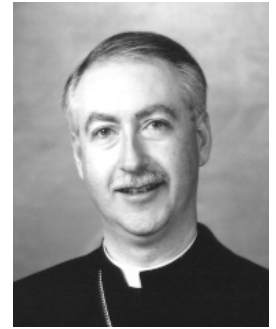


# THE HOLY FATHER'S FIRST ENCYCLICAL

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Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, has issued his first encyclical letter. Entitled *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love), it is a magnificent and moving meditation on the truth of God's love, revealed and active in Jesus Christ. By means of this letter he draws the attention of the whole church to the commandment at the heart of Christian life: love of God and neighbour. The Holy Father reflects upon the wonder of God's love and reminds us that love for others is the distinguishing mark of the Christian.

He begins his meditation with a citation from the first letter of John, "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us." (1 John 4:16) This verse expresses a conviction that should rest in the heart of every Christian, and that stems from an encounter with Jesus Christ: the belief that God loves us. As followers of Christ, we need to make a decision each day to accept, rely on and live from this love.

The encyclical letter is an invitation to dare to believe in God's love. He points out that, throughout salvation history, God has manifested His passionate love for us, as expressed beautifully in the Song of Songs, or in the writing of prophets such as Hosea and Ezekiel. In Jesus Christ, this divine love has been supremely revealed as totally self-giving. We experience this love most poignantly when God forgives us. In our lives we have each known the sad reality called sin. Aware of our failings, we may find ourselves withdrawing from others and community, afraid to make contact. What is worse, we may begin to doubt the love of God. But to know and believe in the love God has for us means that we dare to approach Christ in full truth, trusting that He will meet us with compassion, mercy and healing and restore us to life and relationship. So whatever may be weighing down our hearts or troubling us in life, we must not hesitate to go to Christ and be confident of His deep desire to heal and give life.

The Holy Father points the way for us who seek to encounter Christ by directing our attention to the Eucharist, where the Lord is truly present in the sacrament of His body and blood. In the celebration of the Eucharist, we surrender ourselves to the love and power of Christ in an act of worship. Worshipping Christ means giving ourselves over to Him, acknowledging His greatness and majesty, believing in His love, and asking Him to heal and transform us, thereby making us instruments of His healing love for the world. As the Holy

Father points out, the worship we offer in the Eucharist is an act that includes both our openness to the great love of God and our commitment to share that love with others. Because the Eucharist draws us into Christ's self-gift to the Father for the sake of the world, the love that embraces us in this sacrament impels us to make our lives a gift for others.

Knowing and believing in God's love for us, being seized by that love, we find ourselves drawn out of self-love toward love of neighbour. The Holy Father says we must practice love both as individuals and as a community. Charity toward our neighbour is of the very nature of the church. Our neighbour, he specifies, is anyone who needs our help. We would each do well, then, to ask ourselves: Who in my CWL council, in my parish, in my community, is my neighbour? Who needs my help? Who is poor, sick, lonely or forgotten? How might I love them? Thoroughly convinced of God's love, Christians extend that love to others, impelled by the knowledge that the true measure of human worth is the love of God, revealed in Christ. To know and believe in God's love for us means always standing ready to touch, heal, welcome and forgive, and in these ways to be agents of God's merciful love.

To give orientation to all of the church's activities, the first encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI directs us to the heart of the gospel. God loves us. Let us, therefore, love one another. †

