

Dietrich von Hildebrand Legacy Project

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Quid Est Caritas?:
Considering the Encyclicals of Pope Benedict XVI
in Light of Dietrich von Hildebrand

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ABSTRACT

*Quid Est Caritas?:
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in Light of Dietrich von Hildebrand,*

[author's name withheld], 15pp.

While the influence of Dietrich von Hildebrand upon Pope Benedict XVI (Card. Josef Ratzinger) is a well-known fact, the Pontiff's writings have yet to be critically analyzed and evaluated in respect to this relationship. This paper attempts to illustrate the benefits of such a study, providing several examples from the Holy Father's encyclicals on love in comparison with von Hildebrand's work, *The Nature of Love*. Familiar concepts from von Hildebrand such as the relation between eros and agape, gift-nature of love, and the idea of self-donation, are demonstrated to be useful in elucidating the same ideas, sometimes under different names, in Pope Benedict's letters. In turn, Benedict's expansion upon certain notions is shown to be a fruitful source for the student of von Hildebrand. Finally, future focal points for further study in this matter are suggested, including a proposed application of von Hildebrand's work to the broader context of Catholic Social Thought outside of Benedict XVI.

I. INTRODUCTION

The oft-quoted assessment given by Pope Benedict XVI, when he was still Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, to the life and work of Dietrich von Hildebrand is now rote for most students of Christian personalism. The Cardinal's placement of von Hildebrand as a "most prominent" Catholic intellectual of the twentieth century is indeed a significant and remarkable appraisal.¹ Based on this quotation, one can presume that the future Supreme Pontiff's mind was shaped not only by a considerable familiarity with the work of von Hildebrand, but certainly even by an affinity for that work. Hence, with the recent translation into English of von Hildebrand's work, *The Nature of Love*, the English-speaking world has been presented with a valuable new opportunity to understand more richly the works of our current Holy Father, particularly his two encyclicals on love: *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate*. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate through certain passages the benefits of reading Pope Benedict XVI in light of Dietrich von Hildebrand – and vice-versa. Further, it will be suggested that, through the lens of Pope Benedict's "social thought," the anthropology and ethics of von Hildebrand shine forth as a formidable resource for a unique application: namely, as an instrument for the development of the Social Doctrine of the Church and as a guiding light on the path toward forming a more just social order.

¹ Quoted on the dust-jacket of the St. Augustine's Press hardcover edition of Dietrich von Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, trans. John F. Crosby and John Henry Crosby (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2009). This is the edition referenced throughout this paper, henceforth as *The Nature of Love*.

II. A PRELIMINARY CASE

First, let us take a preliminary case, a negative one, which can serve as a means of justifying the project undertaken. The scholarly reception of Pope Benedict XVI's third encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, was marked by more ambivalence than followed the release of his previous two universal letters. Particularly, the language of the encyclical seemed to trouble many readers because the terminology is somewhat foreign to a typical Thomistic lexicon. One commentator expressed exasperation over one such instance of language:

Some [passages] are simply incomprehensible, as when the encyclical states that defeating Third World poverty and underdevelopment requires a “necessary openness, in a world context, to forms of economic activity marked by quotas of gratuitousness and communion.” This may mean something interesting; it may mean something naïve or dumb. But, on its face, it is virtually impossible to know *what* it means.²

Yet, Benedict provides a very serviceable indication of exactly what he means in the immediate context of the passage in question. In the very previous sentence to the one quoted by the commentator, Benedict says that “actions of

² George Weigel, “*Caritas in Veritate* in Gold and Red,” in *The National Review Online*, 07 July 2009; available from <http://article.nationalreview.com/399362/icaritas-in-veritatei-in-gold-and-red/george-weigel?page=1>; accessed 10 April 2010; 2. [Although we must prescind from a full discussion of the matter at this time, it should be noted that one difficulty in this passage may arise from the weakness of the English translation. The definitive Latin version of the encyclical speaks of *gratuitatis communionisque partibus designantur*, which is rendered more felicitously in other translations as “certain amounts” or “certain parts” of gratuitousness and communion. The connotation of the word *quota*, particularly its resonance with certain Socialist themes, makes it a particularly unfortunate choice in the English rendering.]

gratuitousness... stand in contrast with *giving in order to acquire* (the logic of exchange) and *giving through duty* (the logic of public obligation, imposed by State law).”³ In an earlier paragraph, he had already noted that “the *principle of gratuitousness* and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity can and must *find their place within normal economic activity*.... It is a demand both of charity and of truth.”⁴ So, clearly Benedict is contrasting a cold and calculating economic posture with one motivated by charitable love. If we turn, then, to his earlier encyclical on love, *Deus Caritas Est*, this idea is fleshed out even further. Here, writing about the disposition toward charitable work by the Church and Her members, Benedict notes that “Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends.”⁵ He then exposes that the magnitude of this gratuitousness is contained not only in the freedom of giving, but also in the content of the gift itself: “My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them... I must be personally present in my gift.”⁶

³ Pope Benedict XVI, “*Encyclical Letter Caritas in Veritate... On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth*,” 29 June 2009; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html; accessed 01 April 2010; 26, emphasis in original. Henceforth, *CV*.

⁴ *CV* 36; emphasis in original.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, “*Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est... On Christian Love*,” 25 December 2005; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html; accessed 01 April 2010; 31c. Henceforth, *DCE*.

⁶ *DCE* 34.

The student of von Hildebrand will recognize in this much that is familiar from his writings: the freedom of love⁷, the concepts of gratuitousness and self-donation⁸, the contraposition of love as value-response against the calculation of more remote ends⁹, and the primary motivation for love arising from a source other than moral obligation.¹⁰ It may be granted to the commentator above that the sentence in question from *Caritas in Veritate* begs elucidation; however, it can be contended that what elucidation is required has already largely been achieved in von Hildebrand's writing on the nature of love, and that familiarization with this corpus will lend a great aid to a proper understanding of Benedict's unconventional language.

III. POINTS OF CONTACT BETWEEN BENEDICT XVI AND VON HILDEBRAND

Now that the practicality of reading Pope Benedict in light of von Hildebrand has been established, we can proceed to some specific instances where this rapport is most illustratively beneficial. One significant point of connectivity between the two thinkers is their cautious approach to the traditional dichotomy between *amor concupiscentiae* and *amor benevolentiae*, what Benedict calls

⁷ See *The Nature of Love*, 255, 341ff.

⁸ See *The Nature of Love*, 58-82.

⁹ See *The Nature of Love*, 17-19, 58-61.

¹⁰ See *The Nature of Love*, 300ff.; cf. *DCE* 3: “[L]ove between man and woman... is neither planned nor willed, but somehow imposes itself upon human beings.”

“possessive love and oblativ love” respectively.¹¹ Von Hildebrand and Benedict alike see an extreme contrast between these two loves – *έρως* and *αγάπη* in Greek – as problematic.¹² Benedict describes this problem, saying that, “[f]undamentally, ‘love’ is a single reality.... Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love.”¹³ Benedict casts the two loves instead as being parts of a unity, *έρως* being “drawn upwards” toward God and *αγάπη* descending downward as a gift for man. According to the Holy Father, *αγάπη* is infused into *έρως* precisely at the moment when *έρως* “increasingly seeks the happiness of the other,... bestows itself and wants to ‘be there for’ the other.”¹⁴

This discussion of *έρως* and *αγάπη* bears striking resemblance to von Hildebrand’s treatment. For example, in speaking of the love of neighbor as a particular manifestation of *caritas*, von Hildebrand notes that the categorical uniqueness of this love compared with other “natural” loves rests precisely in the predominance of the concern “for the other.”¹⁵ However, it is worth noting that von Hildebrand provides added depth to the discussion by noting how *caritas*

¹¹ DCE 7.

¹² See *The Nature of Love* 123-24, 272; cf., DCE 7.

¹³ DCE 8.

¹⁴ DCE 7.

¹⁵ *The Nature of Love*, 139, 241.

infuses all kinds of love; far from being identifiable with love of neighbor, it is the transformative and supernatural power which can raise each and every human love to the level of its full moral significance.¹⁶ As von Hildebrand succinctly puts it:

The real datum that one is aiming at with the distinction between eros and agape is to be found in the quality of love, in the spirit of caritas.... This quality of love is not only compatible with the categorial identity of the different kinds of love, but it is the principle of the perfection of each kind of love in its specific genius.¹⁷

Here, von Hildebrand brings a structural clarity to the mode of the relation which Benedict has described between ἐρως and ἀγάπη; in other words, he supplies the “how” to complement the Pope’s description of “what”.

Another significant correlation between Pope Benedict XVI’s and von Hildebrand’s writings on love is the significance of “gift.” As Benedict writes in one of the most remarkable sections of *Caritas in Veritate*, “*Charity in truth* places man before the astonishing experience of gift.... The human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendent dimension.”¹⁸ The transcendence of gift, Benedict says, consists in the fact that “Gift by its nature

¹⁶ See *The Nature of Love*, 252, 265.

¹⁷ *The Nature of Love*, 272.

¹⁸ *CV* 34; emphasis in original.

goes beyond merit, its rule is that of superabundance.”¹⁹ For von Hildebrand, too, love is centrally marked by what the Pope calls the “logic of gift.”²⁰ The donation of the self in an act of love is a central theme for von Hildebrand, whether it be in terms of the special kind of commitment embodied in the super-value response of the natural forms of love,²¹ or in terms of the similarly unique moral commitment involved in the love of neighbor.²² Here, the different modes of self-donation can be associated with different types of the *intentio unionis*. Von Hildebrand first recovers this hitherto degraded concept from the dregs of previous philosophies, in order to reestablish its proper dignity as an enhancement of the “natural” forms of love.²³ Von Hildebrand saliently points out that, far from giving a selfish tinge to these loves, the *intentio unionis* rather bestows upon them the depth of their gift-nature.²⁴ He then takes this notion and applies it to love of neighbor – not as a point of contrast, which had traditionally been done – but rather in a transformed mode which seeks fulfillment through mutual communion in Christ.²⁵

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See *The Nature of Love*, 17: “[T]he specific mark of love is... its character of self-donation, indeed its transcendence.” Cf., *CV* 14.

²¹ *The Nature of Love*, 77-79.

²² *The Nature of Love*, 139-140.

²³ *The Nature of Love*, 123-138, especially 124.

²⁴ See *The Nature of Love*, 131ff.

²⁵ *The Nature of Love*, 139.

Von Hildebrand's extensive treatment of the forms of self-donation and the *intentio unionis* is yet another important side-light for the proper reading of Pope Benedict XVI. Benedict speaks of charity as a call to communion, which through its universal giftedness disposes us to overcome barriers in order to enter into unity with one another.²⁶ The Pope exposes this element of charity in a section of his encyclical where he calls for a “*deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation*”²⁷ in light of the dangers that totalitarianism and radical individualism pose to an authentic relation between persons. Von Hildebrand contributes a valuable rationalization for true community with his recovery of a healthy *intentio unionis* which can perch between the extremes of annihilated solipsism and quietism. In fact, von Hildebrand's important distinctions about selfishness with regard to *intentio unionis*, on the one hand,²⁸ and, on the other, his warning of how a “withered *eigenleben*” interferes with self-donation,²⁹ can together be taken as a fruitful supplement to Benedict's entire treatment of the erroneous extremes of atomistic individualism and state totalitarianism.

One last point of consistency to be considered in Pope Benedict's and von Hildebrand's writings is the emphasis each places on the *imago Dei* as a

²⁶ CV 34, 54.

²⁷ CV 53.

²⁸ *The Nature of Love*, 131ff.

²⁹ *The Nature of Love*, 211.

foundational principle for love of neighbor. Von Hildebrand notes that in the love of neighbor, which is founded in the love of God, there is first of all a response to the ontological value of the person who is made in God's likeness.³⁰ He notes that this basis upon former faith, this response to a theological datum in the value-response of love of neighbor, is precisely what distinguishes it from other categories of love. At its most sublime, love of neighbor is motivated in us by the fact that Christ has first loved us, and this enables us to love with Christ's compassion even the most repugnant person.³¹ Now, here we see a particular instance of where Pope Benedict XVI develops this line of thought and takes it to a striking new level. Benedict follows the von Hildebrandian line in his own categorization of the love of neighbor in *Deus Caritas Est*. Benedict expands upon this, however, and proceeds to suggest how the experience of our love for our neighbors – which comes from the love of God – in its own turn enhances and nourishes the love that we have for God Himself. He writes:

[I]f in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be 'devout' and to perform my 'religious duties', then my relationship with God will also grow arid. It becomes merely 'proper', but loveless. Only my readiness to encounter my neighbour and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well.³²

³⁰ *The Nature of Love*, 70, 237.

³¹ *The Nature of Love*, 237.

³² See *DCE* 18.

For Benedict, Christianity is “the religion of the ‘God who has a human face’.”³³ This is the decisive mystery at the center of the experience of love: love of God and love of neighbor are united in the Person of the Lord Jesus who became Incarnate by birth in Bethlehem, and continues to unite with us in fleshly reality through the sacrament of the Eucharist.³⁴ Benedict brings a richness to the discussion of the centrality of the *imago Dei* in love of neighbor by offering this reflection upon the “necessary interplay” between it and the contemplative love for God, especially as we encounter Him in the Sacraments.³⁵

IV. ONE POINT OF TENSION BETWEEN BENEDICT XVI AND VON HILDEBRAND

A final consideration of the usefulness of the interchange between the Holy Father’s writings and those of von Hildebrand comes not from a point of significant agreement, but rather from a certain tension that can be observed in one particular aspect of their thought.

The careful way in which von Hildebrand distinguishes love of neighbor from the other kinds of love is remarkable in its thoroughness. However, his insistence upon love of neighbor as “an unambiguously moral act” occasionally

³³ See *CV* 55; cf. Pope Benedict XVI, “*Encyclical Letter Spe Salvi... On Christian Hope*,” 30 November 2007; available from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi_en.html; accessed 06 April 2010; 31.

³⁴ *DCE* 13-14.

³⁵ *DCE* 18.

seems to rob this love of a certain affective tenderness which stands at the center of the experience of love.³⁶ In particular, it is worth considering whether the special form of the *intentio unionis* in love of neighbor as von Hildebrand describes it – namely, the desire for communion in Christ – would in practice really be anything more than a generalized desire of the will-to-community.³⁷ One might question whether this sense of the *intentio unionis* has really any specific relation to this or that *particular* person; certainly in comparison with the other kinds of love, this form of the *intentio unionis* seems weakened precisely in its relation to “the other.”³⁸ This dilemma becomes particularly poignant when one considers von Hildebrand’s insistence that in love of neighbor there is a mitigated subjectivity, in which the lover steps beyond his own *eigenleben*; and that, in a certain sense (albeit a lofty one), “the other” stands in relation to the lover more as a “He or She” than as a “Thou.”³⁹

Considering the *intentio unionis* in love of neighbor – which is directed toward communion – alongside this aspect of “removal” from the other-as-Thou in the same form of love, the contrast is brought to mind which von Hildebrand makes between solidarity and love. Here, von Hildebrand takes pains to

³⁶ *The Nature of Love*, 176.

³⁷ *The Nature of Love*, 139.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *The Nature of Love*, 139, 240-241.

distinguish between the experience he calls “we-solidarity” from the experience of love, noting that “love... is always a definite response to a Thou (even in relations in which the we predominates)”.⁴⁰ Love as such differs from an experienced solidarity “both objectively and in all that concerns the experience of solidarity.”⁴¹ Precisely what is lacking in the latter experience is the decisive “response” involved in love, “the specific word of love, namely the self-donation to a Thou, the thematicity of the other person.”⁴² Given the strength of the contrast which von Hildebrand highlights here between solidarity and the experience of love, it can be unsettling to consider similarities which this distinction bears to his other set of comparisons between love of neighbor and other “natural” kinds of love.

Turning to Pope Benedict, we find the Holy Father grappling with a similar problem. In Benedict, the issue does not come to light through distinctions made between love of neighbor and other types of love; rather, the difficulty enters with the introduction of another term or concept, namely “fraternity.” In one place in *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict writes of the global marketplace that “it makes us neighbours but does not make us brothers.”⁴³ He

⁴⁰ *The Nature of Love*, 128.

⁴¹ *The Nature of Love*, 129.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *CV* 19.

goes on to reveal that brotherhood “originates in a transcendent vocation from God the Father, who loved us first, teaching us through the Son what fraternal charity is.”⁴⁴ In another place, Benedict speaks of “the unity of the human race, a fraternal communion transcending every barrier,” which is “called into being by the word of God-who-is-Love.”⁴⁵ Pope Benedict appears to regard the love of neighbor which is commanded for all men as being somehow directed toward the deeper-felt experiences of love, such as friendship and even brotherhood. Contrariwise, he also holds solidarity and fraternal communion to be authentic loci for the exercise of interpersonal love, with universal brotherhood for mankind as the goal toward which Christ’s charity urges us.⁴⁶

The way in which the love of neighbor really associates this or that particular individual to the lover; the relation of this kind of love with the other, more “affective” forms; the mode of love in community that finds expression in solidarity and fraternity: these are issues on which Benedict and von Hildebrand have opened several doors, but which need to be entered into for fuller exploration and elucidation by the students of both scholars. Certainly with the translation of more of von Hildebrand’s works into English, this endeavor will

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *CV* 34.

⁴⁶ *Cf. CV* 20.

gain added resources, in addition to those future writings which we look forward to receiving from our Holy Father.

V. CONCLUSION

Whereas the affinity of thought between Pope John Paul II and Dietrich von Hildebrand has been the topic of robust discussion for many years, a similar *rapprochement* is still wanting in regard to the works of Josef Card. Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. It has been illustrated that such an engagement can be a very fruitful project, and is in some cases a practical necessity. There is, however, another application in which this study may find usefulness. Given that Pope Benedict XVI's social encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, can be better appreciated and understood in light of the work of Dietrich von Hildebrand, scholars should see in this an invitation to consider the entire body of Catholic Social Teaching under a similar aspect. With the relatively recent publication of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, a valuable asset lies open to scholars to explore and critique, and thereby aid the continued development of the most novel realm of Christian Doctrine. In undertaking such a project, students would be wise to consider von Hildebrand as a source for criticism, explication, and elaboration upon Catholic Social Teaching. In this way, they will render a dual service to the Church and to all men and women of good will: first, by aiding the development of social doctrine through use of one of the most fertile resources;

and, second, by bringing about a renewed appreciation for the insight and relevance of Dietrich von Hildebrand.

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