

The Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*
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Reception and Perspectives in the United States and Australia
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In the United States and Australia, the Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est* enjoyed a warm reception.¹ By and large, commentary on the Encyclical appeared in the form of articles in journals or chapters in books. Two major journals published in the United States devoted entire issues either to the 2005 Encyclical itself or to the early pontificate of the Pope *Emeritus*, Benedict XVI. Although the report that follows treats mainly the United States and Australia, it also includes mention of certain noteworthy reactions published in English (and so accessible to the worldwide Anglophone community), even though their authors reside elsewhere than in the aforementioned countries. My remarks include two types of articles. On the one hand, I enumerate the essays that demonstrate a full appreciation for the Encyclical. In addition, I report on those authors who presume to indicate ways in which the Encyclical could have been better written, and so, for the most part, offer a nuanced appreciation. No effort is made, however, to distribute the articles under these two headings.

The fall 2006 issue of the *International Catholic Review*, *Communio*, devoted its pages to the Encyclical. His Eminence, Angelo Cardinal Scola, wrote on “The Unity of Love and the Face of Man.” The Cardinal presents his thoughts as “An Invitation to Read *Deus Caritas Est*.”² The essay proceeds in two main steps. First, six preliminary notations signal the principal themes that unify the Encyclical. These meta-themes sketch out a comprehensive view of human and Christian love. One is invited next to approach the Encyclical as an exercise in reader response. The text, so the Cardinal assures us, offers something for everyone. The second step unfolds a number-by-number commentary that offers “emphases, signposts, incentives, and meditations

prompted by” the Cardinal’s own reading of the Encyclical.³ He proposes to find “elements of Christian method” that will serve a pedagogic role within the Christian community. The Cardinal’s gloss emerges as both dense and highly differentiated, and so it does not surrender easily to recapitulation. Glosses never do. Still, this article proves most useful precisely because of the emphasis which the eminent author puts on what, for lack of a better term, I would call *lectio divina*. On the Cardinal’s account, a text from Romano Guardini provides a bridge between the two parts of the Encyclical: “In the experience of great love, all that happens becomes an event within its sphere.”⁴ In sum, the Encyclical aims more to embolden the heart than to instruct the mind.

A second article in the same *Communio* issue comes from the pen of David C. Schindler, the son of David Schindler, who lent his considerable mental energies to the establishment of the American campus of the Pontifical Institute John Paul II for Studies on Marriage and the Family. The younger Schindler addresses “The Redemption of *Eros*” by way of his posing philosophical reflections.⁵ Schindler shows how a central claim of Part One of the Encyclical serves as a corrective to popular misconceptions about the attitude that Christians bear toward erotic love. The claims that Christians vilify *eros* often owe their existence to the studied sentences of secular savants who understand nothing of the Gospel. Theologians also commit mistakes about Christian *eros*. So Schindler devotes considerable space to explaining the correction that the Encyclical makes of the “transvaluation of values” advanced by the Swedish Lutheran bishop, Andres Nygren. Because of the unity of *eros* and *agape* that the Encyclical sets forth in great detail, Schindler proposes that we speak about a “wholly generous love.”⁶ One is grateful to Professor Schindler for this rich presentation of the Encyclical, one that enables those who ponder the reality of love, even without Christian faith, to learn from it.

Larry S. Chapp, a layman who teaches in a Pennsylvania Catholic university, discusses the retrieval of a Christian cosmology in his lengthy contribution to the *Communio* volume. The author applies “the insights of Hans Urs von Balthasar on the theological grounding for ‘matter’” to Pope Benedict’s Encyclical.⁷ The author realizes that some may demur from this effort to legitimize elements of Balthasar’s corpus by finding therein the seminal thoughts of an Encyclical. At the same time, Chapp considers his approach legitimate. Readers of *Communio* will discover familiar themes from what a non-Balthasarian might call a graced metaphysics in order to distinguish it from a metaphysics that undergirds grace. Those who adopt Balthasar’s special brand of supernatural metaphysics will argue that it affords an antidote to what the purveyors of sophisticated “only-matter-exists” theories deploy to flood the marketplace of scientific exchange. Still, one may ask whether the Encyclical benefits from being tied so closely to what, to the standard philosophers of the Christian epoch from Saint Anselm to Jean-Luc Marion, would appear as a highly personal and even poetic approach to metaphysics.

The commemorative issue of *Communio* also contains a scriptural analysis of the Encyclical by the Spanish priest, Ricardo Aldana, which includes a rich exegesis of the “sacramental mysticism” that Pope Benedict brings to the fore.⁸ Additionally, *Communio* offers its pages to a non-Catholic author. Somewhat unexpectedly in fact, this commemorative issue of the journal contains a short commentary on the Encyclical by the British Anglican theologian, John Milbank, professor at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom.⁹ Milbank ponders with the Pope “the future of love.” And—one is happy to report—both Pope and Milbank find themselves on the same page. Milbank surely thinks so, at least. What Pope Benedict XVI thinks may raise another question. One fairly opines, nonetheless, that the radical

orthodoxy that the Pope represents does not fit interchangeably into the Radical Orthodoxy that Milbank and his colleagues have advanced since the end of the last century.

Whereas *Communio* presents itself as an international journal with several different language editions, *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* embodies a decidedly North American initiative, although the authors who appear in the pages of this journal come from just about everywhere. *Logos* grew out of the Catholic Studies Program at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota. The fabled American pastor, Archbishop John Ireland (d. 1918) founded the university in 1855 as a seminary. The *Logos* article comes from the pen of a celebrated Irish diplomat, currently serving as the Irish Ambassador to Russia, and poet, Philip McDonagh. This author provides an important service for an audience that dwells mainly within the fifty states of the American republic. He reminds the citizens of the United States that European culture holds something perennial for Catholic life. McDonagh argues that the Encyclical “can be understood as a response to those for whom our Christian roots have lost much of their meaning, for whom love is an uncertain quantity both in personal relationships and in the ordering of society, for whom God is ‘missing but not missed.’”¹⁰ The author displays his literary skills when he identifies a series of “pictures” that evoke central themes in the Encyclical. McDonagh shows what a proper appreciation for old European culture can offer toward the explication of Catholic truths. This European snapshot of *Deus caritas est*, which was originally given as a lecture at the American University of Rome, broadens the field of vision in which North Americans may approach the Encyclical.

The same journal, *Logos*, furnishes another dimension to the reception of the Encyclical in the United States and Australia. It published a commentary by a Bishop—from New Zealand. The Encyclical of course received notice from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

as well as from national Catholic organizations.¹¹ Additionally, several dioceses provided study guides for the faithful. On the other hand, Bishop Basil Meeking, Emeritus of Christchurch, who was assisting in an American diocese in 2005, devoted himself to providing a fulsome account of the significance of Pope Benedict's teaching for Catholic believers. With characteristic modesty, the Bishop titles his contribution a "Comment" on *Deus caritas est*.¹² In fact, the Bishop exposes the primordial relationship that exists between truth and love by appealing to the highest norm, the processions of the Persons of the Blessed Trinity. At the same time, the author outlines in a concise but also complete way the reasons why contemporary denizens of Western Civilization prefer either revisionist accounts of truth or no account at all. Still, it remains the case that the Christian cannot escape the truth any more than he can escape the created order. The Encyclical, as Bishop Meeking notes with precision, helps believers to discover what conformity to truth requires of them. "Jesus gives men and women total familiarity with the truth...Indeed, truth alone can take possession of the mind and make it rejoice to the full."¹³ Connoisseurs of Joseph Ratzinger's thought will recognize this quotation from his 2006 Address to the Participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith held in the Vatican.

Another international journal which enjoys its own edition in English appears under the title, *Nova et Vetera*. Georges Cardinal Cottier serves as Senior Editor. Two Dominicans contributed articles on the Encyclical to the spring 2007 English Edition of *Nova et Vetera*. They appeared under the heading of a "Symposium" devoted to Pope Benedict. The Fribourg moral theologian, Michael Sherwin, O.P., composed "Reflections on *Deus Caritas Est*. A Tour Through the Casbah" and the French-born, though now Roman, theologian Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., addressed "'Nature and Grace' in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*." Bonino ponders "the manner in which Benedict XVI envisages the encounter between Christian faith and

human realities.” The author takes this encounter to constitute “a theological structure that underlies the entire encyclical and that does not fail to contribute greatly to its unity.”¹⁴ Bonino then goes on to describe in a contemporary way the proper tensions that exist as long as human realities enjoy the provisional capacity to go it alone, as it were. In other words, Bonino locates the Encyclical within the overarching theme sometimes identified, though wrongly, by reference to Tertullian’s question, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”¹⁵ Bonino also places the Encyclical in continuity with scholastic discussions such as those on faith and reason, nature and grace, acquired and infused virtues. By joining these debates, which enjoy ample exposition in the commentatorial tradition that follows Thomas Aquinas, the Encyclical demonstrates its continuity with the great lines of classical Catholic theology. Father Sherwin’s essay takes inspiration from the mysterious district in the heart of Algiers that he takes as a metaphor for love. Sherwin unfolds twelve questions that lie hidden in “the Casbah of human culture, a place where the attentive traveler encounters all the varied realities that commonly bear the name of love.”¹⁶ He then posits, helpfully, answers to these twelve questions drawn from the Encyclical.

Some mention should be made of the short essay that appeared in *Crisis*, a journal that dates from the turbulent period of the late 1980s.¹⁷ Benjamin Wiker observes on the translation of the Encyclical. “The English translation of the encyclical renders *Deiectus merum ad ‘sexum’* [no. 5] as ‘reduced to pure “sex;”’ [this remains] a most un-fortunate mistake,” opines the author, “since in its current debased condition sex is anything but pure.”¹⁸ Wiker, a lawyer, concludes with a reference to the Pope’s opening line about Nietzsche: “Far from poisoning eros,” Wiker affirms, “Christianity not only affirms it, but elevates it beyond its wildest dreams. Nothing is lost; all is divinized. If only the satyrs had ears to hear.”¹⁹ Nietzsche himself, recall, opted for satyric status. Wiker concludes with a fascinating proposal: “Benedict begins with Nietzsche as a

prophecy. ‘I am a disciple of the philosopher Dionysus,’ declared Nietzsche in *Ecce Homo*, ‘I should prefer to be even a satyr to being a saint.’”²⁰ Wiker deems that the Pope warns our contemporaries that they risk descending to the subhuman by their preferring phoney instead of authentic liberation. On the scale of American cultural politics, *Crisis* falls on the side of the warriors, that is, of those who favor head-on confrontation with the ambient deformities. There also exists in the United States a range of publications that represent a more subtle engagement with errors.

As the Society of Jesus does in many countries, the American Jesuits sponsor both a popular magazine and a scientific journal. The 13 March 2006 issue of *America*, the popular offering under the auspices of the Jesuits, devoted several pages to a commentary by Susan A. Ross who teaches at Loyola University Chicago. Ross, a Christian feminist theologian, combines expressions of approval, for example, the readability of the Encyclical, with remarks about how the Pope could have included more feminist-friendly features in it. In this author’s view, the Encyclical obviously does not fully correspond to the imperative, which is affirmed but not explicated, “to make just and equal treatment of women a priority.”²¹ The Pope and other theologians remain perfectly capable of responding to Professor Ross’s remarks. Whether she and her feminist colleagues would accept such responses raises a question that goes beyond the scope of this report. In a more scientific essay, Monsignor Charles M. Murphy, sometime Rector of the North American College in Rome, graced the pages of *Theological Studies* with an essay that argues that charity, not justice, constitutes the Church’s mission.²² The author, who possesses a longtime familiarity with the documents of the Magisterium, traces the debate from the 1971 Synod and its document “Justice in the World” to the 2004 *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. The article contributes greatly to placing the Encyclical within the

context of the period that begins when Joseph Ratzinger was still a distinguished university professor in Germany. At this juncture, it seems appropriate also to mention the English edition of a book by Paul Josef Cordes which originally was published in German. *Where Are the Helpers?* includes essays by Cardinal Cordes and allied authors. It also presents in English the remarks that the Holy Father made on 23 January 2006 about his first Encyclical to an international congress organized by the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* at the Vatican. There the Pope affirmed that the theoretical and the practical sections of his Encyclical “are properly understood only if they are regarded as one.”²³

John L. Allen contributed a brief report on the publication of the Encyclical to the *National Catholic Reporter*, the Missouri-based independent media outlet. The journalist took the opportunity to expose an alleged conflict over the ownership of the Holy Father’s literary works.²⁴ Otherwise, Allen’s reporting appears straightforward. In another venue, the late Jesuit, Edward T. Oakes, published a learned essay in *Chicago Studies* that spends a considerable amount of space explaining the biblical theology that undergirds the Encyclical’s anthropological assumptions. Oakes wrote extensively on Balthasar, and the Jesuit also placed Pope Benedict in a position of possible dependency on Balthasar’s *The Christian State of Life*.²⁵ One may be forgiven for ignoring the essay’s title, “Golden Living Dreams of Vision, the Mind’s True Liberation,” which borrows from the 1968 Broadway Musical “Hair,” a modest icon of the various cultural revolutions that followed the spirit of the *soixante-huitards*.²⁶ Again, Boston College professor, Stephen J. Pope, gives a reception to the encyclical that, fortunately, has not found its way into others instances in the literature. This layman somehow manages to mention the Boston clergy abuse scandal of 2002; he then regrets that author of the Encyclical had not developed “more careful distinctions.” The brief appraisal appears in a collection of essays from

the Padua Conference, an American initiative that aims to influence theologians and others from the developing countries.²⁷

Protestant theologians paid attention to the Pope's Encyclical. Geoffrey Wainwright, a distinguished professor at Duke University Divinity School, published his reflections on *Deus caritas est* in the ecumenical journal, *Pro Ecclesia*.²⁸ The Methodist theologian finds a point of contact between what the Encyclical teaches and what John Wesley and Isaac Watts, the eighteenth-century English composer of Church hymns, have emphasized in their evangelical outreach. Overall, it is clear that this American Protestant holds Pope Benedict in a great deal of respect. In a symposium that *Pro Ecclesia* dedicated to the Encyclical, the American Capuchin Thomas Weinandy appears alongside Wainwright in a piece titled, "*Deus Caritas Est: Defining the Christian Understanding of Love*." Paradoxically, the late Doctor Jack Dominian (d. 2014), who expressed views as a psychiatrist and putative theologian that run contrary to Catholic teaching on both *eros* and *agape*, gained entry to the pages of *The Furrow*, the erstwhile journal for Irish Parish Priests published at Maynooth. Dominian, a self-avowed critic of Catholic sexual ethics, including her teaching on the distelic character of same-sex relations, attempts to put the Encyclical at the service of his own permissive views about human love. Although this author did remain within the Church, it is fair to observe that the Encyclical finds better company with John Wesley than with Jack Dominian, who wants "the Church to redouble its efforts to educate its people, indeed everyone, how to love."²⁹

The Tablet presents itself as an international Catholic journal. It enjoys a wide readership in the United States. *The Tablet* gave space to a Jewish reader of the Encyclical, Irene Lancaster, who found it intriguing as it revealed significant parallels with Jewish teaching.³⁰ In the same issue, John Cornwall, the British journalist and controversialist, congratulates the Encyclical for

the way that it appeals to the altruistic ideals of the young, although the author wonders whether the Church will not only talk the talk but also walk the walk.³¹ Again, an Orthodox Jewish woman does more justice to the Encyclical than we find in a Catholic author.

Australian author Tracey Rowland treats the Encyclical Letter within the context of her overall appraisal of the Pope's written corpus.³² Rowland currently serves as Dean and Permanent Fellow of the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family in Melbourne. She belongs to the school of critics who have declared that the scholastic thought of the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries exhibits serious deficiencies. Members of this anti-scholastic school generally identify Pope Saint John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI as the heralds of a new approach to theology, one that, again in the view of this school, restores ancient perspectives on how grace informs the created universe. Rowland's commentary on the Encyclical falls within a chapter titled "Beyond Moralism: God Is Love," the fourth of her book *Ratzinger's Faith*. The service that Rowland renders the Encyclical appears in the way that she integrates her reading of the Encyclical into the writings of the Pope, even those he composed before his pontificate. Whatever one may judge about the metanarrative that Rowland expounds, her contribution to giving a positive interpretation to the Encyclical merits a warm commendation. She finds a nutshell summary of the Encyclical in a phrase taken from something that the then Cardinal Ratzinger said in the funeral homily for Don Giussani: "Christianity is not an intellectual system, a collection of dogmas, or a moralism. Christianity is instead an encounter, a love story; it is an event."³³ As in the United States, the official organs of the Catholic Church in Australia, especially the Archdiocese of Melbourne, aided a positive reception of the Encyclical by providing both information about it and resources that help to explain its teachings.

To complete the documentation about the reception of the Encyclical, there remains the lengthy article by the Sri Lankan author, Tissa Balasuriya. This article appeared however in the American journal of religion *CrossCurrents*.³⁴ Before his death in 2013, the author, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, gained some publicity for his intransigence before the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at a time when Cardinal Ratzinger presided over it. Although the opinionated priest fell under excommunication on 2 January 1997, Pope John Paul II later showed him mercy.³⁵ Unfortunately, the nearly thirty-page article reveals that the author did not learn the lessons that every Catholic theologian, especially one to whom mercy has been shown, needs to master. In a word, Balasuriya privileges his own views of the truth over that of the Pope. The errant priest lamentably proves the adage that a little learning is a dangerous thing. It is regrettable that the author's specious rhetoric received the exposure it did in a secular journal of religion. No authentically Catholic journal of course would have given it serious consideration.

In a brief conclusion, let me observe on two summary points: Overall, the Encyclical received a warm and positive reception in both the United States and Australia. (2) Those who made critical observations about the Encyclical represent the three revolutions that, since the 1960s, have afflicted the United States and, somewhat derivatively, Australia. They are the liberationist movements of the mid-1960s and the feminist and sexual revolutions that peaked during the late 1960s. These still alienated voices, I respectfully submit, need to ponder more what Pope Benedict XVI has so aptly explained about the offices intimately related to the very nature of the Church: *kerygma-martyria, leiturgia, diakonia*.³⁶

NOTES

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1. For the official text of the Encyclical Letter issued on 25 December 2005, see *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 98 (3 March 2006): 217-252.
 2. Angelo Cardinal Scola, "The Unity of Love and the Face of Man: An Invitation to Read *Deus Caritas Est*," *Communio* 33 (2006): 316-345.
 3. Scola, "Invitation," 320.
 4. Scola, "Invitation," 334, citing Romano Guardini's *Das Wesen des Christentums*.
 5. D.C. Schindler, "The Redemption of *Eros*: Philosophical Reflections on Benedict XVI's First Encyclical," *Communio* 33 (2006): 375-399.
 6. Schindler, "Reflections," 398.
 7. Larry S. Chapp, "*Deus Caritas Est* and the Retrieval of a Christian Cosmology," *Communio* 33 (2006): 449-472, at 451.
 8. Ricardo Aldana, "'The Word of God Is Not Chained' (2 Tim 2:9). The Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* as an Exercise in Biblical Thinking," *Communio* 33 (2006): 491-504.
 9. John Milbank, "The Future of Love: A Reading of Benedict XVI's Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*," *Communio* 33 (2006): 368-374.
 10. Philip McDonagh, "The Unity of Love. Reflections on the First Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI," *Logos* 10 (2007): 16-31, at 20.
 11. For instance, the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA), a voluntary association of educators and institutions, published Tom Simonds, S.J., "Applying the Encyclical Letters of Pope Benedict XVI to Catholic Schools," *Momentum* 40 (2009).
 12. Basil Meeking, "Proclaim the Truth through Love: A Comment on *Deus Caritas Est*," *Logos* 10 (2007): 91-104.
 13. Meeking, "Comment," 96.
 14. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., "'Nature and Grace' in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*," *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 231-249, at 233.
 15. Tertullian, *On the prescription of heretics*, chap. 7.

 16. Michael Sherwin, O.P., "Reflections on *Deus Caritas Est*. A Tour Through the Casbah," *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 375-402, at 375.
 17. The magazine begun by the late Thomist philosopher, Ralph McInerny, and the political critic, Michael Novak, began publishing in 1982.
 18. Benjamin Wiker, "Benedict contra Nietzsche: a reflection on 'Deus caritas est,'" *Crisis* 24 (2006): 18-31. Available at <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2006/contra-nietzsche-a-reflection-on-deus-caritas-est> (Accessed 15 October 2015).
 19. Wiker, "Nietzsche," p. 31.
 20. Wiker, "Nietzsche," p. 25. For the reference to Nietzsche, see *Ecce Home*, "Preface," no. 2, trans. W. Kaufman, (New York: Random House, Inc, 1989), p. 217: "I am a disciple of the philosopher Dionysius; I should rather prefer to be even a satyr to being a saint."
 21. Susan A. Ross, "Eros and Agape: Some Feminist Reflections." *America* 194 (13 March 2006): 11-13, at 13.

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22. Charles M. Murphy, "Charity, Not Justice, As Constitutive of the Church's Mission," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 274-286.
 23. Paul Josef Cardinal Cordes, *Where Are the Helpers? Charity and Spirituality*, trans. A. J. Figueiredo (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), pp. 9-13, at 11.
 24. John L. Allen, Jr., "On love that lasts: Benedict's first encyclical," *National Catholic Register* 42 (3 February 2006): 10.
 25. Edward T. Oakes, S.J., "Golden Living Dreams of Vision, the Mind's True Liberation: Remarks on *Deus Caritas Est*," *Chicago Studies* 45 (2006): 127-146, at 145.
 26. "The Age of Aquarius" composed by various song writers: "Harmony and understanding / Sympathy and trust abounding / No more falsehoods or derisions / Golden living dreams of visions / Mystic crystal revelation / And the minds true liberation."
 27. Stephen J. Pope, "Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est*. An Ethical Analysis," in *Applied Ethics in a World Church*, ed. Linda Hogan (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), pp. 271-277.
 28. Geoffrey Wainwright, "Reflections on Pope Benedict XVI's First Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*," *Pro Ecclesia* 15 (2006): 263-266.
 29. Jack Dominian, "'God is Love'—A Commentary on Benedict XVI's Encyclical," *The Furrow* 57 (2006): 280-288, at 288.
 30. Irene Lancaster, "Love transcendent," *The Tablet* (15 April 2006): 24,25.

 31. John Cornwall, "Walking the walk for charity," *The Tablet* (15 April 2006): 25.
 32. Tracey Rowland, *Ratzinger's Faith. The Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
 33. Rowland, *Faith*, p. 67. An English translation of the funeral homily may be found in *Communio*, 31 (2004): 685-687.
 34. Tissa Belasuriya, "Companion to the Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI on 'God Is Love,'" *CrossCurrents* 56 (2006): 229-260.
 35. He lifted the excommunication in January 1998.
 36. *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 25. For further commentary, see J. Brian Benestad, "Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate*," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 16 (2009): 411-428.