

# The Practice of Charity in Catholic Spirituality

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**Abstract:** This paper traces the history of and provides the rationale for the centrality of the practice of charity in Christian—specifically Roman Catholic—spirituality. It shows how the understanding of God as Love (*caritas* in Latin) grew as the Jewish people reflected on God’s saving deeds, and how it flowered as the first Christians contemplated the person and mission of Jesus. Their understanding and experience of God’s universal and gratuitous love urged them to show a similar love to those in need. Some outstanding early, modern, and contemporary exemplars and exponents of charity are highlighted. The article concludes with a brief consideration of the first encyclical letter of Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* [God is Love].

The word “charity” takes us to the very heart of Christian faith and spirituality. If we can speak of such a thing as a biblical definition of God, it would be found in the Apostle John’s affirmation, “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

Like all the authors of the books of the Bible that make up the New Testament, John wrote in Greek. The word he used for “love” is *ἀγάπη* (*agape*). In Greek literature this word is used much less often than *ἔρος* (*eros*, sensual or affectionate love) or *φιλία* (*philia*, friendship). The usual

Latin translation of *agape* is *caritas*, from which comes the English word “charity.” In fact, in the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Bible made by Saint Jerome (347-420) that came to be regarded as authoritative by the Roman Catholic Church, John’s words appear as “*Deus caritas est*,” the words chosen by Pope Benedict XVI as the title of his first encyclical.<sup>47</sup>

*Caritas* was chosen rather than other Latin words—*amor* for instance—in order to emphasize that *agape* is not a love founded on attraction or shared interests and values. It is a love that is unconditional, freely offered even to those who are unlovable or unworthy of love, and given without any thought of return or reward.

### **Divine Love and Human Charity in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament)**

John’s affirmation, “God is love,” can be seen as the culmination of centuries of reflection on God’s interactions with the physical and spiritual descendants of Abraham, who is revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as the Father of Faith. The Jewish people believed that God’s love for them had been uniquely and unforgettably manifested in their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. Their prophets would later describe this love of God in anthropomorphic terms that went so far as to compare divine love to the passionate love between man and woman. Later still, the followers of Jesus who believed him to be the promised Messiah interpreted his death, resurrection, and sending of God’s Holy Spirit as the ultimate sign of God’s love for us. In the Christian Church formed by successive generations of believers, reflection on the meaning and implications of this divine love has continued down to the present day.

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<sup>47</sup> In Catholic terminology, an “encyclical” refers to a papal document that addresses theological or ethical issues with a high degree of authority, second in importance only to an “apostolic constitution.”

The descendants of Abraham initially emphasized the power and justice of God. They looked for this power to be especially manifested in God's ability to destroy their enemies and to reward them for their good deeds. Psalm 68, for example, begins,

Let God rise up, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him. As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, let the wicked perish before God. But let the righteous be joyful; let them exult before God; let them be jubilant with joy (1-3).<sup>48</sup>

In spite of their growing awareness that God does not always punish the wicked and reward the good in ways that can be seen in this life, the Jewish prophets continued to proclaim the love of God for the descendants of Abraham and, indeed, for all people. Among the prophets there were those like Hosea who spoke movingly of the tenderness, one might even say, the passion of God's love:

It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. . . . How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath (11:3-4, 8-9).

Going hand in hand with the prophets' growing understanding of God's love was their insistence that people who proclaim their faith in a loving

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<sup>48</sup> All quotations from the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

God must also give concrete demonstration of that love through their charity for those in need. Amos is one of the most outspoken in voicing God's displeasure with the avariciousness of the rich who are unmoved by the suffering of the poor:

Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land, saying, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat." The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob: Surely I will never forget any of their deeds (9:4-7).

The prophetic teaching that divine love can be and indeed must be reflected in love for those in need and that God will honour those who act charitably is also expressed in the Wisdom literature of the Bible: "If you close your ear to the cry of the poor, you will cry out and not be heard" (Proverbs 21:13); "They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever; their horn is exalted in honour" (Psalm 112:9)

### **God's Love and Human Charity in the Christian Scriptures (New Testament)**

Christians believe that God's self-giving love for all creation was made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth, whom they recognize as the promised Messiah and whom the author of the Letter to the Colossians calls "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" (1:15). What Jesus "images" is precisely God's self-giving *agape*: "For God so loved (*ēgápēsen*) the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16).

The writings of the Evangelist Luke especially emphasize the teaching of Jesus on the necessity of showing love for—that is, being charitable to—

the poor and the outcast, those to whom one is not attracted and from whom one can expect nothing in return. Love for the poor images the love of Jesus, who is himself the image of God's love. This teaching of Jesus is expressed in such directives as "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" (Luke 14:23) and "Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back" (Luke 6:30). In the Acts of the Apostles, the sequel that Luke wrote to his Gospel, he includes a saying of Jesus that is not found in any of the four Gospels. "In all things I [i.e., the Apostle Paul, who is speaking to the elders of the Church of Ephesus] have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (20:35).

The teaching of Jesus was taken up, developed, and applied by his first followers in the letters they wrote to early Christian communities. For example, in the Letter of James we read,

If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? (2:15-16).

One of the first acts of the nascent Christian community was to designate certain of its members as "deacons" to insure that the daily distribution of food be done equitably (Acts 6:1-6).<sup>49</sup> Another concrete application of Jesus' teaching on charity is found in the Apostle Paul's concern for the poverty-stricken community of Christians in Jerusalem. In his Second Letter to the Church in Corinth he asks that a special collection be taken up and describes this charitable action both as a way

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<sup>49</sup> "Deacon" comes from the Greek word *διακονία* (*diakonia*) meaning "service." In the Roman Catholic Church, the diaconate was, for centuries, little more than a "stepping stone" on the way to priesthood. The Second Vatican Council restored it as a permanent order.

of imitating Christ and of bringing about what he calls a “fair balance” between the abundance of one community and the need of another:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters [of the Church in Corinth], about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. . . . For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. . . . I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance (8:1-2, 9, 13-14).

### **Witnesses to the Centrality of Charity in the Early Centuries of the Christian Church**

One of the earliest descriptions of the Sunday worship of Christians comes from a document known as the First Apology of Justin Martyr (100-165). It was probably written only a hundred years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

After affirming that Christians believe that the Eucharist is “the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh,” Justin goes on to say that every Sunday Christians gather to listen to the writings of the apostles and to the instruction of the presider. Then they rise to pray, and after making their intercessions, bread and wine are brought to the presider, who offers prayers and thanksgivings. The food over which thanks have been offered is then distributed to those present and taken to those who are absent.

The celebration included a collection, which Justin describes as follows:

Those who are well to do, and willing, give what each thinks fit; and what is collected is deposited with the presider, who assists the orphans and widows and those who, through sickness or any other cause, are in want. He also assists prisoners and the foreigners living among us. In a word, he uses these offerings to take care of all who are in need.<sup>50</sup>

From the second century down to the present day the basic structure of the Roman Catholic Sunday Eucharistic celebration has remained virtually unchanged: readings from Scripture, preaching, intercessions, a collection,<sup>51</sup> a prayer of praise and thanksgiving over bread and wine, communion. Justin's detailed description of who contributed to the collection and who benefited from it indicates that it was regarded as an important, indeed an essential, element of Sunday worship. If Christian believers come forward to receive the sacrament of the body and blood of Jesus, the sign of his total giving of himself to them in love, how can they not respond generously and lovingly to those who are in need? If they are unwilling to participate in the sacrifice of Jesus by sharing their goods with those who are impoverished and suffering, then their reception of his body and blood in communion is little more than a perfunctory ritual, even a sacrilege.

Among the Church Fathers—influential Christian theologians and eminent teachers of the first seven centuries—the Cappadocian bishop, Saint John Chrysostom (347-407), can be singled out for his insistence on the necessity of charity in the life of the Christian believer. This eloquent preacher (“Chrysostom” means “golden-mouthed”) did not refrain from using crude sarcasm to berate wealthy Christians who were insensitive to

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<sup>50</sup> Chapter 67. The whole Apology is accessible on line, for instance at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>

<sup>51</sup> It should be noted, however, that today the collection taken up at the Sunday Mass is, in most cases, directed primarily to the needs of the parish community rather than to the poor. Contributions for the poor are sometimes received in a second collection or, more often, in specific fund raising campaigns.

the needs of the poor. For example, in his seventh homily on Colossians, he says

In truth, wealth makes people silly and mad. If they had such abundance, they would wish for the earth to be made of gold, and walls to be of gold, perhaps even heaven and earth to be of gold. What madness is this, what transgression of decency, what fever? Another person made in the image of God is dying of cold, while you're equipping yourselves with such things. What arrogance. What more would a mad person do? Do you so revere excrement that you would receive it in silver? I know that you're stunned as you listen to this, but it's the women who act like this who should be stunned and the husbands who pander to such illnesses ... What's the use of faith when one has to put up with people being pagans, or rather, not pagans but demons.<sup>52</sup>

### **Witnesses to the Centrality of Charity in the Modern Era**

One of the outstanding proponents of charity to the poor in the early modern period was the French priest, Vincent de Paul (1581-1660). Born in southwestern France (Gascony), he served as a parish priest in Paris and founded the Congregation of the Mission to supervise the formation of priests and to give support to the poor. Every year on his memorial day (September 27) the following excerpt from one of his letters is read in the Roman Catholic Church's "Office of Readings."<sup>53</sup> What is especially significant about this passage is that Monsieur Vincent, as he was called, describes charity to the poor as a spiritual practice of no less value than prayer:

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<sup>52</sup> In Pauline Allen and Wendy Meyer, *John Chrysostom* [The Early Church Fathers] (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 66.

<sup>53</sup> One of the "hours" of the Liturgy of the Hours, the liturgical (ritual) prayer marking the different hours of the day. The "Office of Readings" is also called "Vigils" or "Matins." When prayed in community, it is usually celebrated at night or in the early morning.



It is our duty to prefer the service of the poor to everything else and to offer such service as quickly as possible. If a needy person requires medicine or other help during prayer time, do whatever has to be done with peace of mind. Offer the deed to God as your prayer. Do not become upset or feel guilty because you interrupted your prayer to serve the poor. God is not neglected if you leave him for such service. One of God's works is merely interrupted so that another can be carried out. So when you leave prayer to serve some poor person, remember that this very service is performed for God. Charity is certainly greater than any rule. Moreover, all rules must lead to charity. Since she is a noble mistress, we must do whatever she commands. With renewed devotion, then, we must serve the poor, especially outcasts and beggars. They have been given to us as our masters and patrons.<sup>54</sup>

Among modern Christians whose faith and spirituality were vividly expressed by their charity, surely one of the most well-known is Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1910-1997), the recipient of the Nobel Peace prize in 1979.

Lest the impression be given that emphasis on the centrality of charity is something particularly Roman Catholic, we can point to the example of the great 18<sup>th</sup>-century English reformer, John Wesley (1703-1791), who, along with his brother Charles, is regarded as the founder of the Methodist movement within Protestantism. Even though this movement placed great emphasis on personal piety and religious experience, the example of one of its founders indicates that charity was regarded as an essential element of the spiritual life of Christians.

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<sup>54</sup> The citation given is Epist. 2546: Correspondence, entretiens, documents, Paris 1922-1925, 7.

Wesley records that the first year he taught at Oxford, his income was 30 pounds and his living expenses 28 pounds, leaving him two pounds to give as alms. The next year his income doubled, but he still managed to live on 28 pounds, so he had 32 pounds to give to the poor. In the third year, his income jumped to 90 pounds. Instead of letting his expenses rise with his income, he kept them to 28 pounds and gave away 62 pounds. In the fourth year, he received 120 pounds. But as before, his expenses were 28 pounds, so his giving rose to 92 pounds.

Wesley felt that the Christian should not merely tithe but give away all extra income once the family and creditors were taken care of. He believed that if one's income increased, what should rise is not the Christian's standard of living but the standard of giving.<sup>55</sup>

### The Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI

A recent papal teaching on charity is found in the first encyclical letter of Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* (God is love).<sup>56</sup> Prior to his election as pope, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had acquired a reputation for his strict interpretation of Church teaching, communicated in *monita* (warnings) from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which he headed. Sometimes these warnings were accompanied by prohibitions to teach or publish.

Many Catholics were therefore surprised to find that his first encyclical was not a denunciation of theological errors or moral failings, but a warm, almost poetic, reflection on the supremacy of love. What many found especially remarkable was his insistence that *agape* does not do away with *eros*, but rather elevates and ennobles it, and this teaching was

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<sup>55</sup> See Charles Edward Wright, "About Money – John Wesley" at:

<http://saintluther.blogspot.com/2007/05/about-money-john-wesley.html>

<sup>56</sup> Issued on December 25, 2005, the first year of his pontificate. This encyclical, along with all the writings of recent popes, is available, in various languages, on the Vatican website. The link for *Deus caritas est* is:

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html)

what was most commented on. The section of the encyclical that is most relevant to a consideration of the place of charity in Christian spirituality, however, is part two, which is specifically devoted to “*caritas*,” and which he calls “The Practice of Love by the Church as a ‘Community of Love.’”

In part two of his encyclical, Pope Benedict deals with an objection to the Church’s charitable activity that was raised in the nineteenth century and developed with particular insistence by Marxism:

The poor, it is claimed, do not need charity but justice. Works of charity—almsgiving—are in effect a way for the rich to shirk their obligation to work for justice and a means of soothing their consciences, while preserving their own status and robbing the poor of their rights. Instead of contributing through individual works of charity to maintaining the *status quo*, we need to build a just social order in which all receive their share of the world’s goods and no longer have to depend on charity (26).

Pope Benedict recognizes that there is some truth to this argument, but he argues that while it is the responsibility of civil government to establish a society in which each person has a just share of the community’s goods, love—*caritas*—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society for “there will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable.” He goes on to note that “love does not simply offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls, something which often is even more necessary than material support” (28b).<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Benedict XVI’s successor, Pope Francis, is especially sensitive to the need to show personal interest in and care for the recipients of material assistance. Archbishop Konrad Krajewski reported that when Pope Francis appointed him to the position of papal almoner, he told him, “You will not stay behind a desk signing parchments. I want you always among the people. In Buenos Aires, I

Pope Benedict insists that charity never be turned into an instrument of proselytism.

Those who practice charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak (31c).

When Pope Benedict refers to “the God . . . by whom we are driven to love,” he very likely has in mind the words of the Apostle Paul, “The love of Christ urges us on” (2 Corinthians 5:14), which, in its Latin translation is “*Caritas Christi urget nos.*” The love of God shown us in Christ, a love that is selfless and self-sacrificing, is what drives/urges the Christian to love others and to show that love in works of charity.

## Conclusion

In an interview Pope Francis granted the Italian journalist Eugenio Scalfari and that appeared in *La Repubblica* on October 1, 2013, Scalfari noted that “Jesus in his preaching said that agape, love for others, is the only way to love God. Correct me if I'm wrong.” Pope Francis replied,

You're not wrong. The Son of God became incarnate in the souls of men to instill the feeling of brotherhood. All are brothers and all children of God. Abba, as he called the Father. I will show you the way, he said. Follow me and you will find the Father and you will all be his children and he will take delight in you. Agape, the love of each one of us for the other, from the closest

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often went out in the evening to go find the poor. Now, I no longer can: It is difficult for me to leave the Vatican. You will do it for me.” EWTN News, October 17, 2013. On line at <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/pope-francis-tells-almoner-to-make-it-personal-in-charities-office-reform#ixzz2jATJ8NXb>

to the furthest, is in fact the only way that Jesus has given us to find the way of salvation and of the Beatitudes.<sup>58</sup>

In his insistence that love is the way—the only way—to love God and the only way that Jesus has given us to find the way of salvation, Pope Francis reiterates what Christians of all times and places have affirmed: *agape*, love for the other, from the closest to the farthest, love given concrete expression in the charitable almsgiving of both material and spiritual goods, is the very essence of Christian faith and spirituality.

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<sup>58</sup> English translation at

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/francesco/speeches/2013/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20131002\\_intervista-scalfari\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2013/october/documents/papa-francesco_20131002_intervista-scalfari_en.html)

