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LOVE'S DESCENDING ASCENT:  
DIVINIZATION IN *DEUS CARITAS EST*

**Introduction**

The opening words of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical provide an answer to two of the most fundamental questions of human existence: "what is God?" and "what is love?" Benedict takes the words directly from the mouth of St. John, "the disciple whom Jesus loved." The two questions actually answer one other: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him."<sup>1</sup> Thus while many, including the Holy Father himself, have declared the encyclical to be primarily about the nature of *love*,<sup>2</sup> one might also suggest that it is just as much about the nature of God. Accordingly, this essay investigates the encyclical's presentation of the relation between human love and the divine nature. The relation may be summarized thus: human love finds its origin and final end in God. Theologically speaking, however, such a statement is true not only with respect to human love but for every created reality. The question I would like to explore in particular is whether and in what way creatures come to knowingly *participate* in this relation. In what way are we ourselves able to relate our creaturely longings to the divine nature?

This present essay therefore takes the theme of *divinization* as the most promising entry point for exploring this question. By focusing on *eros*' relation to the infinite, I would like to examine three central claims of the encyclical that together support its

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<sup>1</sup> 1 John 4:16; *Deus Caritas Est* (DCE) §1. The encyclical text may be found at the website of the Holy See, <[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/index\\_en.htm](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/index_en.htm)>

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Benedict's remarks given on 23 January 2006 to the meeting organized by the Pontifical council *Cor Unum* on the theme "But the Greatest of These Is Love." The text may be found at the following website: <<http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=83272>>

account of love's ultimate unity. The first deals with *eros*' ordination to the transcendent. The second involves the observation of a distorted form of *eros* that leads to a dehumanizing "counterfeit divinization." And the third concerns the encyclical's characterization of *agape*, or the *descending* movement of God's love, which is what ultimately allows us to embrace our divine source and end.

Shortly before the official release of *Deus caritas est*, Benedict pondered a brief passage at the end of Dante's *Paradiso* which he took to be a poetic encapsulation of the encyclical's message: "through the sight, that fortified itself in me by looking, one appearance only to me was ever changing as I changed."<sup>3</sup> The passage depicts an encounter with a presence that moves, changes and enriches whomever encounters it. It invokes, as the pope put it, the notion of "a vision-comprehension that transforms us."<sup>4</sup> Such a notion is indeed central to the encyclical's account of human love and its relation to God. The love of God, the love which God *is*, transforms whomever encounters it. Love is not merely what *defines* God, but more importantly what allows us to become *like* God. We come to know the nature of God and the nature of love simultaneously, within an *ascent* toward what is in itself most worthy of love. Yet as human love grows in divine likeness, it comes to imitate the kenotic *descent* characteristic of God's saving love. Thus the encyclical describes *eros* (the ascending love of rational creatures) and *agape* (the descending love of God) as two inseparable dimensions of one dynamism of growth in divine likeness.

It may prove helpful at this point to invoke a particular image found in the encyclical. The ladder Jacob that sees in his dream at Bethel, upon which the angels of

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<sup>3</sup> *Paradiso* XXXIII, vv112–114.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI's remarks to the *Cor Unum* conference, "But the Greatest of These Is Love." (*op. cit.*)

God ascend and descend, symbolizes for Benedict the “inseparable connection between ascending and descending love, between *eros* which seeks God and *agape* which passes on the gift received.”<sup>5</sup> That these two forms of love are inseparably connected is one of the most controversial claims of the encyclical, one that has experienced prolonged resistance from many modern thinkers, who largely tend to deny an organic relation between human and divine love.<sup>6</sup> For them, human and divine love operate on two entirely distinct planes closed off from one another, with no “ladder” between them. Benedict’s rejection of this separation is at the very heart of the encyclical. Yet his rejection at the same time recognizes that the unity of divine and human love is not a conclusion one reaches through conceptual deduction or empirical calculation alone, but rather is something one may encounter only through the mediation of a particular historical event: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In the sacrificial love of Jesus, “the pierced one,” we encounter through faith the eternal current of God’s free self-giving from which all love descends, and in which all love finds its highest perfection.

### I. The Ascent of *Eros* and Divinization †

Just as it is St. John who provides the title statement of the encyclical, so it is again St. John who introduces its first conceptual move. The proclamation that we as Christians “have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us” places the reader within a context of *encounter* in which knowledge unfolds through experience. This context of

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<sup>5</sup> DCE §7

<sup>6</sup> The crowning representation of this line of thought is still Anders Nygren’s *Agape and Eros*. For an excellent account of the encyclical’s engagement with modern accounts of *eros*, see D.C. Schinler’s “The Redemption of *Eros*: Philosophical Reflections on Benedict XVI’s First Encyclical” in *Communio* 33 (Fall 2006), pp375-399.

encounter serves as a condition for *all* knowledge, even self-knowledge.<sup>7</sup> Benedict's thought in general relies heavily on the claim that *alterity* serves as the fundamental condition under which persons encounter *being*. We come to know something only by bringing ourselves *before* it in a way that establishes some sort of relation *with* it. It is only within the contrast such an encounter offers us that we come to awareness of ourselves as selves. "For man is more himself the more he is with 'the other,'" the pope writes. "He only comes *to* himself by moving away *from* himself. Only through 'the other' and through 'being' with 'the other' does he come to himself."<sup>8</sup> The human person thus encounters the world with a radical openness, since its rational faculty grants it an unlimited capacity to assimilate the world to itself. "A being is the more itself the more it is open, the more it is in relationship," says Benedict. Only the human creature "makes himself open to all being, in its wholeness and in its Ground, and becomes thereby a 'self,' who is truly a person."<sup>9</sup>

It is within this experience of selfhood that authentic love unfolds. Indeed, this infinite openness to "the other," to "another self," is what enables and ennoble the personal bond established by human erotic love. In this meeting of infinite capacities, human love discovers its ordination to what is infinite and unchanging in itself. For Benedict, this meeting allows human beings "a glimpse of an apparently irresistible

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<sup>7</sup> It should be clear that such a claim is a direct challenge to the epistemology of Descartes. Ratzinger issues this challenge more explicitly in some of his other work. See especially his *Introduction to Christianity*, J.R. Foster, trans. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979) pp182–204. Instead of an epistemology that begins with "I think, therefore I am," Ratzinger suggests one based on the reception of love: "I am loved, therefore I am." It is interesting to note that Jean Luc Marion takes also the idea of "*amor ergo sum*" as a point departure for his recent *The Erotic Phenomenon* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> *Introduction to Christianity*, p175.

<sup>9</sup> Ratzinger, Josef. *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*. (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1988), p155.

promise of happiness.”<sup>10</sup> As love grows, it seeks to become *definitive*. “*Love embraces the whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time*. It could hardly be otherwise,” Benedict writes, “since its promise looks to its definitive goal: *love looks to the eternal*.”<sup>11</sup> This orientation to the eternal implies “a certain relationship between love and the Divine: love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence.”<sup>12</sup>

According to certain modern philosophical critiques, the obsessively pious ethical commands and prohibitions of Christianity stunt the natural growth of *eros* precisely at the point where it offers us this “happiness which is itself a certain foretaste of the Divine.”<sup>13</sup> These artificial religious restrictions supposedly halt *eros* at the very point where it gives way to the transcendent, to an ecstasy that opens the self up totally to what lies beyond it. Benedict’s account of human alterity actually sympathizes somewhat with this critique. If the human person’s openness to that which is “other” is truly infinite, then unlike other created entities, the human person cannot be content to be simply a part of some greater finite whole. However, Benedict warns that this openness to the infinite is not a warrant for the assertion of one’s own selfhood at the cost of another’s. The truth applies universally: no rational creature made in God’s image may rightfully claim to be the whole to which another such creature belongs as a part or possession.

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<sup>10</sup> DCE §2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. §6

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. §4. As Gabriel Marcel observes in *The Mystery of Being*, the erotic bond between lover and beloved appears immune to the vicissitudes of contingent temporal existence. And for this reason, as experience verifies, the lover experiences the definitive loss of the beloved as a deeply destabilizing travesty.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. §3.

Since the human self is infinitely open in its capacity to receive the other *qua* other, it demands the preservation of the self vis-à-vis the other, and thus forbids any final dissolution of alterity. In a sense, then, Nietzsche's critique is a valid objection against the effacement of human identity, and against any artificial restriction upon the infinite extension of human desire. However, unlike Nietzsche, Benedict concludes that

“in the last analysis, there is one final depth to this truth [of human alterity]. If ‘the other’ is just anyone he can also cause man to lose himself. Man is finally intended for *the* other, the truly other, for God; he is all the more himself the more he is with the *quite* other, with God.”<sup>14</sup>

*Eros* seeks God, for only in God does *eros* embrace the infinite Other without abolishing itself. In this way, *eros* pursues a path of *divinization*. It is ultimately against an infinite horizon that the human person discerns the meaning and coherence of any object of desire. One may thus perceive both the great dignity and danger of *eros* in the love one experiences for another finite “self.” While *eros* by its nature is a sign that directs one to the infinite Other to which all finite selfhood points, it is easily and frequently mistaken for the reality to which it points. In this way, human *eros* remains vulnerable to deception inasmuch as it confronts false promises of fulfillment in the finite realm. It is to this tragic distortion of “inverted *eros*” and the “counterfeit divinization” it promises that we now turn.

## II. Inverted *Eros* and Counterfeit Divinization ↻

At some point, the human person's encounter with the world requires some definitive account, whether implicit or explicit, about the whole within which it takes place. Benedict

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<sup>14</sup> *Introduction to Christianity* 175. Perhaps it is St. Augustine who expresses this idea most adequately in his well-known prayer, “You have created us for yourself, O Lord; and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” (*Confessions* I, i).

observes how such accounts emerged in the cultures surrounding ancient Israel.<sup>15</sup> While the historical development of Israel's cosmology reflected its interaction with the cosmologies of its neighbors, Israel nevertheless arrived at a distinct understanding of God, not as "one god among many, but the one true God himself who is the source of all that exists."<sup>16</sup> This notion of God came into perennial conflict with the cultural and religious practices of its neighbors. Of particular interest to Benedict is the challenge of certain fertility cults to Israel's theological development.

"These fertility religions were severe temptations for Israel for centuries, tempting it to abandon the covenant and to enter into the religious milieu of the time. Through the fertility cults the serpent speaks to the human being: Do not cling to this distant God, who has nothing to offer you. Do not cling to this covenant, which is so alien to you and which imposes so many restrictions on you. Plunge into the current of life, into its delirium and its ecstasy, and thus you will be able to partake of the reality of life and of its immortality"<sup>17</sup>

Benedict claims that these cults fostered a distorted and destructive form of *eros*. This "false *eros*" also translated into a false understanding of transcendence. Such a distorted notion of *eros* posed a threat to Israel's covenant with God not because *eros* was superfluous or disruptive to that relationship, but precisely because *eros* was so *integral* to it. Again and again in the scriptures God addresses Israel in erotic terms, as a jealous lover, especially when Israel succumbs to the unfaithfulness of idolatry.<sup>18</sup> Israel's relationship with God rests upon the erotic impulse which lies at the heart of the covenantal bond.

In the encyclical, Benedict insists that Israel's covenant with God "in no way rejected *eros* as such; rather, it declared war on a warped and destructive form of it, because

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<sup>15</sup> DCE §3–4, 9–11.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. §9

<sup>17</sup> "In the Beginning...": A Catholic Understanding of Creation and the Fall. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995) p65.

<sup>18</sup> Although such language may be found throughout the Old Testament, the classic example of this manner of address is the book of the prophet Hosea.

this counterfeit divinization of *eros* actually strips [*eros*] of its dignity and dehumanizes it”<sup>19</sup> What is really at stake, then, in “getting *eros* right” is the final existential orientation of the human community, inasmuch as the ultimate consequence of “counterfeit divinization” is dehumanization.<sup>20</sup> A purely finite *eros* refuses to love what is truly other. By claiming to find in the finite what can only be found in the infinite, human desire thus retreats from an unlimited openness before the other to the confines of some determinate gratification. As love closes off itself off to the infinite, its focus necessarily returns to the self, since the self remains the most proximate and stable foundation upon which to establish the definitiveness for which love always longs. Such a retreat generally leads one to look to the deliverances of the empirical realm—and so to the physical ecstasy of sexual pleasure—as the surest guarantee of the “reality” of love’s encounter.

As love turns away from the infinite, the perceived “otherness” of the other begins to break down. Erotic encounters come to be seen as occasions for self-assertion or self-gratification. The other comes to be viewed in relation to the designs of one’s own selfhood. The mystery of the other is thereby “tamed” as the identity of the other comes to be enclosed within the horizon of one’s own self-image. The other is then no longer a “beloved,” for which one abandons oneself, but can be at best a mere “partner” whose erotic aspirations happen to coincide with one’s own.

Inverted *eros* has its correlative development within the Western intellectual tradition as well, where patterns of thought have progressively sought to confine human encounter

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<sup>19</sup> DCE §4.

<sup>20</sup> “Indeed,” writes Benedict, “the prostitutes in the temple [of the fertility cults], who had to bestow this divine intoxication, were not treated as human beings and persons, but were simply used as a means of arousing ‘divine madness’: far from being goddesses, they were human persons being exploited” (Ibid.)

within the horizon of the self. These developments usually have taken one of two paths: one that ultimately has prioritized rationalistic logic, and one that has exclusively relied on empirical measurement. Benedict locates representatives of these approaches historically in the figures of René Descartes and Pierre Gassendi.<sup>21</sup> According to him, both paths ultimately lead to the debasement of the body and erotic love. The rationalist approach does so more directly, while the empiricist one does so by way of the “reification” or “commodification” of physical phenomena. Benedict remarks that in our largely materialist cultural environment,

“Eros, reduced to pure sex, has become a commodity, a mere ‘thing’ to be bought and sold....<sup>22</sup> This is hardly man's great “yes” to the body. On the contrary, he now considers his body and his sexuality as the purely material part of himself, to be used and exploited at will.”

In this view, the body becomes a mere instrument for the pleasurable phenomena it affords. It is easy to see how such a view may foster contempt for the body, inasmuch as the body cannot give all the pleasure that is demanded of it. Inevitably a certain *confrontation* arises between our bodily limitations and the unlimited desires of the human heart.

It is precisely the truth of our bodily limitation that Benedict wants to bring to bear on a theological understanding of human love. He insists upon acknowledging the universal facts of *dependence and vulnerability* that attend every human life. Our dependence

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<sup>21</sup> DCE §5.

<sup>22</sup> Among the vast implications of this encyclical, some of the most provocative and perhaps most urgent involve the relation between this sort of commodification of human love and the consumerist environment of Western democratic capitalism. Nicholas Boyle speaks to the potentially alarming consequences of this tension in his book *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998). He writes that in a consumerist environment, “bodies are seen only as the locus of consumption, not of production; production is thereby repressed further into our collective unconscious; and producers, particularly women, are deprived of the political means of protest against exploitation.”(59), as quoted in Michael Hanby’s “The Logic of Love and the Unity of Catholic Truth: Reflections on *Deus Caritas Est*,” *Communio* 33 (Fall 2006), p417.

and vulnerability are evident from the very beginning. In the womb, where each of us had our beginnings,

“the being of another person is so closely interwoven with the being of... the mother, that for the present [this person] can survive only by physically being with the mother, in a physical unity with her....”<sup>23</sup>

This relationship of dependence, vulnerability and self-giving does not confine itself to the womb, however, but is really the essential condition of all human encounter with the world. “If we open our eyes,” says Benedict, we see that the state of the child in the womb, vulnerable to and dependent upon the freedom of another “is simply a very graphic depiction of the essence of human existence in general.”<sup>24</sup>

Thus at the heart of “counterfeit divinization” is the outright rejection of this dependence and the attendant effort to emancipate oneself from any limitation to one’s own freedom. This path of “self-liberation” is the same path that Adam pursued in response to the serpent’s lie: “you shall be as gods.” For as Benedict sees it, “the implicit goal of all of modernity’s struggles for freedom is to be at last like a god who depends on nothing and no one, and whose own freedom is not restricted by that of another.” This sort of freedom is a false path of divinization, for it “presupposes not an image of God, but an idol.” This idol is “the radical antithesis of the real God..., [who] by his very nature [is] entirely being-for (Father), being-from (Son), and being-with (Holy Spirit).”<sup>25</sup> True divinization passes humbly through the contingencies and dependencies of creatureliness. False divinization refuses the vulnerability of love, and in so doing, rebels against the very structure of our being. *Eros* serves as the battlefield upon which these rival concepts of our

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<sup>23</sup> Ratzinger, Josef. “Truth and Freedom.” *Communio* (Spring 1996) p27.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p28

divine calling confront each other. The encyclical's admonition regarding *eros* is simply an echo of the ancient teaching of the Judeo-Christian tradition: the divine nature is not "something to be *grasped*."<sup>26</sup> Our attempts to become a god on our own can only end in the tragic denial of our dignity as creatures.<sup>27</sup>

### III. The Descent of *Agape* and the Perfection of Love's Ascent ↓↑

Now that we have touched on the encyclical's account of *eros*, the love that ascends toward God, let us now venture a glimpse of that other dimension of love: *agape*, the love that descends from God. Even though *eros* directs itself to the infinite—to God—the identity of God nevertheless remains hidden and inaccessible without explicit revelation. Shortly before the encyclical's release, Benedict remarked that

"God's *eros* is not only a primordial cosmic force.... [Rather, the] love that has created man... bends before him, as the Good Samaritan bent before the wounded man, victim of thieves, who was lying on the side of the road that went from Jerusalem to Jericho."<sup>28</sup>

In the revelation of salvation history, we find that *eros*' ascent is met by *agape*'s descent; indeed we discover that it is out of this descent that *eros* comes to be. *Eros* is created in the

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Philippians 2:6

<sup>27</sup> The following is from one of Benedict's published homilies on sin: "Human beings who consider dependence on the highest love as slavery and who try to deny the truth about themselves, which is their creatureliness, do not free themselves; they destroy truth and love. They do not make themselves gods, which in fact they cannot do, but rather caricatures, pseudo-gods, slaves of their own abilities, which then drag them down." Here we can at once say that at the very heart of sin lies human beings' denial of their creatureliness, inasmuch as they refuse to accept the standard and the limitations that are implicit in it. They do not want to be creatures, do not want to be subject to a standard, do not want to be dependent. They consider their dependence on God's creative love to be an imposition from without. But that is what slavery is and from slavery one must free oneself. Thus human beings themselves want to be God. When they try this, everything is thrown topsy-turvy. The relationship of human beings to themselves is altered, as well as their relationships to others. The other is a hindrance, a rival, a threat to the person who wants to be God. The relationship with the other becomes one of mutual recrimination and struggle, as is masterfully shown in Genesis 3:8–13, which presents God's conversation with Adam and Eve. Finally, the relationship to the world is altered in such a way as to become one of destruction and exploitation." *In the Beginning*, pp70–71.

<sup>28</sup> Address to *Cor Unum* conference "But the Greatest of These is Love" (*op. cit.*)

image of *agape*, and it is only in conformity with *agape* that *eros* comes to its highest perfection. Like the ascent and descent of angels on Jacob's ladder, *eros* and *agape* form a confluence as love grows in divine likeness. Yet the descent of God's love is not something that ever could have been deduced from one's experience of human love alone. The full depth of *agape's* descent comes to light only with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Nazarene. Here one encounters

“the novelty that exceeds all human search, the novelty that only God himself could reveal to us: the novelty of a love that has led God to assume a human face, more than that, to assume the flesh and blood, the whole of the human being.”<sup>29</sup>

This love “from above” meets and exceeds every aspiration of human love, and offers to the human person the authentic possibility of becoming like God, of sharing in his nature. Jesus embodies *agape's* descent within human history and, in so doing, reverses Adam's tragic attempt at divinization:

“the One who is truly like God does not hold graspingly to his autonomy, to the limitlessness of his ability and his willing. He does the contrary: he becomes completely dependent, he becomes a slave. Because he does not go the route of power but that of love, he can descend into the depths of Adam's lie, into the depths of death, and there raise up truth and life.”<sup>30</sup>

Like St. John, Benedict conceives of Jesus' identity as one of total relationality: he is the “sent one” whose selfhood is constituted by obedience to the Father, and so entirely bound up with what is other. Jesus' life is portrayed as one uninterrupted self-offering to the other, “the infinite that makes man complete.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> *In the Beginning*, pp75–76.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p176.

Jesus reveals this outward movement as the very impulse from which creation itself proceeds, and to which all creation is called to return.<sup>32</sup> In *eros*' ascent toward the infinite, the human person extends itself to its Creator, a Creator that it cannot comprehend. In this sense *eros* does seek to "grasp" what is ungraspable, but it must ultimately find itself dissatisfied with the "metaphysical images" that speculative notions of the infinite provide. The hope upon which all *eros* rests is the actual realization that God is *love*—that God actually *loves* and is capable of *being loved*. Yet this realization comes to light only in the concrete, in the realm of personal encounter. In the person of Jesus Christ, God's love is finally made manifest as a concrete reality, a reality as concrete as the holes in his hands, feet and side. In the fullness of time, the person of Jesus communicates to humanity the redeeming truth that the infinite to which human *eros* aspires, "this universal principle of creation—the *Logos*...—is at the same time a lover with all the passion of a true love."<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

This brief reflection on Benedict XVI's first encyclical has attempted merely to gesture toward some of the more pivotal ideas that lie at the heart of its message. These ideas concern *eros*' inherent movement toward divinization, the danger of false or counterfeit divinization arising out of a refusal of vulnerability toward "the other," and the unity of *eros* and *agape*. These claims find their deepest theological grounding in the person of Jesus Christ, who gives the definitive answer to the mysteries of love's meaning

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<sup>32</sup> "What is hinted at in the creation is fulfilled in man and finally in *the man par excellence*, Jesus Christ: by embracing the fate of the grain of wheat, by going through the process of being sacrificed, by letting himself be broken down and by losing himself he open up access to true life" (*In the Beginning*, p191)

<sup>33</sup> DCE §10.

and God's identity. This answer comes not in the form of a conceptual proposition or ethical programme, but in the form of a person: an infant in a stable, a preacher by the lakeshore, a healer of infirmities, a washer of feet, a liberator upon a cross. The answer Jesus gives us is *himself*. He offers to all the full and abiding truth about human life and human love. In the love which emanates from his most sacred heart, our own hearts encounter the same boundless love that God himself is.