

Reflections on *Deus Caritas Est*¹

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Province of the Philippines

Introduction

It is jokingly said that God must have loved the poor that is why there are so many of them! The same thing is said about Filipinos who must be loved by God who creates so many of them. Filipinos by nature are loving people, easy to relate to and, for the most part, pro-life. It is no accident, then, that the Philippines has one of the fastest growing populations in the region with a large percentage of young people. That is a proof, some may say, that there is so much love going around in these islands! I certainly hope so but, then, one would sigh: if only life-making through love-making were linked to long-term plans for a better quality of life! The only problem is that it is not necessarily so and the unregulated proliferation of life even affects the quality of life that makes it easy for love to flourish. The integration of love and life, then, is crucial and, hopefully, Pope Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, can make some clarification and provide the needed light.

I see the encyclical as not just another papal exhortation to the virtue of love. Here, one can read an insightful ontology of love. It is not moralistic and does not pretend to be a self-righteous denunciation of contemporary humans' aberrations from true love. It can serve, I think, as an adequate philosophical underpinning of the theology of love which does not dismiss eros as an unnecessary component but rather integrates it into the totality of love. The young innovative theologian, Ratzinger, that he was, is surfacing here.

This is a great work that delineates and clarifies the ongoing dispute concerning love and justice. Its re-reading of the parables on practical charity, like the Good Samaritan, fills gaps on the dispute. It reminds us of the inadequacy of justice alone in our dealing with others and with society. For justice alone, without love, is, in the pope's expression, "arid." It is also worth noting that the encyclical draws from the imaginative sources of the bible rather than from a

¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Encyclical Letter to the Bishops, Priests, and Deacons, Men and Women Religious and All The Lay Faithful on Christian Love (Deus Caritas Est)*, 25 December 2005.

worn-out and outdated theory of the law of nature. This has a consequence on our reflection later on in the issue of population.

When everybody else is avoiding the concept of charity for its connotation of paternalism and dole-out mode of beneficence, the Holy Father does not hesitate to revive it. He has a good rationale for reviving the concept. After all, the original connotation of the word "charity," as its Greek origin suggests, refers to what God's grace is all about: a generous outpouring of the divine love. Any concept of love and justice should really flow from that primal meaning of charity as God's graciousness, that is not dependent on any human consideration.

The second part of the encyclical leads us to concrete acts of charity that cannot be generalized but can only be realized in a certain place with a certain group of people. If it is done, only then can we escape the irony of Charlie Brown's statement in the comic strip, *The Gospel according to Peanuts*: "I love humanity, it's people I can't stand!" From his vantage, Benedict XVI cannot really do more than make "generalizations" concerning charity, for the moment he focuses on one situation he might in the process neglect the others, although, at times, one can detect in his letter the spirit of a bourgeois Bavarian! But that is really innocuous given his commitment to the marginalized in the Church.

We see the potential danger of a localized reflection being made normative in different contexts. Any reflection of the Pope that is contextualized in Europe might be taken in hook and sinker by the Catholics in developing countries where he is overwhelmingly popular. For instance, an alarmist statement that he might make concerning the crisis of zero population growth in his continent might spell disaster if that same statement is addressed to a developing world like the Philippines, where population growth is anything but zero. But, we give the benefit of the doubt to the Holy Father to whatever he says on charity and justice for there is always a way in which the best of human nature tends to permeate through different milieus and environments. Likewise, it is no wonder that St. Vincent's charitable response to the peculiar situation of the poor in France in the 17th century still makes helpful echoes in our society today for the simple reason that charity has a universal appeal. In fact, I have a hunch that Vincent's observations and practical advices on charity would find parallels in this latest papal encyclical.

In *Deus Caritas Est* we have answers, but what are the questions? In its second part especially, we have responses to the many questions asked concerning love, charity and justice, but they are still in need of interpretation according to the questions asked which would inevitably vary according to cultural context and social situation. As it is said, "different strokes for different folks." It is in

this regard that, first, we have to describe the situation in the Philippines today, brief though it may be, in issues touching charity and justice. The situation needs critiquing in the light of Vincent's and Benedict's respective positions on the relationship between those two virtues; only then can concrete actions be proposed.

Seeing the Situation

It is safe to say that the Philippines is one of the economically underdeveloped countries characterized by "poverty, high birthrates, and economic dependence on the advanced countries."² Poverty does not exist alone; it is accompanied by malnutrition, decline in basic education and limited access to health care. Thus, it has an impact on the quality of life. We can theorize, at best, concerning the country's predicament. Whether the facts that we present are really causes or effects of the nation's ills we can argue *ad infinitum*, but what is certain is that they are closely interrelated. Here I am referring to globalization and population.

Globalization has its good aspects; no less than the Holy Father, himself, has positive words for it. "[H]ere we see one of the challenging yet also positive sides of the process of globalization — we now have at our disposal numerous means for offering humanitarian assistance to our brothers and sisters in need, not least modern systems of distributing food and clothing, and of providing housing and care" (n^o 30a). Concern for our neighbor transcends the confines of national communities and has increasingly broadened its horizon to the whole world. Although it might have its good aspects, globalization is also blamed for a lot of things. Here are some generalizations attributed to this contemporary phenomenon. Just by looking at its promoters like World Bank, IMF, WTO, and major corporations we can already surmise what policies are obviously advantageous for them: uniform economic model, homogenized global rules, new resources, new markets, cheap labor.³ Globalization favors export-oriented agriculture which means that the traditional, small-scale, diversified agricultural models have to go and have to abandon the time-tested effectiveness of locally concocted fertilizers, crop rotations, and pesticide management. To produce "luxury export items — flowers, potted plants, beef, shrimp, cotton, coffee, exotic vegetables — to be sent to the already overfed countries," people have to give up even their own lands and become dependent.⁴

² GERALD CHALIAND, www.thirdworldteacher.com/General/ThirdWorld_def.html

³ JERRY MANDER - DEBI BAKER - DAVID KORTEN, "Does Globalization Help the Poor?," in *IFG Bulletin, International Forum on Globalization*, 2001, 1(3).

⁴ *Ibid.*

It is easy to lay the blame on an outside factor like globalization. There is another issue from which the Church, like the proverbial ostrich head, cannot keep on hiding. In its report to the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), the Philippine Commission on Population pointed out the government's continued concern with "reproductive health, the status of women, and the interrelationships linking population, resources, environment, and development."⁵ Concern with population is understandable in the context of its increase to around 81 million by the turn of the century and it is expected to reach 113 million by 2020.⁶

Increase in population for a country with poor economic productivity points to a lowering of the quality of life. The GNP per capita income of the Philippines in 1995 was merely \$1,050 (compared to the United States' \$38,000 or Italy's \$22,000).⁷ It is also to be noted that in this country the lower the educational status of the woman is, the more children she has, just as the poorer the family is the more children and even extended family there are to support. Who is accountable? A Jesuit priest's observation on the issue is very telling. "For more than 30 years, the Church hierarchy has opposed efforts by the state to initiate a vigorous family-planning program, but during all these years it has not been able to come up with its own program adequate to the need."⁸ The same good Father accepts, though, that overpopulation might be a national issue in the Philippines, but not necessarily an issue linked to poverty in other countries, where they even need more people to maintain their population.⁹

Both globalization and overpopulation affect social justice more negatively. Globalization confirms the cliché that the rich get richer and the poor get more babies! In a competitive world, those who have will have more since they already have the resources and can muster strategies to strangle poor competitors. Besides, it is the rich countries that make the rules, giving a new twist to the Golden Rule ("he, who has the gold, rules"). In an overpopulation, more beings compete for the scarce resources and the mighty can muscle their way to seize the bigger piece of the pie. Social inequality is a glaring

⁵ PHILIPPINE COMMISSION ON POPULATION, *The Philippines: Country Report on Population*, Manila, 1994.

⁶ PHILIPPINES NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE, *1990 Census of Population and Housing. Report No. 3*, Manila, 1992.

⁷ INDEX OF WORLD COUNTRIES, www.scarufi.com/politics/gnp.htm

⁸ FR. JOHN J. CARROLL, S.J., "A Window of Opportunity. An Unmet Need," in *Intersect*, 19(2):4-9, p. 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*

reality as one sees that 90 percent of the resources are controlled by ten percent of the population. In a pyramid, the ten percent at the top allow only some percentage of the resources to trickle down to the 90 percent.

Judging the Situation through Vincent and Benedict

Justice is a buzz word today among theological circles. It is often said that our age is the age of entitlement, in virtue of which people everywhere clamor for their rights and for justice to be given them. But love, too, is a mandate that cannot be ignored either, in the face of animosities that often arise from confrontation. Justice without love becomes arid, the papal document declares, and even, we may add, ruthless. That is a point to be considered by our agents for social justice. Christian charity goes also beyond what is merely proper (cf. n° 18) and legal, for through it one also encounters God first whose love, even for the unlovable, cannot leave us indifferent either. I am glad that the Holy Father reminds us of this fundamental reality about God's love and its practical application through charity. He will agree with other social analysts on the facts concerning social injustice that breeds inequalities, but he warns especially the local Churches for the role that they might assume to meet the issue.

For the Pope, in his letter, conversion is an important factor for a happy balance between justice and charity. For charity to be effective and transformative for the beneficiaries, the benefactors must undergo transformation, too. The encyclical talks about the need for kenosis in the practice of charity. *"This proper way of serving others also leads to humility. The one who serves does not consider himself superior to the one served, however miserable his situation at the moment may be. Christ took the lowest place in the world — the Cross — and by this radical humility he redeemed us and constantly comes to our aid"* (n° 35). It is a warning to those who in any way might accompany their beneficent work with a concerted effort to win over the beneficiaries to their faith or ideology. This can also take the form of a condescending help by arrogant do-gooders who might have other ulterior motives. The poor are vulnerable to proselytization because their extreme needs make them accept anything. The encyclical is unequivocal in this issue. *"Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends.... Those who practise charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love"* (n° 31c). This vulnerability was exemplified by the conversion of

many Chinese refugees from Mao's China to Catholicism in Hong Kong in the 40s and 50s. They were called "rice Catholics" because this staple food that was distributed by Caritas, a Catholic aid organization, must have lured them to the faith. When the need for rice stopped (simply because Hong Kong Chinese prospered) mass conversion also stopped.

There is a statement in the second part of the letter that strikes me as similar to Vincent's remark about apologizing to the poor for the bread that we give. *"Those who are in a position to help others will realize that in doing so they themselves receive help; being able to help others is no merit or achievement of their own"* (n° 35). Are Vincent and Benedict thinking of the possible vain or superior thoughts that the givers might be entertaining while they are giving? If so, and if they subsequently find themselves merely using the recipients for their own vanity, should they not, then, apologize to the "victims"? The apology would also be in order if the act of giving occasions the recipients to look down on themselves by accepting dole-outs given to them. Vincent in anticipating a possible miscommunication would make the golden rule a criterion for doing good to others. He says: "What is the first act of love?... To do good to others as we may reasonably desire that they would do unto us is the summary of charity. Can I bear witness to myself that I do to my neighbor what I wish him to do to me? That is a subject for a searching examination."¹⁰ Vincent in this passage indirectly points to empathy as an attitude or framework that will mitigate the asymmetry of doing good to others.

"As a community, the Church must practice love. Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community" (n° 20). This reminds us of Vincent's impassioned appeal for an organized assistance to a stricken family who would be better off in the future if help were planned and organized, including self-rehabilitation. Charity is free and spontaneous, but it needs structure and organization if it is to endure in the life of people. In the Philippine situation, there might be a lot of love going around, but unless it is translated into enlightened and rational management, it will not be effective. Reduction of poverty in this country needs a lot of enlightened planning that is responsive to the needs of the people. The Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCPII) recommends the empowerment of the poor to make their own history in the warm embrace of charity and in a system and milieu

¹⁰ PIERRE COSTE, C.M., *Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul*, Translated by Joseph Leonard, C.M., Edited Eastern Province, U.S.A., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1963, p. 584.

that is conducive to it.¹¹ This is also one way of remedying the proverbial Filipino fatalistic attitude which obstructs development.

Globalization is here to stay together with the other post-colonial blues like dependency, widening economic gap between classes, and overpopulation. The time of Vincent saw semblances of the dependency and alienation of the poor who only became poorer and poorer during his time. Vincent's work was to bring "emergency" assistance to the homeless and starving through a more organized and concerted effort with the collaboration of the rich and the well-to-do. He did not pay too much attention to objections of others who frowned at the prospect of multiplying mendicancy or consorting with the rich. Neither was he fazed by the misgivings of the religious traditionalists who could not see a form of religious life outside of the cloister. Never mind the philosophy and ideology, he might have told himself, for if "the charity of Jesus Christ urges us," who are we to do otherwise. Of course, Vincent went global, too, by sending missionaries both priests and sisters outside of France with only charity as the "arm."

The Pope by writing his first encyclical on charity is sending the message that this will be the only norm a charity worker should rely on. Corollary to this is the realization that even if the law of nature is traditionally normative in the Church, yet it cannot be the sole norm. As with justice, compliance with the law of nature, devoid of charity, would be a clanging cymbal, an arid norm. It is to be noted that the Pope in his encyclical mentions natural law only once and in passing; besides, in that same line he also reminds the faithful of the role of reason (cf. n° 28a). Should not this be a turning point in our moral approach, especially in the issue of human reproduction, which, because of an outdated view of nature (as if it has stood still), we cannot yet shake off our population predicament. We have been too dependent on the natural law theory to shore up the traditional stand of the Church on birth control issues. The encyclical's emphasis on love seems to signal to us a different direction. This would be a welcome shift in the minds of many Filipino Catholics, who on their own have already steered away from that law and rather put in the foreground the value of effective love translated into a quality life, which consists in a reduced family size, among others.

¹¹ SECOND PLENARY COUNCIL OF THE PHILIPPINES, *Acts and Decrees*, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines, Manila, 1992.

Decisive Actions

How the Church should act in consonance with the encyclical has been proffered itself by a popular columnist in a daily newspaper with the widest circulation. In his perception of the Church in the Philippines as having “an interventionist tendency,” he is practically telling activist bishops that the encyclical “does not encourage excessive political activism.” Likewise, for the people in government who think that clerics should only stay in the sacristy the columnist reminds them that neither does the Pope’s letter “offer comfort to secular regimes that have become engulfed by crisis over political acts that have been engulfed by crisis....”¹² Asians in general, and Filipinos in particular, have no problem receiving papal directives that actually promote harmony, considered a virtue in this part of the world. This is an important point for people in the Church in the Philippines whose concern, they believe, is the transformation of society. Its transformation, among others, would inevitably include the reduction of poverty, the humanization of globalization, and the rational management of the population problem.

The State’s efforts to reduce family size simply slowed down because the Church made strong objections, but, as Fr. Carroll remarked, the Church did not offer an alternative either. This time the Church should allow the government to fulfill its political duty to manage population problems without undue intervention, as long as intrinsically evil methods, like abortion, are not employed. The same thing is true with matters of justice where “*the Church must not replace the State to bring about a just society.... She has to play her part through rational argument.... A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church*” (n° 28). I can say that the papal document, in complementing justice with charity with emphasis on the latter, would actually prefer less confrontational modes of exercising justice; this is very Oriental, let me say, since it fits best with the people’s preference for harmonious relationships.

The encyclical does not touch on the explosive population issue but I do not think there is any doubt in our minds that the pope is pro-life and would espouse pro-life causes. Living in Europe for practically all his life with all the zero-population growth around, he cannot feel the seriousness of the “population bomb” that is threatening the Philippines. But it seems that in his letter, there is a significant shift in the guiding principles. Basically, he does not invoke that “law” in a lot of moral issues discussed in the encyclical. The papal document, instead, is heavy on the scriptural underpinnings of love and justice. I would personally like to hear

¹² AMANDO DORONILA, “Roles of State and Church,” in *Philippine Daily Enquirer*, 10 February 2006.

Asian bishops addressing the population issue not from an “arid” law of nature but from the dynamic “law” of love. The law of nature has no feeling and therefore does not lead to empathy. The law of love makes empathy an inseparable element. If only we look at the poor with empathy can we be more understanding of their need to control the size of their family so its members can enjoy a quality of life without feeling guilty about it.

Besides the population problem there are other issues arising from globalization; they also merit our attention and action. The document addresses itself to “those who carry out the Church’s charitable activity in the practical level... [who] must not be inspired by ideologies aimed at improving the world, but should rather be guided by the faith which works in love” (n° 33). So, in the domains of “trade justice” and “justice in debt” the Church can still be prophetic and at the same time mindful of the papal exhortation to be guided by that faith working in love. The Church can live its own kenosis by begging the rich countries to end their massive subsidies of their own exporters so “the poor countries can feed their people by protecting their own farmers and staple crops.” The Church, instead of demanding justice, can appeal to the generosity of the rich countries and their institutions “to act immediately to cancel all the unpaid debts of the poorest countries.” If the debts cannot really be cancelled for political or other reasons, at least, “poor countries be given more grants, rather than seeing their debt burden piled even higher with yet more loans.”¹³

There will surely be other non-governmental agencies (NGOs) who will, in the name of right and justice, take the cudgels for the alleged “victim” countries. It is more appropriate for the Church, instead, to use persuasion which is the way of charity. Who knows if this non-interventionist way will turn out to be more effective in the long run? Thus speaks the Pope: “Interior openness to the Catholic dimension of the Church cannot fail to dispose charity workers to work in harmony with other organizations in serving various forms of need, but in a way that respects what is distinctive about the service which Christ requested of his disciples. Saint Paul, in his hymn to charity (cf. 1 Cor 13), teaches us that it is always more than activity alone: ‘If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing’ (1 Cor 13:3). This hymn must be the Magna Carta of all ecclesial service; it sums up all the reflections on love which I have offered throughout this Encyclical Letter” (n° 34).

The Church in this country has been accused of obstruction of development, because of its population policies and its inability to educate morally graduates from its elite schools, who later find

¹³ CHALIAND, *op. cit.*

themselves participating in running the country. I think the wholesale accusation is inaccurate but, somehow, it contains some truths. The Church, too, shares responsibility in whatever havoc colonialism did in the past for it was part of the establishment. Would not this be a timely opportunity, therefore, for the Church to do its own *mea culpa*, like the recent popes did when they asked pardon for faults committed not only by its “children” but also by its institutions? The ensuing credibility would contribute a lot in order for charity to remove the aridity of justice. It would be another expression of kenosis.

Education is a great tool of the Church in the Philippines, for many of best schools are Catholic, which educate the majority of the children of the elite or of the “ruling” class. Beside the inculcation of values, to forge the ability or the competence to manage responsibly and equitably the scarce resources should never be missed in education. Naturally, this will involve the Church’s both traditional and innovative works of charity. The Church, at this point, has not merely involved itself in issues concerning celibacy or liturgical inculturation; it is embroiled now in non-ecclesiastical matters like mining and the clamor for the president’s resignation. Should not the hierarchical Church leave this matter to the educated laity, who might have the technical expertise for such mundane matters? The Pope’s encyclical highlights the proper relationship of the Church to the State and, as Mr. Doronila, in effect, remarked in his column, no particular sector of society has a sole claim on righteousness or a monopoly of justice.¹⁴ These are issues that are better handled in education early on; that goes a long way in the humanization and professionalization of our educational system, otherwise our schools will merely manufacture workers for the multinational companies here and abroad but will not, unfortunately, form leaders at home. Sadly, the Pope’s vision of a well-planned and organized effort for development only flies in the face of over-politicking by political leaders whose intentions seem to be very far from those insightful lessons on love and justice extolled in *Deus Caritas Est*. The Holy Father has added his encyclical to the best kept secrets of the Church; when will we ever learn?

¹⁴ DORONILA, *op. cit.*