



Deus Caritas Est and Catholic Social Thought

Thomas D. Williams, L.C.

The unofficial category of “social encyclicals” is now well-ensconced in magisterial nomenclature. It distinguishes papal teaching letters that deal expressly with social questions from other encyclicals that touch on social issues only tangentially or treat other subjects entirely. The established corpus of social encyclicals begins with Leo XIII’s groundbreaking *Rerum Novarum*, passes through Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno*, John XXIII’s *Mater et Magistra*, Paul VI’s *Populorum Progressio*, and ends, as of this writing, with John Paul II’s 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*.¹

While perfectly understandable, this custom of drawing a bright line between “social encyclicals” and other Magisterial texts leads to the regrettable consequence of downplaying the important social teachings contained in other papal teachings or ignoring these documents altogether when examining Church doctrine on particular social questions. Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, for example, a masterful treatise on marriage, the family and society, is universally excluded from the catalogue of social encyclicals, as is his encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae* and the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Chris-*

¹ The establishment of a semi-official canon of social encyclicals has been chiefly the work of the popes themselves, who in their own social teaching often make explicit reference to the social documents that have preceded them. This custom grew out of the commemorative encyclicals celebrating different anniversaries of Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, beginning with Pius XI’s 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*.

tifideles Laici, despite their invaluable teaching regarding pressing social justice issues.

Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* will never be considered a "social encyclical." As his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* is considered "programmatic," in that it lays out fundamental themes that Benedict considers of prime importance for the Church of today, themes he is expected to refer back to in the future.² In the first of two parts of the encyclical Benedict examined the fundamental theological truth of God as love, along with the relationship between divine love and human love, and the possibility of truly loving God and neighbor. Those familiar with the theological works of Joseph Ratzinger will find a text in line with his previous writings, both in style and content. The true surprise of the encyclical comes with the second part, which focuses on the charitable work of the Church as a communion of believers.

In this second part of the encyclical, Benedict expressly referenced the Church's social doctrine, and elaborated on it in new and innovative ways. He listed some of the key social encyclicals, as his predecessors had often done, and recalled the origins of modern social teaching in the pressing need for a new approach to a just structuring of society in the aftermath of the industrial revolution. His careful consideration of the social question in the light of the theological virtue of charity, however, offered an original contribution to Catholic social doctrine and merits serious study.

Church and State

The central insight of Benedict's social teaching in *Deus Caritas Est* concerns the complementary relationship between Church and State, between faith and reason, and between charity and justice. In his extended reflections on the topic, which comprise nearly the entire second half of the encyclical, Benedict offered an original contribution to Catholic

² In his inaugural homily, Pope Benedict expressly eschewed the question of a "program" for his pontificate. "At this moment there is no need for me to present a programme of governance. I was able to give an indication of what I see as my task in my Message of Wednesday 20 April, and there will be other opportunities to do so. My real programme of governance is not to do my own will, not to pursue my own ideas, but to listen, together with the whole Church, to the word and the will of the Lord, to be guided by Him, so that He himself will lead the Church at this hour of our history" (Homily of Pope Benedict XVI at the Mass for the inauguration of his pontificate, St. Peter's Square, April 24, 2005).

social thought, while remaining firmly rooted in the tradition. The Church lives by faith and dedicates herself to charity, while the State is called to live by practical reason and dedicate itself to justice. As the Church cannot guarantee justice, neither can the State guarantee charity. Despite this clear distinction, however, Benedict insists that the two realities are closely interwoven and mutually enriching. Though we must distinguish between Church and State and their respective roles, we must not seek to separate them. “The two spheres are distinct, yet always interrelated” (no. 28a).

Benedict begins his discussion on justice and charity as an answer to critics, especially Marxism, that posit a necessary antagonism and incompatibility between justice and charity. According to this ideology, justice can only be achieved when charity is abolished, since insistence on charity only serves to preserve and propagate the *status quo* with its injustices (cf. no. 26). To this criticism, Benedict responds that charity and justice complement one another and must advance hand in hand, as allies rather than adversaries. One cannot supplant the other since both are truly necessary. Even in a perfectly just political environment, charity would not be superfluous.

Benedict takes up the perennial message of Catholic social teaching that the State exists for the sake of the common good, to insure a just ordering of human society. He notes that “the pursuit of justice must be a fundamental norm of the State and that the aim of a just social order is to guarantee to each person, according to the principle of subsidiarity, his share of the community’s goods” (no. 26). More succinctly still, Benedict states: “The just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics,” since justice “is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics” (no. 28a).³

³ In this, Benedict is simply restating settled Catholic teaching regarding the nature and role of the State. Thus John XXIII wrote that the whole *raison d’être* of the State “is the realization of the common good in the temporal order” (encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra* [1961], no. 20) and “the justification of all government action is the common good” (*ibid.*, no. 151), and finally: “The attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities” (encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris* [1963], no. 54). See also: Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891), nos. 32, 35, 51; Pius XI, encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), nos. 25, 110; Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), no. 74; Paul VI, apostolic letter *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971), no. 46; John Paul II, encyclical letter *Laborem Exercens* (1981), no. 20; John Paul II, post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (1988), no. 42; John Paul II, encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus* (1991), nos. 11, 40.

The Church recognizes, respects, and supports this proper role of the State, and has no wish to usurp its competencies. Contrary to the fears of some, Benedict asserted that Catholic social doctrine “has no intention of giving the Church power over the State.” A moment later Benedict repeats: “The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State” (no. 28a). The Church gratefully recognizes the “autonomy of the temporal sphere” as well as her own inadequacy for assuring a just ordering of society.

The Church’s Service to Society

Just as the State has a proper competency, so does the Church. In *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict offers a historical analysis of the Church’s institutional commitment to charity, tracing its origins to the apostolic period, as an essential characteristic of the Church’s mission and self-identity. This institutional commitment is not only a historically verifiable practice, however, but a necessary activity stemming from the Church’s identity, and willed by her Founder. “The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word” (no. 22).

The Church’s practice of social charity preceded by many centuries its theoretical exposition in modern Catholic social doctrine, and constitutes one of her distinctive activities tied to her very identity and mission. Social charity was assimilated, lived, and institutionalized long before it became an object of systematic study. In the practice of Christian charity, Benedict recognizes a hierarchy, in that love of neighbor is “first and foremost a responsibility for each individual,” and only secondarily a task for the entire ecclesial community. Yet this communal task is still essential. “As a community, the Church must practice love” (no. 20). Moreover, this love is not merely a haphazard, spontaneous outpouring of beneficence, but an “ordered service” to the community, and thus Benedict can define the Church’s “*diakonia*” as “the ministry of charity exercised in a communitarian, orderly way” (no. 21).

The Church’s dedication to service—*diakonia*—grew up alongside her dedication to proclaiming God’s word (*kerygma-martyria*) and the celebration of the sacraments (*leitourgia*), such that the three form her “three-fold responsibility” (no. 25a). One can draw an interesting parallel here to Christ *triplex munus* as priest, prophet and king, only here the

munus regale becomes an office of service, rather than of rule, in line with Jesus' new teaching regarding the exercise of authority.⁴ From the earliest days of Christianity the Church assumed this responsibility, and "love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential to her as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel" (no. 22). It was, according to Benedict, with the naming of the first seven deacons⁵ that *diakonia* became "part of the fundamental structure of the Church" (no. 21). Benedict traces the ecclesial institutionalization of her charitable outreach through the *diakonia* of each monastery in Egypt (middle of the fourth century) to its formal incorporation "with full juridical standing" by the sixth century (see no. 23). As Church structures evolved, so did the centers of charitable activity, and the office of *diakonia* was not solely a monastic institution, but existed at the level of the individual dioceses as well. From this institution the present worldwide organization of *Caritas* evolved.

Benedict claims for the Church a right to practice charity, and to do so on her own terms. "For the Church," Benedict insists, "charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being" (no. 25a). In other words, charitable outreach constitutes for the Church an *opus proprium*, "in which she does not cooperate collaterally, but acts as a subject with direct responsibility, doing what corresponds to her nature" (no. 29). It is thus important not only as a community service, for the sake of those served, but also for those serving, as a necessary expression of their Christian faith and of the nature of the Church. Freedom of religion also entails freedom for the exercise of charity, rather than the usurpation of all service into the offices of the State. Moreover, the principle of subsidiarity itself calls for the State to allow for and encourage the subjectivity of society, an important part of which is the Church's activity. Benedict specifically rejects the notion of a State "which regulates and controls everything," and calls, rather, for a State "which, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, generously acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from the different social forces and combines spontaneity with closeness to those in need" (no. 28b).

Although this charitable activity is a necessity for the Church, it is also a necessity for society. It is a distinct service, with characteristics that

⁴ See Matt 20:25-28.

⁵ See Acts 6:5-6.

cannot be found elsewhere, not in other volunteer activities and much less in State services. “There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love” and thus charity “will always prove necessary, even in the most just society” (no. 28b).⁶ The thought that if only social structures could be better ordered, charity would become superfluous manifests a subtle error, that of a materialist view of the human person, or, in Benedict’s words, “the mistaken notion that man can live ‘by bread alone’” (no. 28b). By denying the person’s deeper spiritual and emotional needs, this conviction “demeans man and ultimately disregards all that is specifically human” (ibid). According to Benedict, Christian charity distinguishes itself from social assistance in three key ways.

First, Christian charity must provide a “simple response to immediate needs,” in a professionally competent manner but above all with “heartfelt concern,” since human beings need more than technically proper care; “they need humanity” (no. 31a). This concern is fruit of a “formation of the heart” proper to Christians who have encountered God in Christ, “which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others” (ibid).

Second, Christian charitable activity must be distinguished by its independence of “parties and ideologies.” Present needs are not ignored or sacrificed to future gains, since “[o]ne does not make the world more human by refusing to act humanely here and now.” The Christian’s program is “a heart which sees” where love is needed and acts accordingly (no. 31b). In short, personnel who carry out the Church’s charitable activity “must not be inspired by ideologies aimed at improving the world, but should rather be guided by the faith which works through love” (no. 33).

Third, and perhaps surprisingly, Benedict notes that Christian charity “cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered

⁶ See, for instance, parallels in earlier Magisterial texts. In *Rerum Novarum*, Leo wrote: “At the present day many there are who, like the heathen of old, seek to blame and condemn the Church for such eminent charity. They would substitute in its stead a system of relief organized by the State. But no human expedients will ever make up for the devotedness and self sacrifice of Christian charity” (no. 30). Similarly, Pius XI wrote in *Quadragesimo Anno*: “How completely deceived, therefore, are those rash reformers who concern themselves with the enforcement of justice alone—and this, commutative justice—and in their pride reject the assistance of charity! Admittedly, no vicarious charity can substitute for justice which is due as an obligation and is wrongfully denied. Yet even supposing that everyone should finally receive all that is due him, the widest field for charity will always remain open. For justice alone can, if faithfully observed, remove the causes of social conflict but can never bring about union of minds and hearts” (no. 137).

proselytism,” since love is free, and cannot be practiced as a means of achieving other ends. And yet while such charitable activity must reject aggressive proselytizing, and cannot bind kindness to doctrinal prerequisites, Christians engaged in charitable outreach do not renounce their witness to Christ, since freely given love is itself the strongest testimony of God’s presence. Thus Christians “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” (31c). It is their love itself that witnesses to Christ. God is love, and “God’s presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love” (ibid).

The Church’s Service to the State

Despite the distinct fields of activity proper to Church and State, they are not separate nor unrelated. The Church, in fact, not only serves human society through her charitable activity; she also provides a specific service to the *State* in the latter’s mission of procuring justice and the common good. While the Church is not responsible for this mission, she does offer a critical ancillary function. She does this, Benedict says, in a twofold way, one indirect, the other direct.

First, through her social teaching the Church serves the State indirectly by helping it answer the question: *What is justice?* The State is properly concerned with the common good, but it needs help in discerning the nature of this good and its concrete requirements. The Church, says Benedict, has an “indirect duty,” in that “she is called to contribute to the purification of reason and to the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run” (no. 29). Practical reason needs purification, since political reason always risks ethical blindness because of the influence of power and special interests (see no. 28a). In this context, faith is “a purifying force for reason itself,” since it “liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself” (no. 28a). Here Benedict presents a simple yet profound synthesis of Catholic social doctrine, whose aim “is simply to help purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just” (no. 28a). For Benedict, Catholic social teaching is more than a discipline internal to theological studies; it is a gift to society. Through her social doctrine, the Church “wishes to help form consciences in political

life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly” (no. 28a).

Here we can discern the parallel service that exists among the three pairs of Church-State, faith-reason, and charity-justice. They complement and serve one another, without wishing to assume the other’s proper competencies. Just as charity completes justice, so faith is called to purify and perfect reason, so that it can be truly itself and discover the objective demands of the just order. If, as the Second Vatican Council taught, Christ “fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear” since “only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light,”⁷ then Christian anthropology provides an invaluable service to political authority in its quest to discover the requirements of true justice.

Though a branch of moral theology, Catholic social teaching does not press for the acceptance of revealed truth or confessional doctrine at the State level. Rather, Benedict asserts, the Church’s social teaching “argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being” (no. 28a). In this way the Church addresses her social teaching to all men and women of good will, and participates in civil discourse relying on the common tools of reason and human experience.

Along with this *indirect* duty, which the Church carries out through her social teaching, there is a *direct* service to the political task that the Church carries out through the political engagement of the lay faithful. As citizens of the State, the lay faithful “are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity” (no. 29). The Church’s direct engagement with the just ordering of society, then, is not carried out *institutionally*, but *personally*. Charity and justice converge in the hearts and souls of the lay faithful who, moved by love, work for justice (cf. no. 29). Called to build up the social order according to the principles of the Gospel, the lay faithful take part fully in civil society and political life.

The Nature of Christian Charitable Service

A distinctive contribution of *Deus Caritas Est* is its extensive description of Christian charitable activity and how it is to be carried out.

⁷ Second Vatican Council, pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22.

While this may seem only tangentially an aspect of the Church's social teaching, in reality it is central to Catholic teaching regarding a Christian's role in society. It is hinted at in earlier Magisterial texts, but never treated with the depth or breadth it finds in *Deus Caritas Est*.⁸ In the first place, Benedict describes this charitable work as fruit of the love of Christ, rather than mere philanthropic goodwill or sentimental compassion for the sufferings and needs of others. More than anything, he writes, "they must be persons moved by Christ's love, persons whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening within them a love of neighbour" (no. 33). It is these Christian souls, touched and conquered by the love of Jesus, who carry out Christian charity in all its fullness.

Second, Benedict insists that true Christian charity can never be reduced to efficient, technical activity, but must be moved by true love for the person. Taking his cue from Saint Paul's hymn to charity, which Benedict describes as "the *Magna Carta* of all ecclesial service," he notes that "[i]f I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3). Merely feeding the poor is never enough from a Christian perspective. "Practical activity will always be insufficient, unless it visibly expresses a love for man, a love nourished by an encounter with Christ" (no. 34). Moreover, the gifts one gives of time and material goods must be an expression of personal self-donation, which lies at the heart of charity. "I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift" (ibid).

This self-donation ties directly to Benedict's third consideration: that Christian charitable activity must be characterized by the virtue of *humility*. In philanthropic work there is always a danger that one may assume an attitude of superiority vis-à-vis the beneficiary of one's service, and in so doing, humiliate the one being served. Benedict notes that the way to overcome such an attitude is by realizing that when we serve others, we are the first beneficiaries. It is a gift to be able to help others. "Those who are in a position to help others will realize that in doing so they themselves receive help" (no. 35). Further, this service leads us to discover our own neediness: "The more we do for others, the more we understand and can appropriate the words of Christ: 'We are useless ser-

⁸ See, *inter alia*, Leo XIII, encyclical letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891), no. 63; Pius XI, encyclical letter *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), no. 137; John XXIII, encyclical letter *Mater et Magistra* (1961), no. 6; Second Vatican Council, pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), nos. 21, 88; John Paul II, encyclical letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), no. 40; John Paul II, encyclical letter *Centesimus Annus* (1991), nos. 11, 49.

vants” (ibid.). The practice of humility enables the Christian to eschew ideological utopianism, or vain protagonism. The knowledge that, in the end, we are only instruments in the Lord’s hands “frees us from the presumption of thinking that we alone are personally responsible for building a better world” (ibid.).

Such humility, coupled with an unswerving trust in God’s providence, is also a safeguard against two contrasting temptations highlighted by Benedict. When we consider the situation of the world and the need for responsible activity, we can, on the one hand “be driven towards an ideology that would aim at doing what God’s governance of the world apparently cannot: fully resolving every problem” (no. 36). On the other hand, the prospect of the immensity of the task before us can also induce us to throw up our hands in desperation, convinced that our meager efforts cannot effect any real and meaningful good, or in Benedict’s words, “it would seem that in any event nothing can be accomplished” (ibid.). To overcome these two opposing temptations, more than human prudence and virtue are needed. The solution Benedict proposes is theological: “a living relationship with Christ is decisive” (ibid.), since it leads us to overcome a prideful exaggeration of our own importance, while also encouraging a confident trust that God will use our efforts to accomplish some real good. This is not pietistic theory, but the lived experience of the Church, exemplified in her saints. “In the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta we have a clear illustration of the fact that time devoted to God in prayer not only does not detract from effective and loving service to our neighbour but is in fact the inexhaustible source of that service” (ibid.). By its very nature as a theological virtue, charity is proper to believers who abide in Christ, as a branch abides in the vine and bears much fruit.⁹

Conclusion

Although Benedict never intended *Deus Caritas Est* to be a “social encyclical,” per se, it contains an exceptional amount of material pertinent to the Church’s ongoing social teaching. Making no pretensions to comprehensiveness, Benedict specifically delved into the question of the Church’s commitment to ordered charitable activity, necessarily distinguishing it from the State’s complementary effort to promote and defend

⁹ See John 15:4-5.

justice and the common good. In so doing, he provided a fresh synthesis of the Church's understanding of Church-State relations and the competencies proper to each. He also showed, as no pope had done before, what the Church's specifically contributes to the social order, and outlined the characteristics of Christian charity that both distinguish it from philanthropy and social assistance, and define it as identifiably Christian.

He also presented clear teaching regarding the service rendered by the Church to the State in its efforts to procure justice. Reiterating that the Church neither has the will nor the competence to replace the State in this important responsibility, she does however offer a twofold assistance. Through her social teaching, reasoning with principles of the natural law, she helps purify the State's understanding of social justice and its requirements. As mother and teacher, the Church furnishes sound principles to form consciences and provoke discussion regarding the exigencies of the common good. Along with this *indirect* aid, the Church also offers *direct* assistance through the engagement of the lay faithful in the political process and in the different strata of social life.

Part of the beauty of this important encyclical, made possible—paradoxically—from the fact that it is not a “social encyclical,” is its extended theological treatment of the central virtue of charity in the Christian life. Benedict was able to seamlessly wed the Church's charitable activity to the inner life of the Trinity itself and the Christian vocation to image this life in the practice of love. Love of neighbor stands at the core of the Christian moral life and reveals itself particularly through the charitable activity of Christians in the social sphere—both institutionally and personally. Thus theology manifests its essential unity as a single science, with doctrine and morals nourishing one another in mutual implication. Though it will never be included in future catalogues of “social encyclicals,” the impact of *Deus Caritas Est* on the field of Catholic social doctrine will endure.

Summary: *The category of “social encyclicals”—monographic papal teaching letters treating themes of social justice—while useful for classifying magisterial texts, has the drawback of excluding from the corpus of Catholic social doctrine important papal teaching found elsewhere. Such is the case of Pope Benedict's first encyclical Deus Caritas Est, which, while not technically a social encyclical, presents an original contribution to the field of Catholic social thought. The second half of the encyclical studies the Church's charitable activity as an opus proprium, specifying its distinctive characteristics and revealing its significance for society. In this important treatise, Benedict distinguishes the social mission of the Church from that of the State. The State*

exists to promote the common good (justice) and employs practical reason to this end; the Church devotes herself to charitable works, as an expression of faith. Despite these distinct missions, the Church serves the State in its proper task, both directly, through the engagement of the lay faithful in social and political activity, and indirectly, through her social teaching, by which she helps the State purify its notion of justice and its requirements for the human person.

Key words: Pope Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, Catholic social teaching, Catholic social doctrine, Catholic social thought, social magisterium, social ethics, social justice, common good, charity, charitable activity, Caritas, diakonia, diaconia, Rerum Novarum, social encyclicals, philanthropy.

Parole chiave: Papa Benedetto XVI, Deus Caritas Est, Dottrina sociale della chiesa, Dottrina sociale cattolica, etica sociale, giustizia sociale, bene comune, carità, attività caritatevole, Caritas, diakonia, diaconia, Rerum Novarum, encicliche sociali, filantropia.