

The Spirituality of Love In the Light of *Deus Caritas Est*

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Introduction

Deus Caritas Est, the first document of Pope Benedict XVI to the entire Church published on 25th December 2005, is a remarkable document not only because it expounds certain new proposals for social action on the part of the Church, but through the encyclical the Holy Father also invites the Christian faithful to re-discover the unique and fundamental gift of love. Today the term ‘love’ has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words, a word to which we append diverse meanings.¹ However, God’s love is fundamental for our lives and it is our nature to love because God who is love has created us in his own image and likeness. This encyclical primarily deals with the unity of love and the practice of love in its two aspects, love for God and neighbour. The one cannot exist without the other. Hence our thrust is to illustrate the spiritual dimension of love explained in this encyclical.

LOVE: A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE CONCEPT

1. Terminologies Used in the Encyclical

The encyclical uses terminologies such as *eros*, *philia* and *agape*, found in the Greek literature and the Bible to elucidate love. But in a specific way it critically analyzes and evaluates the difference and unity of *eros* and the Christian *agape*.

In its pre-Christian background *eros* was considered principally as a kind of intoxication, a “divine madness” which elevates man from his finite existence and urges him to experience divine happiness found expression in fertility cult, and temple prostitution.

According to Benedict XVI, unfortunately a perverted understanding of *eros* instead of an ascent in ecstasy towards the divine marked a fall, a degradation of man, which led him to immorality and to licentiousness. This leads to a debasement of the body. No longer it is integrated to our overall existential freedom, but is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere.

The encyclical recalls that Christianity of the past as well as the present is often criticized as holding an opposite stand to the body. This is not true. However, the Church considers the contemporary trend of exalting the body and reducing *eros* to connote only “sex” as deceptive. According to the

encyclical, the body has become a commodity to be bought and sold; or rather man himself becomes a commercial commodity.²

The Christian faith visualizes man as a composite of body and soul. In him the spirit and matter com-penetrates and each is brought to its nobility. True *eros* 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.³

A disciplined and purified *eros* attains exaltation. It makes man a seeker. From the point of creation, *eros* directs man towards woman, which culminates in marriage. In its pristine sense, marriage prefigures the unique and definitive bond of love, which symbolizes God-man relationship. Thus true love leads man to God.

Agape, expresses the experience of a love, which involves the discovery of the other. Going beyond the selfish character, love becomes a concern and care for the other, seeking the good of the beloved, ready for renunciation and even willing for sacrifice.⁴ Thus, *eros* and agape united, enables one to love God and fellow beings in spirit and in truth.

2. God’s Love and Man’s Response

The encyclical sheds light on the love of God. St. John says: “We have come to know and to believe in the love of God has for us”. It is God in the very person of Christ made himself visible. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (I Jn 4:10).

Christ’s love consists not merely of abstract ideas, but in God’s ‘unpredictable’ and ‘unprecedented’ activity. In Jesus Christ, it is God himself who came in search of the “stray sheep” (Lk 15: 3-7), a suffering and lost humanity, it is He who came in search of the lost coin (Lk 15:8-10). He is the Father who went to meet and embraced the prodigal son.⁵ In short, God’s very being and activity are manifested through His Son, the Saviour and the Redeemer. Christ’s death on the cross is the most radical form of love towards mankind.

The love of the Holy Spirit is also briefly analyzed in the encyclical. The Holy Spirit is depicted as the Spirit of Christ who witnesses to the love of the Father.⁶ The Spirit is that interior power; “the river of the living water,” which harmonizes the heart of the believers with Christ’s and moves them to love their brethren as Christ who loved unto death.⁷

2.1. Acknowledgement of the Living God

No one has ever seen God as he is and yet God is neither totally invisible nor unknowable. The Hellenistic concept of the knowledge of God as a highly abstract form of pure contemplation of the ultimate reality in its changeless

essence is alien to the encyclical. The whole spirit and description suggest that the encyclical aims at the believer's knowing of God after the Hebrew concept, an experiential knowledge.⁸

Quoting the Scripture, the document says: "Hear O' Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (Dt. 6:4). The God of Israel, not as one God among many but as the one true God, creator of the universe and the redeemer of mankind. He is the source of all creation and the one who loves his creation.⁹ His love towards man is personal, elective and forgiving. Among many nations he chose Israel and loved her.

Prophets like Hosea described God's relationship with Israel by metaphors of betrothal and marriage. Idolatry was considered as adultery and prostitution. When Israel had committed idolatry and had broken the covenant; it was proper that God should judge and repudiate her. But at this point, God revealed himself saying: "How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel...My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender; I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst." (Hos 11:8-9).¹⁰

God loves, and his love may certainly be called *eros* and yet it is also totally *agape*. The *agape* dimension of God's love goes far beyond the aspect of gratuity as it encounters us ever anew.

The encyclical urges us to acknowledge this God by experiencing his love in creation and in redemption. According to the Pope, it is by contemplating the pierced side of Christ that one realizes the redemptive love of God (Cf. Jn 19:37).¹¹

2.2. Faith: Man's Response to God's Love

The encyclical enriches by leading us to an experiential knowledge of God and at the same time demands us to respond to this love. This love - response is to be shown above all by observing God's commandments. In the Gospel of John we read: "those who love me will keep my word and my father will love them...whoever does not love me does not keep my words (Jn 14:23). It is upon this central precept – the love of God and of neighbour- that all the commandments of God are based.

God's will, though manifested in his commandments, especially in his commandment of love, does not seem to be something imposed on man from outside. But it is an invitation to abide in God who is love and who "loved us first" (cf. 1 Jn 4:10). Since he has loved us first and he continues to do so; we ought to respond it with love. Hence, the divine will and the human will coincide. Then God's will is no longer for the believer something alien. But it becomes one's own will, based on the realization that "God is in fact more closely present to me than I am to myself."¹² This knowledge leads me to say: "Who do I have in heaven but you? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you...for me it is good to be near God" (Ps 73: 25, 28). An

encounter with the living God and a total self-surrender to him is then the response of man to God's love.¹³ Faith, by its specific nature, is the result of this encounter with the living God.

3. Love of Neighbour Raises Man to Divinity

The encyclical throws light on the unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbour. Quoting the Scripture, the encyclical says: "If anyone says I love God and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen (I Jn 4:20). Love involves two aspects: love of God (Lk 10:25-27) and love of man, the image of God (Lk 10:27-37). The one who hates his brother does not love God. So, it is required not to just avoid hatred towards the other, but it is important to do good for the other (Jn 4:20-21; Rom 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14). The norm for the love of neighbour is Christ's love. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another (Jn 13:34-35). Jesus' love surpasses all our understanding. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (Jn 15:13).

In the light of the Scripture, the encyclical invites us to see the neighbour and to do well with him. The concept of the neighbour cannot be reduced to those who live in one's close circuit. Neighbour is anyone who needs me, and whom I can help.¹⁴ Love of neighbour also makes one sensitive to God. It enables one to see what God does for each one and how much he loves us. It also unites one to Christ.

According to the encyclical, one cannot possess Christ just for oneself; one can belong to him only in union with all those who have become Christ's. Love of God unites the believer with his neighbour and with Christ. Thus love, which is "divine" enables man to enter into union with God, it realizes man's primordial inspiration; to be partakers of the divine nature (cf. 2 Pt.1:4).

4. Transcendence of the Conjugal Love

The encyclical highlights the possibilities for transcending conjugal love in married life. The *eros*, the spontaneous love rooted in man's very nature, directs him towards marriage. *Eros* enables man to seek and find woman. It reaches him to a disposition "to abandon" his father and mother and to become one flesh" (cf. Gen 2:24). Thus, an exclusive and definite love arose out of *eros*.

As the desire and love for the other grows and becomes deeply rooted, the ties of *eros* are loosened, and the elements of *agape* enter into it. As a result, *eros* gets disciplined and purified and elevates it to the nobility of *agape*. Thus conjugal love gets ennobled and each can become a spring of love from which the other can satiate his/her thirst for love.¹⁵ Hence, instead of a selfish, self-centered and unquenchable sexual thirst, man and woman will find conjugal

love as a self-offering, self-sacrificing love of Christ the bridegroom, who laid down his own life for the Church, his bride, as paradigm for their conjugal love.

5. The Church: Witness to the Love of God

The encyclical relates love to the nature and role of the Church. The Church is “a community of love” which witnesses to the love of the Triune God. The entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral well - being of man.¹⁶ As a community of love, the Church carries out services of charity in order to attend constantly to man’s sufferings and his needs, including material needs.¹⁷

Charity is described by the Pope, as a *responsibility* of each individual member of the Church as well as the entire ecclesial community at every level- the local, particular and universal. According to the encyclical, the Church “needs to practice love”. The exercise of charity is an essential action of the Church, like the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word of God.¹⁸

The origin of the diaconal office in the early Church (cf. Acts 6:5-6) according to the Pope was to practice this ministry of charity, which is a fundamental principle. The ministry of charity also titled “spiritual service”; started with the origin of *diaconia* became a fundamental ecclesial principle and part of the fundamental structure of the Church.¹⁹ According to the Pope, the ecclesial ministry of charity is not a kind of welfare activity, but is an indispensable expression of her very being.²⁰

Pope Benedict XVI, stresses the fact that the Church, as God’s family, must be a place, where help is given and received. It is the responsibility of the Church to make sure that there is no one within the community of believers, who suffers from the denial of the essentials for a dignified life. The Church must also be a place where people are prepared to serve those outside her confines who are in need of her help. The ministry of Charity is thus an essential part of her task.²¹

6. Eucharistic Dimension of Love

The Spirituality of love has an eucharistic dimension. The term *agape* often used, to give full expression to love, became a term for Eucharist. This reminds the believer of Jesus’ act of self-oblation and the dynamics of his self-giving. Christ’s oblation was given an everlasting presence through his institution of the Eucharist at the Last supper. In the form of the bread and wine, he gave his very self to his disciples. Christ, the Word of God became bread for human beings. Jesus says: “I am the bread of life” (Jn 6:35). All who believe in him partake of this one bread and become one body (1 Cor 10:17). Thus the Eucharist unites the believer with Christ and with others. The Christological and sacramental dimensions of Eucharist thus include the reality of being united with Christ and with others in turn.²²

7. Prayer: The Source and Power of Charity

The Apostolic Document highlights prayer as the source of charity. Our time devoted in prayer, is in fact the inexhaustible source of that service.²³ Pointing out to the example of Moses, the Pope says: Moses entered into the tabernacle time and again remaining in dialogue with God, so that when he emerged he could be at the service of his people. “Within (the tent), he is borne aloft through contemplation, while without, he is completely engaged in helping those who suffer.”²⁴ Pointing out to the monks and saints (St. Antony the Abbot, Martin of Tours, Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, Mother Theresa of Calcutta) the Pope reminds us that it is their encounter with God who is love, that these men and women of God sensed the impelling need to transform their whole life unto service for the neighbour.²⁵ It is in prayer/contemplation that one encounters God “face to face.” A life rooted in contemplation will be able to take upon the needs of others and be able to do good for them.

8. Love and Justice

Love also touches the realm of justice. The encyclical underlines the relationship between the necessary commitment to justice and to the ministry of charity; thus denies the view that justice alone and not charity is needed.²⁶ The claim for the just structuring of the state and of the society is viewed as the duty of the politicians and not of the Church.

At the same time the Church realizes that love-*caritas* is a genuine need even in the most just society. The cry for the material and spiritual need always exists as long as man lives together in a society. The service of charity on the part of the Church does not mean simply to offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls, something that even surpasses material support.²⁷ The papal document examines the social doctrines of the Church from *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII (1891) up to the teachings of Vatican II, as they have become a set of fundamental guidelines in the promotion of justice *cum* charity for the integral development of mankind.

The encyclical emphasizes more on the exercise of charity. It says: “the Church can never be exempted from practicing charity as an organized activity of believers.”²⁸ Following the model given in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Christian charity is first of all the simple response to the immediate needs and specific situations; feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for and healing the sick, visiting those in prisons.²⁹ The Pope also invites the laity to give themselves for the promotion of justice and for the ministry of charity for the *common good*. Through the encyclical, the Pope reveals the mind of the Church, which gives importance both to charity as well as to justice.

9. Cooperation with Other Religions

The encyclical throws light on the present situation of the world, where the name of God is associated sometimes with vengeance, violence and hatred. It is in such a situation that the Pope gives this significant message of love.³⁰

As God's family in the world, the Church's concern is mainly to ensure that in this family, everyone is provided with the necessities of life. At the same time *caritas-agape* cannot be limited to those who belong to this family alone. It should be extended beyond the frontiers of the Church.³¹ The entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of humanity. The Encyclical is very cautious about the ministry of charity, as it in no way imposes the Church's faith upon others. Love is free; it is not practised as a means for achieving other ends.

10. Suffering and Love

Despite considerable progress achieved by science and technology, there is so much of suffering in the world due to different kinds of poverty-of which poverty of love is predominant. The root of suffering is the lack of love-the absence of God.³² Taking the example of Job, the Pope acknowledges the severity of suffering and man's vulnerability to it. At the same time he recommends to unite one's suffering to that of Christ, who suffered out of love.

When suffering becomes incomprehensible and apparently unjust, possibly one asks the question: Why God refrains from intervening? The encyclical states its position about suffering. In critical situations of suffering, God does not prevent us from crying out like Jesus on the Cross: "My God, my God why have you forsaken me? (Mt.27: 46).³³

According to the Pope, we should continue asking this question in prayerful dialogue with him. Though we fail to understand his will in our suffering, this cry from the depth of our heart and his constant encounter will enable us to believe even in God's incomprehensible silence, the "goodness and loving kindness of God" (Tit 3:4).³⁴ Thus according to the encyclical, suffering leads one not to despair but to confide in the love of God.

11. Transformation of the Heart

The encyclical recommends for formation of the heart, which awakens love and opens the spirit to encounter God in Christ, as essential for those who engage themselves in the ministry of charity. Heart, in the biblical sense is not merely an internal human organ but it denotes the whole person.³⁵ It is the Spirit, the interior power and the "energy which transforms", harmonizes the believers' heart with Christ's heart and moves them to love their brethren as Christ loved them.³⁶

Thus formation of the heart means the spiritual formation and eventually the transformation of the whole person with regard to the ministry of charity.

According to the Pope, one needs like Jesus and like the good Samaritan- “a heart which sees” not only to see but also to foresee where love is needed and to act accordingly.³⁷ The encyclical recommends also for humility and humaneness, the virtues of the heart, in order to dedicate oneself to others with heartfelt concern. Those who are responsible for the Church’s charitable ministry must keep in mind that “the love of Christ urges us on” (2 Cor 5:14) as the motive power for their ministry. They also must realize that they are “useless servants (Lk.17:10) hence, are only instruments in the Lord’s hands.

12. Mary: Mother of Love

Mary is the model of love. The encyclical speaks of Mary as a woman who loves. Attuned to the will of God in faith, Mary witnessed through her pure and generous love the presence of God. Through her service of charity to her cousin Elizabeth (Lk 1:56), to the spouses at Cana (Jn 2:3) she gave testimony to God by whom she was driven to love. Mary’s love for God made her “humble to recede to the background during Jesus’ public life, knowing that her Son must establish a new family and that the Mother’s hour will come only with the Cross, which will be Jesus’ true hour” (Jn 2:4; 13:1). When the disciples departed; Mary remained beneath the Cross (cf. Jn: 19:25). At the hour of Pentecost, Mary joined with the disciples to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit.³⁸

Mary always remained faithful to the words she uttered at her visitation. “My soul magnifies the Lord” (Lk 1:46). Being united with the Lord it is her profound love for God and man, which prompted her to place herself completely at the disposal of God’s initiatives in accomplishing the salvation of the world.

Conclusion

The encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* is one of the outstanding documents from the Chair of Peter, which through the exposition of God’s love, offers a kind of summary of Christian faith. While acknowledging the centrality of divine love, the encyclical gives new length and breadth in its different dimensions. Going through the whole document one could see each idea has its base in the Scripture; hence the spirituality of love exposed in the document is essentially biblical.

Love is a single reality expressed by different terms such as *eros*, *agape* in their various dimensions; and at times one or the other dimension may emerge more vividly. But when the two dimensions are totally separated from one another, it leads to an impoverished form of love. Here, the document explains that genuine love leads to unity and ultimately to the Triune God, the source of unity.

From the very outset the document invites the reader to contemplate God as love and to abide in His love.³⁹ It says: “God is love and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him (I Jn 4:16). In order to love God, one needs to know God from an experiential level, and this knowledge leads to an acknowledgement of the presence of the living God in life which is faith; man’s response to God’s love.

Love of God calls for love for one’s neighbour. One is closely connected with the other; that is to say our love of God becomes a lie if we do not love our neighbour. Hence, the encyclical emphasizes on the unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbour.

The encyclical links love to the nature and the role of the Church. According to it, the Church is “a community of love” which witnesses to the love of God. Exercise of charity is observed as a fundamental ecclesial principle and an essential activity like liturgy and evangelization.

The Eucharistic dimension of love involves in the Eucharistic liturgy, as well as in the Eucharist, the sacrament. The Church celebrates the sacrificial, self-giving redemptive love of Christ and the Eucharist, the bread of life itself is a sign of love and of unity.

The Apostolic Document highlights the need of prayer in the service of charity. Prayer is the source and dynamic power of charity; it is out of the encounter with God that man is able to encounter his brother in need.

Genuine love for man is demonstrated by practical actions. Justice is one such action, which serves love. Discerning what is to be done and what not to be done in the area of justice, the encyclical upholds the need of charity and justice to be promoted by the Church.

Love embraces all and denounces none. According to the encyclical, the need to offer our service of Charity must extend beyond the bounds of the Church. The parable of the Good Samaritan is given as a standard, to extend our love towards the needy whom, we encounter even “by chance” (cf. Lk 10:31).

Love entails suffering. The encyclical observes the cause of suffering and adds to it a Christian understanding. To have faith and hope in God is the watchword it gives in the face of suffering. It speaks also about the formation and the transformation of the heart as a requisite for all those who are at the service of charity.

Finally, pointing out to Mary, the mother of love, the encyclical invites each believer to witness God through pure and generous love and to magnify Him by becoming his handmaid. To sum up, this document in a very profound way raises us to the love of God and to the love for our neighbour.

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- ¹ POPE BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, Vatican, 2005 Our reference is from same document published by Carmel Publishing House, Trivandrum, 2006, article 1-2.
- ² *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.
- ³ *Deus Caritas Est*, 5:3.
- ⁴ *Deus Caritas Est*, 6:1.
- ⁵ *Deus Caritas Est*, 12.
- ⁶ *Deus Caritas Est*, 19.
- ⁷ *Deus Caritas Est*, 19.
- ⁸ Cf. AERTHAYIL, “The Trinitarian Dimension”, *Christian Orient* 2 (1980), 99-100
- ⁹ *Deus Caritas Est*, 9:1.
- ¹⁰ *Deus Caritas Est*, 10.
- ¹¹ *Deus Caritas Est*, 12.
- ¹² ST. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, III, 6, 11; *Deus Caritas Est*, 17:2.
- ¹³ *Deus Caritas Est*, 17:2.
- ¹⁴ *Deus Caritas Est*, 15:1.
- ¹⁵ *Deus Caritas Est*, 4-6, Cf. PARANILAM, “Daivam Snehamanu” in *Aikayadeepam*, Vol. 5, (2006) 14-16.
- ¹⁶ *Deus Caritas Est*, 19.
- ¹⁷ *Deus Caritas Est*, 19.
- ¹⁸ *Deus Caritas Est*, 22, 25, 32.
- ¹⁹ *Deus Caritas Est*, 21.
- ²⁰ *Deus Caritas Est*, 25:1.
- ²¹ *Deus Caritas Est*, 32, Cf. PARANILAM, “Daivam Snehamanu” in *Aikayadeepam*, Vol. 5, (2006) 14-16.
- ²² *Deus Caritas Est*, 13, 14.
- ²³ *Deus Caritas Est*, 36.
- ²⁴ *Deus Caritas Est*, 7..
- ²⁵ *Deus Caritas Est*, 40.
- ²⁶ *Deus Caritas Est*, 26-28.
- ²⁷ *Deus Caritas Est*, 28:b.
- ²⁸ *Deus Caritas Est*, 29:3.
- ²⁹ *Deus Caritas Est*, 31.
- ³⁰ *Deus Caritas Est*, 1.
- ³¹ *Deus Caritas Est*, 25: b.
- ³² *Deus Caritas Est*, 31.c.
- ³³ *Deus Caritas Est*, 38.
- ³⁴ *Deus Caritas Est*, 38.
- ³⁵ MALONEY, *Prayer of the Heart*, Indiana, 1986, p. 60-65,
- ³⁶ *Deus Caritas Est*, 19.
- ³⁷ *Deus Caritas Est*, 31:a, b.
- ³⁸ *Deus Caritas Est*, 41.
- ³⁹ JOSEPH CORDES, “Charity, Evangelization” in *L'Osservatore Romano* no.31, August 2006, p. 9.