

Charity: The Exercise of Love on the Part of the Church as a “Community of Love”

by José-Vicente Martínez Muedra, C.M.

Visitor of Barcelona

1. Introduction: the Trinitarian dimension of the Congregation

The human being is created in the image and likeness of God because he tends to create a community. Therefore God created man and woman (cf. Gen 1:27) and this image and likeness of God alludes to the triune God: the transparent and unbreakable communion of the three divine persons united in love. The theses of Bruno Forte and Leonardo Boff show a certain influence of St. Vincent de Paúl who used to defined God as a Family of Love. Moreover, Bruno Forte and Leonardo Boff, in turn, speak of God as Community of Love that possesses vitality and dynamism.

In our Vincentian communities, we find this type of vitality and dynamism expressed in the Constitutions: “The Community is continually responsible for its own development, especially as we renew the principal elements of our way of living and acting. These are: 1. Following Christ the Evangelizer as a community, which generates in us special bonds of love and affection; in this spirit we should, *‘like good friends’* (CR, VIII, 2), join reverence for one another with genuine esteem” (*Constitutions*, 25, 1).

Pannenberg speaks of the one and self-differentiating God. God is not identity. The revelation of God in Jesus includes three aspects:

- **The Experience of Jesus** who senses himself as united with the Father and moved by the impulse of the Spirit. Jesus shares an intimacy with the Father that is given by the Spirit. This intimacy is rooted and lived in the Father.
- **The life of the first Christian community** comes to be as a continuation of Jesus’ religiosity. It is within this perspective that we ought to read article twenty of our Constitutions which follows: “The Church finds the ultimate source of its life and action in the Trinity. The Congregation, within the Church, does the same.”

1. Gathered in community to announce the Father's love for all, we express that same love in our own life.
 2. We follow Christ who called apostles and disciples and shared a fraternal life with them to evangelize the poor.
 3. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we build up a unity among ourselves to achieve our mission, and so offer credible witness to Christ the Savior.
- Also under **Community Prayer** we read: “We ought to show special honor and devotion to the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation” (cf. *Constitutions*, no. 48).

The biblical basis for these doctrinal points are found in the Gospel of St. Mark where Jesus gives the instruction about Christian community: In Mark 3:20-21 and 3:31-35, we observe that Mark makes a play on the word brother. In the first instance, he makes reference to Jesus' blood relations (cf. Mark 3:20-21; Gen. 13:8; and 14:14-16). In the second instance, Jesus refers to the accepted use of “brother” with regard to membership in the tribe (cf. Mark 3:31-35; and Num. 8:26; 16:10; 36:2). Thus the Christian community is a community of brothers, a fraternity, comprised of those who love well, follow, and listen to the Master who is Christ following the will of the Father.

2. Charity as a manifestation of Trinitarian love (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 19)

The Pope specifies how this community of friends that loves one another is to be a model of love, and which is patterned on the love with which Christ loved us (cf. John 13:34 ff.). Moreover, Christ gives us life by way of love (cf. John 13:13) for the redemption and service of others (cf. John 13:13-17; Mark 10:44-45). This is the greatest kind of love (*Αγαπη*) that God has manifested to humanity (cf. John 3:16). Jesus Christ makes himself neighbor. In addition, Christ shares in humanity and he acts as the Good Samaritan of the poor (cf. Luke 10:29-37). According to the parable of the Good Samaritan, the reason why both the priest and Levite pass at a distance is not for the lack of generosity, rather a scrupulous respect for the law prohibited them from contact with a cadaver (cf. Numb. 5:2; 19:2-13). The power of the parable consists in the Samaritan — not an observer of the Law — who shows himself to be the true follower of the spirit of the Law. He places love above any other personal interest. Following this line of reasoning, the *Constitutions* no. 18 recommends that the provinces take initiatives in order to imitate Christ, the “Good Samaritan” who goes out to relieve the needs of the poor.

The Pope calls us to become infected with this love of Christ in the same manner that one contracts the flu. In a similar vein, St. Vincent speaks to us: “It is certain that I have been sent, not only to love God, but that God might be loved. It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love God. I need to love my neighbor, as an image of God and an object of God’s love, and to work [...] so that by virtue of a mutual love they love one another through the love of God, who loved them to the point of surrendering his only Son to death” (ES XI, 553).

The missionary mode of evangelization calls people to conversion by making them participants in the Sacraments. Furthermore, the visible sign that gives credibility to this Good News is human promotion and is Trinitarian love. “Love is therefore the service that the Church carries out in order to attend constantly to man’s sufferings and his needs, including material needs” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 19). Our constitutions summarize this idea in the following manner: “The love (*Αγάπη*) of Christ, who had pity on the crowd (Mark 8:2), is the source of all our apostolic activity, and urges us, in the words of St. Vincent, ‘to make the gospel really effective’ (SV XII, 84). According to the varying circumstances of time and place, our work of evangelization in word and action should strive for this, that all, through a process of conversion and celebration of the sacraments, should be faithful to the ‘kingdom, that is to say, the new world, the new order, the new manner of being, of living, of living community, which the gospel inaugurates’ [*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no. 23]” (*Constitutions*, no. 11).

3. Charity as a work of the Church (*Deus Caritas Est*, nos. 20-25)

The Pope begins to speak to us concerning the building of the Christian community by referring to the pillars upon which the community stands. The first Christians discovered that Jesus (with the Holy Spirit that made them recognize their calling at Pentecost) was sending them to communicate his message of salvation to all men and women throughout the world.

In order that they be faithful to this double task (*to live united and to be evangelizers*) the community discovered that they needed four fundamental tools in order to build a true Christian community: **Catechesis** (*the first witness to the life of Jesus*); **Communal Prayer** (*an intense and deep communion with God*); **Sharing of Goods** (*a genuine communion with those of greatest need*); and the **Eucharist** (*the summary and nourishment of all that following Jesus means*).

Catechesis: The first generation of Christians heard first hand about the life, works, miracles, and marvels of Jesus of Nazareth. Part of these took written form (the Gospels), or became part of the tradition

about the transcendental fact of the resurrection of Christ (Letters) with the famous discovery of the empty tomb.

Catechesis has had and continues to have its *raison d'être* in the Church for the purpose of forming (permanent formation) its members. In the permanent formation of its members, the Church does for its members what other groups do for their members. For example an electrician, a physician, or a mechanic updates himself. The Christian, likewise, has the most agreeable duty to better understand his/her faith. Formation is essential for authentic Christian living, and goes well beyond a superficial response of mere appearances.

Common prayer: The entire community places itself in God's hands, offering to God its hopes, dreams, joys, interceding for both the needs of the Christian Community and those of the world.

Sharing of material resources: These are shared for the sake of the needs of the Church and of the poor. This allows the Christian community to live with a decided austerity, while knowing how to use the goods with courage.

A Christian who does not attend mass and lives in solidarity with the poor is confessing God with his works but he lacks the spiritual element so as to profess God with the lips. On the other hand, a Christian that goes to mass and does not become one with the poor, is a Christian in name only. The Church has received the poor as its inheritance from Jesus, it has the joyful obligation to evangelize the poor and to help them with every kind of need. Any church can call itself Christian, yet if it relegates to the government alone the care of the poor, then it fails to be a Christian community in truth. It may be that its adherents are on fire for Jesus because of the preacher's words. However, if their following of Jesus does not include the poor, then they are fueling emotion that misses the essential point of Jesus' mission.

The Eucharist: People tend to gravitate with those that share their dreams, their interests, and to celebrate. Every celebration has two elements which must be taken into account: The remembrance of the past historical event and its implication of this event for the future. In Spain we celebrate the New Year's Eve party, and it illustrates concretely these two realities. We remember that the year has passed (12 grapes) and we begin a year that promises to be better than the previous (a toast and a drink of wine). These two realities are identified with the traditional meal of 12 o'clock midnight.

All these elements are found in the celebration of the Eucharist or the mass: **We celebrate our identity as a People of God saved by Christ;** not only do we recall what happened that first holy Friday

in history, we also celebrate the day when we will be with Him in heaven. These two realities form the background of our celebration.

While celebrating this identity, I am conscious that there are brothers that do not have the same dignity that I share and love urges me to solidarity with them to whom I am sent to help (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 22).

God gathers the Christian community in order to hear the Word. God also assembles the community before the altar so that it may share the meal of brotherhood. The community receives Jesus who gives himself as nourishment. Subsequently, the community is sent by Jesus to announce the Good News.

As the Early Church organized itself in the task of evangelization, it apportioned various ministries. Some of its leaders retained the ministry of the Word, and others were charged with the ministry of charity as a fundamental work. Thus the apostles were the principal animators of evangelization, and the mission of the deacons (cf. Acts 6:1-6) was defined by the principle of co-responsibility and collaboration in evangelization.

St. Vincent prepared the laity for the popular missions and the missions *ad gentes* in order begin and maintain the Confraternities of Charity in each mission, so that there would be a response to the needs of the poor. Moreover, St. Vincent de Paúl exhorted the missionaries that they were not to neglect meeting the material needs of the poor either by their own or with the help of recruits from among the people who would do this work (cf. ES XI, 393).

Pope Benedict writes: "Thus far, two essential facts have emerged from our reflections:

- a) The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (κeryγμα - μαρτυρια), celebrating the sacraments (leitourgia), and exercising the ministry of charity (διακονια)." These signs gives credibility to the announcement and comes to be an affect Gospel. "These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.
- b) 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. Without in any way detracting

from this commandment of universal love, the Church also has a specific responsibility: within the ecclesial family no member should suffer through being in need. The teaching of the Letter to the Galatians is emphatic: 'So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, and especially to those who are of the household of faith' (6:10)" (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 25).

4. Justice and Peace (nos. 26-29)

Pope Benedict XVI refers to the Marxist critique of the social order. Part of the change, in the search for a new social order to eradicate poverty came in the 19th century, was derived from Marxism. It critiqued the reduction of charity to its minimum in the form of almsgiving. Actually in the West new structures have been created, for example, the Welfare State, that admit the politics of reinsertion of the marginalized into society while applying two principals of political life (solidarity and subsidiarity). Because this formula was not followed the Welfare State has entered a period of crisis because of paternalism. One of the results of a paternalistic State in some countries has been that the State has taken charge of instilling values in children. In effect it has assumed the paternal and maternal responsibility of the parents of the child.

Another alternative to the fight against poverty is to change the criteria of justice, passing from what is an inverse distributive justice to an equitable justice. The social message of Jubilee 2000 went in this direction. The industrialized countries have turned into very bad administrators of the money of the poor; and 0.7% of the budget for public works ought to be set aside for underdeveloped countries as way of returning to them at least part of the money which we have robbed from them.

By evangelization we contribute to the building of a world based on equitable justice. Pope Paul VI writes: "For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new: 'Now I am making the whole of creation new.' But there is no new humanity if there are not first of all new persons renewed by Baptism and by lives lived according to the Gospel. The purpose of evangelization is therefore precisely this interior change, and if it had to be expressed in one sentence the best way of stating it would be to say that the Church evangelizes when she seeks to convert, solely through the divine power of the message she proclaims, both the personal and collective consciences of people, the activities in which they engage, and the lives and concrete milieu which are theirs.

Strata of humanity which are transformed: for the Church it is a question not only of preaching the Gospel in ever wider geographic areas or to ever greater numbers of people, but also of affecting and as it were upsetting, through the power of the Gospel, mankind's criteria of judgment, determining values, points of interest, lines of thought, sources of inspiration and models of life, which are in contrast with the Word of God and the plan of salvation" (PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, nos. 18-19). A simple example to illustrate the above statement, is mission sponsorship of a child. When one sponsors an Angolan child so that he might study is to promote the universal right to education. In such a way a child from Angola and a European child will enjoy going to school. This amounts to investing in the future of a nation, since both the Angolan and European child will contribute to the development and progress of his country.

For St. Vincent assistance can neither be nor appear to be a substitute for structural reform. On the contrary, injustice demands a cry to God for help. Even if from the side of human beings social-charitable work becomes a voluntary response, nevertheless from God's side it remains an obligation. Furthermore, Vincent de Paúl underscores in a letter of March 8, 1658 written to a superior of Marseilles: "May God give to us the grace to endear our hearts to the poor (*les misérables*) and to believe that when we offer them succor we are acting out of justice and not mercy" (ES VII, 90)!

Officially, the Church delayed incorporating into its social doctrine, "social justice" and by way of a small detail: the Christian reading of "The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" of 1948 is put forward by Pope John XXIII in the encyclical *Pacem in terris* of April 11, 1963 (cf. *Pacem in terris*, nos. 11-34).

When St. Vincent speaks of social justice, he refers to divine justice. He presents an argument from theodicy: It is God who makes us just and wants that we recover our dignity as children of God that we used to have from Creation. For this reason social action becomes a way by which a person who has been marginalized recovers the dignity and freedom of a child of God; we are among the intermediaries of divine justice that leads to an extension of the Kingdom of God among the poor (cf. ES I, 203; ES IV, 168; ES IX, 919). In this light we ought to re-read no. 28 of the encyclical *Pacem in terris*.

5. The detailed outline of the Church's activity (31)

Pope Benedict XVI acknowledges all those associations, lay as well as religions, that through the ages have followed Christ The Good Samaritan, having fulfilled the spirit of the Law, they have comforted the poor in their material and spiritual needs, "in the

same way that we extinguish a flame." He illustrates this in the following points:

- a) According to the proposed model found in the parable of The Good Samaritan, Christian charity is simply before all else, a response to the immediate needs in a particular situation: the hungry need to be fed, the naked clothed, the sick cared for so that they recover, and the prisoners visited, etc.
- b) Charitable activity ought to be free from partisanship and ideology. It is neither a means for transforming the world according to an ideology nor does it serve a strategic purpose. Rather it is the present and concrete actualization of love that man always needs.
- c) Besides, charity ought not to be a means for what today can be termed as proselytizing. Love is free; it is not practiced in order to obtain other objectives. But this does not mean that charitable activity, in a manner of speaking, put God and Christ aside. Action always involves the entire person. Often the deepest roots of poverty lie precisely in the absence of God. Those who exercise charity in the name of the Church will never try to impose upon others the faith of the Church. It is evident that love, in its purity and gratuity, is the best testimony of the God in whom we believe and who inspires us to love.

6. Those responsible for charitable activity in the Church (32-39)

The Pope takes up again the theme treated in nos. 20-25, recalling the four pillars of the Christian community from which flow the charitable action of the Church: Prayer needs to accompany my service (cf. ES IX, 374-375.381.1117; ES XI 285); the Eucharist prompts me to be *Αγαπη* for the poor and formation leads to this: The purpose of the Congregation of the Mission is to follow Christ evangelizing the poor. This purpose is achieved when, faithful to St. Vincent, the members individually and collectively: ... help the clergy and laity in their formation and lead them to a fuller participation in the evangelizing of the poor (CC no. 1.3). Let us remember that for St. Vincent, charitable action was already untied to the announcement of the *kerygma* and Jesus' announcement of the Kingdom for the poor.

The Pope describes the profile of the Christian who is responsible for Social Ministry: **a person of faith**, that manifests itself in action (cf. Sant 2,14-18; XI, 393 f.), **a person of prayer**

(cf. ES XI, 778), **with a spirit of humility** (cf. RC II, 14; CC 7) **and who is nourished by the Sacraments: principally the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation** (cf. CC 45, 1-2).

7. Conclusion (40-42)

The Pope refers to Hebrews 13:7-8: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” The pope mentions some of those who have preceded us in the faith and the service of the poor, and among these was St. Vincent de Paul. The Pope urges us to place ourselves in the hands of Mary: “Mary, Virgin and Mother, shows us what love is and whence it draws its origin and its constantly renewed power. 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 which 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” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 42).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

VARIOUS AUTHORS, *Diccionario de espiritualidad Vicenciana*, CEME, Salamanca 1995.

BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005).

BOFF LEONARDO, *A Santíssima Trindade, a melhor Comunidade*, Paulinas, Sao Paulo 1986.

CONGREGATION OF THE MISSION, *Constitutions and Statutes*, English translation 1989, Rome: The General Curia of the Congregation of the Mission.

JUAN XXIII, Encyclical Letter *Pacem in terris* (11 April 1963).

PABLO VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975).

VINCENT DE PAUL, *Obras completas*, Sígueme, Santander 1972-1986.

(GREGORY SEMENIUK, C.M., translator)