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VATICAN - WORDS OF DOCTRINE Nicola Bux and Salvatore Vitiello - "Church, a Community of Love"

Vatican City (Agenzia Fides) - "Church, a Community of love". The second part of the encyclical «Deus Caritas Est» bears the title: « Caritas - The practice of Love by the Church as a "Community of Love"». The word Church is used in DCE no less than 88 times, although in different settings. This very high number reveals the determinant function which the Church, the concept and above all the reality of Church, has in the text written by Pope Benedict XVI.
In the title and at paragraph 19, one essential trait of the Church's identity clearly emerges: she is a «community of love». Definition in which the term «community» indicates mainly the social, public, not intimistic or privatistic nature of the «ecclesial phenomenon». We all know that the «community» derives essentially and inseparably from «communion»: it is the Ecclesia de Trinitate rooted in the Mystery of the Trinitarian God which understands herself as «divine presence in the world», as we said earlier: «family of God in the world ».
This community is also known as a community «of love»: in fact it is Trinitarian love, God himself, who convokes the people of God into one ecclesial communio, making the practice of charity through the Church, the visibility of His Love for mankind. « "If you see charity, you see the Trinity", says Benedict XVI quoting Saint Augustine (n. 19).
Therefore a Church which is a community of love whose heart is continually transformed by the Spirit, whose essential task is the convocation of all men and women into one family of God. This is the missionary task: the Church is not an agency for vague pacifism or generic good works, a sort of massive «international red-cross », it has a task in history: to obey the will of the Father who wishes to reunite all men and women with Christ in one family .
Finalised to the realisation of the lofty mission assigned to her by Christ, the Church «cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word. […]the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities » (DCE 22). The practical exercise of charity is not a mania, nor is it subjective philanthropic predisposition, rather, the Pope says, it is part of the essence of the Church, her most profound identity.
The intimate nature of the Church is expressed in a triple task: kerygma-martyria, (proclamation) leiturgia (sacraments) and diakonia (charity). These tasks presuppose one another and cannot be separated (DCE 25). How often, to justify pastoral reasons, we create totally impermeable structures where it seems that Christ can be proclaimed without authentic education to charity and service, without an expression of the charity of the faith or, even more often, places in which the practice of charity is not in the least concerned with announcing the Gospel, in the name of a wrongly misunderstood respect for others which smacks of relativism. This is not the Church, but rather a partial and therefore dangerous (eiresis) dimension of her essential triple essential identity.
But what are the specific characteristics of the charity exercised by the Church, since they reveal a certain ecclesial identity?
First of all Christian charity is a «response to immediate needs and specific situations» (DEC 31), therefore the Church is firmly rooted in reality and in history and is faithful to the compassionate tender gaze with which Christ looks on all men and women. To live this sort of concern it is indispensable that «Those who work for the Church's charitable organisations […]dedicate themselves to others with heartfelt concern »…« Consequently, in addition to their necessary professional training, these charity workers need a "formation of the heart": they need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others».
The Church is also an expert in humanity able to act with the heart, at the deepest level of the I, where the Mystery is present, active and shows itself. If charity must not be a means for proselytism, because love is always free, «this does not mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside. For it is always

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concerned with the whole man. Often the deepest cause of suffering is the very absence of God » (DCE 31). « Practical activity will always be insufficient, unless it visibly expresses a love for man, a love nourished by an encounter with Christ » (DCE 34). This is the encounter of which the Pope speaks in the introduction that I quoted: the encounter which opens life to a new horizon.

The Church reveals her essence in love and in the exercise of that love which is charity and she gives first place to charity through the dimension of prayer: love which fails to pray cannot be true love. The Church's prayer is the first form of love: « It is time to reaffirm the importance of prayer in the face of the activism and the growing secularism of many Christians engaged in charitable work » (DCE 37). The deepest intention of the Encyclical is a call to « To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world » (DCE 39).

The Church is the Church of the Saints. Testimony of charity starts from them involving the whole community of believers, among them most excellent is Mary «the Woman who loves» (DCE 41). Image of the Church, Mary is for all a continual call to love which is the affirmation of our very identity as human beings and Christians.

Therefore, very briefly, as it emerges from the Encyclical Deus Caritas Est, the Church is a community of love with an immense missionary task, firmly rooted in reality and history, able to act with her heart in a continual dimension of prayer. Here is material sufficient for a profound examination of conscience on what kind of Church we are living, what kind of Church we have in mind, and above all, what each of us means when we confirm our faith and say : «I believe in the Church». (Agenzia Fides 1/6/2006 - righe 67, parole 936)

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