

DEUS CARITAS EST

“GOD IS LOVE AND LIFE TOGETHER”

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OPENING OF THE YEAR

SEMINARY RETREAT

ST. MARY’S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

The opening retreat this year, as last year, will be given by the seminary faculty. Our theme this year is taken from the first encyclical letter of Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* “God is Love.”

The goal of the annual opening retreat is to set the spiritual tone for the house and for formation in 2006-2007. No matter where we are in formation – just beginning or completing 4th year, seminarian or faculty member – we all need to hear the divine summons to love and ask how and where we can make this a reality in our lives.

Benedict speaks of the Church itself as a “community of love,” and identifies three essential traits of the Church: proclaiming the word (Kerygma), celebrating the sacraments (Leiturgia), and serving others (Diakonia). Ordination and the laying on of hands is required before you preach and teach, and before you celebrate mass and the other sacraments. But, no ordination rite is required before you can love and serve. All of us are expected to love and yet all of us are novices in the school of agape.

What aspects of the encyclical of Benedict XVI and what biblical texts should guide this reflection?

The encyclical obviously has a Johannine cast by virtue of its title and opening quotation, “God is love and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” (1 John 4, 16). The Holy Father then quotes the Shema text from Deuteronomy 6, “Hear O Israel, you shall love the Lord your God...” and the famous text about love of neighbor in Leviticus 19. We recall that Jesus himself had linked these two passages as the two great commandments. These classic Jewish

expressions of love constitute the biblical stepping stones into Benedict's reflections. There follows, then, a theological meditation on love followed by a practical discussion of ecclesial charity.

Seminarians need to read this encyclical written by a pope who has spent his life reflecting on the word of God theologically and the last twenty-six years serving his predecessor as prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In this role, he was known for safeguarding authentic magisterial teaching and defending the faith of the Church against errors within and relativism without. The issue of truth was his main concern.

How telling, then, both about the man and his motivations that his first encyclical is on love and that love, for this brilliant theologian, should represent the most compelling apologetic available for Christians. In one word – love – he humbles the belligerent arrogance of crusaders of faith as well as the scorn of its intellectual despisers. Love, it turns out, in the life of Christianity has been trumps all along.

But, as the pope points out, we immediately encounter here a real problem of language and feeling. What does love mean in a world that uses it so indiscriminately and for anything at all? Does linguistic analysis of the word, parsing distinctions between *eros* and *agape*, really help at a time when love has no other word in English? And, is an appeal to love not dangerously sentimental and romantic and that, sad to say, it's so abused as to be no guidance at all? For contentious spirits, isn't the appeal to love too often a pious way to silence disagreement or instill a little guilt before pressing a practical advantage? Cannot the word love be misused, not only by an erotically charged media culture, but by the devout as well?

Part of the Holy Father's task in *Deus Caritas Est* is precisely to avoid sentimentality by configuring love to the theo-drama of the Bible and mapping a rich trajectory for it from the Book of Genesis to the Gospel and Epistles of John.

More than establishing a new biblical address for this word, Benedict also wishes to locate love among all the virtues which nourish it, safeguard it, and extend its reach.

Still, even if love is our origin and our destiny, one might say in all humility, love is not all you need.

That was the provocative title and argument of a now famous article by Stanley Hauerwas, professor at Duke Divinity School, in which he challenged the so-called situation ethics of the 1970s. That ethics made the appeal to love “the” motive and solution to rather complex ethical dilemmas. Slogans such as “always do the loving thing,” – don’t really solve all moral or human problems. Love is not a magic incantation or substitute for thought or careful analysis.

There’s a clear way out of this sentimental ethic. It starts with this notice: Love is something you do. Soren Kierkegaard’s writings in his book, *The Works of Love*, make that point over and over. Sentimental love – warm feelings – are a world away from the parable of the Good Samaritan. The priest and the Levite who walked on past the mugged traveler may very well have felt bad for him. They could even have whispered a prayer on his behalf. The point is they didn’t stop; they didn’t adjust their schedule and priorities; they didn’t go out of their way; they didn’t part with any money. Love for the Bible, the Holy Father, Soren Kierkegaard, and Stanley Hauerwas is not about pleasant feelings. It’s about good deeds.

So, I wish to begin the retreat and humbly say that Christian love quietly nests among all the virtues affecting how we act. In God’s eyes, love is the secret affinity among them, not simply, as Paul says, the greatest of them all. Justice begins as a love for the just, for an honest equilibrium in the treatment of everyone, for the insistence on juridical procedure. Fortitude is nurtured by the admiration for courage and by not running away. Prudence means loving genuine wisdom more than my good intentions and taking the full measure and consequence of my actions.

1 Corinthians 13 makes this affiliation of love and other virtues quite plain. Paul sketches out a series of descriptions of love which keep extending its reach into the social world of human

virtue. Benedict XVI ends his encyclical on this very same point. He connects love to faith and hope, and through them to patience and humility.

If the practice of love is the heart of a Christian community, how should it affect our life at St. Mary's Seminary? What forms of virtue – those sometimes anonymous and subtle anticipations and fortifications of Christian love -- create the human and fragile tissue on which our community life grows and flourishes? In the New Testament, there are various lists of what are often called “household virtues.” (Colossians and Ephesians) While not as rhetorical or poetic as the texts about love in 1 Corinthians 13 or the First Letter of John, they are nevertheless, the humble 1st and 2nd cousins of love. If you practice those, love is probably not far away or long in coming.

I will suggest my own list of twelve virtues or qualities – let's call them love in “low profile” in the community. It could of course be extended further and in different directions. But, these words suggest that virtue branches out from love, and even the more occasional and seemingly optional gestures I will mention have an important connection here. Leaves, after all, do not sprout directly from the trunk of a tree and from roots hidden deep in the ground. But, the buried roots and the delicate fronds at the end of tree branches are the source and fruit of a life force flowing through the trunk and received from the soil and sky. That's how it is with love and the little virtues.

So these “homespun virtues” or “household virtues” are the roots and leaves that both feed and express love. They make “life together” an expression of God's love for us and ours for God.

During the first semester, we will take up the four great cardinal virtues – Prudence, Justice, Fortitude, and Temperance – and explore their importance in seminary and priestly life. Here I wish to be even more specific and practical. Before talking about agape and the cardinal virtues, I will simply urge civility.

If that sounds strange, consider this. One of the biggest universities and medical institutions in the world actually sponsored a study of civility in the belief that a breakdown at this level

affected everything else. Professor P. M. Forni is the co-founder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project which ran from 1997-2000. He is the author of *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* (New York; St. Martin's Press, 2002). In a chapter entitled, "How do we learn to love?" He quotes from a character in a novel who advises a disillusioned and grudging romantic, "Forget love. Try good manners." Forni writes, "First manners and then love..."

Practice politeness, respect, restraint, concern, and some benevolence – then love is a lot easier. So, start here are a few good manners to think about during the retreat:

Pay attention to others and their needs;

Acknowledge people when you meet them;

Think the best of people and put the best interpretation on motives;

Be agreeable even if you're not feeling great;

Don't shift responsibility or blame onto others.

Now let me suggest my twelve virtues that protect love and nourish the soil for it to grow. Let's make 2006-2007 a year when we all express love in these humble ways.

1. Hospitality first and foremost (love welcomes).
 - a. The warm welcome that you received, give to others;
 - b. A word, a smile is all that is required most of the time;
 - c. A majestic building intimidates; you compensate;
2. Courtesy always and no matter what (love is kind).
 - a. Stress makes people discourteous and abrupt;
 - b. Lacking words and gestures and when under pressure we strike back;
 - c. Courtesy is not dishonest even if you have an issue with someone;
3. Patience with the imperfect (love is patient).
 - a. It takes time to fix some things; allow for that;
 - b. Impatience always seems demanding and ungenerous except in true; emergencies

- c. Sometimes people just forgot; give the benefit of the doubt;
- 4. Anticipation, thinking of others first.
 - a. Thinking ahead and thinking of others before yourself;
 - b. This is like “setting the table” for love;
 - c. Gifts and surprises take forethought;
- 5. Not blaming, but understanding and repairing (love is not irritable).
 - a. Don’t be too quick to blame someone especially if you haven’t even spoken to them;
 - b. Try to understand, as the French say, *“Tout c’est comprendre, c’est tout pardonner”* – *“All that is understood is forgiven.”*
 - c. Mop it up, no lectures, don’t be a baby screaming about spilt milk;
 - d. Gossip as a game for weaklings and spectators (love is not arrogant and does not rejoice in wrongdoing);
 - e. Ideas and events elevate conversation as agape elevates eros;
 - f. Gossip is often a close neighbor to fault-finding and running down a reputation;
 - g. Get the facts; rumors are usually spread by people with an axe to grind;
 - h. Christ speaks publicly; the devil mostly whispers;
- 6. Classmates in common.
 - a. Support your classmates in their vocations;
 - b. Clear the air when there are problems;
 - c. Do things together;
- 7. Respect for others.
 - a. Always show respect to others no matter what; respect legitimate authority;
 - b. Respect is especially important under pressure, when you’re being challenged or called to account;

- c. Love doesn't sulk;
8. Zeal for great causes.
- a. Get involved in the larger pastoral world and in the lives of others;
 - b. This draws you out of yourself in the way love always does; the neighbor goes first;
 - c. It also supplies table conversation to replace gossip;
9. Volunteering, helping others.
- a. Pitch in without needing to be asked; don't hang back;
 - b. Ask others to help; don't be afraid to ask for and prevail upon volunteers;
10. Generosity in forgiveness, not taking offense (love forgives).
- a. Giving others the benefit of the doubt; not always surmising the worst;
 - b. Be magnanimous;
 - c. Laugh more than you're accustomed to; don't be so earnest;
11. Love your community.
- a. You have only three choices with your community, seminary, parish: use it (the utilitarian approach – not a member, but a customer); promote and serve it (a loyal member and participant); or be indifferent to or dislike it (a disaffected and disenchanted member);
 - b. Love of and loyalty to one's colleagues and community creates bonds of trust, the very bonds on which love depends;
 - c. After all, the deepest form of human love is known as fidelity.