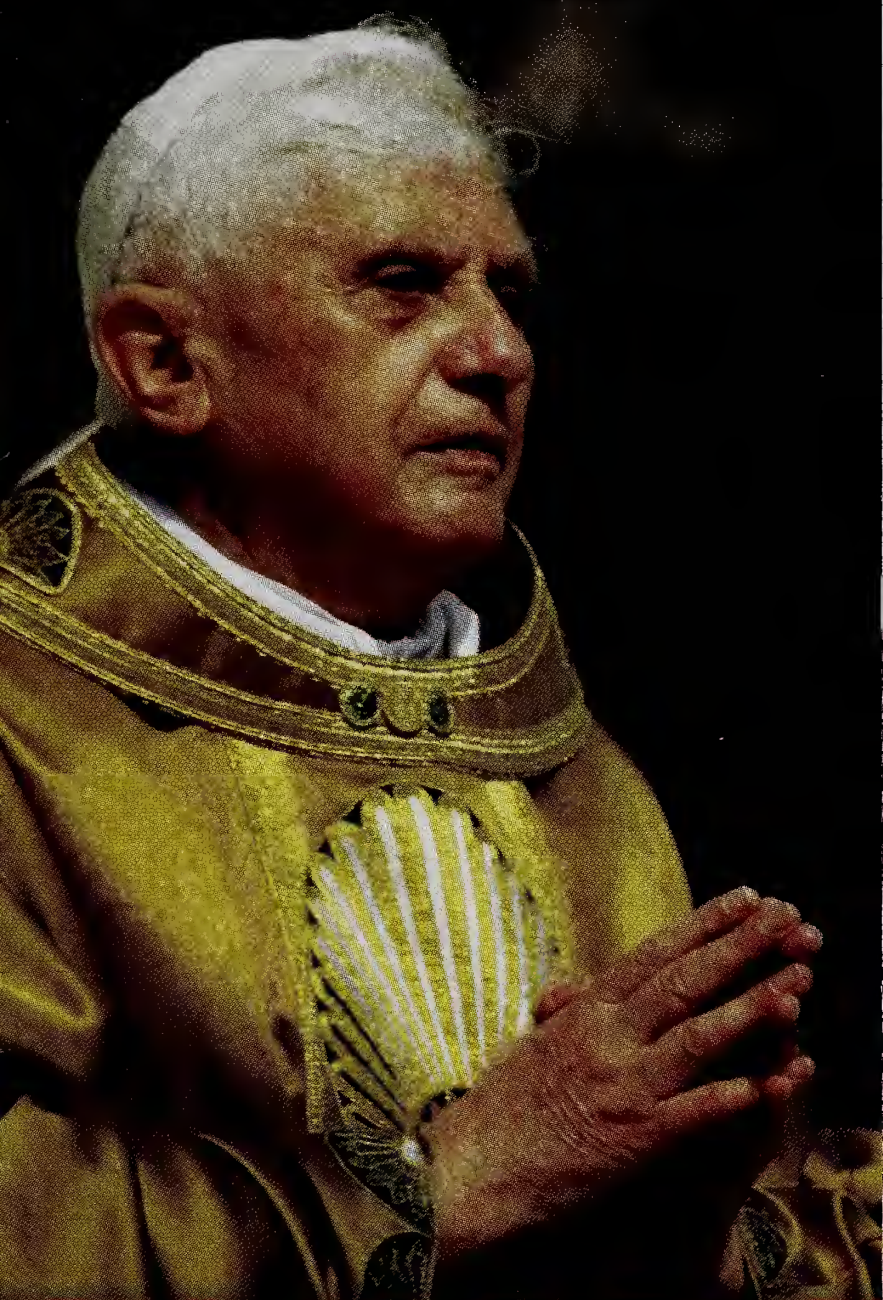


POPE BENEDICT'S
FIRST ENCYCLICAL



Deus Caritas Est
“GOD IS LOVE.”

1 JOHN 4:16

Deus Caritas Est “GOD IS LOVE”

....BUT WHAT IS LOVE?

“Love” is a word that can take on so many different meanings. We love our family, our country, our favorite foods, and our pets. But can we really grasp the full meaning of the good news that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), or the command “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12), based on the worldly definitions of that word?

In this encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI takes on this very question, so basic to understanding who we are as disciples of Jesus and what that means for us in the world. What is love? What kind of life does God’s love call us to?

TRUE LOVE

Love is a natural, primordial element of human life. It brings man and woman together, binds parents to children, and friends through adversity. Pagan philosophers thought a great deal about love and carefully defined it. But there was more, and this “more” is revealed, first, in God’s relationship with Israel.

- ◆ God reveals that He is not — as the ancient Greeks believed — an impersonal force of creativity and wisdom.
- ◆ God is not — as were the idols that pagans worshipped — unpredictable and self-serving.
- ◆ God is One who relates to us in love: creating us, sustaining us, and calling us to relationship in Him.

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Pope Benedict explores the Greek concepts of **eros** and **agape** in depth in this encyclical, pointing out that they are dimensions of love that complete each other. **Eros** is that emotional, physically driven desire for union with another. **Agape** is a self-sacrificing love. **Eros** separated from **agape** results in exploitation and dehumanization, something we have seen in some ancient cultures and can see clearly today. **Agape** apart from **Eros** risks a drying up, a diminishment, for we cannot just give — we must receive love in order to give it. Immersed in the intimacy of God’s love, we are nourished, so that we can, indeed, love as He did.

What is radical about the Old Testament witness is how it reveals that the passion and drive of *eros* are actually dimensions of God’s love. Marriage and passionate love are used as metaphors for God’s love for us, and the creation of Adam and Eve for each other tells us that the love that brings man and woman together is from God. Mystically, it reflects the structure of creation and the love of God.

The people of Israel were surrounded by cultures that misunderstood and misused the physical and emotional drive called *eros*, the drive that seeks ecstasy through union with another. Nothing much has changed. God’s revelation to the world (including us), through Israel, is that this kind of love is not the enemy of true love, but one dimension of it. This dimension, properly focused and purified, can actually, miraculously, be transformed into a selfless commitment. Molded and shaped by God, we can love as He does.

JESUS: LOVE ITSELF

In Jesus, this divine love in all of its dimensions takes flesh, dramatically and fully. There is no mystery any longer about what love is. Jesus seeks the lost and pours out His very life for them. As Pope Benedict writes, the place where this all joins, where our understanding of the real nature of love begins, is in “the pierced side of Christ.” This loving, healing presence is not just an image from the past, however. It’s not just something to think about and hope for. Jesus is present now, in love.

How can we find that true love and make it a part of our lives? Seek the face of love in Jesus, and make a personal relationship with Him the center of your faith.

- ◆ Meet Jesus in the Eucharist, where His love is poured out for you here and now—as it was on the Cross, as it was at the Last Supper.
- ◆ Let the love of Jesus you embrace in the Eucharist adjust your vision so that you see others as He does: beloved brothers and sisters.
- ◆ Let your daily choices be led by Jesus' example of sacrificial love and nourished by His loving presence.

“By contemplating the pierced side of Christ, we can understand the starting-point of this Encyclical Letter: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move.”

Deus Caritas Est (12)



THE FRUIT OF LOVE

Christian faith isn't about subscribing to ideas or joining a club. As all of the great saints reveal in their spiritual lives, faith is rooted in an encounter with a Person — the Word made Flesh. That encounter is one of love, in which we come to see how deeply loved we are by God who created and sustains us. That's a new reality, one that's very different from a world in which love is defined in terms of emotion, personal satisfaction, or even mere pleasure. It's a reality our deepest instincts tell us is true. We know that our deepest desire is for faithful, lasting love. We know that a “love” centered on seeking pleasure ultimately gives no life at all.

We also know that, as God has poured out love on us, we turn, nourished and energized, to share that love with the world. It isn't a burden; it's something that, nourished by prayer, we can't hold back. This love, or *caritas* (“charity,” also described as “ser-

vice”), is one of the three fundamental roles of the Church in the world, along with being a living witness to Jesus and worshipping God.

SAINTLY MODELS OF LOVE



If we're looking for examples of how to live this love, the saints are here to show the way. As Pope Benedict mentions, Martin of Tours, Anthony the Abbot, Francis of Assisi, Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, John Bosco, and — in our own time —

Teresa of Calcutta show us that this life of love is not only possible, but is joyful and fruitful.

From the selection of the seven deacons in the Acts of the Apostles to the loving care the early Jerusalem Christians gave each other, this service of love has been at the center of Christian life. It recognizes the mandate that Jesus gives in Matthew 25: “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do unto me.”

Personal piety, no matter how fervent or devout, is not the end of Christian faith. The Gospels and the witness of the early Christians are very clear about this: As we open ourselves up to Jesus, we're moved to open ourselves up to others as well, to see them in their need and to love as Jesus did.

Charity, however, is not the only way to help others. Since many problems that lead to poverty and suffering find their roots in unjust social and economic structures, action to remedy these structures, so that they reflect the principles of justice, is a fruit of love.

However, the actual work for change in these structures, while important, is work that belongs in the political realm. The Church offers its wisdom and insight on this work, and individual Christians are certainly called to bring their own witness into the political sphere to effect change. But the Church itself, as the Body of Christ, is charged by Jesus in the Gospel to attend most closely to those in need through immediate, direct, compassionate, and personal loving acts of charity.

KEEPING A BALANCE

We live out Jesus' love as we perform the corporal and spiritual acts of mercy. On one level, they are simple: feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, clothing the naked, teaching the ignorant. But because human beings aren't perfect, and human life is complex, there's always a risk of confusing our own flawed motivations with authentic love. How can we stay centered in Christ?

◆ Understand what we can and can't do. We can't solve all the world's problems, but we can share the love of Jesus with this person here and now.

◆ Let Jesus be our guide, not politics or ideologies.



◆ Remember that Jesus is present in those moments of service, and is working in the hearts of those in need, in His own time. Sometimes we might speak of faith in Jesus directly; some-

times we might just let our actions and presence do the speaking.

◆ Imitate Jesus' humility. As he humbled himself and joined His life with ours without judgment, so do we with those Jesus calls us to love.

◆ Make prayer the starting point of all we do. Professionalism and competence are important, but what makes Christian charity different is our awareness of the loving presence of Jesus and guidance of the Spirit.

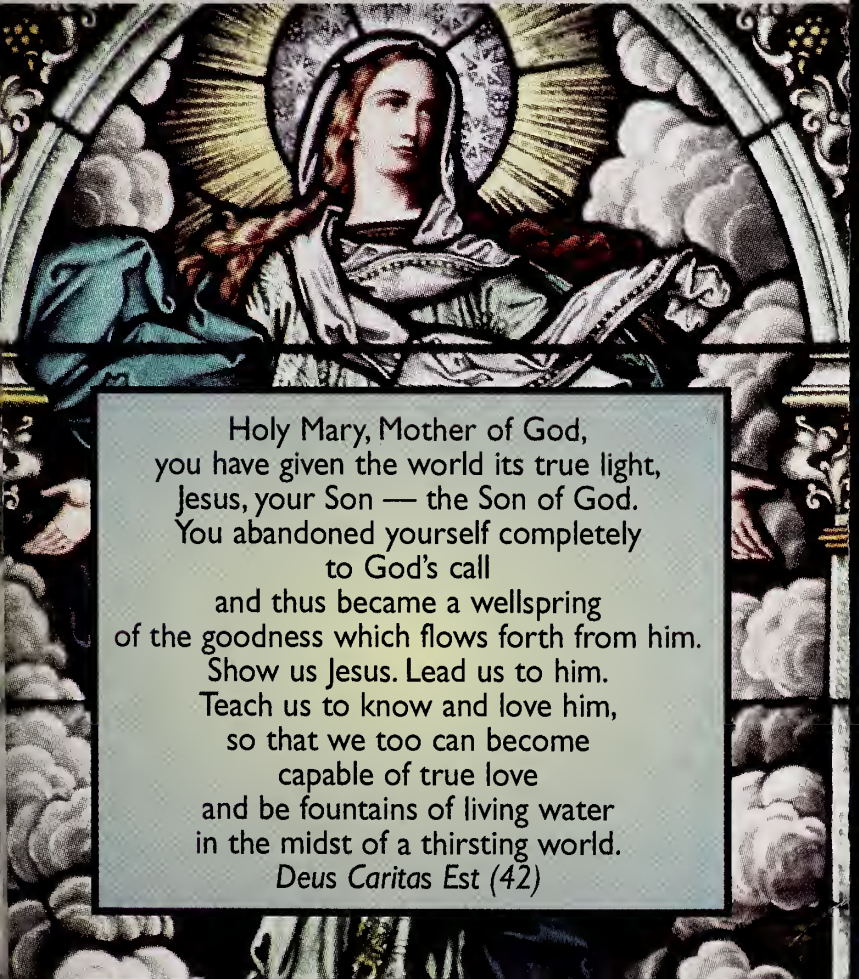
Every act that helps another is a good act, but Jesus' call to His disciples is about more than just improving people's lives. It is about encountering others in love and compassion just as He did. That's what makes Christian charity unique and always necessary, in every age and every political and economic system. A donation can pay a medical bill; only loving presence can ease the pain of a suffering soul.

LOVE IS...

As Pope Benedict writes at the beginning of this encyclical, faith is an encounter with a Person — Jesus Christ. In union with Him through the Church, through the Eucharist, we see reality in a new way. We see it as He sees it, which means we see all people through the eyes of Jesus:

...in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know...I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend. (18)

This gives us the answer to our earlier question, “What is love?” Love sees others with the eyes of the loving God. It opens us up to love as Jesus did, fearlessly and hopefully. In that, as she always does, the Blessed Virgin Mary leads the way:



Holy Mary, Mother of God,
you have given the world its true light,
Jesus, your Son — the Son of God.
You abandoned yourself completely
to God's call
and thus became a wellspring
of the goodness which flows forth from him.
Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.
Teach us to know and love him,
so that we too can become
capable of true love
and be fountains of living water
in the midst of a thirsting world.
Deus Caritas Est (42)

WHERE TO GO FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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For the full text of the encyclical:
www.vatican.va

For more on Pope Benedict XVI:
We Have a Pope! Benedict XVI, Matthew Bunson, Our Sunday Visitor.

For the spirituality of Christian charity:
When Did We See You Lord?, Bishop Robert J. Baker and Fr. Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R., Our Sunday Visitor.

For saintly models of love:
Mother Teresa's Lessons of Love and Secrets of Sanctity, Susan Conroy, Our Sunday Visitor.

Ordinary Suffering of Extraordinary Saints, Fr. Vincent O'Malley, Our Sunday Visitor.

For more details online: www.osv.com/godislove

For additional Catholic resources
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