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May 4, 2007

Justice and Love in *Deus Caritas Est*: A Transcendental Resolution of Potentially
Conflicting Duties

Pope Benedict's encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, is simultaneously enlightening and frustrating. He writes profoundly about the nature of love, of Eros and Agape, and he gives some incredible insights into love's integral role in humanity. At the same time, he writes about the different spheres of Church and State, and how the Church should engage in charity and the State in the construction of a just society. Even if the Church is not on the sidelines in the fight for justice, the description of its role in this encyclical seems different from the deep political critique and wisdom of Catholic Social Teaching and its role in promoting justice. This encyclical poses a further puzzle: How am I, as an individual, as a member of both a church and a state, to make sense of these seemingly separate spheres of duty? I will attempt to answer this question by offering a dualistic interpretation of these duties, that is, justice and love as two separate spheres, and showing the problems that come from it. Then I will offer a model of duties that places justice in the transcendent context of love, which I hope will close the apparent schism between the roles of justice and love in our lives.

I will start by examining the second part of the encyclical, in which the distinction between Church and State appears. Benedict writes, "Fundamental to Christianity is the distinction between what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God."¹ He further describes Church and State as two distinct, yet interrelated spheres (*DCE*, 28a). These spheres involve different duties: the State should order society justly and the Church should engage in charitable activity. As for the interaction of these spheres, the Church

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*. 2005. Section 28a. Further citations in text.

purifies reason to prevent “ethical blindness” in State activity and it “reawaken[s] the spiritual energy without which justice... cannot prevail.” Further, the Church and State may cooperate on the same tasks, e.g. the Church may deal with immediate needs of homelessness by providing services, whereas the State may battle housing discrimination or gentrification.

The relationship between this encyclical’s separation of Church and State and the ideas present in Catholic Social Teaching is not immediately obvious. Prima facie, this encyclical seems to be at odds with the political imperatives found in some documents important to Catholic Social Teaching. Critiquing the American government’s defense spending, as the pastoral letter “Economic Justice for All” does, is hard to reconcile with a solely indirect role for the Church.² Purifying reason and reawakening spiritual energy, the Church’s duties as outlined in *Deus Caritas Est*, seem more tenebrous than the blunt, politically charged ideas found in earlier documents.

The distinction between the Church’s duties as an institution and the duties of an individual member of the Church provides a way to reconcile this apparent break. Prior to *Deus Caritas Est*, Catholic Social Teaching encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum* and *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* did not make this distinction. *Rerum Novarum*, for example, reads:

“But the Church, not content with pointing out the remedy, also applies it. For the Church does her utmost to teach and to train men. ...They alone can reach the innermost heart and conscience, and bring men to act from a motive of duty, to control their passions and appetites, to love God and their fellow men

² U.S. Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*. Pastoral Letter on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy, 1986. Section 20.

with a love that is outstanding and of the highest degree and to break down courageously every barrier which blocks the way to virtue.”³

Notice that this passage switches from the Church as a singular entity to a plural form for its members. The duties, however, convalesce in one, singular role of the Church. One could probably extricate some different duties for the institution and the individuals from the text, but *Deus Caritas Est* makes the distinction very clear. “The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society... is proper to the lay faithful. As citizens of the State, they are called to take part in public life in a personal capacity” (*DCE*, Section 29). The individual, then, as part of both Church and State, must take part in the duties of both. The politically charged message sometimes found in Catholic Social Teaching can be reconciled with the indirect political duty of the Church by recognizing that individuals have social responsibility. As members of the State, individuals must call for justice.

As an individual, reconciling the duties of justice and charity, or love, can be difficult. How distinct and how interrelated are these duties? How should one view them: as complementary, potentially conflicting, or with a certain preference of one over the other? I will begin this exploration by proposing a dualistic view of justice and love; namely, that they are two separate spheres of duty that sometimes overlap, e.g. in scenarios of cooperation and of conflict. This reading of the duties as separate spheres seems tenable because Benedict uses such phrases as “the *autonomy* of the temporal sphere” (*DCE*, Section 28a) when referring to the state.

At first, this reading seems fruitful. I can have two separate duties, just as I can be both a son and a husband. I can pay Caesar what belongs to him, vote according to

³ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*. 1891. Section 26

my conscience, and act against injustice. I can also volunteer, aid charities, and find other ways to manifest my love to humanity. My religion can even guide my political action by developing my reason giving me energy. The two spheres can also come together in cooperation.

The problem with this reading arises when the duties conflict. Pope Benedict addresses such a situation when he discusses the Marxian critique of charity in an unjust state: “the poor, it is claimed, do not need charity but justice. Works of charity... are in effect a way for the rich to shirk their obligation to work for justice,... while preserving their own status and robbing the poor of their rights” (*DCE*, 26). Charity, in this situation, perpetuates injustice by further entrenching the social order and providing an ephemeral palliative to a growing problem. An individual trying to act with justice and with love will see this situation as a troublesome dilemma. If the duties are two separate spheres, one of them must be pushed aside. The individual must choose between justice and charity.

Pope Benedict’s response to the Marxian critique helps to solve the dilemma. He writes,

“Love... 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*. ... In the end, the claim that just social structures would make works of charity superfluous masks a materialist conception of man: the mistaken notion that man can live ‘by bread alone’ - a conviction that demeans man and ultimately disregards all that is specifically human” (*DCE*, 28b).

Love, as essential sustenance for humanity, cannot be cast aside. To promote justice but, in the process, extinguish love would amount to saving a fish bowl

but letting the fish die. The preservation of humanity seems to outweigh the integrity of a justly structured society.

This dualistic reading, even with a seemingly satisfactory resolution of conflicting duties, has a major problem. It pits justice against love. The individual, torn because of these conflicting duties, must weigh the two options. This opposition of duties leads to a slippery slope: to always choose love over justice may lead to an unjust state, to oppression, to an infrastructure so flawed that charity could not overcome the deluge of need. To choose justice every time would seem, in this reading, to deprive humanity of its needed love.

The way to reconcile justice and love requires a different viewpoint. Justice should be seen in the larger, transcendental context of love. In this light, justice and love do not oppose each other. Instead, they are different methods of encountering humanity, of helping others, of doing God's work in the world. Dilemmas, like the Marxian critique, reveal themselves to be illusory. Justice and love are inseparable. Just as an individual can use reason to promote justice and love to promote charity, so can the body of humanity use the Church and the State to promote those things as well.

To explicate this view of justice and love, I will begin by discussing how love is transcendent, and from there I will explain the relationship between justice and love and how that translates into an individual ethic. Love is transcendent in a few ways: it is an encounter with humanity, its horizon is beyond this world, and it gives meaning to justice. In discussing how love forms the core of Christianity, Pope Benedict writes, "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical

choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and decisive direction” (*DCE*, 1). This event is the encounter with God through the person of Christ, and it is an exposure to God’s tremendous love. This love bespeaks a connection to the divine, as Benedict writes that “love promises infinity, eternity – a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence” (*DCE*, 5). Love provides a horizon beyond material existence, beyond the infrastructure that justice provides, and gives humanity a transcendent goal.

This transcendence links into the discussion of Eros and agape, of ascending and descending love, of giving and receiving. These links each merit their own lengthy discussions, so I will be brief here. Love is the great unifying force of individual and community, humanity and God. Pope Benedict, at the end of the first part of the encyclical, writes, “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)” (*DCE*, 18). Love completes us. It is humanity’s bridge to God and to the other.

Love is integral to humanity, because to not have it would be to deny humanity’s nature. Humans are body and soul, as Pope Benedict explains, “...it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature.” (*DCE*, 5). The materialistic conception of man, as mentioned in the Marxian critique, fails to

recognize the full magnitude of love and its relevance to the human person. It is only within this transcendent unity, which love provides, that justice matters.

The relationship between justice and love in this view is much different than the dualistic conception put forth earlier. This transcendent context view does not oppose to the two. Instead, the architectonic manifestations of justice give structure to the whole. Justice gives humanity a fruitful framework in which love can grow. Justice and love are not two separate, competing needs. Justice prepares the way for love, like John the Baptist did for Jesus. In this way, the two cooperate in helping humanity achieve its full potential.

Another way to think about the relationship is to think of love and justice as analogous to virtue and practical reason. The encyclical, at one point, refers to the State as dealing with practical reason: “The State must inevitably face the question of how justice can be achieved here and now. ...The problem is one of practical reason” (*DCE*, 28a). In virtue ethics, virtue and practical reason accompany one another in good actions. Much background stands behind these two concepts, but a short anecdote should elucidate the analogy. A child may have virtue, that is, he may be incredibly generous and love charity, but he may lack the practical reason to make the right choice. He may give all of his money away and have none left over for himself. He may starve because of his virtue. A virtuous person with practical reason, however, would still be generous enough to give some money away, but he would keep just enough for himself to stay alive, to continue being a source of love in the world. So is it with love and justice.

Love is absolutely essential and has primacy, but justice must be taken into consideration and must pave the way for love.

Let us now return to that original dilemma, in which love and justice seemed to conflict. One can now see how the context changes the perception of the whole. An individual should work for both love and justice. Instead of just loving, of allaying those pangs of conscience by giving some pittance to the poor, one could address the immediate need for love through charity and work towards a better framework of justice. The world needs this same unity from dualism that man needs, that is, love and justice must unite like body and soul.

I will close with a passage that sums up the importance of reconciling justice and love in the transcendental way that I have outlined above. It is rather cryptic, but it captures the fullness of this idea:

“God’s passionate love for his people – for humanity – is at the same time a forgiving love. It is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice. Here Christians can see a dim prefigurement of the mystery of the Cross: so great is God’s love for man that by becoming man he follows him even into death, and so reconciles justice and love” (*DCE*, 10).

Christ embodies this transcendental union of justice and love. Maybe someday, we too can become, as Benedict writes to close the encyclical, “capable of true love and ... fountains of living water in the midst of a thirsting world” (*DCE*, 42).