Introduction

1. “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). These words express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny.

We have come to believe in God’s love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. To be Christian is to encounter a person who gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Jesus united into a single precept the commandment to love God and the commandment to love one’s neighbor. Since God has first loved us, love is now no longer a mere “command”; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.

Because this message is both timely and significant, I wish in my first Encyclical to speak of the love which God lavishes upon us and which we in turn must share with others. The first part is speculative, since I want to clarify some essential facts concerning the love God mysteriously and freely offers to man, together with the intrinsic link between that Love and the reality of human love. The second part is practical, since it treats the ecclesial exercise of the command to love one’s neighbor. I wish to call forth in the world renewed energy and commitment in the human response to God’s love.

Part I

Eros and Agape

THE UNITY OF LOVE
IN CREATION
AND IN SALVATION HISTORY

A problem of language

2. God’s love for us raises important questions about who God is and who we are. Today, the term “love” has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words. Let us call to mind the vast semantic range of the word: love of country, love of one’s profession, love between friends, love of work, love between parents and children, love among family members, love of neighbor, love of God. But love between man and woman stands out as the very epitome of love: when body and soul are joined, the partners seem to glimpse an irresistible promise of happiness. So we need to ask: are all forms of love basically one? Is love, in its many manifestations, ultimately a single reality? Or do we use the same word to designate different realities?

“Eros” and “Agape” – difference and unity

3. The ancient Greeks called love between man and woman eros. The
Greek translation of the Old Testament, however, uses *eros* only twice, and it never appears in the New Testament. Of three Greek words for love—*eros* (passionate), *philía* (friendly), *agápē* (selfless), the New Testament writers prefer the last, which occurs infrequently in Greek literature. John's Gospel uses *philía* to express the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. Avoidance of *eros* and preference for *agápē* is distinctive of the Christian understanding of love. As the Enlightenment critique of Christianity grew progressively more radical, this new understanding took on a negative connotation. Nietzsche, for example, charged Christianity with poisoning *eros*, thus contributing to its degeneration into vice.

4. But did Christianity really destroy *eros*? Like other pre-Christian cultures, the Greeks considered *eros* to be a kind of intoxication, the overpowering of reason by a “divine madness” that tears man away from his finite existence and enables him to experience supreme happiness. In ancient religions, this attitude found expression in fertility cults, part of which was the “sacred” prostitution that flourished in many temples. *Eros* was thus celebrated as a divine power.

The Old Testament firmly opposed this form of religion as a perversion. Without rejecting *eros* as such, Old Testament writers held that this counterfeit divinization actually strips it of its dignity and dehumanizes it. An intoxicating and undisciplined *eros* is not an ascent towards the Divine, but a degradation of man. Evidently, *eros* needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a foretaste of the beatitude for which our whole being yearns.

5. Two things clearly emerge from this rapid overview of the meaning of *eros*. First, there is a certain relationship between love and divinity: love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence. Attaining this goal requires purification and growth in maturity, not submission to instinct. Far from rejecting or “poisoning” *eros*, renunciation heals it and restore its true grandeur.

Since human nature is a composite of body and soul, a man is truly himself when body and soul are intimately united; the challenge of *eros* is met when this unification is achieved. Should a man aspire to be pure spirit and reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, both spirit and body would lose their dignity. Likewise, to deny the spirit and regard the body as the complete reality would have the same result. It is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are united is love—*eros*—able to mature and attain its authentic greatness.

Christianity has been criticized for opposing the body. But what is to be thought of its contemporary exaltation? If *eros* is reduced to “sex” it becomes a commodity to be bought and sold; this is surely not man's great “yes” to the body. On the contrary, it reduces the body and sexuality to the material part of man, to be used and exploited at will. Instead of being an exercise of freedom, sexual activity becomes a mere object to be made enjoyable and yet harmless. But this is
a reduction of the body to its biological functions: deprived of freedom it cannot be an expression of our whole being. Apparent exaltation of the body can even lead to hating it. Christianity treats man as a unity in duality where spirit and matter come together and attain their true nobility.

6. What does this path of ascent and purification entail if love is to fully realize its human and divine promise? The Song of Songs in the Old Testament, originally love poems, can give us an important indication. Two Hebrew words are used to express “love.” The first, *dodim,* suggests a love that is insecure and searching. This is replaced by *ahabâ,* which the Old Testament translates as *agape.* The search is completed by discovery of the other. Love passes from self-seeking to care for the beloved, ready for renunciation and sacrifice.

Love moves to a higher level of purification in a twofold sense: It becomes exclusive (this particular person) and endless (forever). It comes to embrace the whole of existence. Love is indeed “ecstasy,” not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather of a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the inward-looking self to its liberation in self-giving, and eventually the discovery of God: “Whoever seeks his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it,” as Jesus says throughout the Gospels, portraying his own path through the Cross to the Resurrection. Passing from the depths of his own sacrifice to its fulfillment, He reveals the essence of love and indeed of human life itself.

7. These initial, philosophical reflections on the essence of love have brought us to the threshold of biblical faith. In philosophical and theological debate, the distinct forms of love have often been radicalized to the point of establishing an antithesis between a typically Christian (descending, oblativ-e) love—*agape*—and a typically non-Christian (ascending, possessive) love—*eros.* Carried to extremes, this antithesis would detach the essence of Christianity from the vital relations fundamental to human existence. But *eros* and *agape* can never be separated. The more they find a proper unity, the more the true nature of love is realized. Even if *eros* is mainly covetous at first, it increasingly seeks the happiness of the beloved, bestows itself and wants to “be there” for the other. Without this element of *agape,* *eros* is impoverished and loses its nature. On the other hand, man cannot live by oblativ-e love alone: He cannot always give; he must also receive.

In the account of Jacob’s ladder, the Fathers of the Church saw the inseparable connection between ascending and descending love, between seeking God (*eros*) and passing on the gift (*agape*). Saint Gregory the Great speaks in this context of Saint Paul, who was borne aloft to the most exalted mysteries of God, and having descended once more, was able to become all things to all men.

8. Earlier, we saw that love is a single reality with different dimensions, with one or other emerging more clearly at different times. Now we have seen that biblical faith is not opposed to the primordial human phenomenon of love, but purifies it and reveals new dimensions of it: the image of God and the image of man.
The newness of biblical faith

9. First, the Bible presents us with a new image of God. In the surrounding cultures, images of God and the gods were unclear and contradictory. In biblical faith, however, there is only one God, the Creator of the universe; all other gods are not God. The notion of creation is found elsewhere, but only here is it clear that the one true God is the source of all that exists. Moreover, He loves man. The divine power that Aristotle sought is for every being an object of love. But this divinity itself does not love. The God of Israel, on the other hand, loves with a personal and elective love: He chooses Israel from among all the nations and loves her precisely with a view to healing the whole human race. His love is eros and also totally agape.

10. Therefore, God’s passionate love for man is simultaneously a forgiving love. So great is it that by becoming man he follows him even to death, and so reconciles justice and love.

The philosophical dimension of this biblical vision is important in the history of religions: As the absolute and ultimate source of all being—the Logos, primordial reason—God is at the same time a passionate Lover. It is the essence of biblical faith that man can enter into union with God—his primordial aspiration. In this unity, God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one.

11. From the biblical image of God we pass now to its image of man. The account of creation speaks of the solitude of Adam and God’s decision to give him a helper. Of all the creatures, not one is capable of being the helper man needs. So God forms woman from the rib of man. Here one might detect hints of the myth mentioned by Plato, according to which man was originally spherical, because he was complete in himself and self-sufficient. But as a punishment for pride, Zeus split him in two; now he longs for his other half, striving with all his being to possess it and thus regain his integrity. The biblical narrative does not speak of punishment, but the idea is certainly present that man is somehow incomplete, driven by nature to seek the part that can make him whole.

This has two important aspects: First, eros is rooted in man’s very nature. Second, eros directs man towards the marriage bond; only thus does it fulfill its deepest purpose. Monogamous marriage corresponds to a monotheistic God; based on exclusive and definitive love, marriage becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people. His way of loving becomes the measure of human love. The Bible’s close connection between eros and marriage has practically no equivalent in extra-biblical literature.

Jesus Christ – incarnate love of God

12. In the Old Testament, the novelty of the Bible did not consist in abstract notions but in God’s unpredictable and unprecedented activity. In the New Testament, this divine activity takes on dramatic form: in Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of a suffering and lost humanity. The parables that speak of a shepherd going after a lost sheep, a woman looking for a lost coin, a father going to meet and embrace his prodigal son, explain God’s very being and activity. Its culmination in his death on the Cross is
love in its most radical form. It is there that our definition of love must begin.

13. Jesus gave this act of oblation an enduring presence by instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper. The ancient world dimly perceived that man’s real food is the Logos, eternal wisdom: this Logos now truly becomes food for us—as love. The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-giving. The imagery of a marriage between God and Israel is now realized in a way previously inconceivable: from standing in God’s presence it becomes union with God through sharing the body and blood of Jesus. The sacramental “mysticism” lifts us far higher than anything human mystical elevation could ever accomplish.

14. This sacramental “mysticism” is social in character, for in communion all become one with the Lord: Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become or will become his own. Christians are “one body,” joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbor are united. The Eucharist was called Agape because God’s agape comes to us there to continue his work in and through us. This Christological and sacramental basis enables us to understand the Christian teaching on love. The transition from the Law and the Prophets to the commandment to love one’s neighbor is not a mere matter of morality; faith, worship and morality are interwoven as a single reality that takes shape in our encounter with God’s agape. Eucharistic communion that did not lead to the concrete practice of love would be intrinsically frag-

15. This principle is the starting-point for understanding the great parables of Jesus: In the rich man and Lazarus, the good Samaritan, and the Last Judgment, love is the criterion for the definitive decision about the worth of human life. Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the captive. Love of God and love of neighbor have become one.

Love of God and love of neighbor

16. We are left with two questions concerning our own attitude: Can we love God without seeing him? Can love be commanded? These questions raise a double objection: No one has ever seen God, so how could we love him? Since love is either there or isn’t, how can it be commanded? The Scriptures answer these objections by emphasizing the unbreakable bond between love of God and love of neighbor. It is a lie to say that we love God if we are closed to our neighbor. Put positively, love of neighbor leads to the encounter with God; closing our eyes to others also blinds us to God.

17. True, no one has ever seen God as he is. And yet God is not totally invisible or inaccessible. He loved us first, and this love of God has appeared in our midst. He has made himself visible in Jesus. Indeed, God is visible in a number of ways. He comes towards us and seeks to win our hearts all the way to the piercing of his Heart on the Cross, to his appearances after the Resurrection, and to the great deeds by which he guided the nascent Church. Ever since, He
has encountered us in the men and women who reflect his presence, in his word, in the sacraments, and especially in the Eucharist. We experience God's love in the Liturgy, in prayer, and in the living community of believers where we learn to love him as he has loved us.

In the gradual unfolding of this encounter, it becomes clear that love is more than a sentiment that comes and goes. Mature love engages the whole man. The joyful experience of being loved comes to engage the will and the intellect. The “yes” of our will to the Will of the living God unites intellect, will, and sentiments in a single but incomplete act of love that changes and matures throughout life as one becomes similar to the other in a community of will and thought. Our will and God's will increasingly coincide. Rather than an imposed command, God's Will becomes my own will. As self-abandonment increases, God becomes our joy.

18. In God and with God, I love even persons I do not know or like. I learn to see others not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend. Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern. But if I had no contact with God in my life, I would be incapable of seeing in them the image of God. The saints constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbor through their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its real-ism and depth in their service to others. Love grows through love until in the end God is “all in all.”

Part II

Caritas

THE PRACTICE OF LOVE
BY THE CHURCH
AS A “COMMUNITY OF LOVE”

The Church’s charitable activity as a manifestation of Trinitarian love

19. “If you see charity, you see the Trinity”, wrote Saint Augustine. In the foregoing reflections, we have focused on the Father’s plan, moved by love, to send his only-begotten Son into the world to redeem man. When Jesus “gave up his Spirit” on the Cross He anticipated the gift of the Holy Spirit He would make after his Resurrection, thus fulfilling the promise of “rivers of living water” that would flow out of the hearts of believers. The Spirit harmonizes their hearts with Christ's Heart and moves them to love their brethren as Christ loved them, above all when He gave his life for us.

The Spirit also transforms the heart of the ecclesial community so that it becomes a witness before the world to the love of the Father, who wishes to make humanity a single family in his Son. The entire activity of the Church expresses a love that seeks the integral good of man through Word and Sacrament, often heroically. Love is therefore the service the Church carries out by attending to man's sufferings and material needs. I want to focus in the second part of the Encyclical on this service of charity.
Charity, a responsibility of the Church

20. Love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost the responsibility of each member of the faithful. But it is also a responsibility of the entire ecclesial community—local communities, particular Churches, and the Church universal. The Church is obliged to practice love. In order to be an ordered service, love needs to be organized. This awareness has been present in the Church since the beginning: “All who believed...had all things in common; they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need” (Acts 2:44-5). This passage defines the Church, whose elements include fidelity to the “teaching of the Apostles,” “communion” (koinonia), “the breaking of the bread,” and “prayer” (Acts 2:42). “Communion” implies that there is no longer a distinction between rich and poor; as the Church grew, such a radical material communion could not be preserved, but it continues to exclude from the community of believers a poverty that would deny to anyone what is needed for a dignified life.

21. A decisive step in the difficult search for ways to put this fundamental ecclesial principle into practice was the office of deacon (Acts 6:5-6). A disparity had arisen between Jewish and Greek members of the early Church with regard to the daily distribution to the needy. The Apostles reserved to themselves their principal duty (the Eucharistic liturgy and “ministry of the word”) and left “serving tables” to seven persons selected for that service, also necessary in the Church. It was not simply a mechanical work of distribution: they were to be men “full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:1-6). Social service was at the same time a spiritual service; it was to be a well-ordered love of neighbor. This “diaconia”—ministry of charity exercised in a communitarian, orderly way—became part of the fundamental structure of the Church.

22. As the Church spread, the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities. Early Christian writers (St. Justin, Tertulian, and Ignatius of Antioch) provide documentary testimony: The Sunday celebration linked charitable activity with the Eucharist by means of a collection to support orphans, widows, the sick and those who for other reasons were in need—to such an extent that the pagans were struck by this agape of the Christians.

23. The earliest legal structures associated with the service of charity included the “diaconia”, an institution responsible for relief work within some monasteries. Eventually it evolved into a corporation with juridical standing to which the civil authorities entrusted part of the grain for public distribution. Many dioceses, East and West, had a diaconia. Charitable activity on behalf of the poor and suffering was an essential part of the Church at Rome from the very beginning—an application of the principles of Christian life given in the Acts of the Apostles. A vivid instance is the case of the deacon Lawrence († 258). After the capture of the Pope and his fellow deacons, St. Lawrence collected the treasures of the Church to hand over to the civil authorities. After distributing whatever was available to the poor, he presented them to the authorities as the Church’s real treasure.
24. When the Emperor Julian the Apostate set out to restore the ancient Roman religion in the fourth century, he showed how essential the organized practice of charity was in the early Church by attempting to imitate and outdo it. His intention was to make the Church’s charitable activity the central feature of a strong new version of paganism capable to driving the empire.

25. Thus far, two essential facts have emerged from these reflections:

a) For the Church, charity is not a mere welfare activity that could be just as well left to others, but an indispensable expression of her very being. Diakonia (the ministry of charity) is integrated into her responsibilities to proclaim the Word of God (kerygma-martyria) and to celebrate the sacraments (leitourgia). These inseparable duties presuppose each other.

b) The Church is God’s family in the world. But while she has a special responsibility to the household of the faith, caritas-agape extends to everyone: The parable of the Good Samaritan imposes universal love towards the needy, whoever they may be.

Justice and Charity

26. Since the nineteenth century, an objection (made with special insistence by Marxism) has been raised to the Church’s charitable activity: the poor need justice, not charity. According to these objectors, the rich often deprive the poor of their rights and soothe their consciences by giving alms instead of working for justice. Charitable contributions only maintain an unacceptable status quo, the objection continues; a new social order must be built so that all may receive their just share of the world’s resources. It is true that the pursuit of justice must be a priority in every State. The Church’s social doctrine has long emphasized the right of every person to a just share of the community’s goods, according to the principle of subsidiarity. The historical background of this issue is the rise of industrial organization and the consequent changes in the fabric of society. As a class of salaried workers grew numerous, a new relationship between capital and labor emerged. As capital and the means of production were concentrated in a few sources of power, the working classes suffered deprivation of rights and had no recourse but to rebel.

27. It took a while for the Church’s pastors to realize that the question of a just social structure had to be approached in a new way. The pioneering work of Bishop Ketteler of Mainz gave rise to leagues and federations founded to combat poverty, disease, and ignorance, some of them promoted by new religious orders. The papal magisterium (Leo XIII, Pius XI, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul II) produced a century of great social encyclicals (1891-1991) insistently addressing the problem, which became especially acute in Latin America. The new Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church gives a comprehensive presentation of that development. The earlier Marxist illusion that only a violent world revolution could cure social ills has vanished. With the rise of a global economy, the Church’s social doctrine provides valid guidelines beyond the confines of the Church in the current complex situation.
28. In order to define the relationship between the necessary commitment to justice and the ministry of charity, two fundamental matters need to be clarified:

a) Vatican II called the Gospel’s distinction between Church and State (what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God, Mt 22:21) ‘the autonomy of the temporal sphere.’ While not imposing religion, the State must guarantee religious freedom and harmony among the followers of different religions. As the social expression of the Christian faith, the Church has a proper independence that must be recognized by the State. The two spheres are distinct, yet always interrelated. The just ordering of society is a central responsibility of politics and also a concern of religion.

Justice, the origin and end of politics, by its very nature has to do with ethics. The question the State addresses (how justice is to be brought about here and now) presupposes a more basic question: what is justice? That question is resolved by practical reason, which requires constant purification if it is to free itself from the danger of ethical blindness that power and special interests can cause.

This is where politics and faith meet. As an encounter with the living God, faith extends beyond reason and as a purifying force helps reason to see its proper object more clearly. This is how Catholic social doctrine contributes to the attainment of justice here and now; it has no intention to exercise power over the State or to impose beliefs on those of other faiths.

Proceeding on the basis of reason and the law of human nature common to every human being, the Church’s social teaching helps to form consciences and stimulates greater insight into the requirements of justice, especially when they conflict with personal interests. As each generation takes up anew the task of building a more just social order, the Church is duty-bound to make her own specific contribution.

The Church cannot take upon herself the political battles that belong to statecraft, but neither can she remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. Without the sacrifices for which the Church provides the spiritual energy, justice cannot prosper. Bringing about an openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is of deep concern to the Church.

b) Love—caritas—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. No ordering of the State is so just that it eliminates the need for a service of love. To eliminate love is to eliminate man, for there will always be suffering, loneliness, and needs that cry out for consolation and help. A State that tried to provide everything would be incapable of what every person needs most—loving personal concern. Instead of trying to regulate and control all human services, States need to recognize and support private initiatives in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. As one of those initiatives, the Church is alive with the love that refreshes and cares for souls—often more necessary than material support. The claim that just social structures would make those works of charity superfluous masks a materialist conception of man, who
“cannot live by bread alone.” Such a conviction demeans man and ultimately disregards all that is specifically human.

29. Now we can determine more precisely the relationship between the just ordering of society and organized charitable activity.

The duty to work for a just ordering of society is proper to the lay faithful. As citizens, they are called to take part in public life. They cannot relinquish this responsibility to promote the common good in cooperation with others, each according to his competence. Since charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful, their political activity becomes “social charity.”

The Church’s charitable organizations, for their part, constitute an opus proprium, a task that corresponds to her nature. The Church can never be exempted from practicing charity as the organized activity of believers. But in addition to justice, persons also need love; and this is where the charity of individual Christians comes in.

The multiple structures of charitable service in the social context of the present day

30. Before detailing the Church’s activities in providing human services, I wish to consider the overall situation of the struggle for justice and love in the world today:

a) The means of mass communication are rapidly narrowing the distances between peoples and cultures. Our ability to know almost instantly about the needs of others challenges us to rise above misunderstandings and tensions and come to their aid. Despite great advances in science and technology, each day we see how much suffering there is on account of material and spiritual poverty.

But on the positive side, we also have available more effective means for offering humanitarian assistance in distributing food and clothing, providing housing and health care. As concern for the needy moves beyond national communities to the whole world a greater sense of solidarity is evident among peoples: governments and humanitarian associations are working together to provide the forms of assistance available to them.

b) This has led to many new modes of fruitful cooperation between political and ecclesial agencies. The Church’s witness to love enables her agencies to add a Christian quality to the work of civil agencies. Numerous private organizations and various kinds of volunteer work are also helping to find humanitarian solutions to the social and political problems of the day. I wish to offer my special gratitude to all those who take provide these services. Younger volunteers are receiving formation in solidarity as they offer to others not simply material aid but their very selves. Their unselfish love is an expression of a culture of life that opposes the anti-culture of death.

The Catholic Church is collaborating with other churches and ecclesial communities in establishing a fruitful link between works of charity and evangelization, as foreseen by John Paul II in his social encyclicals. We all have the same fundamental motivation and look towards the same goal: a true humanism that recognizes man
as the image of God and seeks to help him live in accord with that dignity. The same Pope also emphasized that the building of a better world requires Christians to speak with a united voice.

*The distinctiveness of the Church's charitable activity*

31. Increasing charitable activity is ultimately due to the command of love the Creator inscribed in human nature. The presence of Christianity in the world constantly revives and activates this imperative. It is very important for the Church's charitable activity to maintain its integrity without becoming just another form of social assistance. What, then, are the essential elements of Christian charity?

a) First of all, it is the simple response to immediate needs and specific situations: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for and healing the sick, visiting those in prison, etc. Charitable organizations at diocesan, national, and international levels ought to do everything in their power to provide the necessary resources and properly trained, committed personnel. But as human beings need heartfelt concern more than anything, care givers need a “formation of the heart” that awakens their love and opens their spirits to others.

b) Second, the Church’s charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies. Its only aim is to make the world better is to do good to those in need whenever and wherever the opportunity arises. The only program Christians need is the “program” of the Good Samaritan—“a heart that sees” where love is needed and acts accordingly. Obviously when charitable activity is carried out as a communitarian initiative, the spontaneity of individuals must be combined with planning, foresight and cooperation with other institutions.

c) In the third place, charity is an inappropriate setting for what nowadays is called “proselytism.” But this does not require charitable activity to leave out God; indeed, the deepest cause of suffering is often his very absence. Those who practice charity in the Church’s name never impose the faith upon others; pure and generous love is the best witness to God. His presence is felt at the moment when the only thing we do is love. The Church’s charitable organizations try to instill this awareness in their members, whose deeds, words, and silent example are Christ’s best witnesses.

*Those responsible for the Church's charitable activity*

32. The Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* has primary responsibility for orienting and coordinating charitable organizations and activities promoted by the Catholic Church. Diocesan bishops have primary responsibility for carrying out those activities in their particular Churches. In the rite of episcopal ordination, every bishop promises to show mercy, in the Lord’s name, to the poor and to all those in need of consolation and assistance. The recent *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops* spells out this duty, em-
phasizing that it is an essential part of the Church’s mission, just like the ministry of Word and Sacrament.

33. Those who carry out the Church’s charitable activity on the practical level must be moved by Christ’s love, not by ideologists seeking to improve the world. Consciousness that God has given himself for us, even unto death, must inspire us to live no longer for ourselves but for him, and, with him, for others. The personnel of every Catholic charitable organization work with their bishops in spreading God’s love in the world.

34. Catholic caregivers also work in harmony with other organizations in a way that respects what is distinctive about the service Christ requested of his disciples. Chapter 5 of St. Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians, the Magna Carta of all ecclesial service, well summarizes this Encyclical: Practical activity is insufficient unless it expresses love, a deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others. One who gives to others must be personally present in the gift.

35. This way of serving others leads to humility. Imitating the radical humility of Christ, caregivers take the lowest place—the Cross—to co-redeem with Him. Helping others they receive help in turn. This duty is a grace; the ability to carry it out comes from the Lord. In helping others we are only serving as his instruments. It is good to remember this in times of discouragement or when we are tempted to imagine that we alone are responsible for building a better world. In humility we do what we can, and in humility we entrust the rest to the Lord. To do all we can with the strength we have is what keeps the good servant of Jesus Christ always at work: “The love of Christ impels us” (2 Cor 5:14).

36. Two temptations can assail us when we consider the immensity of others’ needs: arrogance (thinking that we can solve every problem) or resignation (thinking that nothing can be accomplished). A living relationship with Christ will enable us to follow the right path, guided by love in the service of others. Prayer is the decisive way to draw ever new strength from Christ. The life of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta shows that devoting time to God in prayer is the inexhaustible source of effective service of the poor.

37. The secularistic activism of many Christians engaged in charitable work makes it timely to reaffirm the importance of prayer, of a personal relationship with God and abandonment to his will. Prayer to the Father of Jesus Christ for the consolation of the Holy Spirit can also save those who are in danger of falling prey to fanaticism and terrorism. An authentic religious attitude prevents man from presuming to judge God. When people claim to build a case against God in defense of man, on whom can they depend when human activity proves powerless?

38. Like Job, we may find it impossible to understand apparently unjustified suffering and why God fails to intervene. We may even cry out with Jesus on the Cross: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mt 27:46). It is good that we continue asking this question in prayerful dialogue: “Lord, holy and true, how long will it be?” (Rev 6:10). Saint Augustine gives us the response of faith: “If you understand him, he is not God.” Our protest
is not meant to challenge God, or to suggest that error, weakness or indifference can be found in Him. Rather, it is for us, as it was for Jesus, the deepest and most radical way to affirm our faith in his sovereign power. Even in their bewilderment, Christians continue to believe in the “goodness and loving kindness of God” (Tit 3:4). Immersed along with everyone else in the complex drama of history, they remain unshakably certain that God is our Father who loves us even when his silence is incomprehensible.

39. Faith, hope and charity reinforce each other: Hope, practiced in patience and humility, continues to serve even in the face of apparent failure, accepting God’s mystery and trusting Him even in times of darkness. Faith that God has given us his Son and the victorious certainty that He is love transforms impatience and doubt into the sure hope that God holds the world in his hands; in spite of the darkness, He will ultimately triumph in glory. When it sees the love of God revealed in the pierced heart of Jesus on the Cross, faith gives rise to love. Love is the only light that can illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage to keep living and working. To experience love and cause the light of God to enter the world is the invitation I extend in this Encyclical.

CONCLUSION

40. We conclude with the example of saints who displayed immense service of charity toward those in need: Martin of Tours († 397), the soldier who shared his cloak with a beggar; Anthony the Abbot († 356), who helped initiate the monastic movement with its great tradition of hospitality, refuge, and care of the infirm; Francis of Assisi, Ignatius of Loyola, John of God, Camillus de Lellis, Vincent de Paul, Louise de Marillac, Giuseppe Cottolengo, John Bosco, Luigi Orione, and Teresa of Calcutta to name but a few representatives of the mendicant orders and later religious institutes who initiated exemplary services of human welfare and Christian formation. The figures of saints such as these stand out as models of charity for all people of good will. They are the true bearers of light within history, for they are men and women of faith, hope and love.

41. Mary, Mother of the Lord, is the mirror of all holiness. Luke records how she served her cousin Elizabeth in the final phase of pregnancy. The words of Mary on that occasion—“My soul magnifies the Lord” (Lk 1:46)—express her entire life program: to meet God in prayer and in the service of neighbor. Mary’s only desire is to be the handmaid of the Lord (cf. Lk 1:38, 48); she contributes to the salvation of the world by placing herself completely at his disposition. Mary is a woman of hope: The angel can call her to serve God’s promises because she is awaiting the salvation of Israel. Mary is a woman of faith: Elizabeth can say “Blessed are you who believed” (Lk 1:45) because her soul is entirely woven of threads from the Word of God. Her thoughts are attuned to God’s thoughts; her will is one with God’s will. Mary can become the Mother of the Word Incarnate because she is completely imbued with the Word of God. Finally, Mary is a woman who loves. We sense this in her quiet gestures in the stable of Bethlehem, in her delicacy with the spouses and her Son at Cana, in her
humility as she recedes into the background during his public life, allowing Him to establish a new family and even a new spiritual “maternity,” in the loyalty of her Mother’s hour on Calvary and in the Upper Room waiting for the Holy Spirit.

42. The lives of the saints are not limited to this world; they continue to live and work in God after death: Those who are closest to God become truly close to men. In no one do we see this more clearly than in Mary. The words of the crucified Lord to his disciple—to John and through him to all disciples of Jesus: “Behold, your mother!” (Jn 19:27)—are fulfilled anew in every generation. Mary has truly become the Mother of all believers: Men and women of every culture have recourse to her motherly kindness and virginal purity in all their needs, joys, and sorrows. Their gratitude for her benevolence expresses an intuition that her love results from the most intimate union with God. Mary, Virgin and Mother, shows us what love is and whence it draws its origin and efficacy. To her we entrust the Church and her mission in the service of love:

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
you have given the world its true light,
Jesus, your Son – the Son of God.
You abandoned yourself completely to God’s call
and thus became a wellspring of the goodness that flows forth from him.
Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.
Teach us to know and love him,
so that we too can become capable of true love
and be fountains of living water in the midst of a thirsting world.

Given in Rome at Saint Peter’s, December 25, Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, 2005, the first of my Pontificate.

BENEDICTUS PP. XVI

(abridgement by John Gueguen, March 2006)
SACAMENTUM CARITATIS
Apostolic Exhortation on “The Sacrament of Love” by Pope Benedict XVI

Selected Passages for Meditation on Holy Thursday, 2007

Introduction

3) The [liturgical] changes the [second Vatican] council called for need to be understood within the overall unity of the historical development of the rite itself, without the introduction of artificial discontinuities. (I am referring here to the need for ... continuity with regard to the correct interpretation of the liturgical development that followed that council.)

5) This [exhortation] seeks to ... offer some basic directions aimed at a renewed commitment to Eucharistic enthusiasm and fervor in the Church.

Part One: The Eucharist, a Mystery to Be Believed

6) The Church’s very history bears witness to this [mystery of faith]. Every great reform has in some way been linked to the rediscovery of belief in the Lord’s Eucharistic Presence among His people.

7) In the Eucharist Jesus does not give us a “thing,” but Himself; He offers His own Body and pours out His own Blood. He thus gives us the totality of His life and reveals the ultimate origin of this love.

8) The Church receives, celebrates and adores this gift in faithful obedience. The “mystery of faith” is thus a mystery of Trinitarian love, a mystery in which we are called by grace to participate.

10) The remembrance of the ancient liberation [of the Chosen People] thus expanded to the invocation and expectation of a yet more profound, radical, universal, and definitive salvation [of all mankind].

25) Families should generously embrace the gift of life and bring up their children to be open to doing God’s will. In a word, they must have the courage to set before young people the radical decision to follow Christ, showing them how deeply rewarding it is.

Part Two: The Eucharist, a Mystery to Be Celebrated

38) The art of proper celebration is the fruit of faithful adherence to the liturgical norms in all their richness; indeed, for two thousand years this way of cele-
brating has sustained the faith life of all believers, called to take part in the celebration as the People of God, a royal priesthood, a holy nation.

53) It is helpful to recall that active participation is not per se equivalent to the exercise of a specific ministry. The active participation of the laity does not benefit from the confusion arising from an inability to distinguish, within the Church’s communion, the different functions proper to each one. There is a particular need for clarity with regard to the specific functions of the priest.

Part Three: The Eucharist, a Mystery to Be Lived

70) The Eucharist makes our whole life a spiritual worship pleasing to God. ... Catholic doctrine affirms that the Eucharist, as the sacrifice of Christ, is also the sacrifice of the Church, and thus of all the faithful. This insistence on sacrifice—a “making sacred”—expresses all the existential depth implied in the transformation of our human reality as taken up by Christ.

71) Christianity’s new worship includes and transfigures every aspect of life. ... In all their actions, Christians are called to offer true worship to God. ... There is nothing authentically human—our thoughts and affections, our words and deeds—that does not find in the sacrament of the Eucharist the form it needs to be lived to the full.

72) Sunday is the day when Christians rediscover the Eucharistic form their lives are meant to have.

79) The Church’s pastors should unfailingly support, guide, and encourage the lay faithful to live fully their vocation to holiness within this world which God so loved that He gave His Son to become its salvation.

86) The more ardent the love for the Eucharist in the hearts of the Christian people, the more clearly will they recognize the apostolic goal: to bring Christ to others. Not just a theory or a way of life inspired by Christ, but the gift of his very person. Anyone who has not shared the truth of love with his brothers and sisters has not yet given enough.

92) The Eucharist itself powerfully illuminates human history and the whole cosmos. In this sacramental perspective we learn, day-by-day, that every ecclesial event is a kind of sign by which God makes himself known and challenges us. The Eucharistic form of life can thus help foster a real change in the way we approach history and the world. ... The world is not something indifferent, raw material to be utilized simply as we see fit. Rather, it is part of God’s good plan, in which all of us are called to be sons and daughters in the one Son of God, Jesus Christ.

The text of the full document is at www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=104416
An Outline of the Problem: The crisis of faith that is increasingly making itself felt by Christian people is revealing itself with increasing clarity as a crisis regarding awareness of fundamental values of human life.... Where “orthopraxy” [right acting] is lacking, “orthodoxy” [right thinking] becomes questionable.... The basic issue is the question of truth, of what is reality.

Christianity is a conspiracy to promote the good; the theological and moral aspects are fused inseparably in the word itself and in the basic concept of what Christian reality is.... [At stake is] how [human beings] ought to live.... The question of what this goodness involves is to be decided by reason [in light of faith:]... “Have this mind in you, which was in Christ Jesus” [1 Thes. 2:5].... [In the early Church] the “mind of Christ” was condemned as “conspiracy” [by pagan intellectuals, but the Christians] proclaimed it all the more insistently as the genuine “good.”... For Paul, conscience and reason are not variables, one thing today and something else tomorrow. Conscience is what it is because it...uncovers what is constant and thus necessarily leads to the “mind of Christ.”... Following the pattern of Christ, the Apostle linked admission to the Kingdom and exclusion from it with fundamental moral decisions, which are consequences intimately related to the way God is conceived.

The praxis [act] of faith depends on the truth of faith, in which the truth about man is made visible and lifted to a new level by the truth about God. Hence, the praxis of faith is fundamentally opposed to a praxis that first wants to produce facts that establish truth. By holding on to the Creator, the praxis of faith protects the creation against such a total manipulation of reality. By looking to [the “mind of Christ”] faith recognizes fundamental human values and rescues them from all manipulation.

Every age sees reason differently, which ultimately leads to opting for the absolute dominance of practical reason. [Christian] faith thinks more highly of reason. This faith is convinced that reason is capable of embracing truth; therefore, faith does not have to erect its edifice apart from the tradition of reason, but finds its language in communication with the reason of all nations.... Reason’s ability to embrace truth also implies that the content of truth is constant and coincident with the constancy of faith.

As we have seen, faith involves fundamental decisions in moral matters. The first obligation of the teaching office is to protect these fundamental decisions against reason’s capitulation to a given age...in the face of almighty praxis. There must be a correspondence with basic insights of human reason.
[as] purified, deepened and broadened through contact with the faith. This positive, critical dialogue with reason must go on for all time. *

* Compare what St. Augustine says in The Confessions: “...then You took man’s mind, which is subject to none but You and needs to imitate no human authority, and renewed it in Your own Image and Likeness. You made rational action subject to the rule of the intellect...”.

*Values in a Time of Upheaval* (Ignatius, 2005)  
pp. 48-52

... After the collapse of utopia, a banal nihilism is beginning to spread; its results may be no less insidious. The new utopia of banality has for its ideal a liberal society in which absolute values and criteria will no longer exist; a sense of well-being will be the only goal worth striving for. How can [such a society] do justice to its moral responsibility?

Freedom preserves its dignity only as long as it retains a relationship to its ethical foundations and to its ethical task.... The very essence of the concept of freedom demands that it be complemented by two other concepts, law and the good. We might say that freedom entails the ability of conscience to perceive the fundamental value of humanity, a value that concerns every individual.... Freedom is often understood in an egotistic and superficial manner; [in reality, it] demands that we undertake to understand morality as a public and communal obligation. Freedom can abolish itself, can weary of itself when it has become empty. The twentieth century has offered examples of a majority decision that served to abrogate freedom.

Morality in itself has no power, but we must recognize that only the moral dimension possesses the true power to promote man.... An empty and directionless positivism wants to absolutize the majority principle, which inevitably transmutes at some point into nihilism. If we are to defend freedom and human rights, we must neutralize this risk....

Institutions cannot survive and work effectively without shared ethical convictions. But these cannot be the product of merely empirical reason; majority decisions become truly human and rational only when they presuppose a basic human element that they respect as the real common good, the presupposition of all other good things. Such convictions demand corresponding human attitudes, but these attitudes cannot flourish unless the historical basis of a culture and the ethical-religious insights it preserves are taken seriously. A culture, a nation that cuts itself off from the great ethical and religious forces of its own history commits suicide. The cultivation of essential moral insights, preserving and protecting them as a common possession but without imposing them by force, seems to be one condition for the continued existence of freedom in the face of nihilism and its totalitarian consequences.
Pope Benedict XVI
(Address to Members of the Biblical Commission)

The relationship between the Bible and morality concerns not only believers, but every human person—particularly at a time of cultural and moral crisis. Today many people think the happiness they desire should be achieved in absolute autonomy, without reference to God or to his Law. Some have reached the point of theorizing about the absolute sovereignty of reason and freedom in the context of moral norms. They presume that these norms constitute the context of a purely “human” ethic, the expression of a law that man makes for himself and by himself. Advocates of this humanistic morality say that man as a rational being not only can but must decide freely on the value of his behavior. This erroneous conviction is based on the presumed conflict between human freedom and every form of law. In fact, the Creator, because we are creatures, has inscribed his natural law, a reflection of his creative idea, in our hearts, in our very being, as a compass and inner guide for our lives.

Man’s freedom finds its loftiest realization in the love that comes from God. There is no contradiction between God’s law and human freedom. When it is correctly interpreted, God’s law neither attenuates nor, even less, eliminates man’s freedom. On the contrary, it guarantees and fosters freedom. ... The moral action of man is directly based on obedience to God’s law, on union with Christ, and on the indwelling of the Spirit in the believer’s soul. It is not an action dictated by merely external norms, but stems from the vital relationship that connects believers to God.


If human freedom is real only if there is no divine plan that binds and limits it, ... then everything becomes open to limitless manipulation.... If nature is a mere object, ... if it does not express any creative will, then man remains the sole subject and the sole will.... We can be truly “creative” only in union with the Creator. We can be truly responsible only if we know how to place ourselves on the inside of a wise design that precedes us and includes us. Our plans and projects are truly sensible only when they are inserted within the plan of God. The loss of reference to this wise creative plan is the profound root of the bewilderment of contemporary man and of his fear in the face of freedom.... A freedom disconnected from a responsible reference to the wise plan of God and left to itself in a world of chance is secretly undermined by a pact with death, which ends up by destroying it....

Man is a being of the word and of love, a being destined to give himself to the other and to truly possess himself only by giving himself generously in the right way.... Only when a man recognizes his true purpose in his relationship with God, only then is his dignity safe; only then is his freedom rightly directed. Only then is his action constructive.
Pope Benedict XVI, “Commitment to Truth Is the Soul of Justice”  
(Address to the Diplomatic Corps, 2006)

I would like to offer some thoughts by way of fraternal encouragement, which I will set out in a few simple points.

First: **Commitment to truth is the soul of justice.** Those who are committed to truth cannot fail to reject the law of might, which is based on a lie and has so frequently marked human history with tragedy. The lie often parades itself as truth, but in reality it is always selective and tendentious, selfishly designed to manipulate people, and finally subject them. Set against this, there is truth and truthfulness, which lead to encounter with “the other,” to recognition and understanding. Through the splendor that distinguishes it—the “splendor veritatis”—truth cannot fail to spread; the love of truth is intrinsically directed toward just and impartial understanding and rapprochement, whatever difficulties there may be. This search for truth leads people to assert vigorously what is in common, pertaining to the very nature of persons, of all peoples and cultures.

Second: **Commitment to truth establishes and strengthens the right to freedom.** The grandeur of man is ultimately based on his capacity to know the truth. All human beings desire to know the truth. But truth can be attained only in freedom. This is the case with all truths, as is clear from the history of science. But it is eminently the case with those truths in which man himself, man as such, is at stake, the truths of the spirit: the truth about good and evil, the truth about the great goals and horizons of life, the truth about our relationship with God. These truths cannot be attained without profound consequences for the way we live. And once freely appropriated, they demand in turn an ample sphere of freedom if they are to befit every dimension of life.

Third: **Commitment to truth opens the way to forgiveness and reconciliation.** Asking for forgiveness and granting it are indispensable elements of peace. Memory is purified, hearts are made serene, and our gaze is fixed on what the truth demands if we are to cultivate thoughts of peace.

Fourth: **Commitment to peace opens up new hopes.** Man is capable of knowing the truth. He has this capacity with regard to the great problems of being and acting, individually and as a member of society. But this will happen only if human relations correspond to the truth about man and his dignity.

*Logos* (4,2)

The evolution of intellect in the West inclines ever more toward the destructive pathologies of reason.... When reason seeks its potency in its capacity to destroy or snatches at the roots of life, ever more does it tend to see the human being as a product to be made, and no longer as a gift of God. If reason reduces itself to what is experimentally verifiable (or to be more exact, falsifiable), the entire domain of the moral and the religious is consigned to the “sub-
jective" realm and falls outside of common reason altogether. Reason thus fallen ill and religion abused, meet the same result: all recognition of what is definitively valuable, all that stands on the truth capacity of reason, is dismissed as "fundamentalism." All that remains is the dissolution of reason, its "deconstruction." A form of reason that can acknowledge only its empirical self paralyzes and dismembers itself. A form of reason that wholly detaches itself from God, wanting to resettle Him in the zone of subjectivity, has lost its compass and has opened the door to the powers of destruction.

In these days, it is the duty of Christians in the struggle for humanity to recover a reason that is not blind to the moral dimension of Being. God himself is Logos, the rational first cause of all reality, the creative reason out of which the world came to be, and which is reflected in the world. As Logos, God is Meaning, Reason, Word. God as Love also belongs to Christian belief in God. He is not a relationless, self-orbiting Being. Precisely because He is sovereign, because He is the Creator, because He embraces everything, God is Relation; He is Love. The heart and hinge of all morality, the heart and hinge of Being itself, and its inmost source is Love. This declaration represents the strongest repudiation of any ideology of violence; it is the true apologia of humankind and of God. And let us not forget that the God of Reason and of Love is also the world's Judge, the guarantor of Justice, before whom all must make account. God is a Justice that Love does not annul....

Therefore, under the conditions of temporality, the Kingdom of God is no worldly empire, but rather a call for the freedom of humanity and a support for reason that it may fulfill its own mission. The freedom to choose is meant for every person. In this sense, the secular state of this world follows from a fundamental Christian decision. It incorporates the balance between reason and faith, and stands against secularism as an ideology that seeks to construct the state from pure reason apart from its historical roots, which can recognize no moral foundations that are discernable to reason, which ends in a positivism of the greatest number, the abasement of right [justice], and government by a statistic. The secular state must find its support in the formative roots from which it grew and must acknowledge the foundational values without which it would not have come to be, without which it cannot endure.

Part Two

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “I Chose You”
In conclave, April 2005

Excerpt:

Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labeled fundamentalism. Whereas relativism—letting oneself be ‘tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine,’ seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does
not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.

**Cardinal Ratzinger, “Conscience and Truth”**  
*A workshop for bishops, Feb. 1991;*  
in *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (2005), chap. 5

**Excerpt:**

In the contemporary discussion of what constitutes the essence of morality and how it can be recognized, the question of conscience has become paramount. For that question leads to the core of the moral problem and thus to the question of man’s existence. Two opposing models (autonomous morality and normative morality) appear to be locked in struggle over the meaning of conscience. This discussion centers on the concepts of freedom and norm, self-determination and external determination by authority. Conscience appears as the bulwark of freedom in contrast to the encroachments of authoritative norms....

The classical moral tradition makes conscience the highest norm man is to follow, even in opposition to authority. It is, of course, undisputed that one is obliged to follow a certain conscience, or at least not act against it. But whether the judgment of conscience (or what one takes it to be) is always right, indeed whether it is infallible, is another question.... If the conscience is erroneous does it excuse a person by sheltering him from the exacting demands of truth? Such a view of conscience does not see it as a window through which one can see out to the common truth that founds and sustains us all and so makes possible through the common recognition of truth the community of needs and responsibilities. Here conscience does not mean man’s openness to the ground of his being, the power of perception for what is highest and most essential. Rather it appears as subjectivity’s protective shell into which man can escape, there to hide from reality. It dispenses him from searching for truth and justifies a subjectivist preference not to be called into question. Instead of opening the path to truth, which either exists or not, and if it does is too demanding, it becomes a justification for social conformity, which facilitates living together by providing a mediator between different individuals. The obligation to seek the truth ceases, as do any doubts about the general inclination of society and what it has become accustomed to. Subjective conviction is sufficient, especially if it conforms to one’s surroundings....

At this point in our reflections, it is possible to draw some initial conclusions with a view toward answering the question regarding the essence of conscience. We can now say that it will not do to identify a person’s conscience with individual self-consciousness, with subjective certainty about moral conduct. This consciousness may be a mere reflection of social surroundings, of public opinion currently in vogue. Or it may derive from a lack of self-criticism, a deficiency in listening to the depth of one’s soul.... To put it differently, the
identification of conscience with superficial consciousness, the reduction of man to his subjectivity, does not liberate but enslaves. It makes us totally dependent on prevailing opinions and debases them with every passing day. Whoever equates conscience with superficial conviction identifies it with a pseudo-rational certainty that is woven of self-righteousness, conformity, and lethargy. Conscience is degraded to a mechanism for rationalization when it should render transparent the divine norm and thus enhance the very dignity and greatness of man. The reduction of conscience to subjective certitude betokens a retreat from truth. Yes, one must follow an erroneous conscience, but the departure from truth that first lulled it into false security, now takes revenge by abandoning it in a trackless waste.

Let us glance at the situation today, at the really critical issue of the present age: The concept of truth has been virtually given up and replaced by the concept of progress. But this apparent exaltation veils a loss of direction, and without direction, things can just as well regress as progress. Neither individuals nor humanity at large can attain advancement or well being if everything is relative. According to relativity theory, there are no fixed standards of reference in the moral, as well as the physical universe. If we arbitrarily select a fixed reference point from which we try to measure the whole, it is we who do the determining; it could always have been something different. The truth as such, the ultimate reference point of all thought, is no longer visible. There is no longer ‘up’ or ‘down.’ There are no directions in a universe without fixed measuring points. Self-defined direction is not based on a standard that is true of itself and rests finally on considerations of expediency. In such a worldview, to speak of ‘conscience’ is a euphemistic way of canceling the very idea of conscience, understood as a ‘co-knowing’ with the truth. Each person determines his own standards and directions; no one can be of much help to others, much less prescribe their behavior.

At this point, the radicality of today’s dispute over ethics and conscience becomes plain. There is on the one hand, confidence in man’s capacity for truth. On the other, there is a worldview in which man sets his own standards.... In many places, no one bothers to ask what someone thinks. It is sufficient to classify him in a formal category: fundamentalist, conservative, liberal, progressive, etc. It is unnecessary to come to terms with the actual content of his thought.... We have arrived at the heart of the matter. Where content no longer matters, technique becomes the highest criterion. The way of mere technical skill belongs to a land of idols; it has nothing to do with being made in the image and likeness of God. What characterizes man is not that he asks about what he can do, but about what he should do, that he open himself to the demands of truth....

It is finally time to arrive at some conclusions; that is, to formulate a concept of conscience.... At the ontological level (being), conscience consists in the fact that something like an original memory (anamnesis) of the good and true (the two are identical) has been implanted in us, that there is an inner ontological tendency toward the divine within all humans. From its origin man’s being resonates with some things (what is good) and clashes with others
(what is not good for him, as man). This is the medieval ‘synderesis,’ the traces of the eternal law as imbedded in human nature. At the level of judgment and decision (act), conscience (conscientia) applies the original memory to a particular situation. St. Thomas Aquinas divided this act into three components: recognition, witness, and judgment....


Excerpt:

Conscience stands in the world helpless, doomed in the face of gigantic economic and political interests. What is it but folly to count on conscience, when we see what really counts in the world, what alone counts: Is it not an empty, meaningless daydream, in view of the threats of the present day, to look up to those who bore witness to conscience, and whose only contribution was to suffer?.... But we must go on to ask what direction really remains for a human being who has freed himself from his conscience? The vulnerability of conscience, the possibility, indeed the likelihood of its misuse, cannot abolish its greatness. It constantly stands in need of purification.

To put it quite simply, conscience means acknowledging man—oneself and all others—as created beings, and respecting the prerogative of the Creator. Conscience sets a limit to all power and gives it direction. Consequently perseverance in the powerlessness of conscience remains the fundamental condition and innermost core of all true control of power. Where this innermost core is not maintained, there can no longer be any question of controlling power, but simply of balancing interests.... then, good is whatever prevails, and to exist means nothing but to survive: the power we set out to control becomes our sole criterion, and our humanity is destroyed.

Consequently, we need the example of those poor, frail human beings who stand by conscience. They embody the power of powerlessness and protest against exploitation simply by suffering. In fact, suffering for the sake of conscience sums up their lives. One may ask what is the use of merely suffering. Ultimately, injustice can be overcome only by the voluntary suffering of those who remain true to conscience and testify by their suffering and their whole life to the end of all power. I should like to attempt to develop this thought that the kernel of the necessary control and limitation of power in this world consists in the courage to follow conscience....

Power attains greatness when it allows itself to be moved by conscience.

Part Three


The issue here is not simply a form of passive toleration, but a kind of behavior that would result in at least the facilitation of moral evil.... Catholic educational
programs are called to provide their own contribution to the prevention of AIDS in full fidelity to the moral doctrine of the Church without engaging in compromises that may even give the impression of trying to condone immoral practices. The Church’s responsibility is to defend the dignity of human sexuality; this can only be realized within the context of the natural moral law. The only medically safe means of preventing AIDS are those very types of behavior that conform to God’s law and to the truth about man.

Some Reflections on Fides et Ratio

Where post-modern eclecticism, historicism, scientism, pragmatism, and nihilism prevail, the unity of mankind is no longer recognizable; these decadent desires for negativity tend toward the abdication of all meaning and seek only what is provisional and ephemeral. Contrary to this orientation of contemporary thought, man can and must preserve openness to the universal and transcendent, escape from the prison of relativism, and find a breakthrough to what is in reality true for everyone; he must ask who he really is and what he is to do. One who can no longer pose the fundamental questions about good and evil, death and immortality, is by that very fact bereft of any standard or path. The person who cannot recognize a common human nature beyond racial, class, cultural, and national differences has lost his identity. His very humanity is imperiled. Thus for philosophy in its original, classical sense, the question of truth is not a frivolity to be enjoyed by affluent cultures that can afford the luxury, but a question that concerns the existence or nonexistence of man. All are invited to join in this process of self-transcendence of their own particularities, the process that began in ancient Israel and Greece. Everything particular and individual now belongs to everyone, and everything that belongs to others becomes also our own.


It is therefore imperative, in the encounter of various cultures, to identify ethical bases that can point out the right way to live and work together. In the process whereby cultures encounter and influence one another, ethical certainties that were the foundation of society in the past have broken down. The basic question of what is good, and why one should do what is good even when this is not to one’s advantage remains largely unanswered. The fundamental transformation of the image of the world and of man as a result of increasing scientific knowledge is an essential contributor to the dissolution of the old moral certainties.

Conversations in a pluralistic secular society that appeal to shared reason in the attempt to find a basis for consensus about ethical principles still make use of arguments based on natural law. But unfortunately, this instru-
ment has become blunt, and that is why I do not support my arguments on it in this conversation. The idea of natural law presupposes a concept of the natural in which nature and reason interlock: nature itself is rational. For many of our contemporaries, the theory of evolution has trumped that old view of nature. According to this theory, which seems to go broadly unchallenged, nature is not rational....

‘Natural law,’ on the deepest level and at least in the modern period, has meant a rational law. Its last surviving element is ‘human rights.’ But these are ultimately incomprehensible without the presupposition that man as such, by virtue of the simple fact that he belongs to a specific species, is the subject of rights. His existence bears in itself values and norms that must be found, and not invented. Perhaps the doctrine of human rights ought today to be complemented by a doctrine of human obligations and human limits. This might help to shed new light on the question of whether reason is inherent in nature, and hence whether a rational law is applicable to everyone in the world....

Today inter-culturality is an indispensable condition to engage in these discussions about fundamental questions of human existence, for they cannot be limited to the Western tradition of a reason that understands itself to be universal. Even if this position is objectively true, it is a fact that only a small part of mankind finds it comprehensible. The Western tradition is often called into question specifically with respect to rationality, and thus also its claim to universal validity. Even many Western participants to this conversation have become weary of rationality. There is, then, no single rational moral ‘formula’ that could win acceptance by everyone and could then provide support for the whole world. At any rate, such a formula seems unattainable at present: the so-called ‘world ethos’ remains an abstraction.

What, then, ought we to do? I should like to summarize my own viewpoint in two theses.

First, there exist in today’s world highly dangerous pathologies of faith and no less dangerous pathologies of reason. To overcome them, both faith and reason must be admonished to keep to their proper boundaries and learn to listen to what the great traditions of mankind have to say. When faith and reason claim an emancipation that lays aside a willingness to learn, they take on a destructive character. I would speak, then, of a necessary correlation between reason and faith, which are called to purify and heal one another. They need each other and must acknowledge one another’s validity....

Second, Western culture must be willing to listen and accept a genuine correlation with other cultures. It is important to include them in the attempt to form a polyphonic correlation in which non-Western cultures will be open to learn from the Western experience of a complementarity of faith and reason. This would permit the formation and growth of a process of universal purification in which those essential values and norms that are known or at least guessed at by all men could acquire a new radiance. In this way, what keeps the world together would once again become an effective force in mankind.
Pope Benedict XVI, “God Is Love” [Deus Caritas Est], 2006

Excerpts:

[1] What God lavishes upon us, we in turn must share with others. I wish to call forth in the world renewed energy and commitment in the human response to God’s love..... [19] **Love** is the service the Church carries out by attending to man’s sufferings and material needs.... [20] The Church is obliged to *practice* love. In order to be an ordered service, love needs to be organized and attuned to what is needed for a dignified life.

[28] **Justice**, by its very nature, has to do with ethics. The question how justice is to be brought about here and now presupposes a more basic question: ‘What is justice?’ The resolution of that question belongs to practical reason, which requires constant purification if it is to free itself from the danger of an ethical blindness that power and special interests can cause.... Proceeding on the basis of reason and the **law of human nature** common to every human being, the Church’s social teaching helps to form consciences and stimulates greater insight into the requirements of justice, especially when they conflict with personal interests.... Love (*caritas*) will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. To eliminate love would be to eliminate man, for there will always be suffering, loneliness, and needs that cry out for consolation and help.... The claim that just social structures would make those works of charity superfluous masks a materialist conception of man, whose humanity it would demean and ultimately disregard....

[30] I wish to consider the overall situation of the **struggle for justice and love** in the world today. Our ability to know almost instantly about the needs of others challenges us to come to their aid by rising above misunderstandings and tensions.... [31] Increasing charitable activity is ultimately due to the **command of love** the Creator has inscribed in human nature.... [36] Two temptations can assail us when we consider the immensity of others’ needs: arrogance (thinking that every problem can be solved) or resignation (thinking that nothing can be accomplished). A living relationship with Christ will enable us to follow the right path, guided by love in the **service of others**....