

Love, Justice and Catholic Social Teaching in Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est*

Dedicated to the Memory of Bishop Walter Edyvean of
Boston, Massachusetts

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Abstract

In 2005 Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* that powerfully addressed the importance of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on social justice, and taught that it is rooted in *Caritas*, the love that binds all human beings together in respect and in love. In 2007 the encyclical was attacked by the Asian liberation theologian Fr. Tissa Balasuriya (1924-2013), who argued carefully that the teaching Pope Benedict had proclaimed, as was indifferent to the claims of justice. Such practices as emerge from Catholic Social teaching are rooted in justice rather than in love, he insisted, and it is a mistake to confuse one for the other. Speaking from the point of view of one who has engaged for more than thirty years in the sort of social justice work that both theologians address, I argue against identifying Catholic social justice with the politically based practices that Fr. Balasuriya championed, and point out that the historically and theologically based teaching that Pope Benedict taught is vital in sustaining the continuing, informed, and often one-on-one work that such programs undertake. I conclude that to identify the practice of Catholic social justice with politics, whether of a left-of-center inclination or any other, is almost always harmful to its practice, and that both Love and Justice are necessary for its success.

Keywords: Pope Benedict XVI, Fr. Tissa Balasuriya, Catholic Social Justice, Caritas, Justice, Asian Liberation Theology, Deus Caritas Est.

The Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII, published on May 15, 1891, has had such a powerful effect on the discussion of the principles involved in the definition of Catholic social justice that it may seem ungrateful to suggest that its effect has wanted nuance, but in some ways its influence, descending from

a great height, has been more invested in ‘what it is to be’ than in ‘how it should function’. Recent examinations of Catholic social teaching regularly take up economic and social issues, the relationship between church and state, the role of the family, and now thanks to Pope Francis, the care of creation, and the extent to which human ecology can be understood in terms of social justice, but less often do they turn to the ways in which such teachings can actually be enacted, or what is to be expected of those who take part in them.

On Christmas Day 2005, however, Pope Benedict XVI published his first Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, which spoke directly to some of the issues of which his great predecessor had fought shy one-hundred-and-fourteen years earlier, and did so from the vantage point of a faith rooted in scripture and in love, one that involved not only the matters of social justice that had engaged Pope Leo, but also those concerned in its practice, a consideration that had not received the emphasis or the focus he now employed.

That the practice of social justice has often escaped attention, however, is no doubt understandable. The circumstances that lead to its consideration often begin with assumptions of evident inequality and a need for redistribution, whether of things or of power, though such considerations rarely estimate the nature of the relationship that can or should exist between the endowed and the disadvantaged who, for whatever reason, have been neglected or deprived. But these are important considerations in Benedict’s encyclical, which addresses social justice through a consideration of church history and *caritas*, an approach that was subsequently criticized, no doubt in part as a reaction to a much misunderstood speech Pope Benedict gave in Regensburg, Germany, the following year. I shall return to one such critique shortly.

But on the subject of *caritas* itself, Pope Benedict is quite uncompromising. Arguing for “The distinctiveness of the Church’s charitable activity,”⁸⁷ for example, he finds in *caritas* a “simple response to immediate needs and specific situations,” but adds that: “Individuals who care for those in need must first be professionally competent: they should be properly trained in what they do and how to do it, and committed to continuing care. Yet while professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proficient care. They

⁸⁷ Pope Benedict XVI’s, *Deus Caritas Est* (London: CTS, 2006), para. 31.

need humanity. They need heartfelt concern.”⁸⁸ Although such statements appear not only unexceptional but even obvious, there are circumstances in which they are anything but. Many Catholic universities, for example, both in America and elsewhere, offer what can best be called “outlets” for social justice, programs initiated by the university, usually for its undergraduate members, so as to introduce them to the importance of working with disadvantaged persons, in many cases with disadvantaged children. And it is with these, among other places, that Pope Benedict’s strictures can still have a salutary effect.

I address this issue as a Professor of English and American literature at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., where my main area of interest is in European medieval literature, but for the past thirty-two years, I also have been effectively the director of a program in which Georgetown undergraduates tutor, one-on-one, in literacy and the language arts, a group of often disadvantaged primary-school children aged 6 to 10, in Washington D. C. and living in two separate urban communities. Our project, anchored in an appreciation of social justice as it is, originated in a community named Sursum Corda Apartments in 1970, and then when Sursum Corda was razed by developers, moved over to nearby Golden Rule Apartments in 2017. The schools that lie closest to their apartments, and that many of their children attend, are not the best in the city. Many live in accommodation that is supported by rent subsidies of up to seventy-percent by the federal government. Many are one-parent, and some without regular income. But there is too a self-reliance and a sense of fairness and concern for others that I have not space here to describe, but that are frequently apparent in our interactions together. Although I shall draw examples from my work with both communities, I am concerned here with the implications that I believe our work may hold out for an understanding of Catholic social justice in more general terms, particularly those that appear in a setting informed by a university context. To this circumstance I add two caveats: first that the putatively Catholic distinctiveness of some projects involving social justice is not particularly apparent in practice. Such projects may indeed be intrinsic to Catholic identity within an institution like a Catholic university, but it is probably mistaken to claim them as uniquely Catholic. Indeed one of their many advantages is the opening they supply for a dialogue with other religions, particularly in a university context like the one I am concerned with here.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 31a.

The second caveat is that, contrary to usual practice, I am alluding to specific programs that involve social justice in a study that is not about such programs, but rather about the practice of Catholic social justice itself. This is a surprisingly unusual circumstance, but discourse concerning social justice rarely concerns itself with particulars, a circumstance for which current academic discourse is probably as guilty as any direction given to such discourse by Pope Leo, who certainly made allowance for the role of *caritas*. But rarely have I seen much discussion of the specific circumstances concerning such programs in the literature concerning social justice, and though it is easy to believe that the author whom one has in hand may have been much concerned with such matters in the past, it is less easy to believe that he or she is going to address these circumstances now, however eloquent his or her exposition may initially appear. Indeed, I have a memory of once having invited a distinguished Catholic ethician to visit our program at Sursum Corda during its final years, only to be told that he was far too occupied with a book he was writing about Catholic social justice to do so. But one reason I find Benedict's observations as attractive as I do, is his specific reference to such programs as the ones to which I have been referring, even to the extent of offering "a special word of gratitude and appreciation to all those who take part in these activities in whatever way. For young people, this widespread involvement constitutes a school of life which offers them a formation in solidarity and a readiness to offer others not simply material aid, but their very selves."⁸⁹

In chapter one of my forthcoming book, *Inventing Education: Georgetown Students and D.C. Youth Learn from Each Other* (2022), my account of the two programs I have been referring to, I identified the two chief characteristics of both, characteristics that carried with them unexpected but real challenges relevant to our topic. First of all, it was necessary to ensure that, as far as possible, the students who took part were "professionally competent," at least as far as having been "properly trained" in the work they were to undertake would allow. But although Georgetown had sponsored several like programs in the past, sustained training had never been a priority. Some of these had been effectively "homework programs," intended to ensure a young learner's homework was completed and correct, and in these programs subject area competence, but not necessarily the ability to teach it, had been assumed. But another consideration involved

⁸⁹ Ibid., para. 30b.

a belief still held by some who oversee such programs, that it is best to leave the undergraduate students who take part in such programs largely on their own, since not to do so might constrain their inventiveness and limit their ability to come up with a different way of proceeding than what had worked in the past. But such a proposition places the apparent interest of a neophyte student tutor ahead of that of the learner whom he or she intends to serve, though it has, of course, the further property of shielding from responsibility anyone else involved in oversight, who can simply claim that whatever may go wrong is simply the student-tutor's doing. Apart from such dubious advantages, it goes without saying that such instruction as the tutor actually does receive, should not come simply in a brief burst at the beginning of the project, but continue throughout the academic year, and that the student tutor should be personally involved, by discussion and report, in its operation. At least such has been our experience.

But there are cases where the instruction of student-tutors has gone even further. At Boston College, a Jesuit university in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, for example, the Philosophy Department, and some other departments, have instituted courses specifically intended for students involved in the work of social justice, after such courses were called for by the students themselves. But if the instruction of student-tutors is attended to effectively, then Pope Benedict's injunction concerning the need for "properly trained" participants has been answered, and the work of social justice can proceed with some depth. It can even become part of the academic and intellectual life of the university, and not be banished to its "extra-curricular" suburbs, as has so often been its fate.

But if the first requirement for programs concerned with social justice is that its participants, in Pope Benedict's words, be "properly trained," the second concerns the nature of the relationship – sometimes friendship is not too strong a word – that comes to exist between the undergraduate tutor and the *Sursum Corda* learner. This is not entirely surprising, since both are, in very real sense, being instructed, in some ways by the other. In some programs it is difficult for a relationship of any depth at all to develop, since elsewhere there are programs that intentionally fracture the connection between tutor and learner by frequent changes of participant, instructional interruptions and cancellations, or simply not arranging for the same tutor to instruct the same learner over a given period of time. Since the safety and security both of the young learners and their tutors are of paramount importance, this practice is understandable, even if it is

not undertaken for that reason. But whatever its motivation, it is not particularly helpful in ensuring the success of tutorial instruction.

But there are other ways of addressing safety issues depending upon the circumstances of the tutorial sessions, and these of course must be addressed attentively, if usually in a case-by-case basis. In many American states, for example, there are relevant laws, and as a general rule universities, in America and elsewhere, are nothing if not responsive to them. In this connection some programs are arranged so as to accommodate whomever comes to help, so that the same learner will work with a variety of tutors in the course of a term. But other programs, like ours, are rooted in a specific disadvantaged community, and so reach out to learners who would not otherwise be willingly engaged. This circumstance requires a higher degree of commitment on the part of those who are involved, along with a higher degree of oversight by competent authority, support from the community, and particularly from the learners' care givers – my experience has been that mothers and perhaps especially grandmothers often knew our learners best of all – though other care givers, where they existed, could be every bit as effective.

Without the discipline imposed by tutoring inside a school building, however, the effectiveness of the tutor's tutoring often depends, to a greater or less degree, on the nature of the relationship that develops, and that raises the question as to why it is that tutors in particular take part in the work they have undertaken to do – given their age, learners usually have the choice made for them, though to put it in such terms somewhat simplifies the matter. But this second consideration, after those in authority have seen to it that the tutors have been properly instructed, lies in the hands of the tutors themselves. Here I am going to argue that Pope Benedict has again anticipated what is central: it is not only a sense of justice, but also of love, that will direct the tutors, and cause them both to do what they do, and gradually to understand their reasons for doing so. To be sure, the first and easiest reason that they engage in the work they do is that they have become aware of, and responsive to, the goodness and the necessity of human justice. If the earth has ever sustained a totally just society it has not done so recently, and the economic systems that now prevail seem to guarantee that we will not see one anytime soon. But hope, moderated as need be by reason, seems to find a place in many a young heart, and justice is indeed the first motivator for many who take part. But my own experience has been that, attractive as a sense of justice may be, the second, and very often the most

powerful reality, is that of love, a more personal virtue than justice ever was, and one that lies closer to their day-to-day practice. Just as it is justice that indicates that they have an understanding of the larger social purpose to which they have put their hand, so it is love that gives birth to the nature of the relationship, overseen and conditional though it may be, that can, and often does, come about.

Earlier in this article I mentioned that Pope Benedict's *Deus Caritas Est* had been criticized for its emphasis on what constitutes its main contribution to the discussion of Catholic social teaching, its emphasis on the role of *caritas*. One telling attack appeared in a contribution to a multi-author collection of articles called *Catholic Social Justice, Theological and Practical Explorations* (2007) written by the late Sri Lankan priest and philosopher Fr. Tissa Balasuriya (1924-2013), a well-known, very effective, and highly controversial proponent of Asian liberation theology, who had established the Center for Society and Religion in Colombo in 1971, and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians in 1975. He had also been excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church for one year in 1997, a time when then Cardinal Ratzinger was Head of the Congregation for the Direction of the Faith, and was thus involved both in rejecting as "defective" a compromise statement that Fr. Balasuriya had proposed, and in arranging for his subsequent reconciliation.

In his examination of now Pope Benedict's 2005 encyclical, Fr. Balasuriya pointed out, *inter alia*, that whatever its strengths, its reading of Church history – Pope Benedict had cited examples from the past to illustrate the Church's care and concern for the poor and the disadvantaged – was far too one-sided. For centuries the Church had worked in close association with such regressive and reprehensible institutions as Colonialism, he insisted, ones that effectively stood against much modern Church teaching. The Church not only tolerated, but also benefited, from the unjust structures of society that such institutions both established and perpetuated, he argued. Nor did Fr. Balasuriya's examination lack for *ad hominum*. He insisted that both Pope Benedict and his immediate predecessor, Pope John Paul II, never enjoyed "close live contact with other religions in an ongoing manner. They have lived their lives almost entirely in a world dominated by white racism, whether under capitalism or Communism....Both popes implicitly accept the world of neo-liberal domination but also the global world system of land distribution in which the European peoples have taken over the main habitable areas of the world in the Americas

and Oceania.”⁹⁰ Under such circumstances, his argument continues, it is hardly surprising that pope Benedict, “does not speak for mass movements for human liberation and structural changes in favor of justice ... From my part of the world, one is inclined to ask for whom is the encyclical written, and by whom? Should not *Deus Caritas Est* necessarily imply that God is also the God of justice?”⁹¹

It should indeed, and given our author’s well-known beliefs and commitments it is not difficult to sympathize, at least in part, with the strident tone of “let’s have a little more discussion of justice and a little less about all this love,” that runs through his examination as a whole. He paints with broad strokes, with an understanding of history that is perhaps not overly-nuanced, and with a clear and certain grasp of past injustices. He gives what he takes to be the largely Western tradition of *caritas* a nod, but whatever advantages it may hold out, Fr. Balasuriya thinks its embrace part of the reason for Pope Benedict’s evident short-sightedness. His analysis is certainly *ad rem*, but somewhat unhelpful in discussing the circumstances in which the practice of social justice can actually take place, particularly, but not only, in programs like the ones I have been describing.

The difficulty with an approach to social justice that privileges justice over love is that, even in a considered analysis, it easily turns away from philosophical or theological discourse, and to the world of partisan politics instead. But the purpose of maintaining or working in such programs as are informed by a sense of Catholic social justice, is not to produce votes for the Democratic or for the Labour Party, for the Greens or the CDU, even though in some cases it is possible that such may be one of the unintended effects. As I have already indicated, my students are certainly aware of the presence of social injustice, which they sometimes call unfairness, but not wishing to seem to claim a spurious sense of personal accomplishment, only rarely discuss. Still if justice was the only thing that drew them to do the work they do, their teaching would probably be a good deal less engaging than it usually is, and their commitment might not last as long as it often does. At its best, our work is a joy for tutor and learner alike, one that, sometimes at least, effects a connection and a communication

⁹⁰ Tissa Balasuriya’s, “Benedict XVI’s *Deus Caritas Est* and Social Action,” in *Catholic Social Justice: Theological and Practical Explorations*, ed. Philomena Cullen, Bernard Hoose and Gerard Mannion (London and New York: T&T Clark and Continuum Books, 2007), 47.

⁹¹ Tissa Balasuriya’s, “Benedict XVI’s *Deus Caritas Est* and Social Action,” 50.

that might not otherwise have come about. But even though good learning – in our case in literacy and the language arts in general – is the stated and real purpose of our work, the terms of the interaction between tutor and learner is more than a detail, and can even become, according to circumstance, a kind of necessity, even though it is not usually understood as such by either tutor or learner, who often come to take it for granted. I have already complained about accounts of Catholic Social Justice that are long on precept and theory, but short on the details of practice, and so, for all of its compassion and commitment, Fr. Balasuriya's seems to me. To think Pope Benedict's encyclical not sufficiently invested in an examination of justice simply because it privileges the place and role of love seems to me to all but intentionally misread it, and to set aside as irrelevant the less social, more personal, virtues that it seeks to privilege instead.

It would be a mistake to deny to love social meaning, even social significance, particularly where matters of social justice are concerned. Increasingly, both in America and elsewhere in the world, it has become apparent that many of us form not only many of our political opinions, but also many of our social practices, according to what we hate, rather than by what we love. But engagement with social justice is a welcome practice, particularly, *pace* Fr. Balasuriya, if its practice offers a bridge over the only apparent division between justice and love, one that finally privileges neither one. The great accomplishment of *Deus Caritas Est* is to reconcile, without giving advantage to either one, two of the most powerful Christian virtues, and to offer them to us as the best way forward in an increasingly divided and fragmented world.

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Bibliographical Note

This study has been a consideration of three texts in particular, Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est*, cited by paragraph from the edition of the Catholic Truth Society (CTS: London, 2006); Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, cited from the edition of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington, D.C., 1991); and Fr. Tissa Balasureiya's essay "Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est* and Social Action," cited from Philomena Cullen, Bernard Hoose and Gerard Mannion, eds., *Catholic Social Justice: Theological and Practical Explorations* (London and New York: T&T Clark and Continuum Books, 2007), pp. 41-62; my references above are by page number. Papal encyclicals are available online at Vatican.va. The literature on Catholic Social justice is extensive though not always taken with the seriousness that it deserves, even in Catholic universities where it should be particularly relevant, and although

I have taken exception to certain of its current practices, I should point out two particularly interesting examples, Edward Hadas, *Counsels of Imperfection: Thinking Through Catholic Social Teaching* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), and Rodger Charles, SJ, *An Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching* (Oxford and San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999, 2001), for their differing approaches and ultimately, differing positions. My own are apparent in accounts I have given of the programs I have referred to above, and explicitly in my forthcoming book, *Inventing Education: Georgetown Students and D.C. Youth Learn from Each Other*, as earlier, in a related account focused on the community of Sursum Corda itself, *Power and Probity in a D.C. Cooperative: The Life and Death of Sursum Corda* (Washington, D.C.: New Academia Publishing, 2018). A third study focused upon certain English programs that took place in London: *Vygotsky's Children: Georgetown and Oxbridge Students Meet Urban Youth* (Washington, D.C., New Academia Publishing, 2017).

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