



# Deus Caritas Est. Benedict XVI's First Encyclical and Its Johannine Foundation in the Exegesis of St. Augustine

ISACCO PAGANI 

Theological Faculty of Northern Italy, [isaccopagani@seminario.milano.it](mailto:isaccopagani@seminario.milano.it)

**Abstract:** The article examines the Johannine foundation of the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. It shows how Benedict XVI drew heavily on the Augustinian exegesis of the Johannine literature (with a particular focus on the First Epistle of John). The analysis follows the three fundamental elements that the Pope identifies at the beginning of the document, comparing the texts of the two authors (St. Augustine and Benedict XVI): the lexical clarification of *eros* and *agape*, the interaction between the love of God and the love of neighbor, and finally the pneumatological foundation of love. Then, starting from this last element, the article proposes to interpret the second part of the Encyclical as a pneumatological ecclesiology that the Pope presented to the Church at the beginning of his pontificate.

**Keywords:** love, charity, eros, agape, Holy Spirit, pneumatology, ecclesiology, Benedict XVI, Augustin of Hippo, Encyclical, Johannine exegesis, Johannine literature

At the beginning of his first Encyclical, Benedict XVI pointed to the Johannine quotation “God is love” (1 John 4:16) as the central and synthetic formula of the Christian faith, because it expresses “the Christian image of God and also the consequent image of man and his journey.” (*DCE* 1) The Pope therefore chose to open his pontificate by exploring the essential relationship of Christian life between faith and love, recovering “some fundamental elements” of the believer’s experience, understood as “human response to divine love.” (*DCE* 1)

The quotation reveals a significant rootedness of Benedict XVI’s thought in Johannine theology and literature. As we try to show below, the Pope’s debt is more precisely to St. Augustine’s exegesis of the First Epistle of John and the Fourth Gospel. In fact, the comments of the Bishop of Hippo are a precious key for interpreting what the Pope Benedict XVI proposed to the whole Church at the beginning of his pontificate. Therefore, the demonstration of the real presence of this debt is the first purpose of this paper.

The order in which these Augustinian interpretive keys will be studied follows the sequence of the Encyclical, focusing on the “fundamental elements” that compose it (*DCE* 1). The first focuses on the lexical clarification between *eros* and *agape*: this is not present in the Johannine texts, but is instead treated in the Augustinian commentaries. The second element deals with the theme of the “necessary

interaction between love of God and love of neighbor” (*DCE* 18): a theme that is extensively treated in the First Epistle of John, but also explored in detail by the Bishop of Hippo. The third element, finally, concerns the pneumatological foundation of love, an object of particular attention for St. Augustine.

This last topic deserves special attention, since it seems to be mentioned only at the beginning of the second part of the Encyclical (*DCE* 19). However, on the basis of the Johannine Augustinian exegesis, we would like to propose a different assessment and hypothesis for the interpretation of the entire second part of the papal text (*DCE* 19–39). Thus, illustrating this hypothesis is the second purpose of this paper.

## 1. *Eros* and *Agape*, the Augustinian Lexicon of Love

The assertion that God is love inevitably raises a number of theological questions. The first of these is the need for lexical clarification. Today’s cultural context, in which this concept is inflated and subject to a wide semantic spectrum, underscores the importance of this need. For this reason, Pope Benedict makes explicit the need for terminological clarification at the beginning of his Encyclical: “Today, the term ‘love’ has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words, a word to which we attach quite different meanings. Even though this Encyclical will deal primarily with the understanding and practice of love in sacred Scripture and in the Church’s Tradition, we cannot simply prescind from the meaning of the word in the different cultures and in present-day usage.” (*DCE* 2)

Undoubtedly, the need to clarify what is meant by the term “love” when referring to God has its roots in the suspicion of a rather closed attitude on the part of Christianity towards the erotic form of love. It is the Pope himself who recalls Friedrich Nietzsche’s accusation that *eros* has been poisoned, not by killing it, but by distorting it to the point of becoming a vice (*DCE* 3. See Nietzsche 1999, 102).

In addition to the cultural instance, there is also a biblical one, especially in the Johannine literature. Of the three Greek words that make up the semantic field of love, the one that appears most frequently is *agape*; otherwise, the term *eros* plays a marginal role, while in Greek literature it enjoys greater prominence.<sup>1</sup>

The originality of the use of these words certainly also expresses the novelty of the Gospel message, also with regard to the theme of love. However, the Encyclical is careful to point out that this distinction does not correspond to a discrimination of *eros* with respect to *agape*; on the contrary, it is necessary to bring the one and

---

<sup>1</sup> In Johannine literature, and more generally in both New Testament and general Greek literature, the third word (*philia*) has a more specific use.

the other back into unity, so that man may be fully himself.<sup>2</sup> The reference to different aspects of love, signified by the terms *eros* and *agape*, does not necessarily imply an understanding of different kinds of love, as David C. Schindler (2006, 378) has well observed. Rather, as Pope Benedict XVI has emphasized, the plurality of terms indicates the semantic richness of the one love, which thus has a variety of dimensions: all are necessary to sustain the full meaning of love.

Such a terminological reflection might seem to distance the magisterial argument from the Johannine text and its exegesis; so much so that the Pope himself does not hide the rather philosophical character of his initial reflections, then offering an *excursus* on the erotic images applied to God in the Old Testament and on some suggestive interpretations of certain Church Fathers (DCE 7–11).

However, there is a strong affinity between the understanding of *eros* proposed by Benedict XVI and that offered by St. Augustine in some of his commentaries on Johannine passages. Emblematic in this regard is his exegesis of the passage: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44). The Bishop of Hippo dwells on the dynamics of attraction – using terms such as *attrahere*, *delectare*, *voluptas* – and describes it in terms of a yearning, that is, the pursuit of a pleasure that makes one move and search:

It is not a great thing to be attracted by a voluntary impulse when even pleasure can attract us. What does it mean to be attracted to pleasure? “Find your pleasure in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps 37:4). There is a kind of pleasure of the heart (*voluptas cordi*), for which the heavenly bread is sweet. [...] If the senses of the body have their pleasures, why should not the soul? [...] Give to him who desires, and he will hear what I say. Give to him who yearns (*desiderantem*), give to him who hungers (*esurientem*), give to him who wanders and thirsts in this desert and sighs at the fountain of the eternal home: give to such a one, and he will know what I say. (Augustinus, *In Joannis Evangelium* [PL 35, 1608])<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Years earlier, Ratzinger himself had claimed that these reflections were the fruit of his personal theological and spiritual extension of the philosophical work on love proposed by Josef Pieper (Ratzinger 1991, 82–84; see Pieper 1992, 221–28). Pieper questions the relationship between happiness and love. The one who loves recognizes in the beloved a goodness that produces happiness. But what kind of happiness is that? And, consequently, how is love to be understood? The philosopher answers by appreciating every dimension of love, both the erotic and the agapic. On the one hand, distancing himself from other authors, Pieper values *eros* by describing it as “an opening of the sphere of existence to an infinite quenching that cannot be had at all ‘here’” (Pieper 1992, 252): it is a longing for happiness and beatitude that is not to be abolished or made absolute, but to be fulfilled. On the other hand, since erotic desire so understood has a deeply creaturely connotation, *agape* (*caritas*) achieves this fulfillment precisely because it is intertwined with *eros*. Pieper (1992, 242) explains: “Otherwise, on the contrary, we are rather prepared to find what is ‘by nature’, that is, ‘by virtue of creation’, strictly ethical matters and the supernatural so closely interwoven that the seam can scarcely be detected. Or at least it cannot so long as all three impulses, that which springs from nature, that which springs from ethical freedom and that which springs from grace are in harmony with one another.” So it is not the privileging of the one or the other kind of love, but the harmonization and the unification of all of them, that is the answer to the original question of happiness.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent translations of patristic texts are the author’s.

St. Augustine interprets this Johannine dynamic of being drawn to the Father as an opening of desire that brings out the inwardness of the person and pushes him beyond himself. This dynamic of man's movement from the inwardness to the outwardness of the self was already linked to a Platonic matrix by Cardinal Ratzinger a few years before he began his Petrine ministry:

For example, let us take Plato's *Phaedrus*. Plato contemplates the encounter with beauty as the salutary emotional shock that makes man leave his shell and sparks his "enthusiasm" by attracting him to what is other than himself. Man, says Plato, has lost the original perfection that was conceived for him. He is now perennially searching for the healing primitive form. Nostalgia and longing impel him to pursue the quest; beauty prevents him from being content with just daily life. It causes him to suffer. In a Platonic sense, we could say that the arrow of nostalgia pierces man, wounds him and in this way gives him wings, lifts him upwards towards the transcendent. (Ratzinger 2002)

Although there is no explicit reference in the Encyclical to this interpretation of the Johannine concept of attraction, one finds in it the recognition of *eros* as a capacity for "ecstasy towards the Divine:" it is thus disciplined and purified so as not to be content with a "fleeting pleasure", but to foretaste "the pinnacle of our existence, of that beatitude for which our whole being yearns." (DCE 4) So much so that *eros* gives to love a dimension of infinite and eternal openness to "a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence." (DCE 5)

Such an interpretation not only does not exclude *eros* from the life of faith, but even integrates it so that it participates in the more agapic dimension of the believer's life. The supreme example of this union of *eros* and *agape* is to be found in the history of St. Augustine, when, at the end of the tenth book of his *Confessions*, he prays:

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you! Lo, you were within, but I outside, seeking there for you, and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong, I, misshapen. You were with me, but I was not with you. They held me back far from you, those things which would have no being were they not in you. You called, shouted, broke through my deafness; you flared, blazed, banished my blindness; you lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you; I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst; you touched me, and I burned for your peace. (Augustinus, *Confessiones* 10.27.38 [Augustine of Hippo 2012, 296])

Therefore, *eros* is not censored: far from poisoning it, writes the Pope, the Christian way proposes its healing in view of its true greatness (DCE 5), uniting it with every other human dimension, beginning with that of *agape*.

## 2. The Necessary Interaction Between the Love of God and the Love of Neighbor

The second fundamental element that Benedict XVI addresses in his Encyclical is the relationship between love of God and love of one's neighbor: the theme is exquisitely Johannine. As the Pope himself points out, it develops in a reflection on the relationship between the knowledge of God made visible in Jesus and the love with which he first loved us, so that we too might love one another (*DCE* 16). Although the reference in the Encyclical is limited to 1 John 4:7–10, the issue touches on a much broader exegetical point in the Johannine literature that is very strategic for the interpretation of 1 John.

If we look overall at the way the Epistle deals with this theme as a whole, we can see how the verses commented on by Benedict XVI are at the crossroads of this argument. Indeed, if in the preceding part of the Johannine text the relationship between the knowledge of God and fraternal love is more explicitly addressed (1 John 2:3–11; 3:23–24), in the following part the interaction between the love of God and fraternal love is more considered (4:20–21; 5:1–3). The Encyclical thus takes up the central point of the entire argument of the Johannine Epistle and interprets it in such a way as to emphasize two aspects in particular: on the one hand, *the primacy of God's love* in Jesus over fraternal love; and on the other hand, *the priority of fraternal love* over God's love (*DCE* 17 and 18, respectively). Again, these are two paths of interpretation that show great agreement with St. Augustine's exegetical commentaries.

### 2.1. The Primacy of God's Love

With regard to the primacy of the love of God in Jesus over fraternal love, the Pope first excludes the danger of a possible constrictive interpretation: "He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love. God does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing. He loves us, he makes us see and experience his love, and since he has 'loved us first,' love can also blossom as a response within us." (*DCE* 17)

Such a comment has a perceptible affinity with the way the Bishop of Hippo also speaks of it, when he excludes the suspicion that the commandment of love involves a form of imposition and compulsion to love: "How can we love if we have not been loved first? The Evangelist himself says it very openly in his Epistle: 'We love God because He first loved us' (1 John 4:19). [...] Therefore, it is not we who first keep the commandments, so that he may come to love us, but the reverse: if he did not love us, we could not keep his commandments." (Augustinus, *In Joannis Evangelium* [PL 35, 1843])

The primacy of God's love is even more understandable in the light of the Augustinian "triadic conception" of love, as expressed at the end of the eighth book of

*De Trinitate*: “But love is of someone that loves, and with love something is loved. Behold, then, there are three things: he that loves, and that which is loved, and love (*amans et quod amatur et amor*).” (Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 960])

The interplay of these three dimensions of love helps to better specify how the commandment is not a mere imposition, but opens up a space of relational freedom between the one who loves and the one who is loved, in which love takes concrete form. Indeed, the subject who loves (*amans*) does not simply perform an action toward the object of his love (*quod amatur*), but rather performs love itself (*amor*). On the other hand, the object of love enables the loving subject to experience love in its concrete form. In this way it is possible to state that “there is only love where something is loved.” (Dideberg 1975, 141) What determines the dynamics of love, then, is not only the loving subject but also the beloved object: one is not enough without the other for there to be love. “The love that loves is the living, transparent coincidence of itself with itself in that which is loved.” (Dideberg 1975, 141)

Thus, according to St. Augustine, love lives in its self-giving and in its being received, and its vital dynamism cannot be reduced to an extrinsic order: in the Augustinian conception, love cannot be imposed or suffered, but is desirable and desired for its own sake.<sup>4</sup>

Besides excluding that love is obligatory, both St. Augustine and Pope Benedict XVI also exclude that it is static. In fact, by referring to the primacy of Christ’s love, the commandment of love takes on a very dynamic aspect. The Pope emphasizes that the experience of being loved before loving is an appropriate condition for realizing the path of purification of *eros*, to the point of experiencing the fullness of love. In other words, the experience of being loved, even before loving, allows one to feel inside a path of growth in which there is time and a way to mature.

But this process is always open-ended; love is never “finished” and complete; throughout life, it changes and matures, and thus remains faithful to itself. [...] Our will and God’s will increasingly coincide: God’s will is no longer for me an alien will, something imposed on me from without by the commandments, but it is now my own will, based on the realization that God is in fact more deeply present to me than I am to myself. (*DCE* 17)<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, St. Augustine also emphasizes that the commandment of love has a dynamic dimension of maturation, in which love itself is a path to be traveled rather

<sup>4</sup> In the thirty-fifth *quaestio* of *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* (PL 40, 23), St. Augustine expresses, in other words, how the need to love is not imposed, but attractive, desirable: “But if love is loved for the sake of other things to love, it is not said to be rightly loved. For there is nothing else to love than to desire something for itself. Then is love to be desired for its own sake, or else, if that which is loved is lacking, it is undoubtedly misery? Since love is a kind of movement, and there is no movement except toward something, when we ask what is to be loved, we consequently ask what it is necessary to move toward.”

<sup>5</sup> See also Augustinus, *Confessiones* (PL 32, 686–88).

than a command to be fulfilled immediately. Indeed, reflecting on the meaning of perfection in love, he writes:

So this is perfect love. But is it perfect at the time of its birth? It is born to perfect itself; when it is born, it is nourished; when it is nourished, it is strengthened; when it is strengthened, it is brought to perfection.

[...] And he [the Lord] had said this: "As he laid down his life for us, we also ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (1 John 3:16). This is the perfection of love, and there is no greater. But since it is not perfect in all things, there is no need to despair where it is not perfect, when what is to be perfected has already been born. And of course, when it is born, it must be nourished, and brought to its proper perfection by its proper nourishments. (Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* [PL 35, 2014.2019])

## 2.2. The Priority of Fraternal Love

Alongside the primacy of God's love, there is the priority of fraternal love. The Encyclical interprets this priority in two ways. On the one hand, fraternal love is the most direct way in which the believer takes on the very form of Christ: "In God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. [...] Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. [...] Seeing with the eyes of Christ, I can give to others much more than their outward necessities; I can give them the look of love which they crave." (DCE 18)

Thanks to the learning of "the perspective of Christ" (*ad Iesu Christi mensuram*), the priority of fraternal love is explained not from a purely practical point of view, but from an understanding of the commandment of love. Indeed, the discovery of God's love is possible for everyone through the love of one's neighbor: "Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me." (DCE 18)

Again, there are significant similarities in Augustine's exegesis of the First Epistle of John. Commenting on the call to fraternal love found in 1 John 4:11–12, the Bishop of Hippo dwells on the interplay between the invisibility of God and the practice of charity: it is effectively described in the concreteness of the gestures and body parts involved, suggesting that in them it is possible to see the very body of God at work:

If you want to see God: God is love. What is the face of love? What shape does it have? What is its stature? What kind of feet and hands does it have? No one can say. But it has feet, because they themselves lead to the Church; it has hands, because they themselves reach out to the poor; it has eyes, because they can recognize who is in need. The limbs

are not separated in different places, but he who has love sees the whole together with the intellect. So abide in love and it will abide in you; remain in it and it will remain in you. (Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* [PL 35, 2034])

Again building on the theme of God's invisibility, St. Augustine also illustrates how fraternal love becomes a way of discovering and reaching God and His love:

"If you do not love your brother whom you see, how can you love God whom you do not see?" (1 John 4:20). Behold, it is said to you: "Love God." If you say: "Show me whom I love," I will answer what John himself says: "No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18). But do not think that you are completely excluded from seeing God: "God, he says, is love; whoever remains in love remains in God" (1 John 4:16) There you will see God as much as you can. So begin to love your neighbor. Break your bread for the hungry and bring the needy without a bed into your house; if you see him naked, clothe him, and do not despise the family of your offspring. But what will you gain by doing these things? Then your light will break forth like the morning light. Your light is your God. (Augustinus, *In Joannis Evangelium* [PL 35, 1531–32])

### 2.3. Summary of Comparison

In his Encyclical, Pope Benedict XVI develops the theme of the relationship between the love of God and the love of one's neighbor in a way that can be understood in the light of St. Augustine's exegesis of the central point of 1 John.

According to this interpretation of the Johannine text, the reflection and practice of fraternal love is specifically theological because it is a way to God himself. The interplay between *amans*, *quod amatur*, and *amor* proposed by the Augustinian exegesis clarifies the meaning of this theological value: in loving one's neighbor, one loves not only the object of love (the neighbor), but also love itself, which is ultimately God.<sup>6</sup>

In the light of what has been shown, we also understand what Benedict XVI means when he says that "love is not just an emotion" (*DCE* 17). The Latin expression used in the papal document is *animi affectum*. It is then described as something unstable, like coming and going. While not excluding emotion, the Pope extends the human experience of love to "all man's potentialities," including the practical, intellectual and volitional dimensions of the human person. This involvement of "the whole man"

<sup>6</sup> Dany Dideberg (1975, 142) summarizes the theological value of fraternal love according to the Augustinian exegesis using the following syllogism: "Applied to fraternal love, this tripartite scheme of *amor* constitutes the major of a syllogism for which the *Prima Ioannis* provides the minor. Here are the two premises and the conclusion of the argument: (A) he who loves his brother, necessarily loves love; (B) now, love is God, since 'God is love' (1 John 4:8, 16); (C) therefore, he who loves his brother, loves God. Augustine's argument is a synthesis of philosophical schema and biblical verse."



comes from the recognition of “the visible manifestations of God’s love”: man loves love itself, which is ultimately God, from what he experiences when the whole of him is involved and when, in this involvement, he recognizes God himself.

In the gradual unfolding of this encounter, it is clearly revealed that love is not merely a sentiment. Sentiments come and go. A sentiment can be a marvelous first spark, but it is not the fullness of love. [...] It is characteristic of mature love that it calls into play all man’s potentialities; it engages the whole man, so to speak. Contact with the visible manifestations of God’s love can awaken within us a feeling of joy born of the experience of being loved. But this encounter also engages our will and our intellect. Acknowledgment of the living God is one path towards love, and the “yes” of our will to his will unites our intellect, will and sentiments in the all-embracing act of love. (*DCE* 17)

### 3. The Pneumatological Foundation of Love

The third key element, based on themes and language typical of the Johannine literature, is found especially at the beginning of the second part of the Encyclical, which deals with the theme of love from an ecclesiological perspective.

Benedict XVI opens the argumentation, which is more explicitly focused on the Church, with a Trinitarian – and more precisely, a pneumatological – reflection: it is the gift of the Holy Spirit after Easter that harmonizes the hearts of the believers “with the heart of Christ and moves them to love their brothers and sisters as he has loved them.” (*DCE* 18) However, the reflection on the relationship between the action of the Spirit and the life of the Church according to the Johannine texts seems to stop at the first paragraph of the second part of the Encyclical (see *DCE* 19). In what follows, the text gives the impression of dealing rather with questions more concretely related to the ways and means by which the Church is called to carry out her service of charity in the world.

In truth, what Benedict XVI is proposing is the result of a reflection that he had already developed before his election as Pope. Among the many examples that can be cited, we refer to an article written in 1998 by Ratzinger, in which the German theologian dwelt on the definition of the Holy Spirit as God’s love – and here the Johannine foundation is evident – once again helped by the exegesis of St. Augustine.

In particular, Ratzinger dwells on two definitions that the Bishop of Hippo applies to the Holy Spirit in the light of the Johannine texts: he is *God* and *gift* in relation to love. This dual identification is found in the commentaries on the First Epistle of John, as well as in the book *De Trinitate*, where the St. Augustine distinguishes between love *ad se* and love *ad nos* to understand the Spirit. In relation to himself, the Spirit is the theological dimension of love, the God-love that proceeds

from the Father and the Son. In relation to humanity, the Spirit is a gift of love insofar as he is the very act of God's gift of love to humanity (Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 1086]).

### 3.1. The Holy Spirit, God-love

In addressing the identification of the Spirit as love *ad se*, St. Augustine first seeks to clarify why the Johannine statement "God is love" should refer specifically to the third person of the Trinity: "Therefore, the Scripture does not say: 'The Holy Spirit is love,' for if it had said that, it would have greatly clarified the matter. But it did say: 'God is love' (1 John 4:8, 16), so it is uncertain, and therefore to be investigated, whether God the Father is love, or God the Son, or God the Holy Spirit, or God the Trinity Himself" (Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 1080])<sup>7</sup>

In other words, while St. Augustine acknowledges that one cannot speak of love for only one of the three divine persons to the exclusion of the other two, he wonders whether such a theological definition can refer specifically to one of them.

The resulting exegetical argument begins by contrasting two seemingly contradictory statements in 1 John 4:7, 8: "Love proceeds from God" (v. 7) and "God is love" (v. 8) (Ratzinger 1998, 329).<sup>8</sup> From here, the Bishop of Hippo begins to rule out the possibility that these statements are to be attributed in any particular way to the person of the Father: "How do we relate the two expressions just mentioned [...]? In fact, both are found in the Epistle: 'Love is from God,' and 'Love is God.' In the case of the Father, the Scripture does not say that He is from God. When you hear the expression 'from God,' it means either the Son or the Holy Spirit." (Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* [PL 35, 2031–32])

In the book *De Trinitate*, St. Augustine also writes that the expression "God is love" refers to the action by which God dwells in the believer and vice versa, and therefore concerns the Holy Spirit: "'This is how we know that we remain in Him and He in us, that He has given us of His Spirit' (1 John 4:13). Therefore, the Holy Spirit, of whom He has given us, makes us abide in God and He in us: this is the work of love. So the Holy Spirit is the God of love." (Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 1082])

Thus, in Augustine's interpretation, the Johannine concept of love is linked to the dimension of permanence and has a profound pneumatological relevance. Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who, as divine love, makes possible the permanence of God in the believer and vice versa: "The love that is from God and it is God is

<sup>7</sup> Cardinal Ratzinger quotes mainly from the book *De Trinitate*. In order to be consistent with the topic of this article, we will also quote the Bishop of Hippo's interpretation of the First Epistle of John, which seems to us to be more pertinent because it develops the same reflections.

<sup>8</sup> Playing on the juxtaposition of the two Johannine expressions, Ratzinger effectively summarizes Augustine's exegetical argument on the Spirit: "If you put the two together, love is equally 'God' and 'from God'; in other words, love is 'God from God.'" (Ratzinger 1998, 329)

properly the Holy Spirit, through whom the love of God is spread in our hearts, so that the whole Trinity dwells in us (see 1 John 4:7–8, 16)” (Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 1080]).

### 3.2. The Holy Spirit, Gift of Love

The Holy Spirit is also a gift: in fact, he is not only divine love, but is also the one who proceeds from God as love, and enables humanity itself to be itself filled with such love:

“He who keeps his commandments remains in Him, and He in them, and the way we know that He remains in us is from the Spirit that He gave us.” (1 John 3:23–24; John 13:34; 15:12) Is it not clear that this is what the Holy Spirit does in a person, so that there may be love (*dilectio*) and charity (*caritas*) in him? If you find that you have charity (*caritas*), you have the Spirit of God to help you understand: it is an absolutely necessary reality. (Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* [PL 35, 2025])

The Spirit is therefore a necessary gift for recognizing God's life of love in the form of charity. In other words, it can be said that the practice of charity is an important criterion for recognizing the presence of the Spirit in the believer and in the Church. Without the Spirit, human reality cannot experience the love of God that abides in it. And, therefore, it cannot even live by this love, either toward God or toward its neighbor. This is what Augustine says in his commentary on the First Letter of John: “So if you want to know that you have received the Spirit, examine your heart, lest you run the risk of having the sacrament but not having its effect. Examine your heart, and if there is fraternal love there, rest assured. There is no love without the Spirit of God.” (Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos* [PL 35, 2025–26])<sup>9</sup>

In this way, the examination of a concrete life of love, that is, of charity, acquires a profound pneumatological value, both for the individual believer and for the community of believers that is the Church.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, such an examination

<sup>9</sup> See also Augustinus, *De Trinitate* [PL 42, 1082]: “God, the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from God, when He gives Himself to a person, sets him on fire with the love of God and of his neighbor.”

<sup>10</sup> It would be interesting to examine the relationship between charity and communion in the light of Augustinian exegesis, but this is beyond the scope of this paper. Very useful in this regard is a summary offered by Ratzinger himself on Augustine's definition of the Spirit as *communio*: “This already has a fundamentally ecclesiological meaning [...]. It opens pneumatology up into ecclesiology, and reverse connection of ecclesiology into theology. Becoming a Christian means becoming *communio* and thereby entering into the mode of being of the Holy Spirit. But it can also only happen through the Holy Spirit, who is the power of communication, mediating it, making it possible and is himself a Person. Spirit is the unity which God gives himself. In this unity, he himself gives himself. [...] The Spirit's own paradoxical and unique property is being *communio*, having his highest selfness precisely in being fully the movement of *communio*” (Ratzinger 1998, 327).

must be considered necessary and urgent: the absence of the effects of love signals the risk of a lack of openness to the gift of the Spirit and, therefore, of resistance to its action.

### 3.3. A Proposal: Prospects for a Pneumatological Ecclesiology (DCE 19–39)

The preceding observations suggest that the second part of the Encyclical *Deus caritas est* should be interpreted not only as the implementing and operative part of the papal document, but rather as the more exquisitely pneumatological and therefore concrete part.

A first confirmation of this reading hypothesis can be found in the Latin title that opens this part of the text: Benedict XVI proposes to the Church an *exercitatio amoris*, that is, an “exercise of love” and not simply a practice. This exercise is introduced by the Pope with a strong reference to the Holy Spirit and his fundamental action of love, starting from the life of the first Christian community after Pentecost.<sup>11</sup>

The Pope then refers to the Spirit as the one who conforms the charitable life of the believers to the love of Christ, moving them toward their neighbor in the style of the Son of God. This conformation, Benedict XVI continues, takes on a witnessing power for all humanity, making it participate in God’s own life of love. This is the Church’s service to the world:

The Spirit is also the energy which transforms the heart of the ecclesial community, so that it becomes a witness before the world to the love of the Father, who wishes to make humanity a single family in his Son. Love is therefore the service that the Church carries out in order to attend constantly (*perpetuo*) to man’s sufferings and his needs, including material needs. And this is the aspect, this *service of charity*, on which I want to focus in the second part of the Encyclical. (DCE 19)

The concreteness of this pneumatological foundation can be understood precisely by the emphasis on the Church’s perseverance in the service of charity. The adverb “constantly” could recall the aspect of *dwelling* that is proper to the Holy Spirit as God and gift.

The value of using this adverb is confirmed by what Ratzinger wrote even before he began his Petrine ministry. Commenting on St. Augustine’s reflection on the Spirit as a gift, the then Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith understood constancy in love as a characteristic aspect of the Spirit’s action and thus as a fundamental criterion for identifying his operative presence:

---

<sup>11</sup> Between paragraphs 19 and 20 of the Encyclical, the focus shifts from the Augustinian exegesis of love as it is treated in the Johannine literature to the Lucan account of the Acts of the Apostles.

The basic criterion of love – its characteristic activity and therefore the characteristic activity of the Holy Spirit – is that it creates abiding. Love proves itself in constancy. Love is not recognizable right at any given moment, or in just one moment; instead, love abides, overcomes vacillation, and bears eternity within itself, which also shows, in my opinion, the connection between love and truth. Love in the full sense can only exist where constancy exists. Where abiding exists. Because love has to do with abiding, it cannot take place anywhere except where there is eternity. (Ratzinger 1998, 238–39)

In the same article, Ratzinger argued that in order to understand the meaning and value of the Church's own life, it is necessary to adopt this pneumatological criterion of constancy in love. As a creation of the Spirit, the Church is the Body of the Lord, built up by the Holy Spirit himself. For this reason the Church herself is a gift of love offered by God to the world.

In the light of Augustinian reflection, the Cardinal continued, if the Church is a gift of love through the action of the Spirit, then she must persevere in love: as the Spirit dwells in the Church, love remains in her, to the point of saying that “the Church is love.” Otherwise, if the experience of believers does not persevere in the love that makes the Church united, then the Spirit himself is rejected:

The dogmatic statement “The Church is love” is not merely a dogmatic statement for the manuals, but refers to the dynamism that forms unity, a dynamism that is the force holding the Church together. Thus, Augustine thinks of schism as a pneumatological heresy which takes root concretely in the act of living. To remove oneself from the abiding, which is the spirit, from the patience of love, is to revoke love by revoking abiding and thereby denying the Holy Spirit, who is the patience of abiding, of reconciling. (Ratzinger 1998, 332–33)

In the light of these considerations, we could then interpret the second part of the Encyclical as a genuine proposal of a pneumatological ecclesiology. In this regard, the Pope refers to the service of charity as one of the three responsibilities of the Church in the world: far from confusing charity with a kind of welfarism that does not produce justice (*DCE* 26), and without claiming to replace the State and the responsibilities of political and civil life, the Church cannot fail in her *spiritual* responsibility to be a concrete gift of divine love in the world:

Love – *caritas* – will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love. Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. [...] There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbor is indispensable. *The Church is alive with the love enkindled by the Spirit of Christ.* This love does not simply offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls, something which often is even more necessary than material support. (*DCE* 28b)

A few years later, in *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI reaffirmed his pastoral concern for this spiritual responsibility. Understanding *caritas* as the “force that originates in God, Eternal Love and Absolute Truth”, the Pope emphasizes the need to link charity and truth: thus love takes the concrete and personal form that is ultimately embodied in Jesus Christ (*CV* 1). As he wrote in *CV* 2, his intention with this encyclical is to revive the social doctrine of the Church as a style of charity rooted in the incarnate person of Jesus.

Charity is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine. Every responsibility and every commitment spelt out by that doctrine is derived from charity which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the entire Law (Matthew 22:36–40). It gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbour; it is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic and political ones). For the Church, instructed by the Gospel, charity is everything because, as Saint John teaches (1 John 4:8,16) and as I recalled in my first Encyclical Letter, “God is love” (*DCE*): everything has its origin in God’s love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it. Love is God’s greatest gift to humanity, it is his promise and our hope.

A useful key to this understanding of the exercise of charity from a christological and pneumatological perspective can be found in the early studies of the theologian Ratzinger, especially with regard to the Augustinian understanding of the Church as the spiritual Body of Christ. More than fifty years before his first Encyclical, Benedict XVI had studied this ecclesiological aspect in depth (Ratzinger 1971). In the background there is a broader and more fundamental reflection on the relationship between the invisibility of God and the visibility of the Church in the world. The study shows how Augustine progressively interprets the Body of Christ in the “visible *ecclesia*, that is, in the community that celebrates the sacrament of the Body of the Lord.” (Ratzinger 1971, 252) The unified body of the Church throughout the world is rooted in the communion with the Body of Christ through the Spirit:

[The Church] is represented outwardly in the sacrament of the Body of the Lord, but according to its intimate reality it consists in the communion of the Spirit of Christ. The People of God is the community that represents the unity of those who offer the sacrifice with Christ. The House of God intends this interior “being one” in the Spirit of Christ, which certainly does not come about without “being one” in the Body of Christ. (Ratzinger 1971, 184–85)

In Augustine, the understanding of the Church as the “House of God” is not developed “in relation to the meeting places of the community,” but as an image of the

“People of God” and the “Body of Christ,” in relation to the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ratzinger 1971, 180).<sup>12</sup> In being the Body of Christ, the Church receives a generative power that Augustine ultimately identifies in *caritas*. In this regard, Ratzinger speaks of the motherhood of the Church, realized through the *communio sanctorum*, by which Christ’s saving grace is offered to the world. The Holy Spirit works in a proper sense in the Body of Christ through the communion of saints, who are therefore “the true and proper *caritas*” (Ratzinger 1971, 150).<sup>13</sup> Therefore, *caritas* is precisely the principle of authentication in the Augustinian identification of the Church as *caro Christi spiritualis* (“spiritual body of Christ”), which Ratzinger has adopted (Ratzinger 1971, 252, esp. n. 21).

## Conclusion

With regard to the two purposes mentioned at the beginning of this paper, we can first confirm that the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* has a strong rootedness in the Augustinian exegesis of the Johannine literature, and especially in the First Epistle of John.

This rootedness is particularly evident in the lexical clarification of the terms *eros* and *agape*, that St. Augustine proposes to explain love in relation to God. The dual emphasis on the primacy of God’s love and the priority of love of one’s neighbor is also due to Augustinian Johannine exegesis, especially with regard to the interplay between *amans*, *quod amatur*, and *amor*.

The most interesting aspect of the research, however, is the deepening of the pneumatological reflection on love: St. Augustine’s understanding of the dynamic of love in relation to the Spirit, who is God and gift, has allowed us to interpret the entire second part of the Encyclical as a pneumatological ecclesiology that explains the Church’s responsibility in the world and in history. Thus, this part of the papal document could be understood as an *exercitatio amoris* based on the dwelling of the Holy Spirit in the Church, the spiritual body of Christ. From DCE 19 on, the connection between the Holy Spirit and the Church in the world is not a mere allusion or juxtaposition, but is firmly rooted in the theological studies of Augustinian exegesis that the theologian Ratzinger pursued throughout his academic life.

<sup>12</sup> Importantly, Ratzinger points out that by avoiding a spatial identification of ecclesial unity, Augustine protected the church from the temptation to create its own boundary within the world (Ratzinger 2015, 114, n. 51): “As a *communio caritatis*, the Church remains an alien in this world; it is neither an earthly state nor a theocracy but rather achieves its end at the *eschaton*. To that extent Augustine’s sacramental view of the Church maintains rather than does away with an eschatological perspective.”

<sup>13</sup> About the close connection between *caritas* and *communio* for Augustine, see also Ratzinger 2015, 110–13, esp. n. 46 and 48.

## Bibliography

- Augustine of Hippo, Saint. 2012. *The Confessions: With an Introduction and Contemporary Criticism*. Edited by David Vincent Meconi. Edited by Joseph Pearce. Translated by Maria Boulding. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. English translation: David Vincent Meconi, ed. *The Confessions: With an Introduction and Contemporary Criticism*. Edited by Joseph Pearce. Translated by Maria Boulding. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012.
- Augustinus, *Confessiones*: Augustinus. 1841a. “Confessionum libri tredecim.” In *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina*, edited by Jacques-Paul Migne, 32:659–868. Paris: Migne.
- Augustinus, *De Trinitate*: Augustinus. 1841b. “De Trinitate. Libri quindecim.” In *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina*, edited by Jacques-Paul Migne, 42:819–1098. Paris: Migne.
- Augustinus, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos*: Augustinus. 1841c. “In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos. Tractatus decem.” In *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina*, edited by Jacques-Paul Migne, 35:1977–2062. Paris: Migne.
- Augustinus, *In Joannis Evangelium. Tractatus centum viginti quatuor*: Augustinus. 1841d. “In Joannis Evangelium. Tractatus centum viginti quatuor.” In *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina*, edited by Jacques-Paul Migne, 35:1379–976. Paris: Migne.
- Augustinus, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*: Augustinus. 1858. “De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus.” In *Patrologiae cursus completus: Series Latina*, edited by Jacques-Paul Migne, 40:11–100. Paris: Migne.
- Benedict XVI. 2005. Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*. (= DCE), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html).
- Benedict XVI. 2009. Encyclical Letter *Caritas in Veritate*. (= CV), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html).
- Dideberg, Dany. 1975. *Saint Augustin et la Première Épître de Saint Jean*. Théologie historique 34. Paris: Beauchesne.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1999. *Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Zur Genealogie der Moral*. Sämtliche Werke Kritische Studienausgabe 5. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Pieper, Josef. 1992. *Faith, Hope, Love*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1971. *Popolo e casa di Dio in sant’Agostino*. Già e non ancora 36. Milano: Jaca Book.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1991. *To Look on Christ: Exercises in Faith, Hope, and Love*. New York: Crossroad.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 1998. “The Holy Spirit as Communio: Concerning the Relationship of Pneumatology and Spirituality in Augustine.” *Communio* 25:324–37.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 2002. “Message of His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger to the Communion and Liberation (CL) Meeting at Rimini (24–30 August 2002)” (August 24, 2002). [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20020824\\_ratzinger-cl-rimini\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020824_ratzinger-cl-rimini_en.html).
- Schindler, David Christopher. 2006. “The Redemption of Eros: Philosophical Reflections on Benedict XVI’s First Encyclical.” *Communio* 33:375–99.