

WHAT'S LOVE GOD TO DO WITH IT?
Stewardship and Deus Caritas Est

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INTRODUCTION

What's love got to do with it? The title of Pope Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, tells us that God is love. Who God is determines who we are and how we live. The encyclical begins with the words from the First Letter of John: God is love and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. (1Jn 4:16) Learning to love as God loves is at the centre of Christian stewardship. To say that God is love, says as much about us as Christians as it does about God. That God is love defines who we are and gives us our identity in Christ as disciples.

In the Diocese of Calgary our approach to the stewardship initiative that will soon celebrate its second birthday is spiritual formation. Instead of focusing on practices that will enliven parish communities, we have concentrated first on formation in discipleship and evangelisation. By cultivating a stewardship spirituality among people in the parishes, we are investing in the individuals that together will give any concrete endeavours a solid and lasting foundation. Instead of encouraging people to practice stewardship, we start by helping people to see themselves as stewards. We start by forming their identity in relation to God's generous giving. In this way stewardship is a disposition rather than a task that we add onto our already busy lives.

When I speak with parish groups about stewardship, often there is someone who will cry out that he or she couldn't possibly add one more thing to an already impossible agenda. Most recently one participant asked: what about those in the crunch generation? What he meant was people like him looking after young children and looking after ageing parents while working a full-time job, trying to be an attentive spouse, and volunteering at church. This person sincerely wants to be a disciple and asks a very fair question — how can I find time to deepen my stewardship in this already overburdened life?

Underneath the question is often a feeling of despair and an attitude of failure. To live life overburdened and enslaved by a constant sense of inadequacy is NOT what discipleship asks of us. It has been said before: You don't need to save the world; Jesus has done that already. What stewardship does ask of us, is that we re-think our priorities and re-shape our way of living in the world. Stewardship re-makes our image of ourselves into God's image and that in turn affects our attitude and our behaviour. Our concept of God shapes the way we see ourselves and the way we live. The source of our stewardship is therefore not our actions, not even our self-image, but our image of God from which our self-image and our actions follow. For this reason, *Deus caritas est*—God is love—is a very important stewardship document.

The encyclical was published in January 2006. An encyclical is a general letter, something that circulates. In modern Catholicism, the term is usually reserved for a letter issued by the current pope though in earlier usage it applied to letters from

bishops as well. Papal encyclicals treat a significant issue in Catholic doctrine and rank second in importance out of all papal documents, the Apostolic Constitution coming first. Although the encyclical, *God is love*, never mentions the word stewardship, it is foundational for our apprehension of stewardship as a spirituality. Similarly, in the progress of stewardship as a way of life, it is crucial for those of us committed to stewardship to train our eyes to see the stewardship message in a variety of sources from our tradition and to claim them for our ministry.

The encyclical, is divided into two parts. The first part is entitled *The Unity of Love in Creation and in Salvation History*. In this portion of the text, Benedict offers a learned theological meditation on love. For stewardship purposes, it is about images of God and self and about our relationships with God and neighbour. The second part, called *Caritas: The Practice of Love by the Church as a "Community of Love"*, discusses charity in the more limited sense of the word: the work of Catholic charitable organisations and the practical exercise of love in the Church.

Not long after the encyclical was published, Mr. Anthony Garascia wrote a four-part study guide to accompany the encyclical that was published by Ave Maria Press. It is available online and on the stewardship page of the Diocese of Calgary website. The guide is structured for pastoral use beginning with a reading and a prayer, then a short commentary to sum up the major points in each section of the encyclical, some questions for discussion, and then material for continuing reflection and action. Recently, I invited a small group of 4 others to join me in working through the encyclical with the study guide in preparation for today's session. What ensued was a very lively and animated discussion. At the end of the study, members asked me what we would be studying next! For the most part we did not use the discussion questions because members of the group were bursting with their own comments and questions. However, the group agreed that the guide was useful for preparation and for framing the discussion. The questions are always available to help guide the discussion if necessary. I hope that after today some of you will be motivated not only to look at the encyclical for yourselves, but also to form small groups in your own communities to discuss the encyclical in terms of stewardship.

My objective this morning is to introduce you to some of the ways in which Pope Benedict's encyclical *God is love* can be used for formation in a stewardship way of life. I will highlight themes from each part of the encyclical and show how they connect to stewardship spirituality. With each part I will also give you an opportunity to enter into an initial exploratory discussion of the stewardship implications of believing that God is love.

SESSION 1

LANGUAGE OF LOVE

Pope Benedict begins the encyclical by raising the problem of language. As we all know, the word love is used with almost alarming frequency and in the process indicates multifarious meanings. Among others there is love for a spouse or other family members, the love between parents and children, love of country, loving one's job, love of sport or music, I love chocolate and hairless cats, and there is love of God. Romantic love, which Benedict describes as "love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness." [2] is perhaps that which stands out most obviously in our culture. It is this kind of love, which the Greeks called eros. Greek is a nuanced language. There are 3 Greek words for love: eros, philia, and agápe. New Testament writers did not use eros, which is the root of our English word erotic. Philia is used in the New Testament, in John's Gospel in particular, to denote Jesus' relationship with his disciples, a relationship of friendship. Agápe is generally a rather obscure word but it was favoured by New Testament writers in order to suggest that there is something distinct about love in a Christian context.

EROS

In short, Pope Benedict reclaims eros for Christianity by understanding it in partnership with agápe rather than in opposition to it. In ancient times, eros was considered a kind of intoxication or 'divine madness' that enabled communion with the divine. However, the pursuit of the divine through eros was seen at times to objectify and debase the human body, thereby degrading humanity. It is this use of eros to which Biblical authors objected. Initially, eros is not a bad thing. It is the desire for God, for the true, the good, and the beautiful. In our study group, one member offered the thought that "every sin is a twisting of the desire for God." He also mentioned a provocative proverb: "Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is searching for God." Thus, the original impulse towards eros is not a negative thing. It is a sign of our human desire for God but it cannot be left undisciplined. What Benedict calls the 'undisciplined' eros results in a degradation of humanity rather than an ascent to the Divine. If eros is to rise towards the Divine, it must lead us beyond ourselves. In order to do this, it must be transformed through "a path of ascent, renunciation, purification, and healing." [5] What purifies eros is the influence of agápe.

AGÁPE

In its frenzied search for an ecstatic encounter with the Divine, eros meets a contrasting experience that is "a real discovery of the other . . . No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing for sacrifice." [6] The desire for the good, the true, and the beautiful is then put into action in service to others where it becomes agápe. If eros is considered an ascending love, agápe can be considered a descending or oblation/offering love. Benedict's contribution to the philosophical and theological understandings of these terms is his assertion that the two types of love "can never be completely separated" and that they form "a proper unity in the one reality of love" [7]. Eros may start out selfishly seeking some promise of happiness but along the way, as it

draws nearer to the other, it increasingly seeks the happiness of the other. In this way agápe enters into this love and transforms it. Working together, eros seeks God and agápe passes the gift of God on to others. "Fundamentally," the Pope teaches, "'love' is a single reality, but with different dimensions . . . Yet 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] Eros and agápe are distinct but not separate. Our way of loving in the world must include both dimensions of this single reality.

We have a little time for discussion today. Following the presentation for each section of the encyclical I will give you 5 minutes to turn to your neighbour, in groups of 2 or 3, for a mingling of eros and agápe, sharing and listening.

Discuss an example of a time you have been in the position of receiving another's care or love when you were feeling vulnerable. What was at stake in receiving? Was it more or less difficult than giving?

SESSION 2

RECEIVING

In the same way as eros can be distorted without the influence of agápe, an exclusive focus on giving is similarly dangerous. Pope Benedict writes that "Anyone who wishes to give love must also receive love as a gift." [7] Think for a moment about what happens if you give repeatedly but don't open yourself to receiving. What happens to people who are always giving? Do you know someone who will give but won't let anyone else help him or her? You've just discussed times that you have been reluctant to receive a gift or when you've been in a situation where you have received from others and perhaps felt uncomfortable. This question of receiving is one of my favourites. The first principle of stewardship is to receive God's gifts with gratitude. Instead of emphasising gratitude or generosity, I start with receiving because neither gratitude nor generosity can happen well unless we learn to receive well.

Contrary to what we might think, it is usually easier to give than it is to receive. Receiving from others can be difficult and humbling. We insist that we want to pay our own way for instance and say it is out of politeness that or that we don't want to inconvenience another. Without knowing it, we are being selfish because we often prefer to do for ourselves so we are not obligated or in relationship with another person.

The philosopher Jacques Derrida understood this very human perspective on giving and receiving. He makes a pun using the German word for poison, which is Gift. Derrida says that gifts are poison because they create a relationship of debt, obligations, inferiority, and superiority. I would suggest that another way to look at it is to say that receiving puts us in relationship with the giver. The economy of giving, much like the economy of love, is mutual and interdependent. When we receive, we simultaneously give someone else an opportunity to give.

Jesus modelled for us both giving and receiving. Throughout his ministry Jesus was a gracious host who welcomed the unwanted. At the same time, Jesus was the vulnerable

guest: a homeless infant, a child refugee, an adult with no place to lay his head, a despised convict. My favourite example comes from the story in John's gospel of the mandatum or the washing of the feet that takes place before the Last Supper. As you recall, Jesus intends to wash the feet of the disciples but Peter protests saying that no way is he going to let the Master wash his feet. Jesus responds: unless I wash you, you will have no share in me. By allowing Jesus to serve them, the disciples are formed for service. Being a guest allows one to become a host. It is in receiving that we are transformed into givers. Similarly, Allan Boesak, a South African theologian, wrote that the pinnacle of lovelessness is not our unwillingness to be a neighbour to someone, but our unwillingness to allow them to be a neighbour to us. Thus the single reality of love requires both eros and agâpe, giving and receiving.

EUCCHARIST

The connection between the washing of the feet and the Last Supper is not accidental. The lesson learned at the washing of the feet, is important for properly understanding and participating in the Eucharist. In the encyclical Benedict tells us that "Eucharistic communion includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn." [14] This means that a Eucharist that does not continue after we leave the walls of the church, is, in his words, "intrinsically fragmented."

The Eucharist memorializes and makes present the death of Christ upon the Cross for the salvation of humankind. The Cross is at the centre of the encyclical and is a radical and complex gesture of love. God's love is an oblation love because the Son was offered for us. At the same time, Christ's sacrifice raises us up in an eros-like ascension because through the Eucharist we "enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving". [13] The invitation to share in Christ's Body and Blood unites us with God through Jesus' gift of himself. Benedict calls this participation in the divine offering "sacramental mysticism".

Participation in this "sacramental mysticism" is not limited to the benefit, our raising up, but it is also social in character. Our "union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself." [14] In the Eucharist we become "one body" making love of God and love of neighbour inseparable. Benedict explains that in the Eucharist "God's own agâpe comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us." [14] God wants us to reflect in our lives the love that is God. We use our bodies to make God, who is invisible, visible. We also become the sacrament of God's love in this world.

I am reminded here of the poem by St. Teresa of Avila that illustrates the "sacramental mysticism" of our responsibility in this life to embody God's love.

Christ has no body now on earth, but yours.

No hands but yours

No feet but yours

Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world.

Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which He is to bless His people.

Before wrapping up our presentation on the first part of the encyclical, I will give you another opportunity now to discuss some of these ideas. Again, in your small groups, talk about in what ways you feel united with Jesus in the Eucharist and whether you feel united in the same way with others when you receive the Eucharist.

LOVE OF GOD AND LOVE OF NEIGHBOUR

In the final paragraphs of this first part of the encyclical, Pope Benedict turns his focus to the commandment of love of neighbour. Above we talked about how searching for God, eros, leads to an encounter with the other and becomes agàpe when we love the other. Here, in the commandment to love others, agàpe leads us back to seeing God.

The Pope unpacks the first letter of John chapter 4 beginning with the passage that states: If you cannot love your sisters and brothers, whom you can see, you cannot possibly love God, whom you do not see. So, if you say you love God but don't love others, you lie. Love of God and love of neighbour are tied together in an unbreakable bond. Seeing and loving our neighbour, leads us to see and encounter God.

Pope Benedict puts forth the objection: how can love be commanded? It is a feeling that either is there or isn't there. The response, hinges upon what we talked about earlier, upon receiving. Receiving God's love puts us into a relationship with God that opens our eyes to see Christ in others with the eyes of Christ. Once we have been loved by God, our response to receiving God's love is our love of one another.

Being a good steward, more than anything else, depends on that initial relationship between God and humanity, what Pope Benedict calls "a love-story between God and man." As this encounter between humanity and God unfolds "our will and God's will increasingly coincide." Our self-image, distorted by sin, gradually is re-formed into the image of God. We change through our relationship with God until, Pope Benedict writes, "God is in fact more deeply present to me than I am to myself." This may well be the most powerful, important, and beautiful line in the whole encyclical. "God is in fact more deeply present to me than I am to myself."

SECTION 3

CHARITY AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Pope Benedict uses this theme of identification with God to make his transition to the second part of the encyclical. He begins by quoting St. Augustine with the words: "if you see charity, you see the Trinity." In other words, every manifestation of charity shows us a different aspect of God's love. Motivated by love, the Father sent the Son, Jesus. As the human face of the Father Jesus shows us how to love and out of love gives up his life. The Holy Spirit teaches and transforms the Church so it can be a witness to this Trinitarian love. The Church seeks to raise humanity up to God in eros through the liturgy and the sacraments but she also reaches out with agàpe, offering the love of God to the world in human service and activity.

In this second part of the encyclical, Pope Benedict wrestles with the relationship between charity and justice and in that the respective roles of the church and the state. In general, he says that justice—systems to administer just policies in society—are the responsibility of the state. It is for the church to form consciences so that they will choose and maintain just systems. The distinction is provocative in our society, which favours justice over individual charitable actions. Yet, from the earliest Christian communities, charity has been part of the nature of the church and “an indispensable expression of her very being.” [25] In the Acts of the Apostles St. Luke tells us that the earliest Christians held all things in common so that no one among them would be in need. However, this kind of charity broke down as the Church grew. In order that charity would continue to be practiced in a consistent and orderly fashion, the Church gradually developed a structure that included what was known as the diaconia to care for the poor. One of the examples of this early diaconia is worth mentioning here. In the third century the deacons were responsible for the care of the poor in Rome. After the Pope and deacons were captured by the Emperor, the authorities sent deacon Lawrence to collect all the treasures of the Church and hand them over. Lawrence collected as he was told but then distributed all the funds to the poor. To the authorities he presented the poor themselves as the real treasure of the church.

This is one of several stories from the early tradition of the Church that Pope Benedict recalls in order to describe what he summarises as a structure that reflects the deepest nature of the Church. This inseparable triad ensures a consistent application of love: proclamation of the word of God (kerygma-martyria), celebration of the sacraments (leiturgia), and the exercise of charity (diakonia). The stories illustrate that these three responsibilities are interdependent and all necessary for the fullness of Christian living.

In the early Church, there was a tangible connection between the gifts offered up at liturgy and the charity distributed by the Bishop to support those in need. That is why the priest originally washed his hands after the offertory and before the Eucharistic prayer began—his hands were dirty from collecting the produce offered to feed the poor. Today our communities are so large and the identity of our “neighbour” in need so abstract that this connection has been obscured.

Discuss in your small groups how we can reconnect our gifts to the celebration of the Eucharist.
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SECTION 4

MEETING NEEDS

The approach usually taken with charity, giving to needs, can be discouraging because there is no end to number of needs. No matter how just a society becomes, there will always be suffering of some kind. To think that justice makes charity superfluous, Benedict explains “masks a materialist conception of man: the mistaken notion that man can live 'by bread alone' (Mt 4:4; cf. Dt 8:3)—a conviction that demeans man and ultimately disregards all that is specifically human.” [28b] I think this is a fascinating point; meeting only material needs of people, dehumanizes them. Instead, the encyclical challenges Christians to offer a kind of love or charity that not only gives people material

help but also “refreshment and care for their souls” [28b] The focus of the beggar is on the hands while the focus of the steward is on the face. We read in the encyclical that "Practical activity will always be insufficient, unless it visibly expresses a love for man, a love nourished by an encounter with Christ." [34] Here is the difference between secular charity work and Christian charity. Christian love of neighbour is nourished by an encounter with Christ. This understanding of Christian charity is what underlies the adage you've probably already heard several times during this conference: stewards don't give to needs, stewards have a need to give. In other words, stewardship shifts the focus from the needs of others to our relationship with God. (X2) It sounds like heresy!

In the face of incessant need, Christian stewards re-frame the question of need. Instead of responding to needs on their own terms, we meet them through a push from within that is nourished by our encounter with Christ. Stewards understand that everything they have and everything they are come from God. They depend on God and thus are instruments of God. Stewards know they are not saviours but ministers. So, instead of responding to the volume of need with despair, Benedict suggests that "In all humility we will do what we can, and in all humility we will entrust the rest to the Lord." [35] This does not mean we become complacent, or become blind to poverty, violence, abuse, plague, and neglect. We are expected to cry out like Job, who complained in the presence of unjustified suffering, or like Jesus upon the Cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Lament is in fact, a prayerful response of faith and hope.

Your life of prayer is what determines your action as a steward. Pope Benedict sums up this balance between contemplation and action, between worship and ethics, between love and charity when he says, "Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave." [18] Love is transformative. The love of God, transforms us and through us it transforms the world. God loved us so we love others both through our actions of charity and through the Trinitarian "look of love" which God gives to the world through us.