

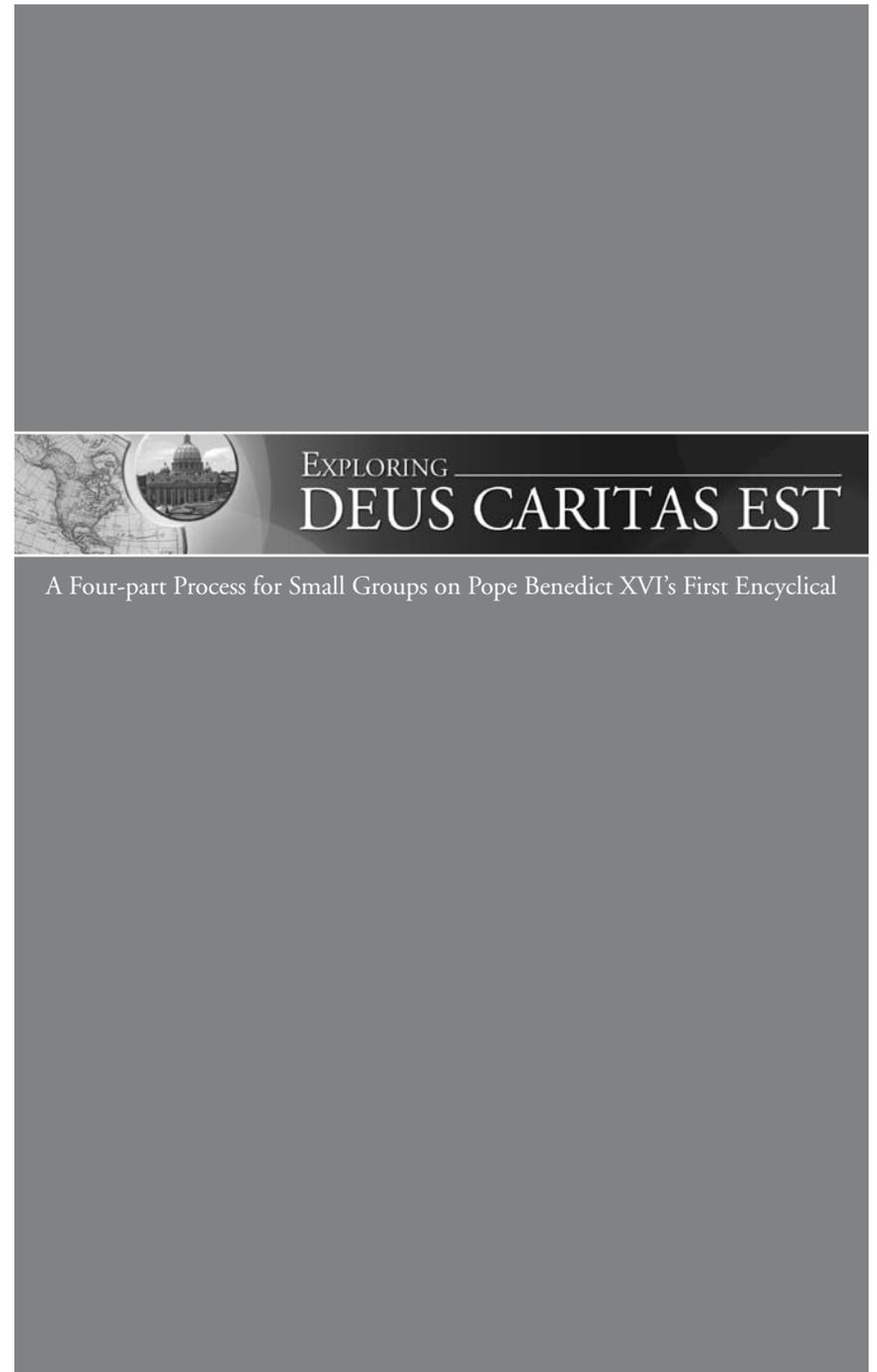
CONTINUING REFLECTION AND ACTION

Take some time to read the Song of Songs. As you read this Old Testament book, ask yourself the following questions:

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

2. Am I surprised by the imagery contained in the Song of Songs? What is God communicating to me through this book of scripture?

3. What does the Song of Songs say to a world that is saturated with sexual images? How can my work to integrate its message into my life?



SESSION ONE: REFLECTION ON PARAGRAPHS 1-8

LOVE AND EROS

OPENING SCRIPTURE: Mk 8: 31–38

QUIET MEDITATION

COMMON PRAYER

Holy God we praise your name.

May your spirit inspire us this day
to reflect on the true nature of love.

We seek to be instructed by your spirit in the way of love.

We come to you seeking
to serve rather than be served,

to listen rather than speak,
and to move beyond our own needs

to recognize your presence in the needs of others.

May we continue to walk the journey of love as Jesus did.

May we embrace his journey and his cross,

and be sustained always by the Eucharist—holy food for our journey.

We ask this through Jesus, your son,

who is our brother and Savior.

Amen.

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A SNAPSHOT OF MATURE BIBLICAL LOVE

The Ecstasy of Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

If you go to the most popular search engines online and search for the “Ecstasy of Teresa of Avila” you will eventually discover a photograph of a very famous Bernini statue. It depicts Saint Teresa in an ecstatic state of contemplation. One interesting thing about this sculpture is that there is a hint of erotic quality to it, almost as if she is experiencing pleasure.

Saint Teresa can serve as a model of the integration of *eros* and *agape* that *Deus Caritas Est* calls for. Her devotion brought her to a deep ecstatic union with God that seems to confirm the profound beauty of just such a union. It is no surprise that at its deepest level, Christian mysticism incorporates the total person, body and soul, including one’s sexuality. In her own life, Teresa of Avila experienced many visions, and always sought to interpret them properly through seeking spiritual direction. She was totally devoted to the love of God and at the same time was a reformer of religious life, placing charity at the heart of her life and rule. In her autobiography she speaks of the journey of the soul, with the last stage being that of “the devotion of ecstasy.”

Saint Teresa was canonized by the Church four years after her death and was given the titles “seraphic virgin” and “Doctor of the Church” for her exemplary life and for her teachings on the interior life.

INTEGRATING DEUS CARITAS EST

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Pope Benedict says that in a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance, hatred, or violence, it is important to speak of the message that God is love. Do you find this a difficult message to preach and put into practice? Why or why not?

2. In this encyclical, the pope states that in the past the Church has been criticized for being opposed to the body and stifling *eros*. What has been your own experience of the Church's treatment of the body and erotic love?

3. Do you agree that *eros* is healed and restored by authentic Church teaching on sex and the body as the pope presents here(¶5)?

4. As you look at how love and sexuality are portrayed in our culture today what is your experience and reaction to what is being communicated? What concerns you? What brings you hope?

5. The pope teaches that when *eros* and *agape* are cut off from each other, the result is an impoverished form of love, the primary end of which is self-serving pleasure. What are some concrete examples of the negative impact of this type of love?

6. How might this concept of love (untempered *eros*) leads to an addictive way of relating toward things and people?

COMMENTARY

Part I of Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, explores the relationship between love as *eros* and love as *agape*. This session will focus primarily on *eros*, which in the ancient pagan world was a way of finding union with the gods, of partaking in their life and utter happiness through sexual union and ecstasy. The prime example of this type of love is the love between a man and a woman that is not planned, but seems to impel itself on both partners; they experience it as an irresistible pull, like being intoxicated (¶ 3). We will learn from Pope Benedict that mature biblical love is a single reality, but with two different dimensions, *eros* and *agape*, and that "...when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love" (¶ 8).

THE GIFT AND STRENGTH OF EROS

For the ancient Greeks, *eros* was exulted as a "divine madness." It was sought as an intoxication that led to an altering of one's mood. This altered mood gave the person a sense of euphoria which was interpreted as ecstasy or a "god like" state. Sexual pleasure was seen as a good in and of itself because it allowed two people to have union with the gods (¶ 4).

At its best, then, *eros* allows a person to experience the ecstasy of the divine; it brings the person outside of the self to a state of transcendence. As a type of love, *eros* seeks to transcend a person's ordinary experience, to be lifted out of oneself and into union with God. What *eros* seeks can perhaps be summed up by St. Augustine's famous phrase, "My heart is restless Lord, until it rests in you."

THE CHALLENGE OF EROS

But *eros* can become cut off from the journey toward God and lead a person to see the other primarily as an object of sexual pleasure or an instrument to achieve a certain ecstatic state. In this case, one's own body and the body of another is used to achieve a feeling of ecstasy or euphoria, just as, for example, a drug is used to achieve an altered mood state. But we are more than just our bodies, we are an integration of

body and soul, and the scriptures call the human community to resist the thought that we are only our bodies. When we objectify ourselves by focusing solely on the pleasures of the body, we debase our very nature.

One implication of *eros* becoming an end unto itself is that instead of seeking God who is behind our restlessness, we begin to seek comfort primarily or even exclusively in material things. Our society today seems obsessed with the accumulation and consumption of alcohol, other drugs, consumer products, and sexual pleasure. Obsessions can soon become addictions and, often before one realizes it, what started out as a yearning for transcendence becomes a dead-end road that traps and defeats our spirit.

Eros only reaches its full potential when it is integrated with the deeper love that the New Testament called *agape*. Without being integrated with a more mature love, *eros* leads to the objectification of the human person; it traps the person into a cycle of egocentric patterns of self-fulfillment (§ 5).

AHABÀ / AGAPE: THE OTHER SIDE OF EROS

In the *Song of Songs*, an Old Testament book well known to Christian mystics, the Hebrew word *ahabà* was used to describe the type of love that moves a person beyond the limits of ego and self-serving motives into the world of the other. It re-frames the concept of ecstasy, not as intoxication, but as a movement of self-giving and self-discovery. *Ahabà* is also a movement of journeying with another, and the transcendence that is felt is the discovery of a deeper unity. This unity is found in the overlapping of the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of being human. This is a love that moves one outside of the boundaries of the ego and places love at the service of the other. The New Testament writers chose to translate the Hebrew word *ahabà* as *agape*, and built on the concept of out-flowing love which is placed at the service of the other.

The Pope points out in his encyclical that the New Testament never uses the word *eros* but rather uses the word *agape* to describe the true meaning of love. Ecstasy is a real thing in *agape* love, but instead

of denoting intoxication it speaks of a journey of dying to a closed, inward-looking self toward a self that is other directed. True love occurs when we can die to self and to the incessant and ever present needs of the ego in order to be present to another person and their needs, wants, and pains (§ 6).

Today, erotic love is very much a part of our world. Pick up almost any magazine, watch any television commercial, and you will see thin and beautiful models, men and women. Their images communicate something to us and attract our attention. They seem to evoke our deepest desires for that which is beyond us: our desire to attain an ideal of youth, seemingly boundless energy, and ecstatic, sexual happiness. This is *eros* at work, tempting us to believe that if we can be like the people in the pictures, we might just find heaven. The challenge for us is to root that deep desire for transcendent happiness in *agape*, the love that we find in Christ Jesus. Pope Benedict calls us to temper the powerful gift of self-serving *eros*, with *agape*, which seeks first to serve the other.