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## LET YOUR LOVE BE ACTIVE AND GENUINE

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At beginning of my reflection I need to make one point clear. Every religion or religious philosophy begins by telling people what they must do to be saved, be it ascetic renunciations or intellectual speculations. Christianity doesn't begin by telling people what they must do, but what God has done for them. Gift comes before duty.

This principle applies, first of all, to the domain of charity. To love God with all your strength and your neighbor as yourself is certainly the first and most important commandment, but the order of the commandments is not the first order; before it comes the order of the gift: "We love because He first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). Christianity is the religion of grace.

The expression "love of God" has two very different meanings: one in which God is object and the other in which God is subject; one which indicates our love for God and the other which indicates God's love for us. The human person is more inclined to be active than passive, to be a creditor rather than a debtor. People have always given precedence to the first meaning, to that which we do for God. Even Christian preaching has followed this line, speaking almost exclusively at certain times of the "duty" to love God ("De diligendo Deo").

However, biblical revelation gives precedence to the second meaning: to the love "of" God, not to love "for" God. Aristotle said that God moves the world "in so far as he is loved," that is, in so far as he is the object of love and the final cause of all creatures<sup>1</sup>. But the Bible says exactly the contrary, namely, that God creates and moves the world in as much as he loves the world. The most important thing, when speaking of the love of God, is not, therefore, that man loves God, but that God loves man and that He loved him "first": "This is the love I mean, not our love for God, but God's love for us" (1 John 4:10).

### I. AN ACTIVE LOVE: THE SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF THE GOSPEL

Once we have clarified this fundamental principle of Christian charity we can move on to reflect on the *duty* to love and in particular to love our neighbor, which is the main interest of this assembly. The link between the two objects of love is clearly defined in Scripture "If God loved us so much, we too should love one another". (1 Jn 4:11)

What I want to do in this meditation is to reflect on the quality this love must have. It is essentially two-fold: love must be active and genuine, loving people, so to speak, with our hands and with our heart. Let us start with the practice of charity.

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<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072b.



## *Traditional Christian Charity*

We know the words of the First Letter of John: “If anyone is well off in worldly possessions and sees his brother in need but closes his heart to him, how can the love of God be remaining in him? Children, our love must not be just words, or mere talk, but something active and genuine” (1Jn 3, 17-18). We find the same teaching, in a more graphic form, in the Letter of James: “If one of the brothers or sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, ‘I wish you well, keep yourself warm and eat plenty’, without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that?” (Jm 2,16).

In the primitive community at Jerusalem this requirement was translated into sharing. It was said of the first Christians that “they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed” (Ac 2,45), but what urged them to do this was not an ideal of poverty, but of charity; the aim was not to make everyone poor, but that “none of their members should ever be in want” (cf. Ac 4, 34).

The apostolic Church, on this point, simply gathered the teaching and example of the Lord, whose compassion for the poor, the sick and the hungry was never simply an empty sentiment but was always translated into concrete help. Indeed, Christ made these concrete gestures of charity the basis for the Last Judgement (cf. Mt 25).

Church historians see in this spirit of fraternal solidarity one of the main factors behind “the mission and expansion of Christianity in the first three centuries”<sup>2</sup>. That spirit was converted into specially created initiatives – and later, institutions –for the care of the sick, the support of widows and orphans, providing aid to prisoners, soup-kitchens for the poor, assistance to foreigners... This aspect of Christian charity, historically and in the present day, is dealt with in the second half of Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical “Deus caritas est” and, in a permanent manner, by the Pontifical Council “Cor Unum”.

## *The emergence of the social problem*

The modern era, especially the nineteenth century, marked a turning point, bringing the social problem to the forefront of attention. It is not enough to provide for the needs of the poor and oppressed on a case by case basis; action needs to be taken on the structures that create the poor and the oppressed. That this was new territory, can be deduced from the title and the opening words of Leo XIII’s encyclical “Rerum novarum” of May 15, 1891, which saw the Church entering the debate as a leading exponent. It is worth rereading the opening paragraph:

“That the spirit of revolutionary change, which has long been disturbing the nations of the world, should have passed beyond the sphere of politics and made its influence felt in the cognate sphere of practical economics is not surprising. The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits and the marvellous discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, and the utter poverty of

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<sup>2</sup> A. von Harnack, *Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten*, Leipzig 1902.



the masses; the increased self reliance and closer mutual combination of the working classes; as also, finally, in the prevailing moral degeneracy”.

The same category of problems provides the setting for the second encyclical of the Holy Father Benedict XVI on charity: “Caritas in veritate”. I have no competence in this subject, and so it is only right that I refrain from going into the merits of the content of this and other social encyclicals which you know better than I do. What I would like to do is illustrate the historical and theological background, the “Sitz im Leben” as it is called, of this new form of ecclesiastical magisterium: in other words, to see how and why social encyclicals began to be written and why new ones are written periodically. In fact, this can help us to discover something new about the Gospel and about Christian love.

At the time when Leo XIII wrote his social encyclical, there were three dominant trends of thought regarding the social significance of the Gospel. First of all there was the socialist and Marxist interpretation. Marx had paid no attention to Christianity from this point of view, but some of his immediate followers (Engels from a still ideological standpoint, and Karl Kautsky from a historical viewpoint) did deal with the question in the context of research on the “precursors of modern socialism”.

The conclusions they reached were as follows: that the Gospel was in the main a great social message to the poor, and that everything else in it was of secondary importance – a mere “superstructure”. Jesus was a great social reformer who wanted to rescue the lower classes from their wretched condition. His programme provides equality for all and freedom from economic need. The system of the primitive Christian community was a type of communism *ante litteram*, as yet unsophisticated and non-scientific: a kind of consumer communism, rather than the communism of the production line.

Subsequently, Soviet-era historiographers rejected this interpretation because, in their view, it conceded too much to Christianity. In the 1960’s the revolutionary interpretation reappeared, this time in political guise, with its thesis of Jesus as the head of a “zealot” liberation movement, but it was short-lived and is outside our present field.

Nietzsche had arrived at a conclusion similar to the Marxist one, but his intention was quite different. For him, too, Christianity was born as a liberation movement of the lower classes, but this fact had to be judged as totally negative. The Gospel embodies the “resentment” of the weak against the strong forms in nature; it is the “inversion of all values”, clipping the wings of mankind’s aspiration to greatness. The whole aim of Jesus was to counter earthly misery by spreading a “Kingdom of heaven”.

To these two schools – which agreed on the reality they saw, but differed on how it should be judged – a third can be added which we may call conservative. According to this view, Jesus took no interest at all in social and economic problems; to attribute such concerns to him would be to diminish him and turn him into a worldly figure. He used images drawn from the world of work and took to heart the miseries of the poor, but he never envisioned the improvement of people’s living conditions in their earthly life.

*Liberal and dialectical theology*



These were the dominant ideas in the culture of the time, when the Christian churches began to engage in theological reflection on the problem. It too developed in three stages and reflected three approaches: that of liberal theology, of dialectical theology, and that of the Catholic magisterium.

The first response was that of the *liberal theology* current at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, represented in this field especially by Ernst Troeltsch and Adolph von Harnack. It is worth pausing a while to look at the ideas of this school, because many of its conclusions, at least in this particular field, were also arrived at from a different direction by the social magisterium of the Church and are still current and sustainable.

Troeltsch challenges the starting point of the Marxist interpretation, which holds that the religious factor is always secondary in relation to the economic. By studying the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism he shows that, while the economic factor influences the religious, it is also true that religion influences economics. They are distinct fields, not subordinate.

Harnack, for his part, notes that the Gospel provides no direct social programme to combat and abolish poverty; that it makes no judgments about the organisation of labor and other aspects of life which are so important for us today, such as art and science. But, he adds, it is fortunate that this is the case! We would have been sorry if it had tried to make rules about the relations between classes, working conditions and so on.

To be concrete, those rules would have been fatally linked to the conditions of the day, (just as many Old Testament institutions and social precepts are), and so would eventually have become anachronisms, in fact a “useless encumbrance” to the Gospel. History, even the history of Christianity, shows how dangerous it is to bind oneself to social structures and political institutions of a particular era, and how difficult it is to get rid of them later.

“And yet”, continues Harnack, “no religion ever went to work with such an energetic social message, and so strongly identified itself with that message, as we see to be the case in the Gospel. How so? Because the words “Love thy neighbour as thyself” were spoken in deep earnest, because with these words Jesus shone a light upon all the concrete relations of life, upon the world of hunger, poverty and misery. ... Its object is to transform the socialism which rests on the basis of conflicting interests into the socialism which rests on the consciousness of a spiritual unity.... The fallacious principle of the free play of forces, of the “live and let live” principle - a better name for it would be “live and let die” - is entirely opposed to the Gospel.”<sup>3</sup>

The position enshrined in the gospel message is, as we can see, opposed both to the reduction of the Gospel to a social proclamation or to the class struggle, and to the position of economic liberalism and the free play of forces.

What was it that the *dialectical theology* of Barth, Bultmann, Dibelius and others, which succeeded liberal theology after the first world war, had against this liberal view? Principally,

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<sup>3</sup> A. von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Leipzig 1900. Italian translation. *L'essenza del cristianesimo*, Torino 1903, pp. 93 ss.



its point of departure, its idea of the kingdom of heaven. For liberals, the kingdom was essentially ethical in nature, a sublime moral ideal based on the fatherhood of God and the infinite value of each soul; for dialectical theologians it was eschatological in nature - a sovereign, gratuitous intervention by God, intended not to change the world but to denounce its present structures (“a radical critique”), to announce its imminent end (“consequent eschatology”), with a call to conversion (“the radical imperative”).

The topicality of the Gospel consists in the fact that “its demands are not made in a general way, to everyone and for all time, but to this person, and perhaps only to this person, at this moment and perhaps only at this moment; and the demand is not based on an ethical principle, but on the situation in which God has placed him, and perhaps only him, requiring from him a decision here and now”<sup>4</sup>. The influence of the Gospel on society comes about through the individual, not through the community or ecclesial institution.

From this perspective, can one still speak of the Gospel having social relevance? Yes, but only as method, not as content. Let me explain. This view reduces the social significance of the Gospel to a “formal” one, excluding any “real” significance, i.e. in terms of content. In other words, the Gospel provides the method, or the impulse, for a correct Christian attitude and action in the social sphere, and nothing else.

And here lies the weakness of this position, because it attributes only formal significance to the gospel accounts and parables (“how am I to welcome the call to decision which comes to me here and now?”) and not also a real and exemplary significance. Is it legitimate, for example, in the case of the parable of the rich man who feasted sumptuously, to ignore the clear, concrete indications it contains about the use and abuse of wealth, luxury, and disdain for the poor, and look only at the “imperative of the moment” that resounds through the parable?

Such a solution strips the flesh from Christ’s message and acts on the mistaken premise that the word of God contains no general demands that apply to the rich of today, as they did to the rich – and to the poor – in Jesus’ day. As though the decision God required were something empty and abstract – simply making a decision – and not a decision about something. All the parables with a social background are called “parables of the Kingdom” and in this way their content is flattened out to a single meaning, the eschatological one.

### *The social teaching of the Church*

The social teaching of the Catholic Church, as ever, looks for synthesis rather than opposition; its method is “et – et” (both-and) rather than “aut – aut” (either-or). It maintains the Gospel’s “two-fold illumination”: eschatological and moral. In other words: it agrees with dialectical theology on the fact that the Kingdom of God preached by Christ is not essentially ethical in nature, i.e. not an ideal that draws its force from the universal validity and perfection of its principles, but is a new and gratuitous initiative of God which, in Christ, breaks in from above.

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<sup>4</sup> M. Dibelius, *Das soziale Motiv im Neuen Testament*, in *Botschaft und Geschichte*, Tübingen 1953, pp. 178-203.



Where it parts company with the dialectical vision is in its way of conceiving the relationship between this kingdom of God and the world. The two are not simply opposed and irreconcilable, just as there is no opposition between the work of creation and that of redemption, and also – as we saw in the first meditation – no opposition between *agape* and *eros*. Jesus compared the kingdom of God to the yeast added to the dough to make it rise, to a seed cast into the earth, or to salt that gives food its flavour; he said he had come not to judge the world, but to save it. This enables us to see the influence of the Gospel on social matters in a different, much more positive light.

However, despite all the differences of approach, some general conclusions do emerge from the whole theological reflection on the relationship between the Gospel and the social sphere. We can summarise them as follows. The Gospel does not provide direct solutions to social problems. It does however contain useful principles by which concrete responses to different historical situations can be framed. Since social situations and problems change from one age to another, the Christian on each occasion is called to embody gospel principles in the situation of the moment.

This is precisely the contribution made by the social encyclicals of the popes. This is why there is a succession of such encyclicals, with each one taking up the subject at the point where the previous ones left off (in the case of Pope Benedict's encyclical, from "Populorum progressio" of Paul VI), and they update the subject on the basis of new needs emerging in society (in this case, the phenomenon of globalization) and also of the new questions constantly being asked in the light of the word of God. The title of Benedict XVI's social encyclical, "Caritas in veritate", indicates the biblical foundations on which, in this case, he intends to base his discourse on the social significance of the Gospel: charity and truth.

The difference lies not only in what is said and in the solutions that are proposed, but also in the genre adopted and in the authority of the proposal. It consists, in other words, in moving from free theological discussion to magisterial teaching, and from an exclusively "personal" intervention in social affairs (as proposed by dialectical theology) to a communal intervention as Church, and not simply as individuals.

### *The task of Caritas workers*

And now comes a question. What, in this whole field, is the job of those in charge of Caritas? As I see it, they should not confine themselves to putting the Church's social teaching into practice; it is not just a question of letting the poor hear the voice of the Church. They must also make the voice of the poor heard in the Church!

Perhaps the greatest sin committed against the poor is indifference, pretending not to see, "passing by on the other side". (cf. Lk 10, 31). What Jesus objected to in the rich man who feasted sumptuously, was not so much the unbridled luxury of his lifestyle, as his indifference to the poor man lying at his gate.

We tend to set up a kind of double glazing between ourselves and the poor. The effect of double glazing, so much in use today, is to keep out cold and noise. It dilutes everything, deadens and muffles every sound. So it is with the poor: we see them on our TV screens or in the pages of newspapers or missionary magazines, but their cries are a distant echo that never



reaches our hearts. We protect ourselves from them. In rich countries, the very words “the poor” provoke the same agitation and panic as the cry “Barbarians!” aroused in the inhabitants of ancient Rome. They built walls and sent armies to watch their borders. We do the same thing, in different ways, but history tells us it is all to no avail.

So the first thing to do in relation to the poor is to break through the double glazing, to overcome our indifference and insensitivity. We need to let our defences down and be overwhelmed by a healthy anxiety in face of the fearful misery there is in the world. As Pope Paul VI wrote in *Evangelica testificatio*, “The persistence of poverty-stricken masses and individuals is a pressing call for conversion of minds and attitudes”. The cry of the poor obliges us “to awaken consciences to the drama of misery and to the demands of social justice made by the Gospel and the Church”<sup>5</sup>.

There it is: I believe that one of the priority tasks of the leaders of Caritas is to remind us all of this call to conversion, and to be ruthless in breaking through the security of our “double glazing”.

### III. LOVING FROM THE HEART

Let us now move on to the second quality of Christian charity, sincere love. The second part of the Letter to the Romans is a whole succession of recommendations about mutual love within the Christian community: “Let love be genuine [...]; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing respect” (*Romans* 12:9 ff). “Owe no-one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law” (*Romans* 13:8).

In order to grasp the underlying idea, or rather the “feel” that Paul has for charity, one must start with the initial word: “Let love be genuine!” It is not just one of many exhortations, but the matrix from which all the others derive. It contains the secret of charity. With the help of the Holy Spirit, let us try to grasp that secret.

The original term used by Saint Paul, translated as “genuine”, is *anhypokritos*, namely, without hypocrisy. This word is a sort of pilot light; it is, in fact, a rare term that we find used in the New Testament almost exclusively to describe Christian love. The expression “genuine love” (*anhypokritos*) returns again in 2 *Corinthians* 6:6 and in 1 *Peter* 1:22. This last text enables us to grasp the meaning of the term in question with complete certainty, because he explains it in different words; genuine love - he says - consists in loving one another intensely “from the heart”.

Hence, with that simple affirmation “Let love be genuine!” Saint Paul takes the discussion to the very root of charity, to the heart. What is required of love is that it be true, authentic, not a pretence. Just as wine, to be “genuine”, must be squeezed from the grape, so must love come from the heart.

We can speak of a Pauline intuition with regard to charity: behind the visible and exterior

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<sup>5</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelica testificatio* 17 s. ( *Enchiridion Vaticanum* [EV], 4, p.649 s.).



universe of charity, made up of works and words, he has revealed another, wholly interior, universe, which is, in comparison with the first, what the soul is to the body. We find this intuition again in the other great text on charity, which is 1 *Corinthians* 13. When you look closely you see that what Saint Paul says there refers entirely to this interior charity, to the dispositions and the sentiments of charity: charity is patient, it is kind, not jealous, not angry, it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things... There is nothing here, specifically and directly, about *doing* good, or works of charity, but everything is taken back to the root of *wanting* that which is good. Benevolence, wanting what is good, comes before doing good.

The Apostle himself is explicit about the difference between the two spheres of charity when he says that the greatest act of exterior charity -- distributing all one's goods to the poor -- would be of no use at all without interior charity (cf. 1 *Corinthians* 13:3). It would be the opposite of "genuine" charity. Hypocritical charity, in fact, is precisely that which does good, but without willing the good, which shows something externally that does not have a corresponding "attitude" in the heart. In this case, there is an appearance of charity which may even be a mask for egoism, self-seeking, acquiring power over people, or simply the remorse of conscience.

It would be a fatal error to see charity of the heart and charity in deed as being opposed to one another, or to use interior charity as a kind of alibi for a lack of active charity. We know the importance St. Paul himself attached to the collects for the poor in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Cor 8-9). On the other hand, to say that without charity "it does me no good at all" even if I give everything away to the poor, does not mean to say that it does no good to anyone and is useless. Rather, it means that it does no good "to me", but it might help the poor person who receives it.

So, it is not a question of lessening the importance of charitable works (we will look at this next time), but of ensuring that they have a firm foundation against selfishness and its infinitely wily ways. Saint Paul wants Christians to be "rooted and grounded in love" (*Ephesians* 3:17); in other words, love has to be the root and foundation of everything.

With regard to love that is sincere, or from the heart, as with active, practical love, I would like to offer a few thoughts of particular interest to those in charge of Caritas. I believe the Apostle's words: "If I gave away all my goods to feed the poor, but had no love, it would do me no good at all", assume a particular urgency for you at Caritas. Your work should never be reduced to social service, a mere distribution of resources. It is much more than just a job, a question of bureaucracy or administration.

The first "charity" we are called upon to give to our neighbour, even when distributing food and medicines, is to transmit to them the love of God. This is impossible, unless we ourselves are filled with that love, or at least strive to grow in it. The fundamental vocation of a Caritas worker is no different from that of any other Christian: a vocation to holiness!

In other words, you cannot work for Caritas without a deep life of grace and prayer. Saint Paul places the exercise of charity – concretely, the distribution of alms or doing works of mercy – among the charisms, alongside prophecy and teaching: "If your gift is prophecy, then use it as your faith suggests ...let almsgivers give freely, and those who do works of mercy, do them cheerfully" (Rom 12, 8).



The person of Christ must be the ultimate foundation of the spirituality of Caritas workers. In the incarnation of the Word, the “problem of the poor” has taken on a new dimension in history; it has become a Christological question too. Jesus of Nazareth identified himself with them. He who pronounced the words: “This is my body” over the bread, has spoken the same words with reference to the poor. He spoke them when, talking about what people had done or failed to do for the hungry, the thirsty, prisoners, the naked or the stranger, he solemnly declared “You did it to me” and “you failed to do it to me” (cf Mt 25, 31 ff). This is the same as saying: “You remember that ragged person who needed a piece of bread, that poor person holding out his hand – it was me, it was me!”

I remember the first time the full force of this truth “exploded” within me. I was preaching in a third-world country, and with each new scene of misery I saw - a child in a tattered dress, her face covered in flies; groups of people running after a refuse cart, hoping to pick up something dumped on the garbage heap; a body covered in sores – I heard a voice booming inside me: “This is my body. This is my body”. It took my breath away.

The poor person is Jesus, still wandering the world unrecognised. It’s a little like when, after the resurrection, He appeared in other guises – to Mary as a gardener, as a pilgrim to the disciples on the way to Emmaus, to the apostles on the lake as someone walking on the shore –, waiting for “their eyes to be opened”. On one occasion, the first person to recognise Him called out to the others: “It is the Lord!” (Jn 21, 7). Oh, if only we too, on seeing a poor person, would exclaim even once, with the same cry of recognition: “It is the Lord”, it is Jesus!

“Simon, son of John, do you love me? Feed my sheep!”: this link between love for Jesus and ministering to others is true in everything the Church does: it applies to pastoral ministry, but also to works of charity. It has always been so for the giants of Christian charity, from the founders of orders established to ransom slaves in the middle ages, to modern saints like Joseph Cottolengo, Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and Father Damian the Leper. For us, however loving Jesus should not be a duty or a necessity, it should be a need. On this depends not only the quality of our service to the poor, but the quality and success of our very life.

“No-one has ever seen God, but as long as we love one another, God will live in us, and his love will be complete in us ... Anyone who does not love the brother he can see, cannot love God, whom he has never seen” (1 Jn 4, 12 20). These words of John are sometimes quoted to make the point that the important thing, the only thing asked of us, is to love our neighbour. The so called “theology of secularisation” made reference to them in its attempt to reduce Christianity to a “religion of the second commandment”.

But we must be careful not to leave out one essential link in the chain. Before the brother or sister whom we can see, there is Another, whom we also see and touch: there is God made flesh, there is Jesus Christ! Between God and our neighbour there is now the Word made flesh, who has united the two extremes in one single person. True, Christ is not visible either, but He exists; He is risen, alive, at our side, more truly than we are to one another in this hall. “He touches Christ who believes in Christ!”, as St Augustine used to say.

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And here is the crucial point: we need to think of Christ not as someone living in the past, but as the Lord, risen and alive, with whom I can talk, whom I can also kiss if I want to, in the certain knowledge that my kiss will not stay on the paper of a holy card or the wood of a crucifix, but on the face and lips of living flesh (even if spiritualised), and that my kiss will make someone happy.

Not all those who love their neighbour love Christ, but all those who love Christ love their neighbour. As the feast of Pentecost approaches, let us ask the Holy Spirit, in the words of the *Veni creator*: “Infunde amorem cordibus”, pour out your love into our hearts. Love for God, for Christ, for the Church, love for the poor and for all of humankind.