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EXPLORING
DEUS CARITAS EST

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

SESSION FOUR: REFLECTIONS ON SECTIONS 26–41

OPENING SCRIPTURE: LUKE 10:25–37

QUIET MEDITATION

COMMON PRAYER

Loving God,
Through his embrace of those in need,
his death, and resurrection,
your son, Jesus, taught us how to love.
May your Spirit encourage us to reach beyond
the confines of our comfort.
Help us respond with love
to those who are our enemies,
those with whom we are angry,
those who don't belong to our specific language, race, or ethnic group,
and those we sometimes label as evil or sinful.
May Christ's love for us encourage us to deepen our own love
so that we may respond in Christian charity to all those in need.
We ask this prayer trusting always
in the presence of your Son, Jesus,
who is our Lord and brother.
Amen.

Yet, since it is also a most important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically. (#28a)

Second, love-*caritas* will always be necessary no matter how just the state is. “There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love” (#28b). Here the pope suggests that only meeting the material needs of people is not enough; we are beings with deep spiritual and emotional needs that go beyond the material. Love is a central aspect of being human and there will always be a need to respond with love. To eliminate love is to dehumanize all of us.

Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. (#28b)

The just ordering of the state and organized charitable activities are linked together. It is the role of the state to provide justice to its citizens, but it is the role of the lay faithful to help shape the policies and organizations of the state so that justice prevails.

The mission of the lay faithful is therefore to configure social life correctly, respecting its legitimate autonomy and cooperating with other citizens according to their respective competencies and fulfilling their own responsibility. (#29)

THE MULTIPLE STRUCTURES OF CHARITABLE SERVICE IN TODAY’S SOCIAL CONTEXT

Pope Benedict continues his reflection on the relationship between the quest for justice and the necessity to engage in charity. He analyzes the present day situation, with the world’s ability to have instantaneous communication. He points out that, despite advanced

Each member of the group is asked to devote him or herself to prayer and some specific volunteer activity on behalf of those in need. The group has received official recognition from the Church as an ecclesial lay association and is a shining example of the continuing call to holiness in which we all share.

More information on this community can be found on the website of Sant’Egidio: www.santegidio.de/en/index.html.

SNAPSHOTS OF MATURE BIBLICAL LOVE

CARDINAL ROGER MAHONY, ARCHBISHOP OF LOS ANGELES

In his Ash Wednesday homily this year, Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles criticized pending congressional immigration legislation. The legislation proposes making it a crime to assist illegal immigrants. Mahony pointed out that this is a grave violation of the Church's call to offer charity to those in need of help. For example, under this proposed legislation, giving water to immigrants in the desert could become a criminal act. Cardinal Mahony stated clearly and forcefully that this is a violation of the gospel mandate to love our neighbor.

Starting from the principal of love of neighbor, the cardinal raised an issue of social justice that must be addressed by the state. In his 2006 Lenten message, *Making Room*, the cardinal urged Catholics of his diocese to fast for just immigration reform. He cites the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* and the call to charity as a call for Catholics of his diocese to make room for immigrants. The complete text of this message can be found at www.archdiocese.la/news/pdf/news_719_2006%20Lenten%20Message.pdf.

THE COMMUNITY OF SANT'EGIDIO:

Begun in Rome in 1968, the Community of Sant'Egidio is an example of what Pope Benedict XVI describes as new efforts at ecclesial communities that embody the call to caritas. It also serves as a concrete example of a "school of life" that forms a person in the Christian life of service.

The community took its name from the Church of Sant'Egidio, and one of the original purposes of the group was maintaining the neighborhood in Rome where the Church is located. Since its founding, the group has grown to over 50,000 lay members throughout the world. Members embrace the core values of prayer, evangelization, solidarity with the poor, ecumenism, and dialogue. They serve the aged, the young, the mentally disabled, and many others in need in their various ministries. In 1992, the Community of Sant'Egidio successfully negotiated a peaceful agreement between warring parties in Mozambique, Africa.

technology and vast amounts of knowledge, we see tremendous suffering through our world. We are able, because of technology, to offer more organized efforts to help those in need. The pope recognizes a growing solidarity between people in need, the Church, and secular agencies that seek to alleviate human suffering. This solidarity has created a new enthusiasm for volunteering in service to those in need. Young people especially have heeded this call. As a result, the Church itself has seen movements arise that embrace the call to help.

For young people, this widespread involvement constitutes a school of life which offers them a formation in solidarity and in readiness to offer others not simply material aid but their very selves. The anti-culture of death, which finds expression for example in drug use, is thus countered by an unselfish love which shows itself to be a culture of life by the very willingness to "lose itself" (cf. Lk 17:33 et passim) for others. This willingness to give of oneself reflects a true humanism, which acknowledges that man is made in the image of God and wants to help him to live in a way consonant with that dignity. (#30)

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF THE CHURCH'S CHARITABLE ACTIVITY

The pope makes three points about the Church's charity. First, it is a direct response to the needs of people in specific situations. "We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern" (#31). This principle follows the example of the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Second, the Church's charitable activity does not promote any specific political or social ideology. Echoing his earlier comments about the service of love, Pope Benedict reaffirms the necessity of giving of oneself in love.

We contribute to a better world only by personally doing good now, with full commitment and wherever we have the opportunity, independently of partisan strategies and programmes. The Christian's programme—the programme of the Good Samaritan, the programme of Jesus—is “a heart which sees.” (#31)

Third, the charitable activity of the Church is primarily geared to help those in need, not to convince them to become Christians.

Those who practice charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. (#31)

There is a paradox in making love the starting point. Because of our complex world, with technology facilitating unprecedented communication, concrete charitable activities often rub up against social policy and justice issues. The pope calls the Church to care in a concrete way for people caught in specific, dire conditions. But once one commits in love to help in a concrete situation it often brings one face to face with unjust laws, policies, or procedures of the state or organization in which one lives or contributes charitable works. Take any issue that besets the world today—child exploitation, poverty, starvation in developing countries, immigration, or any number of others—and one realizes that action on behalf of love and charity will eventually overlap the boundaries of law, politics, and issues of social policy.

THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE CHURCH'S CHARITABLE ACTIVITY

In paragraphs 32–39 Pope Benedict addresses those who are charged with carrying out the Church's charitable activity. Bishops have local oversight and the *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops* outlines specifically the responsibilities of all dioceses to engage in charitable

5. What do you think is the driving force behind the rise in volunteerism, especially among young adults?

6. Pope Benedict calls 1 Corinthians 13 the *Magna Carta* of charitable activity. Do you have a favorite scripture passage that expresses your commitment to love? What is it?

7. When you look at the condition of the world, with all its poverty, oppression, and violence, are you ever tempted to despair? Do you question how God is working in the world? How do you prevent yourself from becoming cynical or indifferent?

8. Do you have a favorite saint or holy person who is an example of charity for you? Who is it? Why?

INTEGRATING DEUS CARITAS EST

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you think the criticism that those who do charity avoid their responsibility to work for justice has any merit? Why or why not?

2. How would you explain the proper relationship between justice and charity to someone who is unfamiliar with Church teaching?

3. Think about a time in your life where empathy or love caused you to stop your ordinary routine and get involved? What did this cost you? Were you changed by the event? How?

4. How do you see the role of the laity in assisting the transformation of society according to Catholic social teaching? Can you think of examples where the impulse of charity leads you or others to raise issues of justice?

work (#32). Personnel who are hired by dioceses or parishes must be motivated by the gospel and not by any particular ideology (#33). Ultimately, all of us are responsible for participating in the Church's charitable activities. St. Paul describes the essential mandate for us as we reach out in love to those in need.

Saint Paul, in his hymn to charity (cf. 1 Cor 13), teaches us that it is always more than activity alone: "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing" (v. 3). This hymn must be the *Magna Carta* of all ecclesial service; it sums up all the reflections on love which I have offered throughout this Encyclical Letter. (#34)

Embracing Paul's call to love leads to humility and helps us realize our servant character in the face of the enormous suffering that we seek to alleviate. "In all humility we will do what we can, and in all humility we will entrust the rest to the Lord. It is God who governs the world, not we. We offer him our service only to the extent that we can, and for as long as he grants us the strength" (#35).

The Pope acknowledges that the immensity of the suffering we face and try to address in charity can cause a person to cry out in protest against God. He cites the sufferings of Job as an example of this (#38). The extent of suffering in the world can lead a person to question how God acts in the world. Given the immensity of the task, we can be driven to embrace strategies, ideologies, or political solutions as our fundamental response. Some who work for those in need are overcome by a despair that prevents them from serving others (#36). Others embrace violence or other equally dehumanizing means in their efforts to relieve the suffering of so many. This makes it all the more crucial to root our response in prayer and hope.

Instead, our crying out is, as it was for Jesus on the Cross, the deepest and most radical way of

affirming our faith in his sovereign power. Even in their bewilderment and failure to understand the world around them, Christians continue to believe in the “goodness and loving kindness of God” (Tit 3:4). (#38)

We are all called to practice the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity as we face a world so much in need of love.

Love is possible, and we are able to practice it because we are created in the image of God. To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world—this is the invitation I would like to extend with the present Encyclical. (#39)

In his conclusion, Pope Benedict asks us to meditate on the saints and cites numerous saints who were examples of charity.

The figures of saints such as Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, John of God, Camillus of Lellis, Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Giuseppe B. Cottolengo, John Bosco, Luigi Orione, Teresa of Calcutta to name but a few—stand out as lasting models of social charity for all people of good will. (#40)

He holds up Mary as the perfect example of charity and cites the *Magnificat* (Lk 1:46–55) as prayer that shows the proper attitude of love and praise of God and neighbor.

Here we see how her thoughts are attuned to the thoughts of God, how her will is one with the will of God. Since Mary is completely imbued with the Word of God, she is able to become the Mother of the Word Incarnate. Finally, Mary is a woman who loves. How could it be otherwise? As a believer who in faith

thinks with God’s thoughts and wills with God’s will, she cannot fail to be a woman who loves. (#41)

The pope concludes his encyclical with a prayer commending the Church to the care of Mary.