

Articles and interviews

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*On the encyclical Deus Caritas Est,
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“*Deus caritas est.*” These words, “God is love,” from the Letter of St. John have been taken by Pope Benedict XVI as the title for his first encyclical.

God is love, one reads in almost all translations of that phrase. Are charity and love identical? In part yes and in part no. The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us that charity is the virtue with which we love God above all things, and our neighbor as ourselves, for love of God. Later on, it affirms that “charity ensures and purifies our human capacity to love.”

For man needs to love and be loved. A faithful and refined love is the deepest yearning of the human heart. Our entire life consists in a search for true love, a struggle to overcome the obstacles that arise, also within each of us.

Jesus Christ is the fullness of Revelation. In him we get to know God; and in him we get to know man fully, as the Second Vatican Council teaches and as Pope John Paul II frequently stressed. In Christ we discover our vocation and our greatness. And an essential part of that discovery is charity, the love that

Jesus Christ ennoble and purifies. Because Christ has brought us, with his Love, *gaudium*—joy and peace.

The word “love” has undergone a type of “word inflation.” Perhaps we use it too often, at times to refer to passing feelings, or even, as the Pope points out, to expressions of selfishness.

Nevertheless, the word “charity” has perhaps undergone the opposite process, one of semantic restriction. Possibly we use it too infrequently, to refer only to specific activities, carried out for certain persons, in specific cases.

But charity is not meant to be something exceptional; rather it should form part of one’s Christian identity: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,” our Lord said. The pagans recognized Christians by this mark: “look how they love one another,” they exclaimed.

Christian love is a moral disposition that is expressed in a great variety of actions. Charity means to serve, to understand, to console, to listen, to smile, to accompany, to correct, to encourage, to ask for forgiveness and to forgive, to give and to receive.

Charity expands, as it were, in concentric circles: from one’s personal relationships to the entire society.

At the origin of the family is the spouses’ love for one another, which

creates the environment where life is engendered, the home that welcomes lovingly the new being, that fosters one's maturing as a person.

The world of work is enriched by charity. Carrying out one's profession in accord with the Gospel precept means carrying it out with love, with the desire to serve, putting one's heart into it, thinking about the others. Sanctifying one's work means converting it into an expression of love for God and for all men and women, imbuing it with justice and charity.

The landscape of the Church is adorned by many light-filled sites where Christians are striving to work and serve silently out of love. One needs only to consider Africa, the continent most in need of everyone's assistance. There the Church makes manifest its love, also "as an ecclesial act," in the words of Benedict XVI, as an essential part of its mission. Charity spurs one to be magnanimous, to not remain indifferent when faced with the needs of others.

The Holy Father sums up the expansive process of charity: "Love is 'divine' because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a 'we' which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is 'all in all' (*1 Cor 15:28*)" (no. 18). Here we can find the explanation for the perennial youthfulness of the Church.

Charity is also the key to the "new evangelization." The mission of spreading the Gospel involves helping many people to experience Christian charity, opening their intellects to the light of faith through

the language of love, the universal idiom that we all understand. For faith, as St. Paul writes, works through charity.

As St. Josemaría Escrivá said so clearly: "the principle apostolate that we Christians need to carry out in the world, the best testimony of our faith, is helping to foster within the Church an atmosphere of authentic charity."

Christ at the Last Supper called his precept of charity "new." "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you." It was new then and it continues being so now, for everyone, two thousand years later. If we read and meditate on the new encyclical with the healthy curiosity of one who knows he is going to discover something new, with our intellect and heart wide open, we will discover the permanent newness of this marvelous revelation: God is love, which He longs to give to all men and women.

Thus Benedict XVI's desire will be fulfilled: that this encyclical "may illumine and assist our Christian life."

Madrid March 8, 2006

*"The world needs a woman's gifts,"
in the newspaper ABC, Madrid*

International Women's Day (March 8) points to the past, with its unfinished efforts to overcome discrimination against women, and looks to the future, encouraging us