



LIGHT & LIFE

VOICE OF THE ROSARY CENTER & CONFRATERNITY

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Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P., Director Nov-Dec 2023, Vol 76, No 6 Western Dominican Province

Embracing Who We Are In God

“Though He was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at. Rather, He emptied Himself and took the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men.” Philippians 2:6-7

What was Our Lord’s first human act after His birth? Did He cry so as to draw in His first human breath? Did He open His eyes in order to see His first, but blurred, image of His Blessed Mother? I like to think that perhaps His very first act was to grasp at the very hand of the one who bore Him into this world, the Blessed Virgin Mary, as a kind of mirror to DaVinci’s “The Creation of Man” when God reaching out to touch Adam, gives him his very life breath. In DaVinci we see God reaching out to man, out of love for His own creation, in His very own image. But Adam would sin, attempting to grasp equality with God through his pride, and thus sin and fall from grace. The Blessed Virgin Mary could certainly have attempted to grasp at equality with God, for through a singular act of grace, God had preserved her from the stain of sin, *yet she did not repeat* the sin of Adam. She was most certainly above the rest of sinful humanity, even the choirs of angels. Rather, as we often see in art, she drew in, in her humility, her arms crossed, her heart open, to receive her very Lord, the Lord of Life.

This is what we often lack, as children of God. As a child matures into his teenage years, he may well begin to cease embracing his parents in public and showing affection; she may well begin to draw in and ignore her father’s advice; he may even “rub off” his mother’s kiss. All of a sudden, those same parents that she was afraid to face the world without but a short span ago, are suddenly too shameful to be seen with in public. We may think sadly of our children for their brazen surge of independence and ignorance while there are still left with much to learn, but how different from them are we when it comes to God? All of a sudden, it seems that we too seem to “know better” when it comes to the world.

It does gnaw at our pride, that somehow, somehow, God just *might* know better than even we ourselves, not only how we should behave or be seen *in* the world, but to our very amazement, even what the path to our own

happiness might entail. This is when we withdraw from God, when we pull back our hand, when we pull back even our soul, when we, in a sense, no longer recognize God as Our Father. Shame enters the picture, not in the shame of our nakedness or sin, but in the shame of our dependence on this Father who loved us unto creation.



“Well, if the Prodigal Son will not, or cannot come to me, then I shall go to him.”

Thus, Christ is born in our very flesh, in the very nature that has been wounded, to seek those who have turned away from the Father. How often the Blessed Mother must have recalled that wondrous moment when her Child, her *Creator*, first reached out. O purest love of a Mother! O purest love of a sinless creature and worshipper of the One God!

The scene would repeat itself once more at her glorious Assumption into Heaven. The Virgin did not Ascend through her own power, but in her humility, was lifted up to the Heavens through the merits of her Son. He reached down once more, and she, the honor of our race, grasped, as it were, His hands once more. He was never once ashamed of her, nor she of Him, Mother and Child always ready to embrace.

Remember that as you grasp your rosary. Don’t pray in public to be showy, but don’t be ashamed of it, either. Grasp it, as you would grasp God at that moment when your soul leaves your mortal body once and for all – grasp it. But know that even before you grasped that first bead for the very first time, He sought you, and embraced you. Through those precious beads, Our Lord has embraced countless sinners and drawn them to Himself. May we always be counted among those never afraid to embrace Him.

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THEOLOGY FOR THE LAITY

God and Love and the Rosary Confraternity

By Fr. Dismas Sayre, O.P.

A BOLD STATEMENT

Pope Benedict XVIth's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, or "God is Love," garnered a lot of curious attention in the press when it was first released, because of the surprising subject matter of the letter. The pundits in the press were not expecting the so-called watchdog of Orthodoxy, Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, whom they nicknamed "God's Rottweiler," to write beautifully about, of all things... LOVE?! But it makes perfect sense, because you have to know what love is before you can claim to say or believe that "God is love." When we say "love" as a society, what we really mean is just "a feeling," or really, "like." It isn't something that deep or profound, and it comes and goes. *Deus Caritas Est* is a wonderful encyclical, not simply because of its theological lesson for us, but perhaps most of all because it takes a direct aim at the world's skewed and impoverished notion of what love is. REAL love, like our God who IS love, is a powerful, supernatural force, overcoming even death.

Now, there is one very curious aspect of this encyclical that you will find, not in the main body of the text, but at the very bottom:

Given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on 25 December, the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, in the year 2005, the first of my Pontificate.

Some folks may not always realize this, but we priests and religious tend to be somewhat busy and occupied during those sacred days leading up to the Christmas and Christmas Day itself. There is so much planning and preparation to do. This being the first Christmas of Pope Benedict as pope, one would think that it would be an especially stressful time for the Holy Father.

The date is not merely an odd coincidence, but rather, a final stress at the very end, a blaring coda to his masterpiece: Love is personal. Institutions cannot love.

As the Holy Father wrote:

*My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift. (*Deus Caritas Est*, 34 [emphases mine on all citations])*

*Love of neighbour is thus shown to be possible in the way proclaimed by the Bible, by Jesus. It consists in the very fact that, in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. This can only take place on the basis of an intimate encounter with God, an encounter which has become a communion of will, even affecting my feelings. Then I learn to look on this other person not simply with my eyes and my feelings, but from the perspective of Jesus Christ. His friend is my friend. Going beyond exterior appearances, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern. This I can offer them not only through the organizations intended for such purposes, accepting it perhaps as a political necessity. 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. (*Deus Caritas Est*, 18)*

I believe that the world does not know love, and therefore is more estranged from God, because we have somehow divided "charity," which might be better called "philanthropy" or "public works", from "love", which in Christ goes far beyond emotional

affection. It does not abandon human affection, but rather builds upon it to its true supernatural completion.

SOCIAL JUSTICE AS AN EXTENSION OF CHRISTIAN CHARITY

Thus we can see that we have often corrupted the idea of *social* justice into *political* justice. The means have become the end for too many Catholics and Christians alike, and the body politic has replaced the Body of Christ. Sadly, Catholic politicians will often proudly wrap themselves with the mantle of Catholic Social Justice, although they often work more for their own political gains than eternal ones, and even work against the very Gospel they ostensibly proclaim. These cannot be separated. To wit:

*Christian charitable activity must be independent of parties and ideologies. It is not a means of changing the world ideologically, and it is not at the service of worldly stratagems, but it is a way of making present here and now the love which man always needs. (*Deus Caritas Est*, 30)*

Pope Leo XIIIth, considered the Father of Modern Social Justice, himself advises us that:

*Charity, as a virtue, pertains to the Church; for virtue it is not, unless it be drawn from the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ; and whosoever turns his back on the Church cannot be near to Christ. (*Rerum Novarum*, 30)*

THE PROPER PLACE OF INSTITUTIONS AND GROUPS

So to go back to the title of this little article, institutions are often a political necessity, always remembering that "political" is not necessarily a pejorative or slanderous term. As the Holy Father pointed out, there can be practical and political necessities. I, as an individual, cannot simply load crates upon crates of food on my back and swim across the ocean, drop them off, and deliver them all myself to countless hungry souls. I must work with others, in organizations, even secular or non-Christian ones, to do this. Pope Benedict affirms this idea when he wrote that:

*Concern for our neighbour transcends the confines of national communities and has increasingly broadened its horizon to the whole world. The Second Vatican Council rightly observed that "among the signs of our times, one particularly worthy of note is a growing, inescapable sense of solidarity between all peoples." (*Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 14). State agencies and humanitarian associations work to promote this, the former mainly through subsidies or tax relief, the latter by making available considerable resources. The solidarity shown by civil society thus significantly surpasses that shown by individuals.*

*This situation has led to the birth and the growth of many forms of cooperation between State and Church agencies, which have borne fruit. Church agencies, with their transparent operation and their faithfulness to the duty of witnessing to love, are able to give a Christian quality to the civil agencies too, favouring a mutual coordination that can only redound to the effectiveness of charitable service. (*Deus Caritas Est*, 30)*

The proper way to think of organizations, then, is as tools, and whether any one organization is for good or for evil, that belongs to the way and the ends for which we as individuals or as members use them. Pope Benedict added that "As a

community, the Church must practise love. Love thus needs to be organized if it is to be an ordered service to the community” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 20). So groups and institutions can be a good tool, provided that they are properly animated and directed toward a good end.

One of the inherent dangers of institutions or groups, however, is that they seek growth or self-preservation more than the common good. In medicine such an organism is a cancer, feeding off a host and seeking to grow for its own sake, and not for the whole body. Sadly, this can happen even in church structures and institutions. Bureaucracies thus become petrified in bitterness, skepticism, and inaction, forgetting the whole reason that they came into existence in the first place, which is to serve God and neighbor. A tool is not made for itself, but for what it can do to help. Institutions do well to keep this in mind, especially those who are in charge of carrying out its respective missions.

Speaking of tools, I do not imagine that there will be any saws or hammers in Heaven nor in Hell. Who will need them there? Likewise, we will not be calling up the city to run the power company, for the New and Heavenly Jerusalem *will* be our city, and we will not need the power company:

And night shall be no more: and they shall not need the light of the lamp, nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God shall enlighten them, and they shall reign for ever and ever. (Revelation 22:5)

So yes, even the Internal Revenue Service, or whatever institution, will be neither in Heaven, nor in Hell, I’m afraid, for those of us who pay our share of taxes. Individual tax collectors, certainly, will end in Heaven or Hell. We know of at least *one* tax collector in Heaven, St. Matthew. Yet Jesus did not call Matthew because He needed a tax collector to run the Church finances or to run the audit of the local synagogue, but because He loved Matthew, this particular Matthew, this individual Matthew.

Even my beloved Dominican Order will cease once we have all been gathered into the world to come. What need will there be for preachers, when our fates have already been decided by the Just Judge? Neither the saved nor the damned will be very interested in my words. Like the tax collectors, we as Dominicans *will* be judged individually, although *more* strictly than the tax collectors, since so much has been given to us in this life for His service, for St. Peter tells us “that judgment should begin at the house of God,” (1 Peter 4:17a) and we are the servants in His same house. We know that there are certainly Dominicans in Heaven, and I have every reason from history to believe there may be some that turned away from God and chose to serve themselves first and will separate themselves from the love of God and neighbor in the end—that is, were we as friars means to a Heavenly end, or stumbling blocks toward an infernal fall? It is best not to lose oneself in a group identity and losing the first identity of a Catholic Christian and a child of God.

THE DANGERS OF SCANDAL

This is not to say that this working together is not without its potential pitfalls. In our times, especially, some Catholic organizations have caused great scandal to the faithful by their indiscriminate and close cooperation with groups or organizations that actively seek to promote some evil, though not all cooperation is evil. We must look at both the ends and the means.

But what is scandal? Scandal, in its proper theological sense, is not merely a kind of social or cultural shame. St. Thomas Aquinas defines it thus:

[W]hile going along the spiritual way, a man may be disposed to a spiritual downfall by another’s word or deed, in so far, to wit, as one man by his injunction, inducement or example, moves another to sin; and this is scandal properly so called. (Summa Theologica IIa IIae, q 43, a 1)

So we could well work with a government that seeks to destroy the Church, provided that we are working to relieve some necessity of its *individuals* within that nation, without supporting or promoting its end goals. If a fire were to happen at an abortion clinic, for example, a Catholic could readily show up to render medical aid to injured clinic workers, at the very same clinic those Catholics might have peacefully protested but a half hour before. Christians throughout the centuries have shown true charity, even for our enemies, following the example of Our Lord, who did good, even for some of the occupying Romans or their collaborators, even praying for those who killed Him, and, this is important, *while not supporting or participating in the evil any individual did, but seeking to love them and bring them to Himself.*

Pope Benedict brings up the great story of Julian the Apostate, the Roman Emperor, both as a warning about the dangers of scandal, and the witness of charity.

As a child of six years, Julian witnessed the assassination of his father, brother and other family members by the guards of the imperial palace; rightly or wrongly, he blamed this brutal act on the Emperor Constantius, who passed himself off as an outstanding Christian. The Christian faith was thus definitively discredited in his eyes. Upon becoming emperor, Julian decided to restore paganism, the ancient Roman religion, while reforming it in the hope of making it the driving force behind the empire. In this project he was amply inspired by Christianity. He established a hierarchy of metropolitans and priests who were to foster love of God and neighbour. In one of his letters, he wrote that the sole aspect of Christianity which had impressed him was the Church’s charitable activity. He thus considered it essential for his new pagan religion that, alongside the system of the Church’s charity, an equivalent activity of its own be established. According to him, this was the reason for the popularity of the “Galileans”. They needed now to be imitated and outdone. In this way, then, the Emperor confirmed that charity was a decisive feature of the Christian community, the Church. (Deus Caritas Est, 24)

Julian the Apostate thus understood and experienced the danger of scandal from Constantius, but also knew the power of its charity, as Pope Benedict alluded:

“For it is disgraceful when no Jew is a beggar and the impious Galileans [Christians] support our poor in addition to their own; everyone is able to see that our coreligionists are in want of aid from us.” (Catholic Answers, “Julian the Apostate’s Lesson on Why We Are Good,” Steve Weidenkopf)

So it is not only appropriate for a Christian to help an enemy, but we can go so far as to say that is expected of a Christian, following a long, apostolic tradition that goes back to Our Lord Himself.

SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY

Looking ahead to Lent, we are reminded every year very forcefully of that holy triad of fasting, alms, and prayer. We know well of alms; we are somewhat limited in fasting; but we often overlook prayer, or the general spiritual works of mercy, that feed the soul more than the body.

Those Spiritual Works of Mercy are:

- To instruct the ignorant;
- To counsel the doubtful;
- To admonish sinners;
- To bear wrongs patiently;
- To forgive offences willingly;
- To comfort the afflicted;
- To pray for the living and the dead.

One can see, then, our blessed Confraternity at work in its wonderful charism in the Spiritual Works of Mercy, especially in

our prayers for the living and the dead, teaching and defending the Faith. This is not to say that any individual member should ever neglect the Corporal Works of Mercy, far from it. But it does mean that we likewise cannot neglect our important mission. How important is it?

I cited St. Peter in his first letter earlier, where he tells us, "For the time is, that judgment should begin at the house of God," that is, that we should be ready to render accounts as servants of God, but he also continues, "And if first at us, *what shall be the end of them that believe not the gospel of God?*" (1 Peter 4:17). This reminds me beautifully of Saint Dominic, who was often seen in tears, pleading to God, "What shall become of sinners?" Many forget that St. Vincent de Paul did not establish an order *only* to feed the body, but also the soul. He writes in one of his conferences, "Our vocation is to go not into one parish, nor into only one diocese, but throughout the earth. And to do what? To inflame the hearts of men. *It is not enough for me to love God if my neighbor does not love Him as well.*"

St. John Chrysostom, rightfully hailed as a hero of the poor and downtrodden, putting the fear of God in those who did not love the poor, did not neglect his Spiritual Works, writing pointedly that, "There is nothing colder than a Christian who does not seek to save others." And later in his homily, adding:

Do not say, "It is impossible for me to influence others." If you are a Christian, it is impossible for this not to happen. Things found in nature cannot be denied; so it is here, for it is a question of the nature of a Christian.

Do not insult God. If you say that the sun cannot shine, you have insulted Him. If you say that a Christian cannot help others, you have insulted God and called Him a liar. It is easier for the sun not to give warmth or shine than for the Christian not to shed his light. It is easier for light to be darkness than for this to happen.

Do not say then that it is impossible. The opposite is impossible. Do not insult God. If we have put our affairs in order, these things will certainly come to be and will follow as a natural consequence. The light of a Christian cannot escape notice. So bright a lamp cannot be hidden. (From a homily on the Acts of the Apostles, as found in the breviary for Office of Readings, Common of Holy Men).

BACK TO YOU, AND TO US

So we now we come back around to our blessed sodality, the Rosary Confraternity. Pope Leo XIII, in writing his encyclical on our group, in speaking of prayers, writes:

But prayers acquire their greatest efficacy in obtaining God's assistance when offered publicly, by large numbers, constantly, and unanimously, so as to form as it were a single chorus of supplication; as those words of the Acts of the Apostles clearly declare wherein the disciples of Christ, awaiting the coming of the Holy Ghost, are said to have been "persevering with one mind in prayer" (Acts i., 14). (Augustissimae Virginis Mariae, 7)

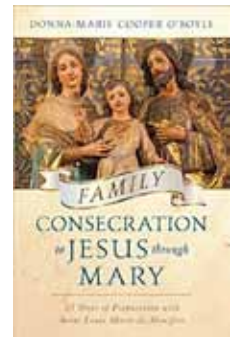
This sodality, this union of the faithful piously praying in one heart and mind, then, has a greater force than the isolated individuals, although the whole cannot flourish without each individual cell carrying out its function. It is able to have a greater reach, then, in charity, as an institution of prayer. Each member benefits from the whole, but the whole has a greater effect for the whole world. We do not seek growth for our own sake as an institution, but for the sake of the whole world, especially those in most need of God's mercy, always in love for each and every soul.

May God then bring to fulfillment this good work He has begun in us, that it may ever be an aid to our own salvation, and the salvation of others.



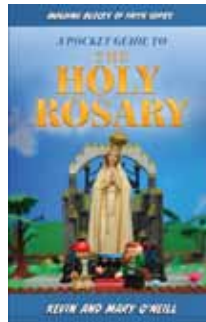
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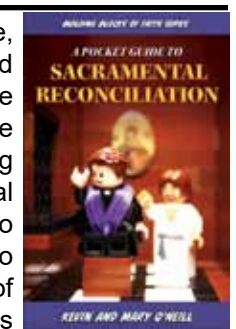


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