

Editorial: *Deus Caritas Est*

MICHAEL DAUPHINAIS & MATTHEW LEVERING

Ave Maria University

Naples, Florida

IN ACCORD with Pope Benedict XVI's lifelong appreciation for the great St. Augustine, Benedict XVI's first encyclical is devoted to Augustine's favorite themes: the nature of love and the relationship of the Church and the political order. *Deus Caritas Est* possesses two parts: the first a discourse on the nature of love, the second on works of love and in particular the relationship of Church and State. Both themes are not merely Augustinian but indeed are richly biblical and discussed profoundly by many saints and doctors of the Christian tradition. Thus *Deus Caritas Est* recalls and proclaims the perennial message of the Gospel. Since the Gospel message is ever timely, *Deus Caritas Est* speaks powerfully to our situation. Many Catholics have become confused precisely as regards the nature of love (claiming that the Church's teaching on marital love is outdated) and as regards the Church's relationship to the State (where the latter is imagined as a sphere of autonomy). Benedict has in view the future of the West as it moves ever further away from Christianity, "in a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence" (no. 1).

The first part of *Deus Caritas Est* builds upon the reality that man is not created in a state of neutrality vis-à-vis the good. Against this view, Benedict points out that human nature, as created, possesses *eros*, an inclination or drive toward union with another. Benedict shows that this *eros*, to be fully realized, must be purified by a deeper "ecstasy" of love, that of self-giving *agape*:

"*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. 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 this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished and even loses its own nature." (no. 7)

The attraction toward the good belongs to both our created and our graced nature. By inscribing in our created nature an *eros* that seeks happiness, and by purifying and perfecting that *eros* in graced self-giving love (manifested in Christ's sacrifice for us), the Trinity draws us to Himself so intimately as to form a spiritual "marriage" between Himself and man. Love is thus no mere extrinsic command: in self-giving love we find the deepest interior fulfillment. As Benedict XVI teaches, "God's will is no longer for me an alien will, something imposed on me from without by the commandments, but it is now my own will, based on the realization that God is in fact more deeply present to me than I am to myself. Then self-abandonment to God increases and God becomes our joy" (no. 17).

This understanding of human nature's ordering and fulfillment has implications for the social order, as Benedict XVI shows in the second part of *Deus Caritas Est*. The Eucharistic generosity and fruitfulness of Christ's Body, the Church, must make its mark upon all worldly structures and social systems. Inseparably from her teaching and sacraments, the Church's communion—as a mediation of Christ's love through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—manifests itself in self-giving service to mankind. Such self-giving service cannot be excluded from the State's own proper pursuit of justice, both because the Church proclaims in the light of faith the requirements of justice, and because lay Christians are called to active participation in the formation and sustenance of a just State. In addition, the Church's works of charity goes well beyond what the State on its own can achieve for the common good: "There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love" (no. 28).

The work of charity, Benedict XVI emphasizes, is no instrument calculated to further "partisan strategies and programs," let alone to proselytize (no. 31). Rather, it is a freely bestowed, personal response of love. The goal is not "improving the world" per se, but rather the personal communication of God's love for us in Christ. In the humility of such free acts of love, whose source is prayer, the Church becomes "increasingly the image and instrument of the love which flows from Christ" (no. 33).

Ultimately, then, Benedict's vision for a "true humanism" (no. 9) is theocentric. The yearnings of all men and women, of all the societies of the world, can be fulfilled only by following the Virgin Mary's example in her love for her Son: "not setting herself at the center, but leaving space for God, who is encountered both in prayer and in service of neighbor—only then does goodness enter the world. Mary's greatness consists in the fact that she wants to magnify God, not herself" (no. 41). The human race's desire (*eros*) for happiness is purified and fulfilled by sharing in Christ's self-giving *agape*. Christ thus cannot be excluded from any true humanism, but must be at its heart. For man and for every society, love alone suffices.

N.V.