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The Covenantal Character of Love: Reflections on *Deus Caritas Est*

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"The Newness of Biblical Faith"

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16). So begins Benedict XVI's first encyclical. With this irreducible core of revelation and the Christian faith, the Pope indicates the central theme of the encyclical: the character of divine and human love and, as he puts it, their "intrinsic link" (DCE 1). In developing this theme, *Deus Caritas Est* tells us that the "newness of biblical faith is shown chiefly in two elements" (DCE 8), each correlating in its own way with the interior meaning of love: "the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny" (DCE 1; cf. DCE 8).

Certainly, one of the most remarkable passages in the encyclical occurs in the discussion of the first of these, the "new image of God" (DCE 9). There Benedict tells us that God's love can be characterized, following Pseudo-Dionysius, as simultaneously *érôs* and *agápē*. As the Pope succinctly puts it, "God's *eros* for man is also totally *agape*. . . . God is the absolute and ultimate source of all being; but this universal principle of creation—the *Logos*, primordial reason—is at the same time a lover with all the passion of a true love" (DCE 10). This "passionate" character of God's love seeks out man lost in the ambiguities and half-light of his sin. Where in this tangle of culpable ignorances,

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ambivalences, and obscure histories, ambiguous cultural and social structures, and confused and distorted actions is the real human being? Thus God is himself a "seeker", and therefore his love is *érōs*.

Even more crucially, however, God's "heart recoils" from abandoning sinful man; his "compassion grows warm and tender" (DCE 10; quoting Hos 11:8). Our situation draws out God's mercy, which in turn elicits a decisive "turn . . . against himself" (DCE 10: *contra se ipsum vertat Deum*; DCE 12: *contra se vertit Deus*), "his love against his justice" (DCE 10). He shows himself to be wholly self-sacrificial even in the penetration of his justice with a mercy that goes so far as the agapic love of the Cross.

This brief commentary will consider this notion of God seeking and bringing man back into the love that lies at the heart of his covenant. Along with St. John's lapidary proclamation that "God is love", the notion of "covenant" forms an essential element of the faith. As Joseph Ratzinger once put it, the idea of covenant constitutes the "interior thread of Scripture itself"; it seems "somehow to sum up conclusively the 'essence of Christianity'" (Ratzinger 1995: 635). Concretely, God's own "seeking" and this "turning" in love constitute the basic structure of the Christian notion of "covenant". In a sense, this movement describes its very heart.

And the second element, the new "image of man"? As Benedict also emphasizes, the "newness of biblical faith" not only tells us about God; it also tells us who we are. It discloses us to ourselves, precisely in showing us the inner meaning of man's "primordial aspiration" for God (DCE 10; cf. GS 22). Without in any way claiming to offer an exhaustive discussion, this essay will address the consequences of God's seeking us in his covenant for our understanding of the human love at the heart of marriage, which is itself a "covenant" (GS 48; CCC 1601).

The New Image of God

As we have just seen, in Jesus Christ "it is God himself who goes in search of . . . a suffering and lost humanity."

When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the

father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are no mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity (DCE 12).

This would seem to constitute a revolutionary feature of Christian faith. While the Greek understanding of love (*érōs*) would highlight man's search for God through contemplation, the Christian God is the one who sets off in search of us. As Benedict tells us, the idea of *érōs* is that it represents this kind of searching love. But in searching out and finding us, in becoming one of us in Christ, God turns and faces himself as man. Certainly the possibility for this second moment is already given in the eternal reality of God-facing-God in the Persons of the Trinity. But now this turning and facing constitutes the center of history (RH 1; cf. Balthasar 1994), as the Son "becomes sin" and takes on the guilt of humanity, "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). In the words of the encyclical, God not only turns to face himself, he in fact "turns against himself" (*contra se ipsum vertat Deum*) for the sake of man. If God passionately seeks his lost creatures in his infinite *érōs*, God in Christ even takes onto his shoulders the world's sinful antagonism to God through the agapic love of the Cross. His divine *érōs* for man issues forth in divine *agápē*. God gives, between the Divine Persons of the Trinity, the response, the Yes on behalf of man, and man is confronted in Christ, like the prodigal son, with the justice and mercy of the Father.

The Bible uses nuptial terms to describe this finding and "turning". Our relationship with God is no longer that of simply "standing in God's presence" (DCE 13). Now it "becomes union with God through sharing in Jesus' self-gift, sharing in his body and blood" (DCE 13). Thus, the Eucharist also becomes crucial to the meaning of Christian love: "The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving" (DCE 13). Moreover, union with Christ is also "union with all those to whom he gives himself" (DCE 14). We become one in the eucharistic-ecclesial body. Indeed, Benedict reminds us that *agápē* was also a name for the Eucharist itself: "there God's own *agape* comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us" (DCE 14).

Christ's "becoming sin", far from leaving us passive or helpless in the face of God's action on our behalf, demands that our own love, our lives and actions, be fitted into and take the form of his own Yes to the Father. His love is therefore the source and meaning of all Christian love, and, against it, all love will finally be measured (*DCE* 11; cf. Balthasar 1983: 27). "Only by keeping in mind this Christological and sacramental basis can we correctly understand Jesus' teaching on love" (*DCE* 14).

Love's Turn in the Old Covenant

The drama of this searching and turning against himself is played out in the evolving understanding of God's covenant with his people, which begins in what appears to be the legalism of God's unilateral imposition of law and ends with the nuptial union of God and man in the Eucharist.

The series of covenantal stories in the Old Testament show an emerging awareness of the meaning of God's covenant with man. Creation itself constituted an original covenantal relationship (cf. Camino 2001: 218-19), one that entailed the relationship of man and woman as such in their mutual relation to God. There are also the covenants with Noah and David, and especially with Abraham. But particularly important is the covenantal relationship set up on Sinai, which is set forth in the form of laws. In an essay on the idea of covenant, Joseph Ratzinger argues that the covenant between Yahweh and his people at first was characterized by a lack of possible reciprocity due to God's utter transcendence. Thus, the translators of the Septuagint translate *b'rith* as *diathéke*, indicating the first meaning of covenant is God's decree. However, there is here a sense of the meaning of covenant as gift. If the covenant is unilateral in the sense that it is God's decree, it is nevertheless, at the same time, God's gift, giving definitive identity to his people (Ratzinger 1995: 637). The Israelites are the ones who have been chosen (this aspect of God's covenant is established in the Abrahamic covenant) and have been taught the living content of this belonging (the Mosaic covenant).

But how, Ratzinger asks, does the nuptial language of the prophets change our understanding of God's covenant with his people? Characterized in terms of marriage, infidelity to the covenant can be

described as adultery. Certainly, according to the justice of the relationship, Israel deserved to be cast off as a faithless spouse, having broken the spousal covenant to her Lord. Instead, Yahweh turns aside his anger. But more fundamentally, the prophets' use of the nuptial analogy would seem to import into the idea of God's covenant with his people a kind of bilateral relationship. Certainly, the possibility of a breach under the Mosaic law allowed for the openness to a certain reciprocity. God gives the law, but his people are expected to follow the law in order to stay within the covenant. The relationship here, also, is one of love: "The history of the love-relationship between God and Israel consists, at the deepest level, in the fact that he gives her the *Torah*" (*DCE* 9).

But the prophetic use of nuptial language further develops this reciprocity. It introduces the additional element that God himself is implied in the relationship, insofar as it suggests that the relationship is no longer simply thought of in terms of lord and vassal. Rather, it becomes a kind of "love story" (Ratzinger 1995: 637). It implies God's own commitment and enduring fidelity in the face of faithlessness on the part of Israel. Thus, *Deus Caritas Est* reminds us of the passionate language used by the prophets:

The Prophets, particularly Hosea and Ezekiel, described God's passion for his people using boldly erotic images. God's relationship with Israel is described using the metaphors of betrothal and marriage. (*DCE* 9)

It is in this light that the encyclical quotes Hosea 11:8-9:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel! . . . My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger. I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst. (*DCE* 10)

The Realism of the New Covenant

The moment of God "turning against himself", foreshadowed in the nuptial analogy offered by the prophets (*DCE* 10), takes on an extreme

realism in the New Covenant—*é kainé diathéke*—effected in the body of Christ and his nuptial relationship with the Church. At the Last Supper, we have a reenactment of the covenant in blood of the Old Testament. There Moses sprinkles the altar, which substitutes for God, and the people, “saying ‘this is the blood of my covenant which the Lord has made with you’” (Ratzinger 1995: 641, quoting Ex 24:8). Christ pours out his own blood for the forgiveness of sins and for the redemption of the world. According to this form of covenant stemming from Sinai, the parties would enter into a pact or would admit a stranger into a familial relation through a kind of legal fiction (Ratzinger 1995: 641–42).

By invoking this tradition, Christ is also radicalizing it. The covenant has become not only a fictitious or juridical kinship, but a covenant written in the body of Christ himself, thus intensifying it “to an overwhelming realism and simultaneously reveal[ing] a hitherto inconceivable depth. . . . For this sacramental communion of blood, which has now become possible, unites the recipient with this bodily man Jesus, and thus with his divine mystery, in a totally concrete and even physical communion” (Ratzinger 1995: 642). In this way, man is drawn out of himself, taken up into God’s own “mode of being”, and divinized.

The reality of flesh and blood in the New Covenant is therefore the reality of God’s covenant with man brought to its deepest implications. As Benedict tells us, it is here that we find “love in its most radical form”. As he puts it, in “contemplating the pierced side of Christ . . . , we can understand the starting-point of this Encyclical Letter: ‘God is love’ It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin” (DCE 12).

If God’s *érōs* seeks out man, it does so in order to unite us with God in the bodily realism of the New Covenant. In this sense, then, God’s seeking is simultaneous with his “turning against himself” out of love and compassion for us. If God’s turning is inherent in his mercy for man, it is at the same time an attempt to uncover mankind itself. Thus, Benedict reminds us that the union between God and man “is no mere fusion, a sinking into the nameless ocean of the Divine; it is a unity which creates love, a unity in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one” (DCE 10). Far from being a

loss of mankind, and far from being an acceptance of man’s sins, it is a demand that we reemerge in love. It is a reaffirmation of our initial and inherent value. Not only does God seek union with us, he also seeks a recovery of our personal richness and irreplaceable goodness.

The New Image of Man

Now, the discussion of the kenotic character of God’s love is preceded in the encyclical by a rather rich discussion of human love as such, particularly in relation to marriage. Indeed, the encyclical begins by telling us that the foundation of love, its “epitome” (*imago perfecta*), is the man–woman relationship, which seeks happiness in marriage. The love between man and woman would therefore seem to constitute a starting point for any understanding of love, a kind of *analogatum principis* (cf. Scola 2005: 90). As Benedict puts it, this “exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa” (DCE 11).

As the most complete example of human love, conjugal love is also at the center of natural human inclinations. It would seem to promise, as the encyclical emphasizes, a sort of complete happiness. The *Catechism* tells us that “conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter—appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will” (CCC 1643, quoting FC 13). Given their “derivative” character (FC 18), something similar may be said of the whole of family life and love. This very rich and subtle *mélange* of human instinct, attraction, desire, self-sacrifice, spiritual aspiration, rational and explicit “choice”, is all part of—realized differently in each case, of course—the various familial loves. Man longs for the fruit of marriage, the child and more generally the family. The family constitutes the milieu in which a child naturally thrives and can attain a fullness of life. The child represents an affirmation of the parents’ place in history and a perfecting gift from God, insofar as the child represents a link to the future and therefore also to past generations. Hence, the human search for love looks to personal fulfillment in the “good” of marriage and the child. For all of these reasons, this good is worthy as an object of human desire and a noble fulfillment of human nature and moral action.

When we consider conjugal love and its natural ordination toward procreation and the family, however, we realize that built into the very center of this natural institution is a demand for growth toward a self-giving, even self-sacrificial, love. This can be seen first of all in the fact that, as Benedict tells us, the love of man and woman necessarily seeks "definitiveness". Conjugal love "seeks to become definitive" in two senses: as exclusive and as eternal (*DCE* 6). As was already suggested by the discussion of the biblical covenant, monotheistic faith is closely associated with monogamous love and with love's irrevocability (*DCE* 11). Indeed, the classical properties of marriage—unity and indissolubility—represent exactly this understanding.

Certainly, the definitiveness described by these two properties entails a kind of totality. Conjugal love cannot therefore be simply one of the many wants and loves of life; it must rather be the one that gives meaning to all the others precisely because it is the one that entails the absolute gratuity and goodness of another. Because of this definitiveness, conjugal love constitutes all man has to give, since it entails the element of the whole of a person's freedom for self-bestowal, now and in the future.

This totality is directed in a way that compels us. Benedict puts this in terms of being "fulfilled" or even "perfected" (*DCE* 11: *perfectus*), drawing analogously on Aristophanes' speech concerning love in Plato's *Symposium*, in which the sexes seek to be "completed" (*completus*) in each other. The *érōs* of man and woman for each other is not the result of a punishment, nor are they seeking to reclaim a lost fusion into a single being, as in the account given by Plato's Aristophanes. Christianity, as Benedict points out, speaks instead in terms of a "communion with the opposite sex" (*DCE* 11). Nevertheless, Plato's text suggests something of the lack of "perfection" (*imperfectus*) experienced by Adam in searching among the animals for a "helper fit for him" (Gen 2:20). It also suggests the meaning of his rapturous declaration that "this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23) upon awaking to the woman. Thus, man is "driven by nature to seek in another the part that can make him whole, the idea that only in communion with the opposite sex can he become 'complete'." From this "imperfection", Benedict draws two fundamental points: first, that "*eros* is somehow rooted in man's very nature;

Adam is a seeker who 'abandons his mother and father' in order to find woman; only together do the two represent complete humanity and become 'one flesh'" (*DCE* 11). Second, "from the standpoint of creation, *eros* directs man towards marriage, to a bond which is unique and definitive; thus, and only thus, does it fulfill its deepest purpose" (*ibid.*). It is only in the totality of the marital covenant that human love can be said to find its fullness.

As the Pope tells us, human *érōs* "tends to rise 'in ecstasy' towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves; yet for this very reason it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing" (*DCE* 5). Indeed, the many "types" of love finally all deserve the name love (Lewis 1960: 1-9; cf. *DCE* 2; 8), because all of them, however tawdry they may often be, tacitly and despite themselves aim toward this central meaning. Thus, "God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love" (*DCE* 11).

Certainly, "love" is an analogous term, particularly when discussed in terms of the relationship between God's love and human love. God's *érōs* can in no way denote a "neediness" or "deficiency". Man's *érōs*, on the other hand, is precisely an expression of his dependency. Moreover, as we have seen, divine and guiltless love "turns God against himself" in response to the abuse of human freedom. Of course, God's guiltless love "turns" in the sense of an agapic outpouring that flows naturally from its *érōs*. The "turning" required for the maturation of human love, on the contrary, must first of all constitute a turn from its sinful self-absorption. Thus, as we saw, Hosea tells us that God's passionate refusal to cast off faithless Israel can only be because he is "God and not man". But even man's guilty love secretly longs for the "turn" that would bring it to the threshold of fair love. And, moreover, even an innocent human love would have to undergo some kind of "turn" in order to arrive at the fullness of love, in order to allow the other's necessary "difference" to stand out within the "unity" effected by love.

The Marital Covenant and Love's Turn

Not long after his election, Benedict said that: "to be able to say to someone: 'your life is good, even though I may not know your future',

requires an authority and credibility superior to what individuals can assume on their own" (Benedict 2005). The pronouncement of the marriage vows is such a declaration of the goodness of the other's life; indeed, the ability to pledge oneself in marriage, in the sense implied by the marital covenant, implies the pronouncement that the spouse's life is worthy of a "leap of faith", a leap that entails the whole of life. Assuming the "definitive" character of conjugal love—its exclusive and eternal character—it is the pronouncement of a word that is in fact greater than the bride and bridegroom are capable of stating firmly on their own.

First, when we think about it for a moment, it is impossible for the bride and bridegroom to know precisely what is being pledged in marriage. Since they cannot know with any assurance or accuracy what the future holds, they cannot know the quality or quantity of what they are giving away or of what they are receiving. While marriage usually results in children and a family, this is certainly not guaranteed. Nor can the qualities or character of that family be accurately predicted. Thus, spouses-to-be cannot, strictly speaking, calculate, control, or even "choose" a particular or knowable goodness. Neither can marriage be thought of as a kind of "high-stakes gamble", according to which a bride and bridegroom could attach "odds", risking possible "failure" in order to arrive at what is thought to be more likely "success". The lifelong pledge of marriage—"for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health"—is a pledge to accept *in principle* the whole of life, of whatever "quality", not only as a possible risk but as an inherent aspect of the underlying goodness of this person and of the union. It is a declaration that even in poor conditions, even in conditions of sin, there is a basic goodness to the relation and to the other that cannot be lost.

The definitive character of conjugal love—the fact that it requires taking a stand with the entirety of one's life for and with another—therefore means that more is sought in marriage than can be summed up in the idea of fulfillment. "Fulfillment" as such, if taken without the further "turn" of love, suggests the subordination of some good to my flourishing. Indeed, this would seem to be implicit in the idea of a human searching love. However, the "definitiveness" of marriage suggests a submission of one's life to the goodness of the spouse and

the marital union itself. The pledge is a declaration that my spouse's life, my own life, the lives of our children, and our conjugal and familial love are good no matter what happens. It is a pledge to stand by the side of the spouse no matter what the future holds. Conjugal love means a willingness to accept vulnerability analogous to God's acceptance of "vulnerability" in his Yes to the world, a Yes that resulted in the crucifixion of his only begotten Son. The definitiveness of marriage is set precisely against the vagaries of sin in this world. In this sense, then, conjugal love's definitiveness makes it a "redemptive" love that, even in its very beginning, tacitly both seeks and gives mercy (*DM* 6).

Because of the more-than-human capacity required to make this pronouncement fully, the capacity to enter into the covenant at the foundation of Christian marriage implies that the spouses' narrow freedom depends radically on God's all-encompassing and limitless freedom. Indeed, it is God's freedom that opens their freedom up, giving it eternal implications. Just as the humanity of Jesus is assumed into the Person of Christ, so too divine and conjugal love mutually dwell within each other—or, as the Council Fathers tell us, "Authentic married love is caught up into divine love . . . and enriched by Christ's redeeming power" (*GS* 48). When Christ turns back to the Father, he enables the inner reality of the covenant of God with his people. His Yes to the Father is a giving over of his entire being on behalf of all mankind. But at the same time the personal freedom and love of each human person is also entailed in Christ's Yes. The freedom manifested in the *consensus matrimonialis* is therefore taken up and given its transcendent platform in faith in God's infinite freedom. As a response, and as a pledge, conjugal love necessarily entails not only the spouses' freedom and action, and not only the "invitation" to the spouses' marital and familial communion, but the reciprocity represented in their relationship to God.

Analogous to the "turning" of God's love in Christ, then, the searching of human *érōs* finally requires a kind of turning against itself and its initial understanding of the meaning of "desire" and "fulfillment". The turning, then, is the realization not only that here is one who is "fit for me", but also that I am "for" this other, that I must on that basis give myself "for" this other (Eph 5:25; *DCE* 7), in a

reciprocal grant of mercy (cf. *DM* 6). “*Eros* is thus supremely ennobled, yet at the same time it is so purified as to become one with *agape*” (*DCE* 10).

The Eternity of Love

I would like to conclude by posing a basic question. “Love looks to the eternal”, as Benedict tells us (*DCE* 6; cf. Balthasar 1983: 38–39; Scola 2005: 105). But the marital covenant, unlike that of God and man in Christ, will finally be transcended in the eschaton. Its rootedness in “this age” (Lk 20:34) will blossom into the virginal existence of the coming kingdom: “For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Mt 22:30; see also, Mk 12:25 and Lk 20:34–36). At the wedding feast of the Lamb (Rev 19:7–8), all the saints will be married within the one Bride. Does this mean that the aspiration at the heart of conjugal love for the eternal is to be frustrated precisely with respect to its essential characteristic—definitiveness? Does this “blossoming” leave room for the particularity of the individual marital covenant and its striving for the eternal?

Perhaps Pius XII offered one of the more suggestive responses to these questions:

Far from destroying the bonds of human and supernatural love which are contracted in marriage, death can perfect them and strengthen them. It is true that legally, and on the plane of perceptible realities, the matrimonial institution does not exist any more, but that which constituted its soul, gave it strength and beauty—conjugal love with all its splendor and its eternal vows—lives on just as the spiritual and free beings live on who have pledged themselves to each other. (Pius XII 1957–58: 289)

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THE WAY OF LOVE

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Encyclical

Deus Caritas Est

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