

Back to the Basics Program

The following is a summary of the encyclicals of Pope Benedict XVI to date:

Deus Caritas Est (“God is Love”) – promulgated December 25, 2005

1. This encyclical has two main parts: a reflection on the different dimensions of love and select thoughts on carrying out the commandment to love one's neighbor.
2. “Love” has a multiple meanings. In the New Testament, real love results in setting aside *eros* in favor of *agape* to express the Christian notion of a self-sacrificing love. The *eros* needs discipline, purification and growth in maturity to not lose its dignity or degenerate into a commodity, i.e. pure “sex.” As *eros* and *agape* find correct equilibrium, the true nature of love is realized.
3. Since man is both spirit and matter, the challenge of the *eros* is overcome when body, mind and spirit are found to be in perfect harmony. Love becomes “ecstasy,” not in a fleeting moment of intoxication, but an exodus from the inward-looking self toward its liberation through self-giving, self-discovery, and the finding of God.
4. In Jesus the *eros-agape* expresses love in its most sublime form. He guaranteed an enduring presence of himself through the Eucharist. By it we are involved his self-giving, united with him and with all others to whom he gives himself; thus, we all become “one body.” In this manner, love of neighbor and love of God are truly united. The double Commandment, thanks to this encounter with the *agape* of God, is no longer solely a precept: love can be “commanded” because it has first been given.
5. Love of neighbor means being responsible for each member of the faithful, as well as the entire ecclesial community. Awareness of this duty in the early Church (cf. Acts 2:44-45) meant that means were needed to carry it out more effectively. The diaconate originated as a ministry of love of neighbor exercised in an orderly way, i.e. a concrete and a spiritual service (cf. Acts 6:16). This practice of charity became one of the Church’s essential responsibilities. Her deepest nature is thus expressed in the Church’s three-fold duty to: proclaim the Word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrate the sacraments (*leiturgia*), and exercise the ministry of charity (*diakonia*). These duties presuppose one another and are inseparable.
6. Since the 19th century, objections raised to the Church's charitable activities claim that they are contrary to justice and will become a means of preserving the status quo. It is contended that, through works of charity, the Church fosters the continuance of the present unjust system, making it seem “tolerable” and thereby impeding the evolution of a better world. The Magisterium, from the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Leo XIII (1891) to John Paul II's social Encyclicals (*Laborem Exercens* [1981], *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* [1987] and *Centesimus Annus* [1991]), developed a comprehensive social

doctrine. The just ordering of society is a core duty of politics and not the Church. Catholic social doctrine does not seek to confer Church power over the State, but to purify and illuminate reason by forming consciences, so that the requirements of justice may be recognized and practiced. **Yet there is no ordering of the State, however just, that can make a service of love superfluous. The State which tries to provide everything ultimately becomes a bureaucracy incapable of guaranteeing the thing which the suffering person needs: loving personal concern.**

7. A positive effect of globalization is that concern for neighbor transcends national borders, creating many philanthropic organizations. **The Church's charitable activity, however, must not lose its own identity and become just another form of social assistance; it must maintain all the splendor of Christian charity.** Therefore:

- Christian charitable activity must be a personal encounter with Christ, whose love moves the heart of the believer, awakening within him love of neighbor.
- Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies, i.e. it must be "a heart which sees." This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly.
- Christian charitable activity cannot be a means of proselytizing. Love is free and is not used as a way of achieving other ends. This does not mean we leave God aside but rather know when to speak of God and when to let love alone speak. St Paul's words in 1 Cor 13 are the *Magna Carta* of service, ensuring it is not reduced to pure activism.

8. We must remember to pray. Contact with Christ prevents the immensity of needs or our own limitations from driving us to claim to do what God is ignoring or from surrendering to inertia and resignation. People who pray do not waste time, but seek the light and strength which overcomes darkness and selfishness in the world.

Spe Salvi ("Saved by Hope") – promulgated November 30, 2007

Pope Benedict XVI offers the example two modern saints to show us how to live in hope.

1. He first shares the story of St. Josephine Bakhita as an example of someone who has, "a real encounter with this God for the first time." Josephine was born circa 1869 in Darfur in Sudan. At age nine, she was kidnapped by slave-traders, beaten and sold five times in slave markets. She eventually worked as a slave for a family and was flogged every day until she bled. As a result, she bore 144 scars throughout her life.

She was rescued in 1882, when she was bought by the Italian consul. Bakhita came to know a master above all others, the Lord. She learned that the Lord had also been flogged, and that he knew her, he created her, and that he loved her. She now had hope - not the modest hope of finding less cruel masters, but the great hope. The pope states, "*Through the knowledge of this hope she was 'redeemed,' no longer a slave, but a free child of God. She understood what Paul meant when he reminded the Ephesians that*

previously they were without hope and without God in the world...without hope because without God."

On 9 January 1890, she was baptized, confirmed and received her first Eucharist from the Patriarch of Venice. On 8 December 1896 she took her vows in the Congregation of the Canossian Sisters. She traveled Italy to share her story with the greatest number of souls.

2. Pope Benedict also relates the story the Vietnamese martyr Paul Le-Bao-Tinh, who died in 1857, as a way to "... illustrate the transformation of suffering through the power of hope springing from faith."

As the martyr Paul's letter begins, "The prison here is a true image of everlasting Hell: to cruel tortures of every kind are added hatred, vengeance, calumnies, obscene speech, quarrels, evil acts, swearing, curses, as well as anguish and grief. But God...is with me always; he has delivered me from these tribulations and made them sweet, for his mercy is for ever. In the midst of these torments, which terrify others, I am, by the grace of God, full of joy and gladness, because I am not alone... Christ is with me."

He goes on to describe the power of hope: "...I would, in the ardent love I have for you, prefer to be torn limb from limb and to die as a witness to your love. O Lord, show your power, save me, sustain me, that in my infirmity your power may be shown and may be glorified before the nations ... In the midst of this storm I cast my anchor towards the throne of God, the anchor that is the lively hope in my heart."

The pope affirms that, "*Christ descended into 'Hell' and is close to those cast into it, transforming their darkness into light. Suffering and torment is terrible and unbearable, yet the star of hope has risen.*" Benedict closes by reminding us that, "...Suffering—without ceasing to be suffering—becomes, despite everything, a hymn of praise."

Caritas in Veritate ("Charity in Truth") – promulgated June 29, 2009

The Holy Father touches on many topics in this encyclical. He attempts to illustrate the interconnectedness of the Gospel message to many aspects of modern life.

1. CHARITY AND TRUTH: Charity is the heart of the Church's social doctrine yet it can be misinterpreted and detached from ethical living. The pope warns how, "*a Christianity of charity without truth would be more or less interchangeable with a pool of good sentiments, helpful for social cohesion, but of little relevance.*" **Development has need of truth, especially the two criteria that govern moral action: justice and the common good.**

The pope echoes Pope Paul VI's encyclical, *Populorum Progressio*, which "*underlined the indispensable importance of the Gospel for building a society according to freedom and justice.*" Causes of underdevelopment are not primarily of the material order but lie in the will, in the mind, and in the lack of true brotherhood.

2. HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: If profit is the exclusive goal, if it is produced by improper means and without the common good as its ultimate end, it risks destroying wealth and creating poverty. The pope enumerates certain "malfunctions" of development: financial dealings that are "largely speculative," migratory flows that are often "provoked by some particular circumstance and then given insufficient attention," and "the unregulated exploitation of the earth's resources."

He refers to the encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, which "highlights the need for a system with three subjects: the market, the State and civil society" and encourages a civilizing of the economy and economic forms based on solidarity. Globalization is not just a socio-economic process but needs "to promote a person-based and community-oriented process of world-wide integration that is open to truth..." Given this interconnectedness, the pope calls for "a new humanistic synthesis" because the world's wealth is growing in absolute terms, but inequalities are increasing along with new forms of poverty.

3. RELATIVISM: Cultural interaction opens new prospects for dialogue, but a twofold danger exists: a "cultural eclecticism" in which cultures are viewed as "substantially equivalent," and the opposing danger of "cultural leveling and indiscriminate acceptance of all types of conduct and lifestyles."

4. HUMAN LIFE: Respect for human life "cannot be detached from questions concerning the development of peoples," and, "when a society moves towards denial or suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man's true good." Governments cannot lose sight of the objectivity and inviolability of rights despite the challenges associated with population growth. They must honor the centrality and the integrity of the nuclear family while realizing that mankind is a single human family. Christianity and other religions "can offer their contribution to development only if God has a place in the public realm." The pope particularly reminds us that, "every migrant is a human person who, as such, possesses fundamental, inalienable rights that must be respected in every circumstance."

5. SUBSIDIARITY: The Pope also reminds us of how subsidiarity assists the human person via the autonomy of "intermediate bodies." **Subsidiarity is the most effective antidote against any form of all-encompassing welfare state.**

6. TECHNOLOGY: The pope warns against humanity thinking it can re-create itself through the wonders of technology. Technology cannot have "absolute freedom" and one of the battlegrounds today is in the field of bioethics. "Reason without faith is doomed to flounder in an illusion of its own omnipotence." Research on embryos and cloning is promoted in today's disillusioned culture which believes it has mastered every mystery.

Benedict XVI highlights how, "human development needs Christians with their arms raised towards God in prayer, just as it needs love and forgiveness, self-denial, acceptance of others, justice and peace."