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EXPLORING  
**DEUS CARITAS EST**

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

## **SESSION THREE: REFLECTIONS ON SECTIONS 19–25** *CARITAS AS ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE*

### **OPENING SCRIPTURE: JOHN 13:1–13**

### **QUIET MEDITATION**

#### **COMMON PRAYER**

God our Father,  
You emptied yourself  
to give the world your son, Jesus  
so that the world might learn the true meaning of love.  
Through his death and resurrection,  
we have been reclaimed as your children.  
May your spirit continue to teach us the example of Jesus  
so that our love might be more mature and more complete.  
May we let go of the burdens of anger toward those who offend us  
and may our resentments be transformed  
into gestures of love and reconciliation  
toward those who have hurt us.  
We ask this prayer, trusting always in the presence of Jesus,  
who is our Lord and brother.  
Amen

## **CONTINUING REFLECTION AND ACTION**

Read James 2: 1-26 and ask yourself the following questions:

1. What words, phrases, or images in the scripture touch, challenge or grab my imagination?
2. How does the passage from James affirm the way I am acting towards others in the world? How does it challenge the way I am acting?
3. To which needs of others do I commit to develop greater awareness? What concrete action for others am I encouraged to take this week as a result of reading this scripture passage?

opposed every war and military action of the United States from World War II on. She saw her service and advocacy to the poor directly linked to the sufferings of Christ and his mystical body, the Church. For her, spirituality and charity were forever linked. She died on November 29, 1980 and within a few years the late Cardinal John O'Connor of New York asked the Vatican to consider her cause for sainthood. The Vatican accepted the cause in 2000 and the formal process has begun. For more information on this Dorothy Day visit the Catholic Worker web site: <http://www.catholicworker.org/>.

## COMMENTARY

We now begin exploring Part II of the encyclical: *Caritas: The Practice of Love by the Church as a "Community of Love."* Pope Benedict leads us on an extensive discussion of how *agape* is to be lived out in the concrete lives of Christians and in the life of the Church. In this session we will look at sections 19–25. Here, the focus is on how *caritas*—charity—is meant to be the essential foundation of the community of the Church. This section of the encyclical concludes with the pope's reflection on the nature of the Church.

The pope shifts the language of love in the second part of the encyclical. In Part I, he used the word *agape* to describe the New Testament understanding of the essential and mature love that Christ gave to the world. In Part II, the word "charity" is used extensively. Because the word charity is very much a part of our vocabulary, all of us have a preconceived notion of what it means. We can show charity to another, we might give to a charity of our choice, and we make distinctions between love and charity.

In the encyclical, charity means applied *agape*, or mature love in action for the benefit of the person and the world. "Love is therefore the service that the Church carries out in order to attend constantly to man's sufferings and his needs, including material needs" (#19). When we read this part of the encyclical, we must keep in mind the very practical application of *agape* and what this requires from each of us.

### THE CHURCH'S CHARITABLE ACTIVITY AS A MANIFESTATION OF TRINITARIAN LOVE

Pope Benedict begins the second part of *Deus Caritas Est* with a reflection on the *agape* of the Church as first and foremost a reflection of the Trinitarian love of God.

The entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man: it seeks his evangelization through Word and Sacrament, an undertaking that is often heroic in the way it is acted out in history; and it seeks to promote man in the various arenas of life and human activity. (#19)

The pope quotes St. Augustine, “When you see charity you see the Trinity” and reminds us that every manifestation of God shows us a different aspect of love (#19). The Father, moved by love, sends his son, Jesus. Being the human face of the Father, Jesus shows us how to love and gives his life out of love. The Holy Spirit continues to teach and transform the Church so that it becomes a witness in the world to the Trinitarian love of God. The Church manifests this love through its concrete actions of charity.

#### CHARITY AS A RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH

In order that it be practiced and applied constantly and through time, the practice of love must be organized and ordered for the greater good of all.

As a community, the Church must practice love. Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community. The awareness of this responsibility has had a constitutive relevance in the Church from the beginning: “All who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44–45). (#20)

The early Church experienced a radical newness and missionary zeal. As it grew rapidly, priorities needed to be established so that the Church’s mission could be accomplished.

The ordering of the community gave rise very early to essential, constitutive elements of the Church. Saint Luke provides a kind of definition of the Church, whose constitutive elements include fidelity to the ‘teaching of the Apostles,’ ‘communion’ (*koinonia*), ‘the breaking of the bread,’ and ‘prayer’ (Acts 2:42) (#20). Communion did not just mean “the breaking of the bread,” or Eucharist, but also meant that the community held all things in common.

This radical ownership of everything by everyone soon broke down because of the rapid growth of the Church. As church structure developed, another essential aspect of the Church, that of “*diaconia*,” was instituted. The *diaconia* was a structured ministry of the early Church in

#### A SNAPSHOT OF MATURE BIBLICAL LOVE

*DOROTHY DAY (1897–1980)*

Born in 1897, Dorothy Day became one of the most influential American Catholics in the twentieth century. Having survived the San Francisco earthquake in 1906, she moved to Chicago with her family shortly thereafter. This was a time of great social stirrings and crucial years for the modern labor movement in the United States. Dorothy’s own social conscience was formed early and she took a keen interest in the rights of workers and the poor. While not a Catholic she was attracted to the symbolism and devotions of the Catholic Church. A love affair at a very early age resulted in a pregnancy and abortion that brought much sorrow and grief to her.

As a young adult, Dorothy Day was attracted to journalism and writing. She moved in with a man who was a self-described anarchist and lived with him for some years. In 1926 when she again became pregnant—something she thought could never happen due to the abortion—Dorothy experienced a major turning point in her life. Her common law husband was opposed to having children and she separated from him, giving birth to her daughter on March 3, 1927. Out of her profound gratitude, she decided to have the baby baptized and by the next December she also was received into the Catholic Church. But this was only the beginning of her journey, for Dorothy Day’s conscience moved her to devote her life to the plight of the poor.

As the Great Depression deepened, so did Dorothy’s resolve. On December 8, 1932 she offered a special prayer at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C. vowing to live a life of service to the poor. A day later she met Peter Maurin, a French intellectual advocate of worker’s rights who became her mentor. Soon after, he advised her to start a paper that would publish and promote the Church’s social teachings. Thus was born *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper that was given freely to anyone who asked and especially to the poor. With the beginning of *The Catholic Worker*, a movement of the same name was born, and Catholic Worker houses began to organize all across the United States.

Dorothy Day devoted herself to spirituality and charitable action for and on behalf of the poor. She was a committed pacifist and

4. In #25, the pope says that the Church is God's family in the world and that *caritas* extends even beyond the boundaries of this family. Does your experience resonate with the image of the Church as God's family? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?

5. How are you called to act differently towards others knowing that there are many in the family of the Church and in the world who do not have enough to eat, a place to live, or adequate education and health care? What specific changes can you make?

which seven deacons served the community and tried to ensure that gaps between the rich and poor did not exist. Deacons were commissioned by the local communities to represent the Church in their service to those in need. "With the formation of this group of seven, "*diaconia*"—the ministry of charity exercised in a communitarian, orderly way—became part of the fundamental structure of the Church" (#21).

The exercise of charity and charitable acts became a defining characteristic of the Church from the earliest years of its existence. Pope Benedict cites some of the most famous and ancient of early Christian saints and writers to make this clear; all of them articulating in one way or another that charity is an essential aspect of the life of the Church. Among these early Christian witnesses is Justin Martyr, whose writings exemplify the early understanding of the link between Eucharist and charity.

Justin Martyr († c. 155), in speaking of the Christians' celebration of Sunday, also mentions their charitable activity, linked with the Eucharist as such. Those who are able make offerings in accordance with their means, each as he or she wishes; the Bishop in turn makes use of these to support orphans, widows, the sick and those who for other reasons find themselves in need, such as prisoners and foreigners. (#22)

Charitable service developed as the Church became more highly structured through the centuries. It became a part of every diocese and monastic community as well. The pope illustrates his point about the importance of charity for the early Church by telling two stories of model Christians. The first is of the deacon Lawrence († 258), who is celebrated as a saint for his life of service.

As the one responsible for the care of the poor in Rome, Lawrence had been given a period of time, after the capture of the Pope and of Lawrence's fellow deacons, to collect the treasures of the Church and hand them over to the civil authorities. He distributed to the poor whatever funds were available and then presented to the authorities the poor themselves as the real treasure of the Church. (#23)

In the second story, the pope tells of Julian the Apostate († 363), who as a young child saw his family assassinated by guards loyal to the reigning emperor, Constantius. The emperor was well known to boast of being an exemplary Christian and so Julian blamed the Church for the murder of his family. When he became emperor himself, he suppressed the Church. He was, however, so impressed by its system of charity that when he set up his reformed pagan priesthood and state religion, he copied it. “He thus considered it essential for his new pagan religion that, alongside the system of the Church’s charity, an equivalent activity of its own be established. According to him, this was the reason for the popularity of the ‘Galileans’ (#24). Even when leaders of the Church failed to live up to its ideals, the charitable work of its faithful impressed many who were not believers.

Pope Benedict summarizes what he calls the deepest nature of the Church: “proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*)” (#25a). All three are inseparably linked and each assumes the others. Like proclaiming the word of God and celebrating the sacraments, charity is a duty and call of all members of the Church. The pope commends the parable of the Good Samaritan as our universal standard of charity. And finally, he reminds us that the Church is a family and that charity extends beyond the boundaries of the Christian community to the entire world. We are called to love—to go beyond ourselves, our fears and prejudices—to love, even our enemies.

The Church is God’s family in the world. In this family no one ought to go without the necessities of life. Yet at the same time *caritas-agape* extends beyond the frontiers of the Church. The parable of the Good Samaritan remains as a standard which imposes universal love towards the needy whom we encounter “by chance” (cf. Lk 10:31), whoever they may be. (#25b)

## INTEGRATING DEUS CARITAS EST

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. When you think of the word *charity* what comes to mind? Does the concept of applied *agape* deepen your understanding of charity? How so?
2. The pope teaches that you are reflecting the life of the Trinity when you participate in charity and seek to help meet the needs of others. What is your reaction to this idea? How important do you think it is for Christians to embrace it?
3. Following the example of the Good Samaritan, how are you challenged to love concretely in: your family, among friends, in your neighborhood or local community, and in the world?