering some features of the current situation in which ecclesial charity is lived, the pope asks, “what are the essential elements of Christian and ecclesial charity?”<sup>95</sup> The pope answers this question by identifying three such elements. First, Christian charity is a response to immediate needs in specific situations: “feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for and healing the sick, visiting those in prison, etc.”<sup>96</sup> Moreover, this response entails not merely professional competence on the part of these workers of charity, but also “a formation of the heart” that enables them to lead those whom they help to “experience the richness of their humanity.”<sup>97</sup> Thus, in order to respond to the integral needs of those whom they serve, these workers must themselves receive a formation that, through an encounter with Christ, “awakens their love and opens their spirits to others.”<sup>98</sup> Second, “Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies.”<sup>99</sup> Ecclesial charity is neither a means of “changing the world ideologically” or of preserving the status quo. Instead, in imitation of the Good Samaritan, charity flows from “a heart that sees.” It is a heart that “sees where love is needed and acts accordingly.”<sup>100</sup> Third, Christian charity is not a means of engaging in “proselytism,”<sup>101</sup> by which the pope means that charity is not a stratagem for persuading individuals to convert.

Those who practice charity in the Church’s name will never seek to impose the Church’s faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. He knows that God is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8) and that God’s presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., no. 29.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., no. 31.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

As a personal love, charity is never a means to a further end except in the sense of being ordered to love God. Charity is a free gift of love for one's neighbor springing from the neighbor's inherent dignity. This does not mean that charity excludes God from its activity or sees the acceptance of Christian Revelation as an unwanted byproduct of its activity. Ecclesial charity always bears witness to Christ. It does so, however, as a free gift and through quiet acts of service, speaking about God with words only when the moment is right.<sup>103</sup>

After identifying these three essential elements of ecclesial charity, Pope Benedict turns to those who administer this charity. Although the Holy See and the bishops have a unique responsibility for administering ecclesial charity, the duty of charity is "a responsibility incumbent upon the whole Church."<sup>104</sup> In this context, the pope reiterates the traits of character that workers of charity should have: "[T]hey must not be inspired by ideologies aimed at improving the world, but should rather be guided by the faith which works through love."<sup>105</sup> Since it is through experiencing Christ's love that love of neighbor is awakened within us, the deepest requirement for those who practice ecclesial charity is that they be "moved by Christ's love."<sup>106</sup> The inspiration underlying their activity should be St. Paul's affirmation that "the love of Christ urges us on."<sup>107</sup> In essence the pope is affirming that those who administer the Church's organized good works must be animated in their actions by the *agape* described in the first part of his letter. It is not enough simply to want to do good. As an expression of ecclesial love, their actions must flow from "a love nourished by an encounter with Christ."<sup>108</sup> One who loves with this *agape* recognizes with St. Paul that "if I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing."<sup>109</sup> Pope Benedict even goes so far as to assert that "[t]his hymn must be the *Magna Carta* of all ecclesial service; it sums up all the reflections on love which I have offered throughout this encyclical letter."<sup>110</sup> Ultimately, as this *agape* grows within us, we are inspired by the example of Christ "to live no longer for ourselves but for him, and, with him, for others."<sup>111</sup> The pope, however, recognizes the ever-present danger of discouragement before the overwhelming needs that

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., no. 32.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., no. 33; cf. Gal 5:6.

<sup>106</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 33.

<sup>107</sup> 2 Cor 5:14; *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 33.

<sup>108</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 34.

<sup>109</sup> 1 Cor 13:3; *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 34.

<sup>110</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 34.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., no. 33.

confront us and the seemingly insignificant results that we are able to attain. This leads Benedict to pose a series of questions that confront our relationship with God in the context of human suffering.

### *Questions Nine Through Eleven: The Question of God*

Pope Benedict acknowledges that the immensity of the needs confronting us can give rise to two powerful temptations. We can either be drawn toward an ideology that offers the illusory promise of “doing what God’s governance of the world apparently cannot: fully resolving every problem,” but which comes at the price of an “arrogant contempt for man,” or we can succumb to a resigned inertia, “since it would seem that in any event nothing can be accomplished.”<sup>112</sup> Benedict explains that during such times of temptation “a living relationship with Christ is decisive if we are to keep on the right path.”<sup>113</sup> Yet, how to cultivate such a relationship? The pope poses this question by quoting the words of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta: “We need this deep connection with God in our daily life. How can we obtain it?” Mother Teresa’s answer is decisively simple: “By prayer.”<sup>114</sup> It is a response that summarized the answer the pope had already begun to develop. Benedict appeals to the reader to see that “prayer, as a means of drawing ever new strength from Christ, is concretely and urgently needed.”<sup>115</sup> Countering the danger of a restless activism, the pope contends that “people who pray are not wasting their time, even though the situation appears desperate and seems to call for action alone.”<sup>116</sup> Once again Benedict offers Mother Teresa as an example. The balanced life of prayer and service that she practiced and that her sisters continue to live illustrates that “time devoted to God in prayer not only does not detract from effective and loving service to our neighbor but is in fact the inexhaustible source of that service.”<sup>117</sup> Indeed, time spend in prayer protects us from a form of discouragement that Benedict regards as closely linked to the secular rejection of God. It protects us from the disappointed rejection of God because of God’s seeming indifference to human suffering. “An authentically religious attitude” that the life of prayer sustains within us “prevents man from presuming to judge God, accusing him of allowing poverty and failing to have compassion for his creatures.”<sup>118</sup> It is poignantly

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid., no. 36.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., no. 37.

in this context that the pope asks his tenth question, a question he leaves his readers to answer for themselves: “[W]hen people claim to build a case against God in defense of man, on whom can they depend when human activity proves powerless?”<sup>119</sup> In a manner reminiscent of Augustine’s argument with the Stoics, the pope is inviting non-believers to recognize the powerlessness of human effort before the mystery of death. He makes this invitation with the confidence that in God’s grace an honest recognition of human limitation will open the non-believer to seek the ultimate meaning of his existence in the God who cries out to him.

Although the pope rejects the case against God, he acknowledges that human suffering nevertheless confronts the believer with a deep and painful mystery. The suffering of the innocent and the apparent inactivity of God are mysteries that the believer will never fully understand in this life. The human heart, however, cannot help but question God about this. Thus, although the pope asks a question of non-believers, he proposes a question for believers to ask their God. It is a question drawn from the Book of Revelation: “Lord, holy and true, how long will it be?”<sup>120</sup> The pope regards this question as the equivalent of Jesus’ agonized words from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46). These words themselves hold the key to interpreting Jesus’ attitude from the cross, because they are the initial words of Psalm 22. Although this psalm begins by describing the agony of the psalmist, it ends with the psalmist proclaiming God’s praises: “I will tell of your name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (Ps 22:22). The experience of the psalmist is that God “has not despised or abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; and He has not hid his face from him, but has heard, when he cried to Him” (Ps 22:24). By citing this psalm from the cross, Jesus reveals this confidence to be his own. The pope invites us to do the same. By embracing a question from the Book of Revelation, we are called to have the same confidence that the book itself symbolically proclaims: that “in spite of all darkness [God] ultimately triumphs in glory.”<sup>121</sup> Those who live the Church’s charity, therefore, question God in the midst of the sorrows of their ministry, but do so in faith, hope, and charity. United to the suffering Christ, their acts of charity are a light revealing the God whom they serve.<sup>122</sup> As we shall see, the pope offers Mary as an example of one who lives this charity. First, however, before turning to Benedict’s twelfth and final question—

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Rev 6:10; *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 38.

<sup>121</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 39; cf. Rev 21:1–22:21.

<sup>122</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 39.

the question of Mary—we should address the unexpressed question that has, in a certain sense, guided the pope's entire letter.

*The Unexpressed Question:  
Why Write an Encyclical on Charity?*

Pope Benedict famously introduces his encyclical with the Johannine affirmation that “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.”<sup>123</sup> Benedict describes this affirmation as “the heart of the Christian faith.”<sup>124</sup> Christian faith is about a personal encounter with God who reveals himself as love. The fundamental act of faith is thus “to believe in God's love.”<sup>125</sup> The consequence of faith in God's love is eternal life: “God so loved the world that whoever believes in Him should . . . have eternal life.”<sup>126</sup> The pope begins, therefore, by affirming that since God is love the object of Christian faith is love. It is in relation to this core message that the pope explains why he chose charity as the topic of his first encyclical.

In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant. For this reason, I wish in my first encyclical to speak of the love which God lavishes upon us and which we in turn must share with others.<sup>127</sup>

The pope wishes to speak to us about God's love because of the ways in which God, and by implication religion, have been associated with vengeance, violence, and hatred.

The pope returns to the theme of violence when he addresses the danger of ideology. As we have seen, Pope Benedict underlines that Christians must avoid the ideological temptation. Benedict offers the historical example of Marxism. Through its strategy of viewing charitable works as something that delays the advent of the liberating revolution, Marxism sacrificed the people of the present “to the *moloch* of the future,” a revolutionary future that Marxism was itself never able to inaugurate. The lesson the pope draws from this historical example is that, “one does not make the world more human by refusing to act humanely here and now.”<sup>128</sup> An integral part of Benedict's conception of ideology

<sup>123</sup> 1 Jn 4:16; *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1.

<sup>124</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1.

<sup>125</sup> 1 Jn 4:16; *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1.

<sup>126</sup> Jn 3:16. *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1.

<sup>127</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 31.

is that ideologies always paradoxically entail “an arrogant contempt for man.”<sup>129</sup> In their misguided attempts to serve God or save humanity, ideologies lose sight of the individual humans we are called to love and respect. As we have seen, the pope regards prayer and a personal experience of Christ’s love as what keeps us from succumbing to ideology.

In arguing for the priority of prayer, Benedict introduces two further concepts, “fanaticism and terrorism.” By associating these terms to ideology, the Holy Father reveals that he intends ideology to signify something more contemporary than Marxism. In a passage that counters the assumptions of radical religious fundamentalism as well as those of radical secularism, the pope asserts that “a personal relationship with God and an abandonment to his will can prevent man from being demeaned and save him from falling prey to the teaching of fanaticism and terrorism.”<sup>130</sup> If the pope is here making (at least in part) a veiled reference to violent forms of Islam, his remarks cut in two directions. First, they pose a challenge to the consciences of pious Muslims. The reference here to “an abandonment to his will” is not without import, since the literal meaning of the word “islam” is “surrender” or “abandonment.”<sup>131</sup> As every Muslim knows, Islam is a call to “surrender to the will of God.”<sup>132</sup> Essentially, the pope is saying here that true Islam should reject the ways of fanaticism and terrorism. Moreover, the pope is inviting Muslims to deepen their “personal relationship with God” as a way of avoiding the demeaning effects of ideology. At the same time, however, the pope’s remarks counter the secularist view that religion by its very nature promotes intolerance and violence. Throughout his encyclical the pope takes pains to affirm that the goal of biblical religion is to promote an “integral” or “true” humanism.<sup>133</sup>

At the deepest level, however, the pope’s primary audience is neither Islam nor secular society. The pope is primarily addressing his remarks to Christians themselves.<sup>134</sup> Benedict’s references to the Roman emperor

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., no. 36.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., no. 37.

<sup>131</sup> It is worth noting that the Latin version of the encyclical employs the word *deditio*, which literally means “surrender.” In German, it is *Hingabe* (“devotion” or the act of “giving oneself to”), which is also closer to the literal sense of “islam” than “abandonment.”

<sup>132</sup> The word “islam” derives from the Arabic word *salama*, which actually means both surrender and peace. A Muslim is one who surrenders to God’s will and thereby finds inner peace.

<sup>133</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 9 and 30.

<sup>134</sup> Note that the Holy Father does not, as is often the current practice, include among the intended recipients of the encyclical “all men and women of good will.” The letter is addressed “to the bishops, priests and deacons, men and

Julian the Apostate are instructive in this regard. The Holy Father could have described Julian in any number of ways, but he chooses to portray him as follows:

As a child of six years, Julian witnessed the assassination of his father, brother, and other family members by the guards of the imperial palace; rightly or wrongly, he blamed this brutal act on the Emperor Constantius, who passed himself off as an outstanding Christian. The Christian faith was thus definitively discredited in his eyes.<sup>135</sup>

The pope explains that the one aspect of Christianity that Julian admired was its organized works of charity. It is worthy of note that the pope chooses this example—the reaction of one who rejected Christianity because of the violence he had suffered at the hands of publicly professed Christians—to underline the importance of Christian charity. Whatever one may think of the legitimacy of the West’s interventions in the Islamic world over the last sixty years, it is an undeniable fact that a growing number of Muslims have shared Julian’s experience. They too have witnessed the death of their loved ones at the hands of Christians or their surrogates. From this perspective, the pope’s encyclical offers a concrete proposal for how Christians should live in an environment increasingly shaped by Islam, by which I mean Europe. Muslims are a growing presence in Europe, and if the demographic projections are correct, this trend will continue and accelerate. Whether Christians wish to or not, therefore, we shall be forced to formulate a response to this Islamic presence—both individually and collectively as a Church. What will be our attitude before our Muslim neighbors? This, I believe, is the unexpressed question that guides the Holy Father’s analysis of charity. His encyclical is nothing short of a pastoral plan for living among those who have been shaped by experiences analogous to those that formed the anti-Christian views of the Emperor Julian.<sup>136</sup>

women religious, and all the lay faithful” (an die bischöfe, an die priester und diakone, an die gottgeweihten personen, und an alle christgläubigen).

<sup>135</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 24.

<sup>136</sup> Shortly after the publication of *Deus Caritas est*, Pope Benedict explained that he chose to write an encyclical on love because our understanding of love needed to be purified, especially in its relation to faith. Faith informed by love changes us and configures us to Christ. Benedict explicitly linked this renewed conception of faith and love to the violence of our contemporary culture: “In an epoch where hostility and greed have become superpowers, an epoch where we support the abuse of religion to the point of deifying hatred, neutral rationality alone cannot protect us. We need the living God, who loved us even to death. And so, in this Encyclical, the themes ‘God,’ ‘Christ’ and ‘Love’ are fused together



The pope offers us what he describes as a “sacramental mysticism.” It is a mysticism centered on Christ and dedicated to loving our neighbor with the love of Christ. As noted above, this sacramental mysticism is deeply influenced by the theology of St. Augustine. Augustine develops this theology, however, in relation to martyrdom. He describes the martyrs as those who have followed the admonition to “observe carefully all that is set before you, for you also must prepare such a banquet.” Augustine then explains that

the banquet is none other than the Lord of the table himself. No one has his guests feed upon himself, and yet this is precisely what Christ our Lord does; though host, he himself is both food and drink. The martyrs recognized the food and drink they were given, in order to make repayment in kind. But how can they make repayment, unless he first spends his riches on them and gives them the means to repay? . . . The Lord of the heavens directed their minds and tongues; through them he overcame the devil on earth and crowned them as martyrs in heaven.<sup>137</sup>

Augustine was writing in the context of the collapse of Roman culture in North Africa and the pastoral challenges this raised for his suffering flock. Augustine responded both by engaging his pagan contemporaries (telling them that the cause of this collapse was not the Christian religion) and by offering the Christian faithful a vision of how to live in their violent world: through a sacramental mysticism ready to die for the love of Christ. Pope Benedict, as a student of Augustine, is offering a similar proposal to his Christian flock throughout the world, a flock that—ever since September 11—finds itself in an analogous situation. In this context, the example of the Trappist monks at Tibhirine acquires special relevance.

The Christian theology of martyrdom does not focus on the dying, but on the living that led to it. A Christian becomes worthy of the title “martyr” only because his violent death is the culmination of a life

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as the central guide of Christian faith.” “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants at the Meeting Promoted by the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*” (Monday, 23 January 2006). Benedict developed this theme further in his address at Regensburg where he underlined that neither secular rationality nor religious fundamentalism can preserve and renew our contemporary cultures, but only the charity that flows from the eternal *Logos*, which renders our life and worship a “‘λογική λατρεία,’ worship in harmony with the eternal Word and with our reason.” “Meeting with the Representatives of Science: Lecture of the Holy Father, Aula Magna of the University of Regensburg” (September 12, 2006).

<sup>137</sup> *Sermo* 329 (PL 38, 1454–56).

configured to the love of Christ. The murdered monks at Tibhirine were truly martyrs in this sense. Their manner of living among their Muslim neighbors offers a concrete model of the charity Pope Benedict wishes to promote. Indeed, the words of one monk to his Muslim friends well encapsulates the pope's message:

The only thing I have to say to you is the "I love you" that Jesus said to the Church. This "I love you" is not simply for us [Christians] but for the whole world—for you Mohammed, Ahmed. . . . This "I love you" is for everyone. We all need the love of God to live.<sup>138</sup>

This is not the place to relate the history of that particular North African monastery or to tell the full story of the events that led up to the monks' deaths during Algeria's violent civil war. I wish only to note that a small community of very diverse personalities was quietly and collectively dedicated to living lives of prayer and Christian charity in the midst of their humble Muslim neighbors. Cardinal Duval had described the Church's vocation in Algeria as a ministry of presence, prayer, and sharing (*la présence, la prière, et le partage*).<sup>139</sup> This is what the monks lived. They took care of their neighbors' medical needs (old Brother Luc had helped at the births of several generations of villagers), helped alleviate their material poverty, attended their celebrations, shared their joys and sorrows, and prayed for them continually. The community's prior, Christian de Chergé, also made the monastery a place of intellectual and spiritual dialogue, where Christians and Muslims met regularly to discuss their differences and prayerfully celebrate what they shared in common.

The monks had no illusions about their situation. Although they were given ample warning of what might befall them, they decided to stay. A deciding factor was that the local Muslim population repeatedly begged them to remain. During the violence of that time, one Muslim villager told the monks, "If you go away, you will rob us of your hope, and we'll lose ours."<sup>140</sup> Later, this same villager would simply say of the monks, "you are the branch and we are the birds."<sup>141</sup> In his last testament, which was to be

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<sup>138</sup> These words were expressed by Fr. Christophe Lebreton on the day of his ordination. See John W. Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine: Faith, Love, and Terror in Algeria* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 74. For a study of Fr. Lebreton's thought, see Marie-Dominique Minassian, "La Spiritualité de Frère Christophe moine-martyr de Tibhirine: éléments d'une théologie du don" (University of Fribourg, STD dissertation in preparation).

<sup>139</sup> Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine*, 81.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

read in the event of his murder, Christian de Chergé forgave his executioners and expressed the wish that “Insha Allah” he and they, “like happy thieves,” would one day meet in heaven as friends. He also explained that although he did not wish to die this way, he would be grateful to them because “my death will satisfy my most burning curiosity.”

At last, I will be able—if God pleases—to see the children of Islam as He sees them, illuminated in the glory of Christ, sharing in the gift of God’s Passion and of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to bring forth our common humanity amidst our differences.<sup>142</sup>

The pope’s encyclical invites us to begin to see this way now. We are to see even our enemies “with the eyes of Christ.”<sup>143</sup> What would it mean for us to see our Muslim neighbors as Christ sees them? What would it mean to love them as he loves them? The pope is aware that the greater threat to Christianity than Islamic violence is a disordered Christian response to it. During his community’s discernment over whether they should remain in Algeria, Brother Paul Favre-Miville wrote home, “How far does one go to save his skin without running the risk of losing his soul?”<sup>144</sup> In our post-9/11 world, this is a question that all Christians must face.

### *The Twelfth Question: The Example of Mary*

Our Lady of the Atlas Mountains, which is what Tibhirine’s Trappist monastery is called, lies only sixty miles south of the ancient heart of Algiers known as the Casbah. To this day the vandalized statue of the Lady, whom the Muslim villagers call “Lalla Mariam,” Mother Mary, watches over the monastic compound from the nearby hilltop. A keen chronicler of the events at Tibhirine relates that “over the years, Muslim women from the surrounding villages had worn a path to her feet through the dense cork-oak forest to seek her aid and blessing.”<sup>145</sup> It is

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 245. Christian de Chergé’s death brought his life to full circle. He had first come to Algeria as a French soldier during Algeria’s war of independence. A Muslim friend with whom he had many discussions once asked him, “you Christians don’t know how to pray. We never see French soldiers praying. You say you believe in God. How can you not pray if you believe in God?” (ibid., 8). That friend was subsequently murdered in retribution for having saved de Chergé’s life. Fr. Christian dedicated his life to answering his friend’s question. He returned to Algeria to be a witness of Christian prayer.

<sup>143</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 18.

<sup>144</sup> Kiser, *The Monks of Tibhirine*, 198.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 82.

appropriate, therefore, that after listing “the entire monastic movement” as bearing clear witness to the character of Christian charity, the pope ends his letter by offering the example of Mary. He describes her as “a woman who loves,” and asks his final question: “How could it be otherwise?”<sup>146</sup> She, more than any other creature, embodies the love of God and neighbor. She was the first to be configured to the love of Christ; in her role as our mother, which Christ entrusted to her from the cross, she continues to love her neighbor with a mother’s love. As a woman honored by all three of the faiths that trace their lineage to Abraham, she can teach us how to love our neighbor as Christ does. In the grace of her son, this humble daughter of Sion is the best guide through the twisted lanes of love’s Casbah. N V

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<sup>146</sup> *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 41.