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EXPLORING
DEUS CARITAS EST

A Four-part Process for Small Groups on Pope Benedict XVI's First Encyclical

SESSION TWO: REFLECTIONS ON SECTIONS 9-18

EROS AND AGAPE: LOVE THROUGH THE LENS OF BIBLICAL FAITH

OPENING SCRIPTURE: ROMANS 13: 8-10

QUIET MEDITATION

COMMON PRAYER

Loving God,

We praise you for making us each unique in spirit, mind, and body.
Send us your strength so that we might better embrace
the fullness of your love.

Help us praise you through our bodies and souls
as we seek to understand the call to love as Jesus loved.

May we be open to the inspiration of
your Holy Spirit, so that your love resounds
in our words and is clearly seen in our actions.

Seeking the unity found only in the Trinitarian love of Father,
Son and Holy Spirit, we make this prayer through Jesus,
who is our Lord and brother.

Amen.

CONTINUING REFLECTION AND ACTION

Read I Corinthians 13. As you read, ask yourself the following questions.

1. What words, phrases, or images in the scripture touch, challenge, or grab my imagination?

2. Are there any concepts about love that I find difficult to live? For example, do I find it easy or difficult to be patient with others?

3. Which characteristic of love from the reading are you called to work on this week?

Persevering with others

Patience when I'm angry

Avoiding rudeness

Not boasting or being overly proud

Being kind and empathic to others

Being patient with others

Trusting more

Protecting the vulnerable

Not keeping score or harboring grudges

A SNAPSHOT OF MATURE BIBLICAL LOVE

BLESSED TERESA OF CALCUTTA (1910-1997)

And so here I am talking with you—I want you to find the poor here, right in your own home first. And begin love there. Be that good news to your own people. And find out about your next-door neighbor—do you know who they are?

Mother Teresa, Nobel Lecture, 1979

Perhaps no other person in the twentieth century epitomizes direct outreach to the poor more than Mother Teresa. Born in 1910 in Albania, Teresa joined the Sisters of Loretto at the age of eighteen. She had a crucial conversion in 1948, while serving as a missionary in India where she felt called to serve the poorest of the poor. She received permission from her order to begin a life of service to the poor and in 1950 she founded the Missionaries of Charity. From then until her death in 1997, Mother Teresa worked with the outcasts of society. She saw in their faces the face of Christ.

Time after time, Mother Teresa encouraged and cajoled all of us to give not only from our excess material goods, but also from our hearts to the poor, the outcasts, and the marginalized. Her life and example make flesh the challenge of the Eucharist to open our lives more fully to those in need. Pope Benedict XVI cited her life as an example of Eucharistic love that leads one to a life of concrete action on behalf of others.

The saints—consider the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta—constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbor from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others. Love of God and love of neighbor are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment.

(Deus Caritas Est, #18)

COMMENTARY

This session will focus on sections 9-18 of the encyclical that conclude Part I of the pope's letter. In these paragraphs the pope speaks of the integration of *eros* and *agape* as different journeys of the heart toward God. *Eros* sums up and helps us express our yearnings for transcendence. It allows us to reach for the power of ultimate happiness, for the very essence of God. *Agape*, on the other hand, reaches out of itself toward service of the other. Pope Benedict examines the newness of the biblical understanding of love, in both the Old and New Testaments. He explores distinctive images of God and of the human person and addresses the radical nature of the Incarnation. This section ends with reflection on the social dimension of love, which we call charity.

The pope paves the way for a discussion of the nature of biblical love by using the story of Jacob's ladder from Genesis 28:12. He speaks of *eros* as ascending love and *agape* as descending. *Eros* seeks God while *agape* "passes on the gift received" (#7). Since *eros* ascends toward the divine in a seeming desire to possess the divine quality for itself, it can appear selfish, focused only on its own happiness. Yet in the ascending, *eros* begins to seek out the other and actually begins to lose itself in the other. *Agape* is a descending love, one that leaves itself to seek the good of the other. It is non-possessing, and descends from its own claims to meet the other. Here is the paradox of mature human love: it is both giving and receiving—descending and ascending love—held in perfect balance.

THE NEWNESS OF BIBLICAL FAITH

EXPLORING OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES OF GOD

Pope Benedict explores how our biblical faith reveals the integration of *eros* and *agape*. The Old Testament tells us that the God of Israel is one and is strikingly different from the gods of the surrounding cultures. Where other gods lacked nothing, our God, the God of Israel, reaches out in love, desiring another. Our God is a god who creates and loves humanity into being with a personal, elective love (#9).

The ancient Jews depicted the love of God for the people of Israel in the earthy and erotic images of marriage between a man and a woman.

In the prophets Hosea and Ezekiel, we find metaphors of betrothal and marriage, as if God is marrying the people of Israel (#9). We also find images of infidelity between marital partners where Israel is described as an unfaithful spouse. At the same time, we hear of God's unwavering forgiveness of Israel, of letting go of anger and wrath in favor of loving a spouse who is flawed and imperfect.

We have seen that God's *eros* for man is also totally *agape*. This is not only because it is bestowed in a completely gratuitous manner, without any previous merit, but also because it is love which forgives. (#10)

EXPLORING OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES OF THE HUMAN PERSON

Rooted in our very nature, *eros* is an essential part of our human experience. We are all seekers of transcendence and seek our fulfillment in the other. But *eros* can only fulfill its deepest purpose in a community of fidelity where it is integrated with *agape*. From the creation stories of the first parents in Genesis through the books of the prophets, it is clear that the integration of *eros* and *agape* are expressed most clearly in the images of marriage. Marriage becomes the primary image of the love of God for humanity and God's way of loving shows us all how to love.

Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love. (#11)

Eros is part of God's creative activity. The seeking, ascending part of *eros* is part of creation itself, part of the experience of being man and woman. Only in the security of committed marriage does a couple achieve a fully mature love that allows them both to reach out to the other, sharing the gift received. "Only together do the two represent complete humanity and become one flesh" (#11).

The pope reminds us that the newness of biblical faith consists in its images of God as one who loves with the fullness of both *eros* and

4. The pope gives the example of blessed Teresa of Calcutta as an example of concrete, applied love. Who do you know that lives the mandate to love concretely? How do you live this mandate?

5. The pope speaks of Sacramental mysticism to describe Jesus' total giving of self. In what ways do you feel united with Jesus in the Eucharist?

6. Do you feel united in the same way with others when you receive the Eucharist? How have you been called to become more involved with others as a result of reception of the Eucharist?

INTEGRATING DEUS CARITAS EST*QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION*

1. Pope Benedict teaches that mature human love is rooted in biblical faith. It is a well-balanced integration of *eros* and *agape*. How do you try to maintain a healthy balance between the giving (*agape*) and receiving (*eros*) aspects of love?

2. Have you ever been in the position of receiving another's deep care or love when you were feeling vulnerable? What was that like for you? Was it more or less difficult than giving?

3. The Incarnation shows God's willingness to empty himself and receive human love as part of his divine love for all of us. Can you think of a time when you emptied yourself for the sake of another?

agape and of the human person called to covenanted love in marriage between a man and a woman. "This close connection between *eros* and marriage in the Bible has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature" (#11).

JESUS CHRIST THE INCARNATE LOVE OF GOD

EXPLORING THE RADICAL NATURE OF THE INCARNATION

In the person of Jesus we find the fullest expression of *agape*. Jesus is the human face of God and speaks continuously of God's love and mercy. Jesus shows what oblation, self-giving love really is in his life, suffering, and death. God, who is love, empties himself, taking on human flesh, being born of a woman in humble conditions. The paradox is that God's powerful love and yearning for all of us (*eros*) results in the incarnation where Jesus is born first as a vulnerable baby, totally dependent on the love and care of his parents. Just as erotic love rises toward the transcendent God, *agape* love empties itself and allows itself to embrace vulnerability.

Jesus proclaims that love of God and love of neighbor are inseparably joined.

When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are no mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity. His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form. (#12)

For the people of Israel, the symbolism of marriage meant standing in the presence of God in a covenant relationship. But Jesus takes the covenant relationship and dramatically changes it by offering his own body to be spiritual food for his people. Through the sacrifice of his body and through the Eucharist, we now share a mystical union

with Jesus. Pope Benedict describes this new sharing and unity as “sacramental mysticism.” Instead of the image of marriage, we now have the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ as sign of the everlasting covenant between God and his people. We partake of the Body of Christ and, at the same time, through this sacramental mysticism are transformed into the Body of Christ through the grace of the sacrament.

The imagery of marriage between God and Israel is now realized in a way previously inconceivable: it had meant standing in God’s presence, but now it becomes union with God through sharing in Jesus’ self-gift, sharing in his body and blood. (#13)

LOVE OF GOD AND LOVE OF NEIGHBOR

EXPLORING THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF LOVE

The social dimensions of love become immediately obvious in the Eucharist. The “sacramental mysticism” of the Eucharist is not a private affair but very much a social reality. Through the Eucharist, love of God and love of neighbor lead to an ethics of *agape*. We cannot love God without loving our neighbor. We cannot genuinely partake of the Eucharist without opening our hearts to love. This is meant to be love in the specific, concrete, and everyday aspects of our lives.

Eucharistic communion includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented. (#14)

The concrete love of neighbor and love of God are illustrated in the great parables of the rich man (Lk 16:19-31), the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), and in the parable of the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46), where the criterion of love becomes the criterion of judgment. We are called to love, again and again, because we have been loved so deeply by God.

Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt 25:40). Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God. (#15)

It is clear that the New Testament calls all to love in the concrete. Pope Benedict cites the First Letter of John, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 Jn 4:20). This type of love is not a sentiment, but arises out of a journey we all agree to take, a journey towards holiness and maturity.

The unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbor is emphasized. One is so closely connected to the other that to say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbor or hate him altogether. (#16)

In the love story of the bible Jesus shows us the way to the Father and shows us how to love. His love story becomes our love story, his way of giving becomes our way of giving, and his sacrifice becomes our call to embrace the cross and love more deeply (#17).

The pope ends the first section with a reflection on the life of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta as a saint who loved God in the concrete action of serving the poorest of the poor in India. She learned to look on others not with her own eyes, but with the eyes of Christ. The pope holds up the lives of the saints as people who allowed the “sacramental mysticism” of the bond with Christ to deepen the way they loved. This also is our call, to love God and love our neighbor.