

**THE APOSTLESHIP OF THE SEA: WITNESS OF LOVE, HOPE AND SOLIDARITY IN THE LIGHT OF
THE ENCYCLICAL *DEUS CARITAS EST* OF BENEDICT XVI**

Rev Dr. John Chalmers
Apostleship of the Sea, Australia

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Introduction:

Despite the fact that we all walk in different lands (and sail different seas), we have all, humanly speaking, come from the same place and are heading out into the same blessed mystery that awaits us all.¹ From different lands and across many seas, the Apostleship of the Sea gathers in Gdynia. Though people have come before us to this Tricity/Trojmiasto for a thousand years and ten, we come here for reasons similar to Pope Benedict's when he wrote his encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*: "so as to call forth renewed energy and commitment to God's love."² What renews and deepens our energy for **God's mission** among seafarers, a mission in which we are more than willing partners? *Deus Caritas Est* proposes three things, indeed the three practices referred to in the title of this paper: love, hope and solidarity.

In his 2006 Message for Sea Sunday, Cardinal Martino, noted that "globalisation is putting the dignity of the human persons involved in shipping and fishing under heavy strain."³ "On the one hand, globalisation is bringing us closer together than ever before, interweaving our lives, nationally and internationally, in complex and inextricable ways. On the other, a new tribalism – a regression to older and more fractious loyalties – is driving us ever more angrily apart. One way or another, religion is and will continue to be, part of these processes. It can lead in the direction of peace. But it can equally, and with high combustibility, lead us to war. Politicians have power, but religions have something stronger: they have influence. Politics moves the pieces on the chessboard. Religion changes lives."⁴ Reading between the lines of Benedict's Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, it's not the concept of religion that changes lives. Rather, it's the practices of love, hope and solidarity that changes lives. Such practices are, Benedict says: "the light - and in the end, the only light - that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage to keep living and working."⁵ Sociologist, Robert Bellah came at it from another perspective: "The social ecology is damaged not only by war, genocide and political repression. It is also damaged by the destruction of the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another, leaving them frightened and alone."⁶ Love, hope and solidarity: these three practices, suggests Benedict, and Bellah would agree, enhance and deepen the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another. And is not nurturing the subtle ties that bind human beings to one another, at the heart of the Apostleship of the Sea's varied activities?

¹ Buechner, Frederick (1996) *The Longing for Home* San Francisco: Harper Collins p129

² Benedict XVI (2006) Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* Strathfield: St Paul's Publications #1

³ Martino, Cardinal Renato, (2006) Message for Sea Sunday. Available online at www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=92653

⁴ Sacks, Jonathan (2002) *The Dignity of Difference* New York: Continuum p7

⁵ *Deus Caritas Est* #62

⁶ Bellah, Robert (1998) *Habits of the Heart* London: Hutchinson p284

Witness of Love, Hope and Solidarity

There is a telling word in the title to this paper. Without that particular word, our task of enacting the practices of love, hope and solidarity is bound to become onerous, even overly self-important. As Frederick Buechner lilingly puts it: “To do for yourself the best that you have it in you to do – to grit your teeth and clench your fists in order to survive the world at its harshest and worst – is, by that very act, to be unable to let something be done for you and in you that is more wonderful still.”⁷ Beyond enacting in our lives and in all our efforts with the Apostleship of the Sea the practices of love, hope and solidarity, God’s invitation, is to be **witnesses** to love, hope and solidarity. What a difference the addition of one word, “witness”, makes. If we lose sight of that word “witness” and worse, fail to witness, we’ll forget, as Benedict puts it that “we are only instruments in the Lord’s hands. (After all) this knowledge frees us from the presumption of thinking that we alone are personally responsible for building a better world.”⁸ In this paper we’ll take a look at what Benedict suggests is entailed in witnessing to Love, Hope and Solidarity. I’ll be using Benedict’s words from his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* throughout this presentation.

Witness to Love

The Apostleship of the Sea makes an enormous impact in peoples’ lives every day through kindness, companionship, rigorous advocacy and more. Yet, Benedict cautions us, at the beginning of *Deus Caritas Est*, there needs to be something more. “Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”⁹ Benedict finds in the words of St John, the primary motivation for all our work with the Apostleship of the Sea: “We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us.”¹⁰ That being said, Benedict acknowledges an immediate problem: “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.”¹¹ Surprisingly, he rejects the usual distinction which sees *eros*, “a kind of intoxication, the overpowering of reason by a divine madness”¹², as the human way of loving and *agape* as the divine way of loving. Benedict insists that *eros* and *agape* can never be completely separated. Indeed, God loves us with both *eros* and *agape*.¹³ God desires us, God wants us.¹⁴ God’s passionate interest in us, in Christ, renders him vulnerable, even to death on a cross.¹⁵ Even if *eros* is at first mainly covetous, a fascination for the great promise of happiness, in drawing near to the other it is less and less concerned with itself and increasingly seeks the happiness of the other.”¹⁶ By linking *eros* love and *agape* love both within God and within every human being, Benedict does two things. First he implies that “Christianity does not neglect the deepest wants and needs of human beings.”¹⁷ Second, he undermines the perception that the church is against love. John Allen perceptively comments: “It’s not that the church is against love, but rather that it’s in favour of a love that lasts.”¹⁸ Benedict dispels a flawed, commonly-held assumption: “love is not merely a sentiment”, he says. “Sentiments come and go. A sentiment can

⁷ Buechner, Frederick (1991) *Sacred Journey* San Francisco: Harper Collins p46

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* #59

⁹ *Deus Caritas Est* #1

¹⁰ 1 John 4.16

¹¹ *Deus Caritas Est* #2

¹² *Deus Caritas Est* #4

¹³ *Deus Caritas Est* #9

¹⁴ Charles Curran on *The Religion Report* Feb 1, 2006. Available online at www.abc.net.au/rn/religionreport/stories/2006/1558971.htm accessed 10/3/06

¹⁵ Imbelli, Robert “The Pope and the Poet” *America* March 13, 2006 p9

¹⁶ *Deus Caritas Est* #7

¹⁷ Sokolowski, Robert. “The Philosophy behind *Deus Caritas Est*” available online at www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=84557 accessed 20/2/2007

¹⁸ Allen, John “On Love that Lasts: Benedict’s First Encyclical: *National Catholic Reporter* Feb 3, 2006

be a marvellous first spark, but it is not the fullness of love.”¹⁹ *Eros* separated from *agape*, “reduced to pure ‘sex’ has become a mere ‘thing’ to be brought and sold, or rather, human beings themselves (have) become (mere) commodities.”²⁰ French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, somewhat tongue-in-cheek points out that the German word for gift also means poison. Gifts may become poisonous. *Eros* love is a great gift. However, without its other half, *agape*, self-giving love, it can become “poison(ous), involv(ing) both giver and receiver in an (unequal) relationship of debt and obligation, inferiority and superiority.”²¹

More recently, in his 2007 Lenten Message, Benedict has pointed to “Christ, pierced on the cross, thirsty for the love of everyone of us” as “God’s *eros* for us made manifest. The response the Lord ardently desires of us is above all that we welcome his love and allow ourselves to be drawn to Him. Christ ‘draws me to Himself’ in order to unite Himself to me, so that I learn to love the brothers (and sisters) with His own love.”²²

The implications of God loving us with both *eros* and *agape* love are profound. Benedict disarmingly comments: “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.”²³ Selfless *agape* “love is now no longer a mere ‘command’; it is the response to a gift of love with which God draws near to us.”²⁴ *Agape* love “love(s) even the person (we) do not like or even know.”²⁵ American theologian, Frederick Buechner puts it lyrically: “To love God is not a goal we have to struggle toward on our own because what at its heart the Gospel is all about is that God himself moves us toward it even when we believe he has forsaken us. The final secret, I think, is this: that the words: ‘You shall love the Lord your God’ become in the end less a command than a promise. And the promise is that, yes, on the weary feet of faith and the fragile wings of hope, we will come to love him at last as from the first he has loved as-loved us even in the wilderness, especially in the wilderness, because he has been in the wilderness with us.”²⁶

The bottom line is this: “The ‘commandment’ of love is only possible because it is more than a requirement. Love can be commanded because it has first been given.”²⁷ That’s why Benedict can say of our varied Apostleship of the Sea activities: they “will always be insufficient unless (they) visibly express a love for (the people we work with), a love nourished by an encounter with Christ.”²⁸ Benedict is clear: “while professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement (in all our endeavours) it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heart felt concern. Those who work for the Church’s charitable organisations,” Benedict says “must be distinguished by the fact that (we) do not merely meet the needs of the moment, but (that we) dedicate (our)selves to others with heartfelt concern, enabling them to experience the richness of their humanity. Consequently, in addition to the necessary professional training, (we) need a ‘formation of the heart’; (we) need to be led to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens (our) love and opens (our) spirits to others.”²⁹

¹⁹ *Deus Caritas Est* #17

²⁰ *Deus Caritas Est* #5

²¹ Cited by Cardinal Francis George in a Jan 25, 2006 interview, published in the *National Catholic Reporter* Jan 27, 2006. Available online at <http://nationalcatholicreporter.org/word/pfw012706.htm>

²² Benedict XVI *Papal Message for Lent 2007* Available online at www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=102906 Accessed 15 Feb 2007

²³ *Deus Caritas Est* #17

²⁴ *Deus Caritas Est* #1

²⁵ *Deus Caritas Est* #18

²⁶ Buechner, Frederick (1992) *A Room Called Remember* San Francisco Harper Collins p45

²⁷ *Deus Caritas Est* #14

²⁸ *Deus Caritas Est* #34

²⁹ *Deus Caritas Est* #31

This does not mean that we force our faith on those we work with, however precious it is to us. Benedict insists that the services we offer “cannot be used as a means of engaging in proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends.” He continues: “Those who (offer social services) in the church’s name will never seek to impose the church’s faith upon others. They realise that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to **let love alone speak**.”³⁰ At the same time, “this doesn’t mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside. Often, the deepest cause of suffering is the very absence of God.”³¹

Witness to Solidarity

We have explored how Benedict sees our primary role within the Apostleship of the Sea as being witnesses of love, witnessing, by the way we live and treat each other to the love of God that we have tasted for ourselves. To witness to God’s love is, inevitably, to witness to solidarity.

Benedict connects solidarity with, or rather sees it growing out of love, “not the love we have for each other but the love God has for us.”³² “Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own.”³³ “Love of neighbour is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God.”³⁴ Furthermore, “in God and with God, I love even the person whom I do not like or even know. 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. 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. If I have no contact with God in my life, then I cannot see in the other anything more than the other, and I am incapable of seeing in him the image of God. Only (such) readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well.”³⁵

Consequently, our work with the Apostleship of the Sea, practical as it is, “is not (just) welfare activity which could equally well be left to others. (It) is a part of (the church’s) nature, an indispensable expression of her very being.”³⁶ “In a certain way (it) makes the living God visible.” “Hence, the church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word.”³⁷ Catholics see the Sacraments and the Word of God as exquisite expressions of God’s love, the “light that illumines a world grown dim.”³⁸ May we see our work too, illuminating a world grown dim through seemingly simple acts of kindness, generosity and “heart felt concern.”³⁹ Equally, may we work towards the eradication of those structural injustices that demean mariners. Benedict encourages both approaches, noting that “love will always prove necessary, even in the most just society.”⁴⁰ At the same time, the church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible.”⁴¹ Benedict continues: “She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet, at the same time, she cannot and must

³⁰ *Deus Caritas Est* #31

³¹ *Deus Caritas Est* #16

³² 1 John 4.10

³³ *Deus Caritas Est* #14

³⁴ *Deus Caritas Est* 16

³⁵ *Deus Caritas Est* #18

³⁶ *Deus Caritas Est* #25

³⁷ *Deus Caritas Est* #22

³⁸ *Deus Caritas Est* #39

³⁹ *Deus Caritas Est* #31

⁴⁰ *Deus Caritas Est* #28b

⁴¹ *Deus Caritas Est* #28a

not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not the church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the church deeply.”⁴² We do this, according to Benedict by liberat(ing) reason from its blindspots, by purify(ing) reason and contribut(ing), here and now, to the acknowledgement and attainment of what is just.”⁴³

Witness to hope

Disciples of Jesus, all of us in the Apostleship of the Sea, people who “have come to know and believe in the love God has for us”,⁴⁴ people, whose “encounter with God in Christ (has) awakened (our) love and opened (our) spirits to others”,⁴⁵ people intent on developing “a heart which sees”⁴⁶ can easily be overwhelmed by the demands of “building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due”, a task that Benedict says is “an essential task that every generation must take up anew.”⁴⁷ Reflecting on the parable of the Good Samaritan, Benedict notes that until Jesus’ time ‘neighbour’ (referred) essentially to one’s countrymen. This limit is now abolished. Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour.”⁴⁸ This is why every one of us in the Apostleship of the Sea must be hope-filled. It “frees us from the presumption of thinking that we alone are personally responsible for building a better world.”⁴⁹ Hope is not synonymous with optimism or the power of positive thinking. Nor is it merely a sunny disposition. Benedict expresses it poignantly: “Hope is practiced through the virtue of patience, which continues to do good even in the face of apparent failure and through the virtue of humility, which accepts God’s mystery and trusts him even at times of darkness. It thus transforms our impatience and our doubts into the sure hope that God holds the world in his hands, and that, in spite of all darkness, He ultimately triumphs in glory.”⁵⁰ American theologian, Letty Russell’s words complement Benedict’s thinking: “Even if we cannot see the alternate future for which we work, by beginning from the other end, (from) God’s promise, we are able to live (and work) with a hope that is strong enough to transform the present.”⁵¹

Conclusion

So there they are: love, hope and solidarity – three hallmarks of God’s advances towards us, in Jesus, three practices to which our work with the Apostleship of the Sea must witness. We witness to God’s enduring love, God’s dependable hope and God’s limitless solidarity with all people. Our capacity to witness is nurtured “in the Eucharist, (where) God’s own *agape* love comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us.”⁵²

Well might we conclude these reflections, as Benedict concludes his encyclical letter, with a call to prayer: “Even in their bewilderment and failure to understand the world around (us), (we) Christians continue to believe in the “goodness and loving kindness of God” (Titus 3.4). Immersed like everyone else in the dramatic complexity of historical events, (we) remain unshakably certain

⁴² *Deus Caritas Est* #28a

⁴³ *Deus Caritas Est* #28a

⁴⁴ 1 John 4.16

⁴⁵ *Deus Caritas Est* #31a

⁴⁶ *Deus Caritas Est* #31b

⁴⁷ *Deus Caritas Est* #28a

⁴⁸ *Deus Caritas Est* #15

⁴⁹ *Deus Caritas Est* #35

⁵⁰ *Deus Caritas Est* #39

⁵¹ Russell, Letty (1986) *Household of Freedom* Philadelphia: The Westminster Press p67

⁵² *Deus Caritas Est* #14

that God is our Father and loves us, even when his silence remains incomprehensible.”⁵³ English Carmelite, Sr Wendy Beckett expresses it pungently when she says that “The essential act of prayer is to stand unprotected before God. What will God do? He will take possession of us. Do you want to be possessed by God? If you want God to take possession of you, then you are praying. That is all prayer is. God’s one desire is ‘to come and make his home with us’,⁵⁴ remembering, of course, as Benedict puts it, that “union with God entails union with all those to whom he gives himself.”⁵⁵ “Those who draw near to God do not withdraw from (people) but rather become truly close to them. In no one do we see this more clearly than in Mary.”⁵⁶

So, into His gracious and puzzling hands we commend ourselves at the end of these reflections, indeed through all the days of our voyaging, wherever it takes us. And at the end of all our voyages,⁵⁷ perhaps even in the midst of them, may we look at what there is to be seen in the world and in ourselves and in those we work with, hoping, trusting, believing against all evidence to the contrary, that beneath the surface we see there is vastly more that we cannot see:⁵⁸ both “the love God has for us” and our “response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.”⁵⁹

⁵³ *Deus Caritas Est* #38

⁵⁴ Beckett, Wendy “Simple Prayer” *The Clergy Review* lxiii Feb 1978 p43

⁵⁵ *Deus Caritas Est* #14

⁵⁶ *Deus Caritas Est* #42

⁵⁷ See Buechner, Frederick (2006) *Secrets in the Dark* San Francisco: Harper Collins p48

⁵⁸ See Buechner, Frederick (2006) *Secrets in the Dark* San Francisco: Harper Collins p64

⁵⁹ *Deus Caritas Est* #1