

“Nature and Grace” in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*

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NATURE AND GRACE: Might this be the cryptic theme of Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical, which was made public on January 25, 2006?¹ Of course not. The precise subject of *Deus Caritas Est* is one that could not be more clearly specified right from the beginning: “I wish in my first encyclical to speak of the love which God lavishes upon us and which we in turn must share with others” (no. 1). Consequently, the pontifical document is subdivided in two parts, which are distinct in many aspects but unified by the common reference to divine love, envisaged first in and of itself, and then considered as participated in the community of believers and the source of the community's charitable energy. The goal of the first part is to “clarify some essential facts concerning the love that God mysteriously and gratuitously offers to man, together with the intrinsic link between that Love and the reality of human love” (no. 1). The second part “treats the ecclesial exercise of the commandment of love of neighbor” (no. 1), which is to say, the *diakonia* or *service of charity* (no. 19, original emphasis). The practical goal of this teaching is to “call forth in the world renewed energy and commitment in the human response to God's love” (no. 1).

This being said, it quickly becomes apparent to the theologian that, in the treatment of the encyclical's questions, Benedict XVI uses a well thought-out and precise conception of that which is classically called “the question of the relationship between nature and grace.” In truth, even

¹ This article first appeared as “‘Nature et grâce’ dans l'encyclique *Deus Caritas Est*,” trans. Shannon Gaffney, *Revue Thomiste* 105 (2005): 531–49.

though the concept of nature is well-attested to in the encyclical,² it would be distorting the thoughts of the pope to force them, at any cost, to fit into the problematic, and the “Thomistic” categories, of the relationships between nature and grace. Benedict XVI does not focus as much on abstract essences as on concrete, historical situations, in such a way that the problematic of the relationships between nature and grace takes on, for him, the analogical form of a reflection on the encounter between, on the one hand, the event that is the grace of Christian revelation³—in its twofold dimension of light for the intelligence and dynamism for the will, and on the other, the historically determined human realities, personal and communal.⁴ For Benedict XVI, the archetype—which is constantly a subject of meditation—of this encounter is that which took place at the beginning of Christianity between Christian faith and the Greco-Latin culture of Antiquity.⁵ There is nothing surprising about the fact that the meditation on love that opens the encyclical is constructed on the encounter between *eros*, as understood in Greco-Latin culture, and *agape*, which defines Christian love according to the New Testament. It is also not surprising that the encyclical is full of references to the wisdom of antiquity: This comes not from a mania of an erudite German, but rather

² Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, January 25, 2006. The term “nature” appears at least a dozen times in the encyclical. Once it is used simply to translate the Latin, *indoles* (no. 28). Most of the time, it refers to the essence of a reality, that is to say to the elements and the dynamisms that define it. Thus, it concerns the nature of love (nos. 7 and 18), that of *eros* (no. 7), of the Church (nos. 25 and 29), and of faith (no. 28). Concerning human nature, Benedict XVI explains that God revealed to Israel “man’s true nature” (no. 9). This nature is the source and the normative justification of certain fundamental givens of human existence. It founds the natural law that manifests “what is in accord with the nature of every human being” (no. 28). In the same way, “*eros* is somehow rooted in man’s very nature” (no. 11) and “the command of love of neighbor is inscribed by the Creator in man’s very nature” (no. 31).

³ Cf. Benedict XVI, encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*, January 25, 2006, no. 1: “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

⁴ These “human realities” are the expression of human nature defined by a constant ensemble of active and passive powers; but, as realities concretely situated in the history of Salvation, they also carry the double mark of the initial vocation of man to the supernatural, which coincides in fact with creation as the first act of the history of Salvation, and of sin that refuses this vocation and warps human nature in the sinner.

⁵ Cf. for example Joseph Ratzinger’s recent explorations of this theme in *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006); and idem, *On the Way to Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), ch. 3.

from the desire to think within a horizon of the intimate relationship between the classical, pre-Christian culture and the Christian faith.

The manner in which Benedict XVI envisages the encounter between Christian faith and human realities—its modalities and the causes of its success or failure—constitutes a theological structure that underlies the entire encyclical and that does not fail to contribute greatly to its unity. It effectively governs the principal problematics at play in the encyclical. In the first part, the meditation on the relationship between *eros* and *agape* clearly shows this vision of the encounter between Revelation and the order of human realities. In the second part, this same vision is at the heart of the reflection on the relationship between justice and charity, as well as on the relationship between the State and the Church as subjects of social activity with the purpose of doing good.

This article aims to be a theological homage to Benedict XVI at the dawn of his pontificate. It proposes to explain, in a small way, this theological structure. To do so, two paths are possible. An inductive route, according to the *ordo inventionis*, would begin from different analogical realizations of this structure of the encounter in order to show, little by little, the *ratio* or the analogically common notion. In this article, I will follow a more deductive route, according to the *ordo expositionis*, which consists in first expressing the general laws of this encounter of faith and human realities, in order then to illumine the various applications that the encyclical sets forth.

The General Laws of the Encounter Between Faith and Human Realities

The order of natural human realities and the order of grace are two distinct orders. For example, concerning the State and the Church, the pope affirms that “the two spheres are distinct, yet always interrelated” (no. 28). Human realities are the deployment of the capacities of human reason, in the theoretical order (philosophy, science) or the practical order (justice, political life), as well as in the dynamisms of human love. The order of grace comes from a more profound gift of God: It consists on the one hand in the objective revelation of the Mystery, received in faith, and on the other hand in the dynamism of charity as participation in the love with which God loves himself and loves his spiritual creatures. In relation to nature, grace is irruption and newness: It opens “new horizons”⁶ to human existence.

As distinct as they may be, these two orders are not called to be purely juxtaposed or to be contented with a peaceful coexistence. On the

⁶ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1 and no. 28: “Faith by its specific nature is an encounter with the living God—an encounter opening up new horizons extending beyond the sphere of reason.”

contrary, they must imperatively enter into and stay in an intimate relationship with one another. A successful articulation between these two orders is characterized by three traits.

First, it assumes at the very least a unity according to the analogy between the two orders. If there were no relationship between the natural human realities (for example, human love) and the supernatural realities (charity), there would be two parallel universes that never meet.⁷ This gets to the heart of the very pertinence of Christianity, which is to say its inscription in the real life of men. If the order of grace were “another world,” without a relationship to the historic realities of human cultures, Christianity would be reduced to a gnosis, an evasion. On the contrary, human realities offer themselves to grace as a surface of incarnation.

Second, grace ripens, heals, and purifies natural human realities. This is something upon which the encyclical greatly insists. There exists in natural human realities, a sort of initial indetermination that must be lifted up in the course of their development by an encounter with faith. This makes emerge, not without suffering at times, that which is the best and most authentically human within them.⁸ By contrast, when they are left to themselves, that is to say, when man refuses to enter into the paschal steps that are implied in the encounter with Christian faith, these human realities can only degenerate. But, when man opens himself to grace, man becomes aware of his own mystery, which is to say the integral reality of his nature; and he can fully and truly exercise the dynamisms that constitute this nature.

Third, the irruption of grace at the heart of human realities brings newness and rupture: Grace cannot be reduced to a homogenous deployment of nature.⁹ Nonetheless, beyond the rupture, grace also fulfills, in an

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 7: “Were this antithesis [between the Greek *eros* and the Christian *agape*] to be taken to extremes, the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life”; and no. 8: “biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe, or one opposed to that primordial human phenomenon which is love, but rather accepts the whole man; it intervenes in his search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it.”

⁸ Cf., for example, *ibid.*, no. 8: “Fundamentally, ‘love’ is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly.”

⁹ The encyclical insists, for example, on the newness of the image of God brought by Revelation in comparison to that which circulated in ancient religions or even in Greek philosophy. This newness was not without rupture. Between Greek philosophy and Christian faith, there is not a simple homogenous development. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 9: “The divine power that Aristotle at the height of Greek philosophy sought to grasp through reflection, is indeed for every being an object of desire

unexpected fashion, the profound wishes of human nature and carries its dynamisms to their full completion. In fact, Revelation brings certain still confused hopes which, by nature or already by grace—this question will not be discussed here—inhabit and agitate the human heart, a response that is both disconcerting and fulfilling.¹⁰

In opposition to this logic of complementarity and accomplishment are the mortifying logics of substitution and separation. In the first case, the autonomy of temporal realities is denied by religious overdetermination. Religion refuses the constituent dialogue with reason, which leads to its own degradation, to a deformation of the image of God, and in the sociopolitical arena, to a fanaticism that does not hesitate to have recourse to violence.

In the second case, the logic of separation leads to the secularization and the social marginalization of Christian faith, which is denied any influence over the real life of men. A certain “gnostic” tendency in the interior itself of Christianity can, by advocating a spirituality of evasion or disengagement, favor this movement of secularization to the highest degree. Religious values, confined to a strictly private sphere, appear, in this way, to be more and more ethereal and without real interest. As for the human values which were brought by Christianity, they are, one may think, reintegrated or reabsorbed into the structures of natural order. Thus Revelation is reduced to a mere anticipation of the conquests of reason, and the charitable works of the Church to a rough sketch of the pure rationality of the providence of the State.

The consequences of this separation are no less noxious to human realities than they are to Christian faith. To describe the situation that is created in nature when it is cut off from grace, the encyclical many times uses words such as degradation, debasement, and demeaning: Nature degrades itself when it closes itself off from the beneficial influences of grace.¹¹ In

and of love—and as the object of love this divinity moves the world—but in itself it lacks nothing and does not love: it is solely the object of love. The one God in whom Israel believes, on the other hand, loves with a personal love.”

¹⁰ The encyclical uses the concept of “dream” two times to indicate this type of confused hope. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 10: “man can indeed enter into union with God—his primordial aspiration [*somnium*]. But this union is no mere fusion, a sinking in the nameless ocean of the Divine; it is a unity which creates love, a unity in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one”; and no. 13: “The ancient world had dimly perceived [*antiqui somniaverunt*] that man’s real food—what truly nourishes him as man—is ultimately the *Logos*, eternal wisdom: this same *Logos* now truly becomes food for us—as love.”

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 4: “An intoxicated and undisciplined *eros*, then, is not an ascent in ‘ecstasy’ towards the Divine, but a fall, a degradation [*imminutio*] of man”; no. 5:

fact, the opening to grace is not an optional possibility, but an intrinsic requirement of nature, whose refusal is equivalent to mutilation. This is to say, for example, that *eros* that thwarts the movement, which brings it to go beyond itself toward *agape* and which divinizes itself, becomes its own caricature.¹² Similarly, “neutral” reason—reason that desires to be nothing but reason—easily allows itself to be subverted by particular instincts or interests that are, however, inferior in dignity.¹³

In particular, reason cut off from faith ends up easily losing the dynamism that should open it to the totality of reality in all of its complexity. The price that is paid for this withdrawal into ourselves is reductionism, which consists in taking the part for the whole, and reducing the real to that which reason—a reason voluntarily lacking in fullness—thinks it grasps. From this comes a truncated vision of God that has produced at least three venomous fruits in contemporary culture.

“Here we are actually dealing with a debasement [*depravatio*] of the human body: no longer is it integrated into our overall existential freedom”; no. 7: “The element of *agape* thus enters into this love, for otherwise *eros* is impoverished [*decidit*] and even loses its own nature”; no. 37: “A personal relationship with God and an abandonment to his will can prevent man from being demeaned [*prolatur homo*].”

¹² Cf. *ibid.*, no. 8: “Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love.”

¹³ Joseph Ratzinger has a great interest in the thought of St. Bonaventure. In an era during which philosophy tended to claim its independence, Bonaventure firmly denounced this pretension of philosophical reason as a degradation of reason. Cf. St. Bonaventure, *Collationes de septem donis Spiritus sancti*, Collatio IV, no. 12: “Philosophical science is a path toward other sciences, but those who claim that we can stop there [*ibi stare*, such was the ideal of certain members of the faculty of arts] fall into darkness [*Philosophica scientia via est ad alias scientias; sed qui vult ibi stare cadit in tenebras*];” and *ibid.*: “The first light, that of philosophical science, is great in the opinion of the men of the world, but it is easily eclipsed if one is not on guard against the head and the tail of the dragon. If between it and the sun of justice something is interposed, it suffers the eclipse of foolishness. . . . The one who trusts in philosophical science and is appreciated, and because of this he believes he is better, he becomes stupid. That is to say, when he believes he grasps the Creator through this science, without an ulterior light, it is like a man trying to look at the sky or the sun with candles [*Prima claritas, scilicet scientiae philosophicae, magna est secundum opinionem hominum mundialum; sed de facili eclipsatur, nisi homo caveat sibi a capite et cauda draconis. Si aliquid interponatur inter ipsum et solem iustitiae, patitur eclipsim stultitiae. . . . Qui confidit in scientia philosophica et appetiatur, se propter hoc et credit se esse meliorem, stultus factus est, scilicet quando per istam scientiam sine ulteriori lumine credit se apprehendere Creatorem, sicut si homo per candelas vellet videre caelum vel corpus solare*].”

The first fruit of rationalist reductionism is materialism. The encyclical denounces, above all, the social effects of materialism, such as the reduction of the person to his economic needs, which goes hand-in-hand with forgetting the necessary interpersonal and spiritual dimension of aid to the destitute.¹⁴

The second fruit is dualism, which, incapable of conceiving of the unity of reality in reference to the Creator and the unifying presence of original reason (the *Logos*), divides the world into two universes that are strangers to each other: that of the body, abandoned to the materialist interpretation, and that of pure spirits. Benedict XVI indicates two major consequences of this dualism. First, applied to the human person, it pulverizes unity;¹⁵ it decomposes the human person into one part to which is reserved the exclusivity of rationality and to another part, consequently purely material, which no longer has rational and human meaning on its own. From this point on, it is up to each person's subjectivity to impose a meaning on the foreign and insignificant mass of the body that each person technically manipulates in a way that treats it as a purely physical and exterior reality.¹⁶ This vision of things is evidently destructive for authentic love: It disconnects the spiritual dimension of love, often reduced to a chaste amorous feeling, from sexuality, which is reduced to a purely biological function, ceasing to be the sacrament of love.¹⁷ Second, the same dualism is at the root of the ideology of progress and betterment, which is many times denounced in the encyclical.¹⁸ It is certainly not the case that the pope is against progress or

¹⁴ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28: "In the end, the claim that just social structures would make works of charity superfluous masks a materialist conception of man: the mistaken notion that man can live 'by bread alone' (Mt 4:4; cf. Dt 8:3)—a conviction that demeans man and ultimately disregards all that is specifically human."

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 5: "Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness."

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*: "On the contrary, he now considers his body and his sexuality as the purely material part of himself, to be used and exploited at will. Nor does he see it as an arena for the exercise of his freedom, but as a mere object that he attempts, as he pleases, to make both enjoyable and harmless."

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*: "Here we are actually dealing with a debasement of the human body: no longer is it integrated into our overall existential freedom; no longer is it a vital expression of our whole being, but it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere."

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 31: "The modern age, particularly from the nineteenth century on, has been dominated by various versions of a philosophy of progress whose most radical form is Marxism"; no. 33: "they [Christians] must not be inspired by

amelioration of the conditions of the life of humanity, but he diagnoses in this common belief—which holds that men radically modify their condition by their action—an illusion that flows from the forgetting of God and his providential action. If, in fact, as dualism claims, the world is not the work of the *Logos*, if it is not governed by him with strength and wisdom, then man, instead of fitting into the world as a humble instrument in the work of this mysterious governance, is tempted to impose, even by revolutionary violence, the pseudo-clarity of his “scientific materialism.”¹⁹ However, this ideology, because it takes its support from a truncated vision of man, can only lead to inhumane practices.²⁰ The failure of the bloody experiment of Marxism sounded the knell of this dualist and promethean approach toward the amelioration of the world by “pure reason.”²¹

The third venomous fruit of rationalist reductionism is, on the sociopolitical level, totalitarianism. Having no vis-à-vis to remind it of its relativity, political reason, incarnated in the State, can easily take itself to be everything, as we will discuss later. But, here again, the pretense that neutral reason can suffice in and of itself leads, in fact, to its pledging allegiance to infrarational interests, which is to say to ideologies.

Eros and Agape

In this perspective of a necessary and fecund interaction between natural human realities and Christian faith, the first part of the encyclical teaches

ideologies aimed at improving the world, but should rather be guided by the faith which works through love (cf. Gal 5:6)”; no. 35: “we are helped by the knowledge that, in the end, we are only instruments in the Lord’s hands; and this knowledge frees us from the presumption of thinking that we alone are personally responsible for building a better world. In all humility we will do what we can, and in all humility we will entrust the rest to the Lord.”

¹⁹ State bureaucracy (cf. *ibid.*, no. 28) is another expression of this will toward excessive rationalization. In fact, the desire to master everything in the social body is born from the lack of knowledge—which is characteristic of this rationalist dualism—of the immanent rationality of the natural communities anterior to the State.

²⁰ An example of this would be sacrificing, in the name of a “generic, abstract, and undemanding expression of love” (*ibid.*, no. 15), the concrete and truly present person, for the utopia of a perfectly organized society. Cf. no. 31: “What we have here, though, is really an inhuman philosophy. People of the present are sacrificed to the *molech* of the future—a future whose effective realization is at best doubtful. One does not make the world more human by refusing to act humanely here and now.”

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 27: “Marxism had seen world revolution and its preliminaries as the panacea for the social problem: revolution and the subsequent collectivization of the means of production, so it was claimed, would immediately change things for the better. This illusion has vanished.”

that a just appreciation of nature and the value of human love becomes possible only in the climate of an openness to supernatural Revelation, filled with the love that is in God. Only in the coming together of *eros* and *agape* can the full truth of human love be shown.

Love considered as a gift of self to the person loved is not a perfection that belongs exclusively to the love of God or to his participation in man, which is supernatural charity: This is already a constituent dimension of human love. At the same time, this dimension, virtually present from the beginning in *eros*—which is the “worldly” form of love (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 7)—seems to be concealed by the initial predominance of the possessive dimension of this love. It only fully emerges in the light of the revelation of the divine form of love, *agape*. This is an eloquent illustration of the thesis that only grace can fully reveal nature to itself.

There exists, therefore, in *eros*, as the human form of love, whose archetype is the love of man and woman, an internal dynamism that pushes it not to deny itself in charity but to come to its fulfillment in charity. It contains two types of elements. Some come from its initial imperfection, for example, its selfish, possessive, primarily sensual character, or the fact that sexual instincts or feelings of love develop in a savage fashion without being integrated into a properly spiritual and unifying plan. If *eros* were defined by such properties, it is clear that it could never be assumed into the Christian form of love. *Eros* and *agape* would, in this case, be two contradictory and irreconcilable realities. The victory of one would be the death of the other. However, *eros* also contains, and more essentially, an oblation, spiritual dimension. The passage from an *eros* that is predominantly possessive to an *eros* that is predominantly oblation, assumed by *agape*, is, therefore, not so much a rupture, but rather a maturation, a healing, and a purification.²² Little by little, these accidental elements of *eros*, which could be parasites to the essential reality of human love and limit its dynamism, are abandoned, and the secondary elements are integrated into the global plan. This passage, which is in the very logic of authentic human love, nevertheless does not happen without death to itself. But, this is in order to attain, in a paschal logic, to a fulfillment where love becomes capable of integrating the diverse components of the person and unifying them. In this fulfillment the promises of the absolute and of

²² Cf. *ibid.*, no. 5: “Purification and growth in maturity are called for; and these also pass through the path of renunciation. Far from rejecting or ‘poisoning’ *eros*, they heal it and restore its true grandeur.” The concept of “purification” is omnipresent in the encyclical: It expresses an essential aspect of the action exercised by grace in natural human realities.

happiness, which are confusedly present like a foretaste in the experience of human love, are finally realized.²³

A completely opposite logic of separation between the human experience of love and the revelation of divine love in Christ would lead here to a two-fold impasse. On the one hand, human love that rejects the illuminations and purifications that come from grace would lower itself to an infra-human form of love—sentimentalism or eroticism. *Eros*, being intrinsically ordered to its assumption by *agape*, degrades and denies itself when it opposes this. The perversions of *eros* in the cultures of antiquity and the reduction of *eros* to “sex” in contemporary culture show evidence of this problem.²⁴ On the other hand, a divine love of charity that would come to juxtapose itself in a purely extrinsic fashion to the experience of human love would not only lose its pertinence for man, but would be purely and simply incomprehensible: The very term “love” would be equivocal.

Without using the term, Benedict XVI has recourse here to the classic thematic of analogy. On the one hand, a “categorical” analogy unifies the different meanings of love on the human level by using the first and unifying analogate, the love of man and woman, which finds its fulfillment in marriage.²⁵ On the other hand, a “transcendental” analogy

²³ Concerning the “promises” that human love contains, without being able to realize them by itself, cf. *ibid.*, no. 2: “love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness”; no. 5: “love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence”; no. 6: “How might love be experienced so that it can fully realize its human and divine promise?”; no. 7: “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.” Along the same line, human love gives a foretaste of full happiness; cf. *DCE*, no. 3: “the joy which is the Creator’s gift offers us a happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine”; no. 4: “Evidently, *eros* needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns.”

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 4: The Old Testament “in no way rejected *eros* as such; rather, it declared war on a warped and destructive form of it, because this counterfeit divinization of *eros* actually strips it of its dignity and dehumanizes it”; and no. 5, “*Eros*, reduced to pure ‘sex,’ has become a commodity, a mere ‘thing’ to be bought and sold, or rather, man himself becomes a commodity.”

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 2: “Let us first of all bring to mind the vast semantic range of the word ‘love’: we speak of love of country, love of one’s profession, love between friends, love of work, love between parents and children, love between family members, love of neighbor, and love of God. Amid this multiplicity of meanings, however, one in particular stands out: love between man and woman. . . . This would seem

permits us to think of the “intrinsic link” (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 1) between, on one side, these different forms of human love and, on the other, divine love. These two loves clarify each other: Revelation of the love of God for men is expressed through human love, and human love receives from this revelation an unsuspected depth and discovers the fullness of its meaning. The link, which biblical scholars know well, between the deepening of monotheism and the emergence of monogamous marriage illustrates this reciprocity perfectly.²⁶

This understanding of the fullness of the truth of human love, made possible by the light of Revelation, reflects back on the idea that one can have of love in God. The authentic perfection of human love must eminently be found in God, but free of its created modalities. Can *eros* then be attributed to God? Is *eros* a divine Name?²⁷ If *eros* is taken in the restricted sense, in which it defines a sensual and passionate love, or even a love of the possessive sort, it is clear that it cannot in any manner be attributed to God. St. Thomas comes to our aid in this question. In the *Summa theologiae*, he explains how the will and love of God that extends first to the infinite Good, God himself, extends also to his creatures. In doing this, St. Thomas leads us deeply into the contemplation of the mystery of love. Using physical beings as his starting point, because for us they are the most familiar, the Angelic Doctor draws out a first transcendental metaphysical law: Each being, he says, has a natural inclination toward his own good, his own perfection, whether it be to acquire it (if he does not have it), or to rejoice in it (if he has it). But this is only one aspect, the most apparent one for us, of the dynamism of the appetite. St. Thomas also discerns in each being another natural inclination: the tendency to communicate his own good, to have others participate in his own perfection, to “shine” with a kind of gratuitous superabundance. Such is the law of the generosity of being, which defines in its source the mystery of causality: “Hence we see that every agent, in so far as it is perfect and in

to be the very epitome of love; all other kinds of love immediately seem to fade in comparison. So we need to ask: are all these forms of love basically one, so that love, in its many and varied manifestations, is ultimately a single reality, or are we merely using the same word to designate totally different realities?”

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 11: “Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage. Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa.”

²⁷ Benedict XVI, who, concerning the love of God for his people, declares that “his love may certainly be called *eros*, yet it is also totally *agape*” (*ibid.*, no. 9), indicates in number 9, note 7 that this was the position of Dionysius: “Cf. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who in his treatise *The Divine Names*, IV, 12–14 (PG 3, 709–713) calls God both *eros* and *agape*.”

act, produces its like.”²⁸ The Dionysian influence can be seen here (*bonum diffusivum sui*). This law of the generosity of being applies analogically to God: “Hence, if natural things, in so far as they are perfect, communicate their good to others, much more does it appertain to the divine will to communicate by likeness [that is to say: by communicating its likeness] its own good to others as much as possible,” that is to say, as much as the other things are susceptible to receive it.²⁹

The perfection of love consists, therefore, in giving, in giving oneself. Thus, on the human level, deeper than the love that desires (a sign of the imperfection of our “needy” nature) there is the love that gives (a sign of a certain already possessed perfection). However, for us, the two aspects are indissociable: The love that gives does not exist without the love that desires and acquires the good that it communicates. Consequently, *eros* cannot be defined without this reference to desire. It remains intrinsically linked to need and to lack, and thus to the potentiality that characterizes the condition of the creature. In this case, it appears difficult to see in *eros* a pure perfection that one could attribute analogically to God. The love of God is supremely “liberal”: God does not want creatures in order to fill a lack or a need that he has, but rather to communicate to them his goodness in a manner of superabundance.³⁰ The attribution of *eros* to God can, therefore, only be along the lines of a metaphor, which clearly does not mean that it has nothing to teach us about God’s way of being toward his creatures.

Justice and Charity

The same logic of the fulfillment of natural human realities through their encounter with grace, which is fully at play in the meditation on the rela-

²⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 19, a. 2.

²⁹ Cf. *ibid.*: “Deus non solum se vult, sed etiam alia a se. Quod apparet a simili prius introducto. Res enim naturalis non solum habet naturalem inclinationem respectu proprii boni, ut acquirat ipsum cum non habet, vel ut quiescat in illo cum habet; sed etiam ut proprium bonum in alia diffundat, secundum quod possibile est. Unde videmus quod omne agens, in quantum est actu et perfectum, facit sibi simile. Unde et hoc pertinet ad rationem voluntatis, ut bonum quod quis habet, aliis communicet, secundum quod possibile est. Et hoc praecipue pertinet ad voluntatem divinam, a qua, per quandam similitudinem, derivatur omnis perfectio. Unde, si res naturales, in quantum perfectae sunt, suum bonum aliis communicant, multo magis pertinet ad voluntatem divinam, ut bonum suum aliis per similitudinem communicet, secundum quod possibile est. Sic igitur vult et se esse, et alia. Sed se ut finem, alia vero ut ad finem, in quantum condecet divinam bonitatem etiam alia ipsam participare.”

³⁰ Cf. *ST* I, q. 44, a. 4, ad 1: “Et ideo ipse solus est maxime liberalis, quia non agit propter suam utilitatem, sed solum propter suam bonitatem.”

tionship between *eros* and *agape*, is still at work in the second part of the encyclical about the relationship between social justice, as a rational requirement in the relations between people, and charity.³¹

Benedict XVI affirms both the necessary distinction between justice and charity, and their no less necessary complementarity. It follows that charity has not to substitute for human justice and that human justice has not to do without Christian charity.³² On this last point, the pope vigorously responds to the Marxist objection, according to which, in a society that is finally rational like the post-revolutionary society, social justice should substitute for charity.³³ This Marxist absorption of charity into justice, which is the fruit of a logic of separation, betrays a double error. First, narrow rationalism, which inescapably flows from the separation of reason and faith, disfigures and humiliates human nature by reducing it to its material, economic dimension. Narrow rationalism does not understand that the human person aspires to things beyond the abstract love due to this abstraction, which is the *ens oeconomicum*. The human person wants concrete love, which is manifested in quality, interpersonal relations and especially in the gift of self.³⁴ Second, Marxism does not understand that, without Christian charity, human justice can only degrade itself. In fact, if it is not animated by charity, the pursuit of social justice loses its most efficacious moral spirit, and, in the face of difficulties becomes a prey to the discouragement that lies in wait for those who adhere to the ideology of promethean progress.³⁵

³¹ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 26.

³² Cf. *ibid.*, no. 28: "There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such."

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, nos. 26 and 31.

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 18: "Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern. This I can offer them not only through the organizations intended for such purposes, accepting it perhaps as a political necessity. Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave." The same principal according to which a merely "technical" (objective and abstract) relationship is insufficient to truly come to the aid of a concrete human person is applied to the work of caregivers (no. 31): "Individuals who care for those in need must first be professionally competent: they should be properly trained in what to do and how to do it, and committed to continuing care. Yet, while professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern."

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 35: "There are times when the burden of need and our own limitations might tempt us to become discouraged. But precisely then we are helped

The State and the Church

The question of the relationship between Church and State is, along with the analogous question of the relationship between faith and reason, one of the classic forms of the issue of the relationship between grace and nature. In *Deus Caritas Est*, this question is raised by the pontifical teaching on the necessary harmonization between, on the one hand, charitable works that are proper to the Church as an autonomous social subject, and, on the other hand, the workings of the requirements of justice and solidarity in which the State is invested. Benedict XVI intends here to warn against the temptation of a gentle secularization of the Church's works of social charity, which would lead to their absorption into the tentacular structures of the providence of the State.

As must be done, Benedict XVI reminds us of the importance of the distinction between the two social communities that are the Church and the earthly city:

Fundamental to Christianity is the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God (cf. Mt 22:21), in other words, the distinction between Church and State, or, as the Second Vatican Council puts it, the autonomy of the temporal sphere. . . . The two spheres are distinct. (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28)

According to its essential goals, the State, which is to say the political authority, aims to promote a social justice that guarantees to each member of the civil society his share of the common good.³⁶ In order to determine this just order, the political leaders use the support of the fundamental givens of natural law and, making use of reason, create laws that are adapted to the desired end.

As for the Church, she is not an invisible communion of pure spirits, but rather the "social expression of Christian faith." She is an autonomous social subject endowed with institutions that are necessary for the realization of her own ends. Consequently, she "has a proper independence and is structured on the basis of her faith as a community which the State

by the knowledge that, in the end, we are only instruments in the Lord's hands; and this knowledge frees us from the presumption of thinking that we alone are personally responsible for building a better world."

³⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 26: "It is true 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. This has always been emphasized by Christian teaching on the State and by the Church's social doctrine"; and no. 28: "Justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics."

must recognize” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28). The Church works directly to procure the eternal salvation of men: This consists for them in communion with God, who realizes at the same time their full humanization. Thus, in accord with the main concerns of the encyclical, Benedict XVI affirms that “the entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man” (*ibid.*, no. 19).

It follows from this distinction between “two spheres” that the Church must respect the “legitimate autonomy” (*ibid.*, no. 29) of the political order: She must not seek to exercise political power nor even to intervene directly in concrete determinations of the political order.³⁷ Similarly, the State must abstain from intervening in religious subjects as such and must respect the structures that are proper to religious communities.³⁸

However, there is nothing more arduous for the State, considered not as a philosophical abstraction but as a real institution composed of men who are marked by egoism and sin, than to resist the temptation to totalitarianism. The State has a tendency almost spontaneously to free itself from any relationship with the religious institution, which, in reminding the State of its relative status, would hinder it from erecting itself as the absolute. Little by little the State absorbs and governs every aspect of social life. The “laity,” when it is conceived as a reduction of religion to an individual option of the strictly private order, without inscription in the social or political order, becomes, in this way, a decisive step in this process of absolutization of the State. Against this, Benedict XVI claims for the Church the status of a proper social subject, as much in the order of charitable action as in the order of social and cultural life. To be faithful to the integrality of her mission, the Church possesses and must possess her own charitable works, which insert themselves into the social network of the civil community.³⁹ Thus, the wave of secularization (or

³⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 28: “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”; *ibid.*: “The Church’s social teaching . . . recognizes that it is not the Church’s responsibility to make this teaching prevail in political life”; no. 29: “We have seen that the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church, but belongs to the world of politics, the sphere of the autonomous use of reason.” Lay Christians have a specific mission to fulfill on this concrete level of political life; cf. *ibid.*, no. 29: “The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society, on the other hand, is proper to the lay faithful.”

³⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 28: “The State may not impose religion, yet it must guarantee religious freedom and harmony between the followers of different religions.”

³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, no. 29: “The Church’s charitable organizations, on the other hand, constitute an *opus proprium*, a task agreeable to her, in which she does not cooperate collaterally, but acts as a subject with direct responsibility, doing what corresponds

self-secularization) that desires to put certain ecclesial institutions (hospitals, schools, universities, youth movements, and so forth) under the more or less direct tutelage of the State, far from closing an abnormal bracket during which the Church would be provisionally substituted for the State, which is weak in these domains, represents a vital loss for the Church and for society. In addition to this, it constitutes a danger for civil society that finds itself with its hands tied and given up to the deadly embraces of the State hydra.⁴⁰

Historically, this process of secularization could have been favored by a false theological conception that unilaterally insisted on the autonomy of the temporal realities, while making the beneficial influence of grace, which allows for the full blossoming of nature, go unnoticed. A certain neo-Thomism—that which categorically refused the notion of Christian philosophy, and, always in the name of strict separation of orders, came to justify the “purely political” adhesion of Catholics to *Maurrassisme* and then to communism—carries its weight of responsibility here. *Deus Caritas Est* teaches, on the contrary, how vital it is for natural human realities to be exposed to the purifying influences of grace. Concerning this “Christian philosophy,” Jacques Maritain judiciously distinguished, inspired perhaps by the Thomist theology of angelic illumination, a dual influence of faith on the *opus rationis* that is and must remain philosophy. In concrete human history, faith, on the one hand, brings certain objective givens to philosophy, which stimulate it, and, on the other hand, subjectively comforts the philosopher in permitting him to practice philosophy in a propitious moral and spiritual climate.⁴¹ This is also, *mutatis mutandis*, the role that Benedict XVI attributes to faith vis-à-vis politics. In fact,

to her nature. The Church can never be exempted from practicing charity as an organized activity of believers”; and no. 32: “the true subject of the various Catholic organizations that carry out a ministry of charity is the Church herself.”

⁴⁰ On the merely political level, secularization of ecclesiastical institutions manifests a serious misunderstanding of the principle of subsidiarity, which nevertheless protects personal and communal freedoms against the absolutist temptation that always exists for the State. Cf. *ibid.*, no. 28: “The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person—every person—needs: namely, loving personal concern. We do not need a State which regulates and controls everything, but 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. The Church is one of those living forces.”

⁴¹ Cf. Jacques Maritain, *De la philosophie chrétienne* (conference given in 1931), in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. V (1933; Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1982), ch. 3, “*L’état chrétien de la philosophie*,” 245–58.

politics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life: its origin and its goal are found in justice, which by its very nature has to do with ethics. The State must inevitably face the question of how justice can be achieved here and now. But this presupposes an even more radical question: what is justice? (*Deus caritas Est*, no. 28)

In this ethical determination of what is just, a work of practical reason, Christian faith intervenes on the level of “objective contributions” thanks to the social doctrine of the Church, which, arguing “on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being” (ibid.), reminds us of and confirms the fundamental principles of ethics. The Church contributes in this way to the “formation of consciences in political life” (ibid.). Faith also intervenes on the level of “subjective considerations.” Indeed, if practical reason can, by right, discover what is “just,” it is actually fragile, precarious, and menaced: “The problem is one of practical reason; but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification, since it can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests” (ibid.). Grace, by purifying the heart, places practical reason in the best conditions to accomplish its proper ethical work. Thus, faith is “a purifying force for reason itself”: “From God’s standpoint, faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly” (ibid.). What is more, still on the level of subjective considerations, the purification accomplished by grace not only ameliorates the capacity for discernment, but also gives the moral strength to put into practice, whatever the costs may be, the demands of justice that one perceives. Grace thus nourishes and keeps alive the spiritual and ethical motivation of the members of civil society: The Church “has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper” (ibid.). In sum, grace gives a “soul” to action for social justice and brings it to its perfection.

Deus Caritas Est is addressed “to the bishops, priests, and deacons, men and women religious, and all the lay faithful.” It nevertheless contains a powerful and well-defined message for all men of good will. Benedict XVI is convinced that the recognition of the primacy of God and of spiritual values is not an option but a vital necessity for the life of people and communities. Integral humanization passes through the opening to grace that does not destroy anything, but rather purifies and fulfills everything that is good in human realities. Likewise—and this is the obscure side of

the same principle—our societies self-destruct by marginalizing Christian faith and hiding their spiritual roots. Thus, Benedict XVI, in his homily for the inaugural Mass of his pontificate, April 24, 2005, restated with fervor the famous words of his beloved predecessor: “Do not be afraid! Open wide the doors for Christ!”⁴² Benedict XVI explained that John Paul II

was addressing the mighty, the powerful of this world, who feared that Christ might take away something of their power if they were to let him in, if they were to allow the faith to be free. Yes, he would certainly have taken something away from them: the dominion of corruption, the manipulation of law and the freedom to do as they pleased. But he would not have taken away anything that pertains to human freedom or dignity, or to the building of a just society.⁴³

Then Benedict XVI enlarged his meditation and, going beyond the political order alone, applied to the whole of human reality the necessity of being open to grace:

If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful, and great. No! . . . Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. . . . [Christ] takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ—and you will find true life. Amen.⁴⁴

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⁴² Pope John Paul II, homily at the Mass for the inauguration of his pontificate (October 22, 1978), www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1978/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19781022_inizio-pontificato_it.html.

⁴³ Pope Benedict XVI, homily at the Mass for the inauguration of his pontificate (April 24, 2005), www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato_en.html.

⁴⁴ Ibid.