

The Encyclical Letter of Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, and its African Reception

by Yosief Zeracristos, C.M.

Vice-Province of Saint Justin de Jacobis

Premise

We all know who John Paul II was and we know of his impact and influence on the faith journey of so many people: religious and laity, believers or not alike. He was a challenging figure, a very attractive and lovable father, a father to all men and women and, especially, a father and leader for youth.

Since his election on 19 April 2005, many individuals and groups have been asking what the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI will look like. What will it mean to many of us, as individuals and groups? What influence and impact will this very well-known, brilliant theologian, timid, and humble man of God, Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, have on our Church and the worldwide society? These were the anxieties of many people, I guess. Most of these anxieties were set against the backdrop of the legacy of Pope John Paul II. If I could interpret the sentiments of many Africans, when all the ceremonies were over, millions of Africans were expecting a black Pope to appear on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica. But it did not happen simply because the time is not yet ripe or it is not yet God's will, though I have to say that many Africans were not disappointed by the election of Benedict XVI, but rather considered it as providential (God's Providence). Far from being subjected to human intrigues at all, what comes from God is always for the good of the Church and our society.

I. African hopes and expectations from the Papacy of Benedict XVI¹

What are the expectations of us Africans from the papacy of Benedict XVI? And what does the first Encyclical Letter of Benedict XVI have to do with our hopes and expectations? How is this clear, simple and theologically profound Encyclical Letter understood?

First of all, let me clarify that the real concern or challenge is not what the papacy of Benedict XVI will do for our continent, it is rather how the leadership of the Catholic Church in Africa can re-position itself so as to create the necessary conditions for a paradigm shift on all fronts in Africa. We all remember that when John Paul II came to the See of St. Peter, Rome symbolically brought down the Berlin Wall. After so many years of conflict and divisiveness, communism and the extreme apartheid, thanks to God, came to an end.

Standard Africans and good Christians dream, even with open eyes, of seeing the following curses eradicated from this beloved continent: man-made poverty caused principally by situations of war, the partial or total dependence on others (or the problem of self-reliance), dictatorship, corruption, traditional debt, tribal conflicts, disrespect for human life and sexual discrimination (especially against women), etc. Africa needs to inculturate Christian values in order to transform her own. To do so, it needs the strong moral voices of her own sons and daughters joined to that of the new Pope Benedict XVI.

On the other hand, the Church of Africa needs a strong, provocative moral voice, inspiration and support from the new Pope in order to: strengthen and inculturate properly her faith in Christ; modify the African culture through the person of Christ; and have a well-formed clergy with very solid moral behaviour and life-witness. What our Church needs is, I think, to have a clear conscience and a radical acceptance of Christ and his teaching. In many cases we can see that it is not the Christian faith that guides our moral behaviour but the tradition and customs of our ancestors. Therefore, the Church of Africa and especially her clergy need to define clearly their vocation and Christian identity and their lifestyle as Christians.

¹ Though I myself am an African, it is hard to speak for all Africans. After all, Africa is neither a village, nor a country, but a very huge continent with a variety of hopes and expectations. Therefore, the reader of this article should be aware of this limitation. I am an Eritrean Vincentian and, in speaking about my fellow Africans, I do not have any pretension, but I simply put my personal thoughts here and not as a representative of many fellow Africans.

Radical fellowship with Jesus, hence, is necessary for the Church of Africa, without any shadows in regard to the life of faith, celibacy or tribalism (a very narrow and very limited way of seeing things). The African Church and its clergy need to struggle against these limitations, trying to overcome them, with the help of God, and the support voiced by the vicar of Christ, Benedict XVI.

II. Does *Deus Caritas Est* respond to the expectations and challenges of the Church in Africa?

Pope Benedict XVI seeks to remind us that God is Love, as John the Evangelist did. John presents God as Love to a world of conflicts; so too does the Holy Father. Therefore I would say that the Pope has chosen a significant title at the heart of our Christian faith: *God is Love*. He believes that the strongest revolution is to believe in the Love-Power of God, as the apostles did. If we believe in Love, then, yes, it is already an answer to our questions and we definitely can meet our challenges. As a result, I personally have a sharp impression that this Encyclical Letter is a perfect response to all our expectations. The second part of this Encyclical Letter deals with *effective love*. It is a reminder and a clear indication of the path that the worldwide Catholic Church should take. "*God is Love,*" the Church is *God's family* and is, therefore, *communion in love*. St Augustine put it clearly: "*If you see charity, you see the Trinity*" (cf., *DCE*, 19). Love and charity to all, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, says the Pope, but also to our brothers in faith (Gal 6:10). Every individual member of the faithful and the entire ecclesial community at every level have the responsibility to love their neighbour. In the footsteps of St. Vincent, the Holy Father, affirms that *love needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community*. The Pope rightly reminds us, that the very nature of the Church is in her being *koinonia, kerygma/liturgia and diakonia*.

The Church is God's family in the world. In this family no one ought to go without the necessities of life. Yet at the same time caritas-agape extends beyond the frontiers of the Church. The parable of the Good Samaritan remains as a standard which imposes universal love towards the needy whom we encounter "by chance" (cf. Lk 10:31), whoever they may be... (DCE, 25).

This Encyclical Letter encourages us, as it does the Universal Catholic Church, to be committed to the work of justice:

... commitment to the just ordering of the State and society on the one hand, and organized charitable activity on the other. We have seen that the formation of just structures is not

directly the duty of the Church, but belongs to the world of politics, the sphere of the autonomous use of reason. The Church has an indirect duty here, in that she is called to contribute to the purification of reason and to the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run (DCE, 29).

The Pope warns that Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies. The second part of the Encyclical Letter deals with different aspects that I consider challenges to the way we handle charitable works. It is obviously not addressed particularly or directly to the African Church, but, perhaps much more than any other Church, challenges us indeed. For the Holy Father, *true love*, based on Paul's Hymn of Charity/Love in 1 Corinthians 13, which he himself considers a synthesis of his Encyclical Letter, transforms individuals and society alike. If Africans believe in God who is Love and act properly, there will be no more:

- poverty caused by situations of war, unjust social order and disrespect of life;
- abuses or misuses of authority or dictatorship, the real disease of so many African nations, the leaders of which are blind for power and money;
- corruption, poor self-love (*amor propre*);
- tribal conflicts and discrimination;
- sexual abuse or discrimination, especially against women, and so many other issues.

Deus Caritas Est is also a challenge to the Church of Africa to be:

- *transparent and efficient*: The Pope strongly appealed for transparency and efficiency in charitable activities. He reminded us to serve the poor faithfully, as Vincent would have said to us today, as Vincentian Family;
- *moved by Christian love and service to challenge paganism*: The Holy Father mentions Julian the Apostate to tell us a very simple truth: true Christian love and service are always challenges to the secular or pagan world and are the best means of evangelization. The African Church, as the Universal one, is called to maintain a balance between activism and discouragement in face of the difficult task to accomplish, and the life of prayer. The very important message of the Holy Father seems to say: *Beloved faithful and clergy of Africa, remain in love, for love and service of Christ are your true vocation!*

Everybody knows how our Africa is filled with immense problems to the extent that it is not easy to list them all. But the Pope gives a key to our challenges: **Love**. *“The Love of Christ urges us on”* (2 Cor 5:14). We all know that love never fails. Therefore, as the Pope tell us, we need to believe seriously and be in touch always with the Loving God and pray fervently as Mary the Mother of God did.