

Summary of Deus Caritas Est

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Summary of *Deus Caritas Est*

L'Osservatore Romano

Abiding in God and God abiding in us

The following is a translation of the Summary of the Holy Father's first Encyclical, Deus Caritas Est (God Is Love), which was published on Thursday, 26 January.

Summary

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16).

These words that begin the Encyclical express the core of the Christian faith. In a world in which God's Name is sometimes linked with revenge or even with hatred and violence, the Christian message of God-Love is very timely.

The Encyclical is divided into two main parts.

Part I presents a theological and philosophical reflection on the different dimensions of "love" —*eros, philia, agape*— and explains certain essential facts concerning God's love for man and the intrinsic connection of this love with human love.

Part II deals with the actual practice of the commandment to love one's neighbour.

Part I

The term "love", one of the most used and abused words in today's world, has a multiplicity of meanings. From them, however, emerges an archetype of love par excellence: the love of a man and a woman, which in ancient Greece was known as *eros*.

In the Bible, especially in the New Testament, the concept of "love" is examined closely, a development which results in setting aside the word *eros* in favour of the term *agape* to express a self-sacrificing love.

This new vision of love, an essentially Christian innovation, has often been judged in a totally negative way as the rejection of *eros* and of bodiliness. Although these tendencies have existed, the meaning of this deepening is different.

The *eros*, implanted in human nature by the Creator himself, needs discipline, purification and growth in maturity if it is not to lose its original dignity or degenerate into pure "sex", becoming a commodity.

The Christian faith has always considered man as a being in whom there is a sort of interpenetration of spirit and matter, from which he draws a new nobility. We can say that the challenge of the *eros* has been overcome when body and mind are found to be in perfect harmony in the human being.

At that point, love indeed becomes an "ecstasy", not in the sense of a fleeting moment of intoxication but as an ongoing exodus from the inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards self-discovery and the discovery of God: in this way the *eros* can uplift the human being "in ecstasy" towards the Divine.

In short, *eros* and *agape* somehow need to be connected to each other. Indeed, the more the two find the correct equilibrium in their different dimensions, the more the true nature of love is realized.

Even if *eros* is at first mainly desire, in drawing near to the other person it becomes less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other, bestows itself and wants to "be there for" the other. It is then that the element of *agape* enters into this love.

In Jesus Christ, who is the incarnate love of God, the *eros-agape* reaches its most radical form. In dying on the Cross, by giving himself in order to raise and save man, Jesus expresses love in its most sublime form. He guaranteed an enduring presence of this oblation act through the institution of the Eucharist, in which he gives himself under the species of bread and wine as a new manna that unites us with him.

By participating in the Eucharist, we too are involved in the dynamic of his self-giving. We are united with him and, at the same time, with all others to whom he gives himself; thus, we all become "one body".

In this way, love of neighbour and love of God are truly united. The double Commandment, thanks to this encounter with the *agape* of God, is no longer solely a precept: love can be "commanded" because it has first been given.

Part II

Love of neighbour, grounded in love of God, as well as being a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, is also a responsibility for the entire Ecclesial Community, which must reflect Trinitarian love in its charitable activity.

Awareness of this responsibility also had a constitutive relevance in the Church from the very beginning (cf. Acts 2:44-45), and very soon the need for a form of organization became apparent, as a presupposition for carrying it out more effectively.

Thus, the "diaconate" came into being in the fundamental structure of the Church as a ministry of love of neighbour exercised in a communitarian and orderly way — a concrete but at the same time spiritual service (cf. Acts 6:16). As the Church gradually spread, this practice of charity was confirmed as one of her essential responsibilities.

The Church's deepest nature is thus expressed in her three-fold duty: to proclaim the Word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrate the sacraments (*leiturgia*), and exercise, the ministry of charity (*diakonia*). These duties presuppose one another and are inseparable.

Since the 19th century, a fundamental objection has been raised to the Church's charitable activity. People claim that it is contrary to justice and will end by becoming a means of preserving the *status quo*. Through individual works of charity, the Church would foster the continuance of the present unjust system, making it appear at least to some extent tolerable and thereby slowing down the result and potential evolution of a better world.

In this regard, Marxism saw world revolution and its preliminaries as the panacea for the social problem, a dream that has faded in the meantime.

The Papal Magisterium, starting with the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII (1891) to the trilogy of John Paul II's social Encyclicals (*Laborem Exercens* [1981], *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* [1987] and *Centesimus Annus* [1991]), persistently tackled the social question and, in confrontation with the ever new problematic situations, developed a very comprehensive social doctrine which proposes effective guidelines extending far beyond the Church's frontiers. The just ordering of society and of the State, however, is a core duty of politics and therefore cannot be an immediate responsibility of the Church. Catholic social doctrine does not seek to confer upon the Church power over the State,

but simply desires to purify and illuminate reason, making its own contribution to the formation of consciences, so that the true requirements of justice may be perceived, recognized and subsequently practiced.

Yet there is no ordering of the State, however just, that can make a service of love superfluous. The State which aims to provide everything would ultimately become a bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person — every person — needs: loving personal concern.

Those who wish to get rid of love are prepared to get rid of the human being as a human person.

In our time, a positive collateral effect of globalization can be seen in the fact that concern for neighbour transcends the confines of national communities and tends to broaden its horizons to the whole world. State agencies and humanitarian associations support in various ways the solidarity shown by civil society: this has led to the foundation of many organizations with charitable or philanthropic aims.

In the Catholic Church as well as other ecclesial communities, new forms of charitable activity have arisen. Among all these bodies, the hope is for fruitful collaboration.

It is, of course, important that the Church's charitable activity does not lose its own identity and become just another form of social assistance, but that it maintain all the splendour of the essence of Christian and ecclesial charity.

Therefore:

- Christian charitable activity, as well as being based on professional competence, must be based on the experience of a personal encounter with Christ, whose love has moved the heart of the believer, awakening within him love of neighbour.
- Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies. The Christian's programme — the programme of the Good Samaritan, the programme of Jesus — is "a heart which sees". This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly.
- Christian charitable activity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends.

But this does not mean that charitable activity must, so to speak, leave God and Christ aside. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing about him and to let love alone speak. St Paul's hymn to charity (cf. I Cor 13) must be the *Magna Carta* of all ecclesial service to protect it from the risk of being reduced to pure activism.

In this context and in the face of the impending secularism that can also condition many Christians who are involved in charitable work, it is necessary to reaffirm the importance of prayer.

On the one hand, living contact with Christ prevents the experience of the immensity of needs and the limitations of our own action from driving the agent towards a policy that would claim to do what God does not seem to be doing or, on the other hand, from becoming a temptation to surrender to inertia and resignation.

People who pray are not wasting their time, even though the situation may seem to call for urgent action alone; nor do they claim to correct God's plans, but rather seek — after the example of Mary and the saints — to find in God the light and strength of the love which overcomes all the darkness and selfishness present in the world.

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