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A Commandment Ever New

Reflections on Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical, from Bishop Javier Echevarría, the Prelate of Opus Dei.

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“Deus caritas est.” These words, “God is love,” from the Letter of St. John have been taken by Pope Bededict XVI as the title for his first encyclical.

The word “love” has undergone a type of “inflation.” Perhaps we use it too often, at times to refer to passing

sentiments, or even, as the Pope points out, to manifestations of selfishness.

Nevertheless, the word “charity” has perhaps undergone the opposite process, one of semantic restriction. Possibly we use it too infrequently, to refer only to specific activities, carried out for certain persons, in specific cases.

But charity is not meant to be something exceptional; rather it should form part of one’s Christian identity: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another,” our Lord said. The pagans recognized Christians by this mark: “look how they love one another,” they exclaimed.

Expressing charity

Christian love is a moral disposition that is expressed in a great variety of actions. Charity means to serve, to

understand, to console, to listen, to smile, to accompany, to correct, to encourage, to ask for forgiveness and to forgive, to give and to receive.

Charity expands, as it were, in concentric circles: from one's personal relationships to the entire society.

At the origin of the family is the spouses' love for one another, which creates the environment where life is engendered, the home that welcomes lovingly the new being, that fosters one's maturing as a person.

The world of work is enriched by charity. Carrying out one's own profession in accord with the Gospel precept means carrying it out with love, with the desire to serve, putting one's heart into it, thinking about the others. Sanctifying one's work means converting it into an expression of love for God and for all men and

women, imbuing it with justice and charity.

The landscape of the Church is adorned by many light-filled sites where Christians are striving to work and serve silently out of love. One needs only to consider Africa, the continent most in need of everyone's assistance. There the Church makes manifest its love, also 'as an ecclesial act,' in the words of Benedict XVI--as an essential part of its mission. Charity spurs one to be magnanimous, to not remain indifferent when faced with the needs of others.

'Love is divine'

The Holy Father sums up the expansive process of charity: "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)” (no. 18). Here we can find the explanation for the perennial youthfulness of the Church.

Charity is also the key to the “new evangelization.” The mission of spreading the Gospel involves helping many people to experience Christian charity, opening their intellects to the light of faith through the language of love, the universal idiom that we all understand. For faith, as St. Paul writes, works through charity.

As St. Josemaria Escriva said so clearly: “the principle apostolate that we Christians need to carry out in the world, the best testimony of our faith, is helping to foster within the Church an atmosphere of authentic charity.”

Christ at the Last Supper called his precept of charity “new”: “A new commandment I give you, that you

love one another, even as I have loved you.” It was new then and it continues being so now, for everyone, two thousand years later. If we read and meditate on the new encyclical with the healthy curiosity of one who knows he is going to discover something new, with our intellect and heart wide open, we will discover the permanent newness of this marvelous revelation: God is love, which He longs to give to all men and women.

Thus Benedict XVI’s desire will be fulfilled: that this encyclical “may illumine and assist our Christian life.”

Bishop Javier Echevarría // Our Sunday Visitor

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