Archbishop Paul Josef Cordes

President, Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*

Vatican City

"God is Love"

On the First Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI

The following is the prepared text of Archbishop Paul Josef Cordes' talk at the Overture Center in Madison on September 19.

The Question of God

The new Pope, Benedict XVI, has begun the exercise of his official teaching with the Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas est*. It is natural that the first doctrinal statement of a Pope should give a kind of blueprint for his service, almost an inaugural address. We can compare it with the importance, for instance, of Pope Paul VI's Encyclical *Ecclesiam suam VI* (1964) or Pope John Paul II's *Redemptor hominis* (1979).

There is a second aspect, though, that should be underlined. Benedict XVI's Encyclical is the first doctrinal letter ever specifically on the theme of love and charity. Toward the end of his life, Pope John Paul II had wanted to address this question. He had directed me to make a preliminary draft. Since his illness prevented him from working on the text, it never reached the point of publication. Cardinal Ratzinger knew about the preparatory work on this document, and decided to choose this theme on love of God and love of neighbor for his first Encyclical. He gave it a completely new character, however, not by approaching it inductively, but by beginning instead with the perennial issue on the question of God. In this way, he achieved the greatest clarity for his fundamental teaching; namely, that selfless love between human beings can only come from the power that God's love offers to us. The fact that all charity between human beings is theocentrically rooted, that is, it finds its source in God, is, for the Pope, the central affirmation of his first Encyclical.

Love: Often Misunderstood

It seems to me especially courageous, but also urgently necessary, that Pope Benedict XVI should start by trying to make a contribution to the way we should properly understand the term "love." It is a term too often forced and distorted, even trivialized, in contemporary life. How is this term connected to the Biblical affirmation "God is love" (1 Jn 4:16); how can we relate this word of God to our own understanding of love? That was the great question posed to the Pope at the outset of his Encyclical. Considering how the entertainment industry describes "love" in their productions, and what is called *amour physique* in Stendhal's famous essay, one must ask if these have anything to do with the theological virtue customarily named along with faith and hope.

Is not the notion discussed by the Greek philosopher Plato in his *Symposium* yet again something totally different? Do we not also speak of the "love" of wine, nature, and song? And, is there not, indubitably, an abyss between all of this and the Biblical affirmation that God is love?

From his perspective of faith and in his engaging language found in the Encyclical, our Pope at first tries to come closer to an understanding of love as something given by God and possessed by man. He does this in a very synthetic way, so that each summary of his thoughts would unfortunately risk distorting them. Fortunately, however, he describes in another place the complementarity of *eros* and *agape*: the love that is self-seeking versus the love that selflessly gives itself. He did so in his Address to the participants in a Conference organized by our Vatican Office, *Cor Unum*, which brought together some 250 delegates from charitable organizations throughout the Church in order to promulgate the Encyclical.

God, the True Source of Love

The Pope himself said: "The cosmic journey in which [the great Italian poet] Dante wishes to involve the reader in his *Divine Comedy* ends in front of the eternal light that is God himself, before the light that is at the same time 'the love that moves the sun and the other stars' (*Paradiso*, XXXIII, v. 145). Light and love are one and the same. They are the primordial creative powers that move the universe. If these words in Dante's *Paradiso* betray the thought of Aristotle, who saw in *eros* the power that moves the world, Dante nevertheless perceives something completely new and inconceivable for the Greek philosopher. Not only that, the eternal Light is shown in three circles, which Dante addresses as follows: 'O everlasting Light, who only in yourself dwells, only yourself understands, and self-understood, and self-understanding, love and smile at yourself!' (*Paradiso*, XXXIII vv. 124-126)."

Even more overwhelming than this revelation of God as a Trinitarian circle of knowledge and love, is the perception of a

human face — the face of Jesus Christ — which, to Dante, appears in the central circle of the Light. God, Infinite Light, of whose immeasurable mystery the Greek philosopher had a premonition — this God has a human face and, we may add, a human heart. This vision of Dante reveals, on the one hand, the continuity between Christian faith in God and the quest pursued by reason and by the world's religions. On the other hand, however, it also reveals something new that surpasses all human searching and that only God himself can reveal to us: the love that moved God to take on a human face, to even take on flesh and blood — to take on the entire human being. The *eros* of God is not merely a primordial cosmic power; it is the love that created man and bows down to him, as the Good Samaritan bowed down to the wounded and robbed man lying at the side of the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

The Pope continues, "Today, the word 'love' is so worn out, so stale and abused, that one almost hesitates to utilize it. And yet, it is a fundamental word, an expression of the primordial reality. We cannot simply abandon it, but must take it up anew, purifying it and restoring it to its original splendor, so that it can illuminate our life and guide it on the right path. The consciousness of this led me to choose 'love' as the theme of my first Encyclical. I wanted to try to express for our time and our existence something of what Dante boldly summed up in his vision. He tells of a 'sight' that 'was altering' as 'he gazed on' it and he was interiorly changed (cf. *Paradiso*, XXXIII, vv. 112-114). It is precisely this: faith becomes an insight that transforms us. It was my aim to shed light on the centrality of faith in God — in the God who took a human face and a human heart. Faith is not a theory that can be personalized or even put aside. It is something very concrete: it is faith that determines how we live. In an age in which hostility and greed have become superpowers, and in which we experience the abuse of religion to the point of the apotheosis of hatred, neutral rationality alone cannot protect us. We need the living God, who loved us even to death."

Eros and *Agape*

"And so," Benedict goes on, "in this Encyclical, the themes 'God,' 'Christ,' and 'Love' are fused together as the central guide of Christian faith. I wanted to show the humanity of faith, of which *eros* is a part; man's assent to his God-created bodily nature that finds its appropriate form, the form ordained by the Creation, in the indissoluble matrimony between man and woman. But, at the same time, *eros* is transformed into *agape*: love for the other person that is no longer self-seeking, but becomes concern for the other, ready for self-giving to the other, while at the same time being open to the gift of a new human life. Christian *agape*, love of neighbor in the following of Christ, is nothing alien to, situated alongside, or even opposed to *eros*: on the contrary, in the sacrifice that Christ made of himself for man, it found a new dimension which has been continuously developed in the history of charitable dedication of Christians to the poor and suffering" (Pope Benedict XVI, Address to International Conference on Charity, 23 January 2006).

The Pope's high estimation of *eros* may come as something of a surprise for people outside or on the fringes of the Church. Non-believers are only too glad to label believing Christians as unfeeling and lifeless killjoys. The Christian conception of love, they say, has nothing in common with the experience of life-loving contemporary views, so it would be better if they didn't speak of it at all. The Christian affirmation "God is love," is quite simply a fantasy.

Even those acquainted with theological discussion will scratch their heads in reading the papal document, for the Encyclical energetically repudiates an exegetical school that has, in a decisive way, shaped the image of love among both supporters and opponents of Christianity. It was formulated by the Swedish bishop Andres Nygren, the first President of the Lutheran World Federation, in a two-volume work, entitled *Eros and Agape* (1930/37). He supported his argument by citing, for better or worse, Martin Luther as his principal source; the noted theologian, Karl Barth, also embraced his interpretation.

Nygren emphasized that a Christian should only love in the form of *agape*, since the only form of love open to him is the love that gives itself. All self-love, in this view, in un-Christian. True love, in the Gospel sense, demands boundless self-hatred, and the antithesis of *agape* is *eros*, egocentric love, love as desire. The human yearning for fulfillment, Nygren maintained, must be destroyed, and seduction through beauty and goodness that arouses our love, is incompatible with Christianity. Betweeen these two types of love, there could be no middle way, no mediation; no path, not even sublimation, led from *eros* to *agape*. Such an interpretation clearly implies a fatal defamation of the Christian concept of love. If it really were the authentic meaning of the Gospel message, we Christians would be the poorest and most stupid creatures under the sun.

The Pope's Encyclical reinforces the urgent need to restore the value of *eros* in a section on the complementarity between man and woman (n. 11). He points to the solitude in which Adam finds himself according to the Biblical account of the Creation — a solitude which none of the other created animals could alleviate. Such existential solitude had already been emphasized and explained in the myths described by Plato. It arose from the vision that the human person had originally been spherical, complete in himself, and self-sufficient. As a punishment for pride, he was then split into two by Zeus, and, as a consequence, now longed for his other half, striving with all his existence to possess it and thus regain his integrity (Plato, *Symposium*, XIV-XV, 189c-192d). In the Biblical Creation narrative, there is no hint of punishment; but the idea is

certainly present that, as the Pope says, "man is somehow incomplete, driven by nature to seek, in another, the part that can make him whole, the idea that only in communion with the opposite sex can he become 'complete.'" In the experiences described here, the Pope sees proof that *eros* belongs to the very nature of human beings and cannot be rooted out of our human hearts. It is, he underlines, a valuable force, which he does not hesitate to call "ecstasy" in another passage (n. 4), while at the same time leaving no doubt, and more than once emphasizing, that *eros* is in need of discipline and purification.

The Pope states: "Love is indeed 'ecstasy,' not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God . . ." (n. 6).

Surprisingly Warm Reception

Throughout the world, *Deus Caritas est* has been greeted with considerable attention. Reactions to it were almost always approving, even enthusiastic; the press response was unusually extensive. Many of the leading newspapers published extracts from it, and even commentary from notorious critics of the Church turned out to be largely positive.

The person of the author no doubt contributed significantly to the particular interest aroused by the Encyclical. As Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the former Cardinal Ratzinger had often taken a position on controversial doctrinal matters. This had earned him not only sympathy and support among many, but also a national prejudice, that sometimes came into play when he was called the "Panzer Cardinal." Yet, ironically, his first official statement on the Church and on humanity speaks of "love"! There is no doubt that the element of surprise had a positive effect on the level of interest.

Even more importantly than this, he explains *diakonia* as the intrinsic expression of the Church's mission. Following the example of Jesus, the first Christian Apostles and Evangelists understood their mission, from the very beginning, as the imitation of the God's goodness. They alleviated the needs they encountered and, thus, gave greater credibility to their preaching of the Good News. Even as early as 160 A.D., the author of the Letter to Diognetus writes: "He who takes his neighbor's burden upon himself, who is willing to benefit his inferior in a matter in which he is superior, who provides the needy with that he himself has received from God and thus becomes the god of the recipients — he, I say, is an imitator of God! Then you will realize, while your lot is on earth, that God lives in heaven . . ." ("The Epistle to Diognetus," ed. by J. Quasten and J. Plumpe, *Ancient Christian Writers*, Vol. 6, ch. 10, p. 144, New Jersey: The Newman Press, 1948). The members of the Church, both individually and collectively, have always exercised the apostolate of charity towards those who are suffering. Christ's imperative of love for our neighbor was, *eo ipso*, the reverse side of His indicative of the promise of salvation.

Following the historical development of the Church's recent commitment to the poor, something new appears. In the Nineteenth Century, poverty and deprivation, largely due to industrialization, had reached such proportions that they could only be addressed in terms of a decisively new approach and the fostering of more just social structures.

The Pope admits in his text (n. 27) that the representatives of the Church were slow to realize the importance of the social questions, only gradually tackling and adopting a clear position on it. He does refer, however, to some pioneers in the field, such as seen in the prophetic action of Bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler of Mainz (d. 1877) and the numerous new religious orders founded already in the early 1800s to combat poverty and disease and the need for better education. Later in 1891, Pope Leo XIII published his Encyclical *Rerum novarum* as the basic document of the Social Doctrine of the Church, aimed at providing fundamental directives and enunciating clearly the demands for greater justice. The subsequent Popes further articulated this doctrine of ethical principles through their various Encyclicals, most notably Pope John Paul II, whom our Pope calls his "greatest predecessor," who bequeathed to us a trilogy of Social Encyclicals: *Laborem exercens* (1981), *Solicitudo rei socialis* (1987), and *Centesimus annus* (1991).

Religion and justice

Pope Benedict XVI refers to all three Encyclicals, as well as the recently published *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 2004. He briefly touches on the social doctrines enunciated in these documents and affirms the central role of politics in ensuring the common good. According to the Holy Father, this teaching calls on the State to create a just ordering of society. In this way, he stresses that not solely the Church must call today's people to practice charity.

He begins this section addressing the question of justice with a citation from his favorite theologian, St. Augustine, who wrote in his *City of God*: "Remota itaque iustitia quid sunt regna nisi magna latrocinia" ("A State which is not governed according to justice would be just a den of thieves") (St. Augustine, *De Civitate Die*, IV, 4; CCL 47, 102) (n. 28). For this very reason, a State must give religion its proper place within which to act, for the fact remains that religion continues to lead a mis-

erable "Cinderella" type of existence in many public discussions, as often seen in United Nations' Conferences or in the formulation of the Preamble to the European Union's Constitution, sidelined as such by blind allegiance to the so-called "Enlightenment." Indeed, there are those who would prefer to exclude it altogether from anthropology, only to stand dumbfounded when confronted with the brutal acts of violence that result from such exclusion.

The Pope contrasts this view by underlining the general importance of religion, posing the question, "What is justice?" Justice, he declares, is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics. In making this connection, he develops his thoughts on the reciprocity between reason and faith, issues that are clearly close to his heart, as manifested in his dialogue in Hamburg (2004) with the well-known German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas. If reason is to be exercised properly, if it is to determine what the right course of action is, then it must undergo constant purification, since, as the Encyclical notes, reason "can never be completely free of the danger of a certain ethical blindness caused by the dazzling effect of power and special interests." Politics, therefore, needs religion, and justice and reason need faith, for their purification. Faith not only extends far beyond the sphere of reason, but it is also "a purifying force for reason itself . . . (it) liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly" (n. 28).

Religion is, consequently, no *quantité négligeable*, either for the State's even-handed justice or for an adequate anthropology of humanitarian assistance. The large aid organizations, including those of the Church, clearly do not always take this into sufficient account (Paul Josef Cordes, "The Dimension of Religion in Our Charitable Activity," Pontifical Council *Cor Unum*, *Religion and Chartiable Activity*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003), pp. 27-49). Can one really afford to overlook, or even deny, the importance of religion in the human decision-making processes of today? Can responsible political and cultural leaders ignore it and risk dismissing it?

We need only open our eyes to what is happening in our world. The coincidence in time between the publication of the Papal Encyclical and the reactions to the cartoons of Mohammed published in a Danish newspaper is daunting. Media representatives and international agencies, conferences of United Nations delegates, and rulers of states are dedicating themselves to the problem in the interest of global security. In preparing for this meeting, I read about the murder of the Roman priest, Father Andrea Santoro (d. February 2, 2006) in Turkey, the retaliatory act of a fanatical young man. The chain reaction within Islam also brings horribly before our eyes what destructive forces can lie within exaggerated religious zeal and how seductive such zeal may be. The brief lines, by which Pope Benedict XVI introduced his Encyclical prior to all these events, now seem prophetic, as when he gave a premonition of just such a clash of civilisations: "In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message (the message that 'God is Love') is both timely and significant" (n. 1). The human face and the human heart assumed by Jesus Christ, mentioned by the Pope with reference to Dante above, are unique and invaluable.

While admittedly being unable to pose, let alone answer, all the questions implied here, at least one consequence can clearly be articulated: the Christian heritage is not automatically preserved, *eo ipso*, in the so-called First World. Religion must win back its rightful place in the general consciousness of the West as well. The vitality of the faith of Christians will contribute much to a new visibility of the Christian heritage through a stronger influence of Catholic Social Doctrine and through the continual action of the large number of Church institutions.

Theology of love of neighbor

The formulation of a just social order has already yielded impressive fruits in the countries of Christendom. It has launched an academic discipline and has called for campaigns, both individual and collective, against mankind's poverty and deprivation. Are these appeals no longer sufficient? Why is a further papal statement on love for our neighbor still needed in our time, and, what is more, one that in tone and discourse clearly differs from the usual genre of the Social Encyclicals? Whoever considers the Church's perennial campaign against hunger and poverty may well, and with some wonder, pose such a question.

In seeking the answers, the actuality of the Encyclical is, once again, impressive, as this dimension of the Social Doctrine of the Church clearly needed further reflection. The theology of charity intersects, of course, with the theology of love of neighbor, but does not coincide with it. The individual and social dedication to the relief of our suffering brothers and sisters — love of neighbor in the strict sense — does not at first construct any sort of methodical doctrinal edifice. It grows directly out of the indicative of the faith. For that reason it has hardly been subjected to any systematic theological formulation in the history of the Church; it is simply present within the transmission of the *kerygma*. It is the other side of the coin, the Lord's *caritas*, by which He redeemed us. Charitable action, therefore, places self-dedication more powerfully in the foreground before our fellow human beings. It makes use of the non-scientific language of the New Testament, adopting its existentially moving metaphors and parables.

In view of the world-wide sensitivity to human deprivation to which the Pope alludes (n. 30), the time seems to have come

to give the ecclesial world of aid a broader theological foundation and to root it in the hearts of the faithful with convincing arguments. This is not due to the State or civil society having repudiated the fundamental principles of the dignity of man. The challenge of society lies rather in the fact that the Christian conception of love of neighbor, in a wave of secular humanism, is at risk of losing its Biblical roots, and hence, its original inspiration.

The salutary readiness of contemporary man to help a needy neighbor has induced a secularization of this central aspect of the Church's mission among members of the Church. Large Church-run aid organizations are tempted to dissolve their links with the Church, to relax their ties with the bishops, and to identify themselves comprehensively as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Frequently, this results in advocacy for a programme that no longer differs from that of the Red Cross or the relief organizations of the United Nations. This approach contradicts the whole tradition of the charitable endeavours of the Church, consequently reducing the credibility of the Christian message. The new Encyclical of the Pope thus explicitly aims at holding together the three basic missions of the Church: *martyria*, *leiturgia*, and *diakonia*. It opposes the trend that seeks to weaken the rooted-ness of *caritas* in God, constricting itself to mere philanthropy as its motive.

Such weakening of faith among those working in charity could also lead to a regrettable impoverishment of the Apostolate, which is necessarily to the detriment of the work of evangelization, and causes it to become atrophied. Many people, especially the young, show themselves to be sensitive to the needs of their neighbor, and it is here that we discover a great pastoral opportunity, since those willing to help are innumerable. If they could only be inspired to root their service to their brothers and sisters in God's love, they could then discover, and help others discover, Him Who alone makes selfless love possible.

The Pope was more than right to choose the Biblical quotation "Deus Caritas est" and to anchor his Encyclical in God. No thoughtful person will thus reproach him by claiming that this had already been exposed as a pious "superstructure" by Karl Marx, or by arguing that the proposition "God is love" fails to convince, since it conceals the economic reasons for misery and poverty. Such objections are groundless. The Pope expressly repudiates the Marxist theory of impoverishment. He calls it "an inhuman philosophy" (n. 31), and instead his writing repeatedly affirms how the world of faith and the world of aid mutually interweave with and support each other. Since God is the source of charity, the reference to God promotes charitable service. The Encyclical ponders the marvelous first spark that ignites the will to serve another (n. 17). An individual's commitment may well have been moved by his or her feelings, but, the Pope says, because sentiments come and go, the will needs a kind of stabilization that transcends psychological constraints and that can only come from an intimate encounter with God. How else could I, as a helper, remain steadfast in assisting someone who arouses in me a certain abhorrence? He also emphasizes how decisive a living relationship with Christ is in helping us to overcome the temptation to become discouraged by the sheer scale of the burden of need and the sense of our own limitations.

Only faith in God can stop us from "surrendering to a resignation which would prevent us from being guided by love in the service of others" (nn. 35-36). Where can the aid worker draw the strength, where can he or she rediscover their own inner serenity, other than in God, the loving Father? Thus, faith is not the only condition for Christian charitable action; it also inspires and promotes it.

On the other hand, the sentence "God is love" is not only a help in the struggle against poverty and need, but it also brings us face to face with a difficult and profound problem. A sharp intellect like Benedict XVI does not overlook the fact that those who place man's suffering in God's light, and who are convinced of "the goodness and loving kindness of God" (*Titus* 3:4), will be afflicted by a new problem (cf. n. 38). Does not every philanthropist shudder before Job's reproach to the Almighty about the presence of incomprehensible and apparently unjustified suffering in the world? Job speaks of his oppression of mind in the Old Testament: "Oh, that today I might find him, that I might come to his judgment seat! . . . I would learn the words with which he would answer me, and understand what he would reply to me. Even should he contend against me with his great power . . . Therefore I am dismayed before him; when I take thought, I fear him. Indeed God has made my courage fail . . ." (*Job* 23:3, 5-6, 15-16). Often, we receive no answer to the question of why the worst has happened, or why the Almighty has withdrawn his hand and does not intervene; we cannot understand why God refrains from acting. In spite of this, we should, amidst this inner bewilderment, remain in prayerful dialogue before his Presence. Our groaning does not imply any error, weakness, or indifference on God's part. Rather, our soul's cry of anguish to God proclaims once again his sovereignty, and in this regard, the Pope recalls the concise and perceptive remark of St. Augustine: "*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*" — "If you understand, he is not God" (St. Augustine, *Sermo* 52, 16: PL 38, 360).

The neighbor

Contemporary thinking is saturated with information that brings world history into our very homes. We are increasingly alerted to global economic and political developments. Our judgments and our wills are subjected to globalization. The horizon of our responsibility is thus widened, and we perhaps become clearer-sighted in the pursuit of our goals.

This "farsightedness," this global perspective, is further disseminated by the investigations of sociology on society and

man, and, more especially, by events that have caused worldwide horror — such as the terrorist attacks on the USA on September 11, 2001; those in Madrid on March 11, 2004; or later on, the reaction in largely Muslim countries to the cartoons of Mohammed. Yet, our participation in these rather distant events should not tempt us to lose sight of the Lazarus who lies before our own door. When it is a question of compassion for the poor, the Bible brings all idealists with great plans for the improvement of the world down to earth again — down to the narrower constraints of our own rather personal environment. This appeal must not be lost to sight, even when all the considerations of political and social engagement mentioned earlier retain their validity.

In teaching the Commandment of Love in the New Testament, our Lord uses an expression of impressive clarity: he speaks of "love of neighbor." Behind the word "neighbor" lies the Greek adverb *plesion*, denoting the locality; so it effectively means "in the vicinity" or "neighboring." If this indication of place is referred to a person by the article *ho*, it means that the criterion of that person's vicinity to us should be underlined. Concern for our neighbors should first addressed especially toward those we encounter in person immediately where we live; those we meet face to face. So it would be mistaken to address our commitment to the needy primarily toward those far removed from us. Even if all global considerations are justified, indeed necessary, poverty and hunger must especially be combated in our own neighborhoods. That is why Pope Benedict addresses himself to those in countries with good social legislation, noting that " . . . there will never be a situation where the charity of each individual Christian is unnecessary . . ." (n. 29).

The pain-racked face of a suffering sister or brother touches our hearts. We are all familiar with this experience; but our response can have a meaning that far transcends philanthropy. The Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Lévinas, who died in 1995, but who has been newly rediscovered and greatly admired nowadays, gave this explanation to our reaction in a moving way. He noted that our charitable commitment has a sense that goes far beyond philanthropy. It is God Himself Who prompts us to ease human misery, and thus it is HIM Whom we ultimately carry into the world. The more convincingly and clearly we bring Him as a healer, the more powerfully will our love change the world and arouse hope — the hope beyond death.