

## ***DEUS CARITAS EST - A BREATH OF FRESH AIR***

**JAMES R. LOTHIAN**

*&the curious incident of the dog in the night time."*  
*"The dog did nothing in the night time."*  
*"That was the curious incident," remarked Sherlock Holmes.*  
*-Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Silver Blaze (1894)*

**T**HE world's media seemed taken aback by Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. He had actually written a theological treatise on God's love and man's proper response to it. Any boiler plate written before the fact about Panzer-Cardinal-turned-Panzer-Pope had to be jettisoned and a new story line found rather quickly.

### **Mish-mash of reportage**

In the mish-mash of reportage that followed, one of the things that got lost entirely was the new turn that Pope Benedict took in the area of social thinking. What he said in this regard is a welcome change from the rhetoric of the past four decades. It is worth serious reflection.

Since the mid-1960s, Catholics have been inundated with pastoral letters, white papers by bishops' conferences and pronouncements from the pulpit on this, that or the other economic and social issue. The basic thrust of most of this has been left-leaning and pro-welfare state. In its extreme liberation-theology variant, it has been out-and-out Marxist. Like the changes in the liturgy, the rationale given for this new social activism was the Second Vatican Council and, in this specific instance, its constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*.

*Gaudium et Spes* is the example par excellence of a document written by committee. It rambles incessantly and is fraught with so much ambiguity that anyone with a modicum of intellectual ingenuity can justify virtually any position by culling passages from here and there. To those already so minded, its admonition "scrutinis[e] the signs of the times" coupled with the Enlightenment sense of optimism that permeates the document were taken as a clarion call to embrace the things of this world. In the milieu of the 1960s, that proved a complete disaster. The

declines in vocations to the clerical and religious life and the erosion of many once-venerable religious orders to near oblivion that followed are major cases in point.

Pope Benedict has long had a different interpretation of Vatican II and has argued vigorously against what he recently has termed the "hermeneutics of discontinuity and rupture" and for the "hermeneutics of reform" and a respect for the permanent things. *Deus Caritas Est* is a return to first principles and should, I believe, be viewed in the context of that debate.

### **Rational argument**

The encyclical is divided into two parts. The first, entitled "The Unity of Love in Creation and in Salvation History" focuses on God's love and the part it plays in our lives. The second, "The Practice of Love by the Church as a Community of Love", focuses on the question of how we as Christians are called to put that love into practice in our day-to-day dealings with one another. This latter part is a "social" statement, but of a quite different sort from what we have become accustomed to hearing. Reminiscent of Conan Doyle's *Silver Blaze*, a major clue that it is different is what is missing—the laundry list of specific economic policy proposals that has become characteristic of so much Catholic literature on that subject.

The omission appears quite purposeful. In this second part of the encyclical, Pope Benedict writes:

The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. *She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper* [my emphasis]. A just society must be the

achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.

Pope Benedict then goes on to say:

Love *caritas* will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. 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. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable.

Lest any of that be misunderstood, he says further:

The State which would provide everything, absorbing everything into itself, would ultimately become a mere bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the very thing which the suffering person every person needs: namely, loving personal concern. We do not need a State which regulates and controls everything, but a State which, in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, generously acknowledges and supports initiatives arising from the different social forces and combines spontaneity with closeness to those in need.

### **Key to growth**

All of this makes good sense both from a theological and an economic standpoint. The second great commandment is to love our neighbour for the love of God, not start the revolution for the love of either. If, moreover, we as Christians are to work for the alleviation of the poverty that grips large portions of the world, statist solutions are the absolute wrong method of doing so.

The only way out of poverty for a society as a whole is economic growth. Ireland and the United States are both examples of the benefits of growth. In 1820, both countries had per capita incomes in the range of \$800 to \$1000 when expressed in 1990 prices. The same is true to slightly varying degrees for most other Western

countries and Japan. That these countries are no longer poor countries is purely the result of growth. No amount of income redistribution in the early 19th century could possibly have made any difference.

Growth only comes about when the government, so to speak, runs in the background, providing an environment in which property rights are protected and pursuing stable, non-interventionist policies. In such an environment people invest in the technology and knowledge and engage in the entrepreneurial activities that are the engines of economic growth. Governments that do the opposite, that substantially restrict private property, that greatly inhibit trade both internationally and domestically and that pursue erratic and highly inflationary monetary and fiscal policies hamper such investment and stifle the entrepreneur. Growth suffers or becomes non-existent, as a result. The ordinary citizen in such an environment is condemned to a life of poverty.

A market economy only works well, however, if there is an underlying moral ethos. Witness the problems that have surrounded the transition to markets in Russia and some of the former Soviet satellites. It is in this context, Pope Benedict's statement that the Church "has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper" is best seen.

### **The common good**

What then is the role of the individual Christian? Here Pope Benedict writes:

As citizens of the State, [Christians] are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity. So they cannot relinquish their participation "in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the common good". The mission of the lay faithful is therefore to configure social life correctly, respecting its legitimate autonomy and co-operating with other citizens according to their respective competencies and fulfilling their own responsibility. Even if the specific expressions of ecclesial charity can never be confused with the activity of the State, it still remains true that charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful

and therefore also their political activity, lived as "social charity".

The Church, for its part, he argues, has an important role to play via its charitable activity:

[It] can never be exempted from practising charity as an organised activity of believers, and on the other hand, there will never be a situation where the charity of each individual Christian is unnecessary, because in addition to justice man needs, and will always need, love.

This activity, however, must be of a very definite type:

[It] must be independent of parties and ideologies. It is not a means of changing the world ideologically, and it is not at the service of worldly stratagems, but it is a way of making present here and now the love which man always needs. The modern age, particularly from the 19th century on, has been dominated by various versions of a philosophy of progress whose most radical form is Marxism. Part of Marxist strategy is the theory of impoverishment: in a situation of unjust power, it is claimed, anyone who engages in charitable initiatives is actually serving that unjust system, making it appear at least to some extent tolerable. This in turn slows down a potential revolution and thus blocks the struggle for a better world. Seen in this way, charity is rejected and attacked as a means of preserving the status quo. What we have here, though, is really an inhuman philosophy. People of the present are sacrificed to the moloch of the future – a future whose effective realisation is at best doubtful. One does not make the world more human by refusing to act humanely here and now. 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.

Commentators expressed puzzlement that Pope Benedict sought comments on *Deus Caritas Est* before he issued it. That, however, is what scholars do as a matter of course. And Benedict is a true scholar. Absent is the intellectual hubris that has characterised so much of what is palmed off as deep thinking in the Church today. The encyclical is a breath of fresh air.

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