

Note: The following lecture, delivered on March 8 last, at Saint Margaret Mary Parish, Oakland, is the first of three constituting a “workshop” on the encyclical letter of Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* or “On Christian Love.” This first lecture intended two things: to locate the encyclical in the context of *magisterial* teaching, as the *magisterium* is understood in the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the universal *Catechism of the Catholic Church*; to locate the Holy Father’s teaching in the context of the Eucharistic theology which (on my reading, at least) informs and colors his argument. That argument’s two main parts are the subject of the second and third lectures, which will be delivered on April 19 and May 10, respectively.

S. A. C.

+MJJ+

In memory of Frank Ellis,  
Teacher in the Faith

Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI  
*Deus caritas est*  
An Introductory Workshop

Part I  
The Encyclical as a Magisterial Document

1. On Magisterial Documents:  
The Teaching of II Vatican Council and of the  
*Catechism of the Catholic Church*

Encyclical letters (hereafter, encyclicals) belong to the category of magisterial documents: they belong among the written organs of official Church teaching, authored by the Church’s official teachers, the popes and the bishops in communion with the popes. In this connection, we should recall that “office” and “official” come from *officium*, the Latin term for dutiful or respectful action, that is, for action in fulfillment of a trust.

The trust in point is, of course, the transmission, interpretation and (if I may so speak) the enactment of God’s Revelation through Christ Jesus, in Whom, as the Word of God, the whole Revelation of God is summed up.<sup>1</sup> The fathers of the Second Vatican Council address the Church’s teaching office, or duty in trust, in *Dei verbum*:

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<sup>1</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 74–79 (pp. 24–25).

[T]he task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. Yet this Magisterium is not superior to the Word of God, but is its servant. It teaches only what has been handed on to it.<sup>2</sup>

The Church's living, authoritative teaching office, or *magisterium*, is exercised in person by the Bishop of Rome and by the members of the world-wide college of bishops united with him, their head.<sup>3</sup> In the words of the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen gentium*:

[T]he bishops . . . are authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach the faith to the people assigned to them, the faith which is destined to inform their thinking and direct their conduct . . . [T]he faithful, for their part, are obliged to submit to their bishops' decision, made in the name of Christ, and to adhere to it with a ready and respectful allegiance of mind. This loyal submission of the will and intellect must be given, in a special way, to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra*, in such wise, indeed, that his supreme teaching authority be acknowledged with respect, and that one sincerely adhere to decisions made by him, conformably with his manifest mind and intention, which is made known principally either by the character of the documents in question, or by the frequency with which a certain doctrine is proposed, or by the manner in which the doctrine is formulated.<sup>4</sup>

The *magisterium* extends beyond the content of the Revelation to the authoritative proclamation of moral principles that belong to the very exercise of reasoned, human agency. That is, it extends to precepts of the natural law, both because God demands natural justice of every person and because the Church is bound to declare the whole

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<sup>2</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dei verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)*, 10 §2 in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, OP (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1975), 755; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 84f. (pp. 27–29).

<sup>3</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 878 (p. 233).

<sup>4</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)*, 25 §1 in *Vatican Council II*, ed. Flannery, 376.; see also *Christus dominus (Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church)* 12, in Flannery, ed., op cit., 569–570, and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 2032–2040 (pp. 491–493).

truth concerning what human beings are, and what they should be, in the sight of God. Therefore, and once again in the words of the Second Vatican Council (*Dignitatis humanae*):

It is her [the Church's] duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself.<sup>5</sup>

Through magisterial documents, the Pope or bishops (or, in the case of conciliar and some synodical documents, the Pope and bishops together) exercise the teaching office—the duty in trust—established by Christ in the Apostles and their successors, the bishops, under Peter and his successors, the popes. To this duty in trust, Christ added the promise of divine grace to assist in its fulfillment; to responsibility, He added commensurate authority. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* glosses this authority:

In order to preserve the Church in the purity of the faith handed on by the apostles, Christ who is the Truth willed to confer on her a share in his own infallibility. By a “supernatural sense of faith” the people of God, under the guidance of the Church’s living Magisterium, “unfailingly adheres to this faith” (*Lumen gentium* 12). . . . [T]he pastoral duty of the Magisterium is aimed at seeing to it that the People of God abides in the truth that liberates. To fulfill this service, Christ endowed the Church’s shepherds with the charism of infallibility in matters of faith and morals.<sup>6</sup>

As to the exercise of this authority, the *Catechism* continues, first:

“The Roman Pontiff, head of the college of bishops, enjoys this infallibility in virtue of his office, when, as supreme pastor and teacher . . . he proclaims by a definitive act a doctrine pertaining to faith or morals. . . . infallibility . . . is also present in the body of bishops when, together with Peter’s successor, they exercise the supreme Magisterium,” above all in an Ecumenical Council (*Lumen gentium* 25). When the Church through its supreme Magisterium proposes a doctrine “for belief as being divinely

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<sup>5</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis humanae* (*Decree on Religious Liberty*), 14 §3, in Flannery, ed., op. cit., 811; see also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 2032–2040 (pp. 491–493).

<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 889 – 890 (p. 235).

revealed” (*Dei verbum* 10 §2) and as the teaching of Christ, the definitions “must be adhered to with the obedience of faith” (*Lumen gentium* 25 §2).<sup>7</sup>

And again:

Divine assistance is also given to the successors of the apostles, teaching in communion with the successor of Peter, and, in a particular way, to the bishop of Rome, pastor of the whole Church, when, without arriving at an infallible definition and without pronouncing “in a definitive manner,” they propose in the exercise of the ordinary Magisterium a teaching that leads to better understanding of Revelation in matters of faith and morals. To this ordinary teaching the faithful “are to adhere . . . with religious assent” (*Lumen gentium* 25) which, though distinct from the assent of faith, is nonetheless an extension of it.<sup>8</sup>

Whenever the Church’s official teachers address, from their office, matters pertaining to faith (what Christ taught us to believe) or to morals (principally, how Christ taught us to act, but extending to the precepts of the natural law as well), they exercise the *magisterium*. Nevertheless (as *Lumen gentium* n. 25, quoted above, implies in the case of the Pope), in its exercise they engage the *magisterium* in varying degrees, according to the intention expressed by the character of the document, by the language employed, and by signs of emphasis (such as the repetition of a teaching).

The popes and bishops engage their ordinary *magisterium* most fully when they intend to resolve doubts, or to lay down judgments, on disputed questions concerning the right understanding of the doctrine of the faith or concerning the right exercise of morals. (Hence, *Lumen gentium* speaks of “bishops’ decision, made in the name of Christ” and of “his [the Pope’s] decision.”) Again, the Church’s pastors engage the *magisterium* when they teach not for the purpose of resolving doubt or opposing error, but for the purpose of explicating established teaching or of confirming the faithful in their understanding of the faith or of morals.

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<sup>7</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 891 (pp. 235 – 236).

When they do these things in the usual course of fulfilling their offices, the Pope and the bishops engage their *ordinary magisterium*. “Ordinary” here signifies in the sense of the Latin *ordinare*: to set in order or to arrange well. Its first meaning is thus not “normal” but “normative.” (In this same sense, the bishop of a diocese is called the “local Ordinary,” because it is his responsibility to regulate the teaching and practice of the faith in his diocese.) Nevertheless, it is also true that the exercise of the *ordinary magisterium* is also the *magisterium*’s usual exercise.

As to faith and morals, then, ordinary magisterial documents set forth norms of belief and conduct. It does not follow, however, that their contents are uniformly normative. Let us now turn to the example of papal encyclicals.

## 2. On Encyclicals

Encyclical letters have a privileged character. In current Church usage, they rank second, after apostolic constitutions, among formal exercises of the Pope’s *ordinary magisterium*.<sup>9</sup> That is, modern popes have made use of the apostolic constitution to signal their intention to exercise their authority as supreme teachers emphatically, on weighty matters of permanent importance to the universal Church.<sup>10</sup> When the Pope

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 892 (p. 236).

<sup>9</sup> In order of formal magisterial authority, papal documents in current use (and recognized in Canon Law) include: apostolic constitutions, encyclical letters, encyclical epistles, apostolic exhortations, apostolic letters, letters, and messages. See, e.g., Francis G. Morrissey, “Papal and Curial Pronouncements: Their Canonical Significance in Light of the 1983 Code of Canon Law,” *The Jurist* 50 (1990): 102–125, cited in J. Michael Miller, CSB, *The Encyclicals of Pope John Paul II*, (Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 1996), 9–23. Miller’s brief “Introduction to the Papal Encyclicals” in these pages is quite useful.

<sup>10</sup> For example, John Paul the Great introduced the *editio typica* (definitive edition) of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* via the Apostolic Constitution *Fidei depositum*, addressed to all in Holy Orders and to the whole People of God “for everlasting memory.” Concerning the teaching value of the text, the Constitution declares:

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* . . . the publication of which I today order by virtue of my Apostolic Authority, is a statement of the Church’s faith and of catholic doctrine, attested to or illumined by Sacred Scripture, the Apostolic Tradition, and the

teaches in the form of an apostolic constitution, he signals a teaching of great weight and timeless import. Recent popes have used encyclicals to signal their intention to teach authoritatively on matters of faith or morals important to the universal Church in a present situation (encyclical letters) or to a local or regional church (encyclical epistles).<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, the encyclical form of papal teaching carries the presumption that the contents belong to the Pope's ordinary *magisterium* unless the contrary is clearly manifested. The contrary may be manifest in the subject matter the Pope addresses or in the manner in which he addresses it. In social encyclicals, for example, popes often advance political and economic analyses. These may support the Pope's more authoritative pronouncements, or may illustrate how principles pertaining to faith or morals might guide concrete action. Since these analyses are thus ancillary, subservient, to the Pope's teaching intention—since, that is, he does not intend to teach normatively on such matters—they engage his *magisterium* in a limited way.

For example, since Pius XI's social encyclical *Quadragesimo anno* (*After Forty Years* or *On Reconstructing the Social Order*), the popes have consistently recommended shared ownership of business enterprises (including shared decision-making and profit sharing) as a means of promoting (among other ends) just wages.<sup>12</sup> Now, the payment of just wages is a moral imperative founded both in natural law and in Sacred Scripture and Tradition. The promotion of just wages is therefore a serious obligation for both the

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Church's Magisterium. I declare it to be a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, pp. 1, 5).

<sup>11</sup> The distinction between encyclical letters and encyclical epistles seems to be eroding. The most recent encyclical epistle—John Paul the Great's commemoration of the 11<sup>th</sup> centenary of Ss. Cyril and Methodius' mission to the Slavs, *Slavorum apostoli*— is routinely treated on all fours with John Paul's encyclical letters.

individual employer and the political community.<sup>13</sup> In declaring this principle, the popes use language that clearly signifies they are teaching authoritatively.<sup>14</sup> But as to shared ownership, “present conditions” make it “advisable . . . when possible” (Pius XI) or “very desirable . . . by such methods as seem more appropriate” (John XXIII).<sup>15</sup> Again, even as he notes that (authoritative) Catholic social teaching “recognizes workers’ efforts . . . to gain broader areas of participation in the life of industrial enterprises,” John Paul the Great observes:

The church has no models to present; models that are real and truly effective can only arise within the framework of different historical situations, through the efforts of all those who responsibly confront concrete problems in all their social, economic, political and cultural aspects . . . For such a task the church offers her social teaching as an indispensable and ideal orientation.<sup>16</sup>

Shared ownership (again, broadly construed to include also employee stockholding plans, employee participation in managerial decision-making or profit sharing) is thus no norm, no prescription, of official Catholic social teaching. Although it is consistently commended in some of that teaching’s most authoritative documents, no Catholic is bound to affirm shared ownership except on its economic or other practical merits. It belongs to the category of the official documents’ ancillary—subservient:

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<sup>12</sup> See Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno*, n. 65;; John XXIII, *Mater et magister (Christianity and Social Progress)*, n. 77; Paul VI, *Populorum progressio (On the Development of Peoples)*, n. 28; John Paul the Great, *Laborem exercens (On Human Work)*, n. 14.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2434 (pp. 584–585); Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum*, n. 17, quoting the Epistle of James, v 4; John Paul the Great, *Laborem exercens*, n. 19.

<sup>14</sup> John XXIII, for example, declares “. . . the standards of judgment set forth above [*sc.* under “Remuneration for Work”] are binding always and everywhere” (*Mater et magister*, n. 72); with Leo XIII, Paul VI invokes “the demands of the natural law” (*Populorum progressio*, n. 59). Pius XI is fully explicit: “[T]he deposit of truth entrusted to us by God, and our weighty office . . . demand that social and economic questions be brought within our supreme jurisdiction, insofar as they refer to moral issues” one of which is the payment of just wages.

<sup>15</sup> *Quadragesimo anno*, n. 65; *Mater et magister*, n. 77.

<sup>16</sup> *Centesimus annus (On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum novarum)*, n. 43; see Second Vatican Council, *Apostolicam actuositatem (Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People)*, n. 7 in Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II*, 773–775.

explanatory, illustrative or exhortatory—content, as opposed to their magisterial (normative, authoritative) content.

As the case of shared ownership shows, the distinction between the normative and ancillary content of official Church documents is usually suggested by the subject matter in view and “flagged” by the documents’ language. With respect to official Catholic social teaching, normative content regularly concerns the ends (the goals or purposes) of political, economic, or (broadly) social life; ancillary content usually concerns contingent means for the realization of those ends.<sup>17</sup> Judging how the normative principles of Catholic social teaching, for example, can be carried out in concrete situations “on the ground” falls to the office of the laity, which is no less a duty in trust than is the exercise of the living Magisterium. Thus *Apostolicam actuositatem*, the II Vatican Council’s *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People*:

[F]or the exercise of the apostolate, He [*sc.* the Holy Spirit] gives the faithful special gifts . . . (cf. I *Cor.* xii 7), ‘allotting them to each one as he wills (I *Cor.* xii 11), so that each and all, putting at the service of others the grace received may be as “good stewards of God’s varied gifts” (I *Pet.* iv 10), for the building up of the whole body in charity (cf. *Eph.* iv 16). From the reception of these charisms . . . there arises for each of the faithful the right and duty of exercising them in the Church and in the world for the good of men and the development of the Church . . . in the freedom of the Holy Spirit “who breathes where He wills” (*Jn.* iii 8).<sup>18</sup>

Again:

Laymen ought to take on themselves as their distinctive task [the] renewal of the temporal order. Guided by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church, prompted by Christian love, they should act in this domain in a direct way . . .<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Of course, normative Catholic social teaching extends to prohibition of the use of means that are inconsistent with the revealed Law (the Commandments) of God or with the precepts of the natural law. Moreover, means that are necessary to realize the natural or revealed ends of human life may be the subjects of normative, magisterial judgments.

<sup>18</sup> *Apostolicam actuositatem* n. 3, in Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II*, 769.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 7, 774.

The distinction between normative (or magisterial) and ancillary content means that the authority of individual statements or judgments advanced in a magisterial document must be evaluated by reference both to their subject matter and to the way in which the pastoral author(s)—Pope, bishop, bishops’ synod or conference, council—propose them. Typically, some among them will, like the propositions advanced in any public document, command assent just so far as they rest on good arguments. Others will command assent not because they are well argued, but because they are authoritatively proposed: proposed, that is, in the name of Christ and in fulfillment of the Church’s office to proclaim and conserve His teaching on faith and morals.

Even among the authoritative propositions contained in a magisterial document distinctions may be drawn according to the criteria summarized in *Lumen gentium*, n. 25: the frequency with which a doctrine is proposed, or the manner in which it is proposed. In his 1995 encyclical *Evangelium vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*), John Paul the Great writes:

[B]y the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the Bishops . . . *I declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder, since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written word of God, is transmitted by the Church’s Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.*<sup>20</sup>

This is solemn, ordinary magisterial teaching. The Pope’s “manner” is declarative. He explicitly invokes his authority as Successor of Peter. He cites the communion of the college of bishops in his declaration. He attributes the judgment to the settled mind of the Church (“transmitted by the Church’s tradition and by the ordinary and *universal* Magisterium”), as informed *both* by natural law and (written) Revelation.

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<sup>20</sup> John Paul the Great, *Evangelium vitae*, n. 62.3 in Miller, ed., *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, 851–852 (emphases original).

It would be difficult to imagine a more authoritative declaration, short of an *ex cathedra* definition.<sup>21</sup> The motives weighing for assent include explicit, authoritative teaching of the Pope and bishops, the authority of Sacred Scripture and Tradition, embodied in the (historically) attested, settled mind of the Church.

In the same Encyclical, John Paul writes:

Suicide is always morally objectionable as murder. The Church's tradition has always rejected it as a gravely evil choice. . . . [I]t represents a rejection of God's absolute sovereignty over life and death as proclaimed in the prayer of the ancient sage of Israel: "You have power over life and death; you lead men down to the gates of Hades and back again" (Wisdom xvi 33).

This is ordinary magisterial teaching: John Paul does not explicitly invoke his Petrine authority, nor does he use emphatic language ("I declare," "I confirm"); he situates the condemnation of suicide in the Church's unanimous Tradition, and indicates that its source is the Revelation to which the Church's Tradition is obedient. The motive weighing for assent goes to the Church's traditional understanding of the Revelation, as it bears on God the Creator's sovereign authority over human life.

In *Evangelium vitae*, then, one and the same magisterial document advances authoritative propositions of varying emphases, propositions that make more and less urgent demands on the readers' religious assent. Of course, more and less urgent demands on religious assent are one and all *demands* on religious *assent*.

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<sup>21</sup> And, indeed, John Paul's expressed intention was ". . . to set for the constant doctrine of the Church's faith with an act confirming truths which are clearly witnessed to by Scripture, the apostolic Tradition and the unanimous teaching of the Pastors. These declarations [*sc.* in *Veritatis splendor* and *Evangelium vitae*], by virtue of the authority handed to the Successor of Peter to 'confirm the brethren' (Luke xxii 32), thus express the common certitude present in the life and teaching of the Church" ("Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *L'Osservatore Romano* 48 [24 November, 1995]: 3).

### 3. On Reading an Encyclical

It would be a mistake to conclude that a faithful, or even a responsible, reading of encyclicals (and other magisterial documents) consists in sorting out authoritative from their ancillary content, so as to determine what falls to a faithful reader's discretion and what, because it is authoritative, claims the faithful reader's religious assent. To recognize that a document belongs to the ordinary *magisterium* is to hear behind its words the voice of Christ, instructing His Apostles: "Who hears you, hears me."<sup>22</sup>

That is to say: The *magisterium* is a *charism*; it is *gratia gratis data*, a grace conferred on some by Christ (in virtue of the office to which He calls them), through the Holy Spirit, in order to multiply grace in the whole Church, for the common good of the whole Church. Its pronouncements do not substitute for the sound formation of personal conscience, nor does its exercise impose on conscientious personal judgment. For, the *magisterium* is a grace given to the end that the whole Church and each of the faithful may attain to "this mind which was in Christ." This mind avoids contentiousness and vainglory; it humbly seeks the good of others.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the *magisterium* is *destined* (*destinare*: to determine or appoint; to fix or settle a matter), by Christ, to the sound formation of personal conscience and to the exercise of genuinely conscientious personal judgment. It can neither obstruct the first nor impinge on the second.

The responsible reading of magisterial documents is therefore at least as much a matter of fundamental attitude as it is a matter of theological learning. When the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council call (formidably enough) for a "religious submission of

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<sup>22</sup> Luke x 16, cited, in this connection, in Pius XII, *Humani generis (On Certain False Opinions Opposed to Catholic Doctrine)* (1950), n. 20; Pius' text is paraphrased and amplified in *Lumen gentium*, n. 25.

mind and will” to ordinary magisterial teaching, they rely on their readers to recognize in the term “submission” a synonym for “humility” (for so it is).<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the Fathers recall us to the example of Christ. Conscious that even the learned doctors of the Temple “were astonished at his understanding and his answers,” Jesus nevertheless went down, in love for Mary and Joseph, to Nazareth. There He “was subject”—He submitted—“to them,” advancing in “wisdom, and age and grace before God and men.”<sup>25</sup> Just so, the religious submission desired by the Council must be understood as an act of love: love for the Church and for her pastors; loving confidence that the way to the fullness of life in Christ is marked out by the sacramental and charismatic gifts He has bestowed on His Church.

That said, it remains true that no Catholic is bound to accept, against the witness of conscience, ancillary proposals advanced in magisterial texts. The obverse also remains true: the normative pronouncements of magisterial documents carry authority which depends neither upon the force of the arguments that support them nor upon their appeal to individual conscience. When they pronounce from their office on matters of faith or morals, the pastors of the Church do not act as theologians, whose conclusions carry only as much authority as their arguments carry weight. They act as instruments of the grace promised by Christ through the Holy Spirit:

. . . the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of everything I have said to you.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Philippians ii 5, ad ii 1–4.

<sup>24</sup> *Summissio* (submission), “a laying down or sending of oneself (under another’s authority),” expresses (in the participle *submissus*) a quality of character, humility. It is a synonym for *subiectio* (subjection), “placing oneself under another,” as is *subdere* (which lacks a nominal derivative): “to lower oneself (before another).” In St. Jerome’s Vulgate, *subdere* appears (Luke ii 51) in the perfect participle, *subditus*, to express Christ’s surrender to the parental authority of Mary and Joseph.

<sup>25</sup> Luke ii 47, 51–52.

<sup>26</sup> John xiv 26; cf. Matthew xxviii 19–20.

Finally, it remains true that where love moves belief, claims to a “right” or “privilege” to dissent lose luster. If we approach a good friend, a wise counselor, for advice, we may well expect to hear much that goes beyond the basics of our inquiry. A good friend and a wise counselor will not deal peremptorily with us. He will appeal to us “in the round”: he will appeal to our sense of what is fitting by exhortation; he will appeal to our understanding by argument. We would betray the relationship that grounds the exchange, were we to insist, as a matter of principle, that our friend’s amplifications or explanations were *merely* ancillary—let alone superfluous—and so need not engage our serious consideration.

Above, speaking of papal encyclicals, we noted that ancillary contents “engage [the Pope’s] *magisterium* in a limited way.” You may have noted what was *not* said, namely, that ancillary matters *fail* to engage the *magisterium*. When the Church’s teachers gird their official pronouncements with explanations, illustrations or exhortations, they intend to shed light. Normal charitable reading—the good habit of entertaining an argument before criticizing it, of setting it first in the best possible light instead of the worst—would bid us pay close attention. But magisterial documents’ source in the grace of God, and their high purpose, merit more than simple charitable reading. They merit earnest, prayerful, loving openness to the documents’ full arguments, just as their authoritative pronouncements merit religious assent. This is the spirit in which we must turn to the text of the first encyclical of our Holy Father, the Supreme Pastor and Teacher, Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*.

Interlude:  
Magisterium, Charism, Work of Divine Love

Earlier we noted that the *Magisterium* is a charism, and the chief charism, bestowed on the Church by Christ Jesus in order that the Holy Spirit's works of recollection (the conservation and cultivation of the doctrine of the faith) and of love (the enactment on earth of the two-fold summons to unqualified love of God and neighbor) may abound in her. In view of the present purpose—to reflect, in pursuit of authentically religious assent, on the Holy Father's magisterial teaching concerning Christian love—a transitional meditation on some familiar scriptural witnesses—those of Ss. Matthew (xvi 15–20) and Luke (xxii 31–34)—to the Petrine authority, seems in order. For, that authority is established through Peter's adventure with divine love.

Matthew records how, to Peter, God the Father gave a singular grace that illuminated for Peter the person and action of the Christ:

[Jesus] said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter said in reply, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.”

Jesus' reply to Simon Peter is enshrined in the heart of every Catholic:

“Blessed are you, Simon Son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father. And so I say to you, you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you shall have bound on earth [*et quodcumque ligaveris super terram*] shall have been bound in heaven [*erit ligatum et in caelis*]; and whatever you shall have loosed on earth [*et quodcumque solveris super terram*] shall have been loosed in heaven” [*erit solutum et in caelis*].<sup>27</sup>

In St. Jerome's Latin (given above) as in the Evangelist's Greek, Peter's future bindings and loosings in time, on earth, “shall have been bound” and “shall have been loosed” in

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<sup>27</sup> The Vulgate translation of St. Jerome is the precise Latin equivalent of the original Greek. In it, Christ's words signifying the fulfillment of His promise to Peter are given in the passive voice and the future perfect tense; the Greek original gives a periphrastic construction: the (middle) passive perfect participles *dedemenon* (“has been bound”) and *lelumenon* (“has been loosed”) are predicated of Peter's acts with the future tense of the verb “to be,” *estai*.

Heaven; by grace, Peter shall bind and loose strictly in accordance with the eternally antecedent will of the Father.

From the special grace bestowed on Simon son of Jonah as *gratia gratum faciens*, that is, as a gift making Simon, its receiver, so far pleasing to God—making him Peter, making him Rock—Jesus decrees a grace *gratis data*. That is, he decrees a gift given that further gifts, further grace, may abound, through Simon Peter, its receiver, for the whole Church (and indeed for the whole human race) in space and time, and in eternity. Through that gift of God the Father which makes Simon into Peter, Jesus destines Peter to be a gift to the Church he is called to build up and to rule. This is the work of divine love, the work of Christ who is Love Incarnate, viz.: to perfect the beloved superabundantly, so that the beloved becomes himself a source of perfection for others beloved of God.

This bears repeating: To be perfected by and in God's love is to be made a source of the like perfection in and for others. Here we touch on the meaning of that most unmanly of Jesus' commands, recorded by Saint Matthew (v 48) as the very synopsis of the doctrine of love, a command that might easily seem a counsel of despair: "Be ye, then, perfect [*Estote ergo vos perfecti*] as your Father in heaven is perfect [*sicut et Pater vester caelestis perfectus est*]." We are perfected after the manner of the Father when, in the likeness of the Son, we are re-created by the Lord and Giver of Life to be instruments of divine blessing for our neighbors and brethren. This is true of the Servant of the servants of God, and it is true of each of those servants, who, in serving God must serve one another.

Saint Luke gives us to understand that Peter will be strictly a gift *of* grace to the Church: *of* grace in the subjectual sense—for grace will be the whole source—and *of* grace in the objectual sense—for grace will be the whole purpose—of what is obtained for him, and through him for us, by Christ (*Lk* xxii 31–34):

“Simon, Simon, behold Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat; against him I have prayed for you in order that your faith may not fall short [*ego autem rogavi pro te ut non deficiat fides tua*], and you, once you have been converted [once you have turned back—*sc.* from your betrayal of me—*et tu aliquando conversus*], strengthen [confirm] your brothers” [*sc.* in that same faith: *confirma fratres tuos*].

In response—and, no doubt, in view also of Jesus’ foretelling, a little before, that He must be betrayed to death by one of His own company (*Lk.* xxii 21 – 23)—Peter offers Jesus the most emphatic pledge of love that flesh is capable of:

[Peter] said to Him, “Lord, I am prepared”—*sum paratus, hetoimos eimi*: I am ready, equipped, capable—“to go to prison and to die with you.”

We are bound, I think, to observe that on this occasion recorded by Luke, Peter’s love for Christ appears as the human love that, in Greek, would be called *philia*: the love that prizes the beloved as another self. The Greek proverb goes, *philos allos autos estin*: A friend—the beloved—is another self. It need hardly be said that “The friend is another self” does not involve a disguised self-love; it means that there is no good one would will for oneself that one would not will for the beloved, and no burden that one would endure for oneself that one would not endure for the beloved.

Surely, *philos* is the love out of which Peter speaks when, in St. Matthew’s narrative, immediately following xvi 16 – 20, Peter earns Christ’s rebuke for resisting the teaching that the Messiah must suffer, die and rise on the third day. That rebuke does not directly convict Peter of inapposite love, but it does insist that the “set” of Peter’s mind is

all-too-human: “you do not mind divine things, but human things” (*ou phroneis ta tou theou, alla ta tōn anthrōpōn*: Mt. xvi 23). In Matthew’s narrative, then, what Peter could never will for himself, ignominious death, he cannot accept for the Beloved. In Luke’s narrative, what (as he now knows) he must accept for the Beloved, Peter wills for himself. Both are, arguably, acts of (human) *philia*.

Of the utter failure—the failure, not the extinction—of Peter’s love, of his human *philia* for Jesus, to satisfy its own, freely elicited measure, nothing need be said to the present purpose beyond noting that Jesus foresees it:

And He said: “I say to you, Peter, the cock shall not call this day before you thrice deny that you know me” (*Lk. xxii 33 – 34*).

The affirmation *that* love’s failure need not entail love’s extinction requires no argument: we have all similarly, signally failed in love for Jesus—have failed to satisfy the freely elicited measure of our love, and with regard to pledges far less taxing than Peter’s—yet without extinguishing love. Like Peter, we *keep coming back* to Jesus because (to use John Paul the Great’s formulation, echoing the II Vatican Council’s *Lumen gentium*) in revealing God to man Jesus also reveals man to man: in Him we see and respond desirously to “another self.” Christ is “another” in the sense of “like us,” but also “an other” unlike us; for He is without sin and so He is the fullness of human life and being. Our difficulty is like Peter’s: we must rise from the love that keeps us coming back to Him to a love that does not fail, for the very love that keeps us coming back to Him demands a love that does not fail. Our consolation in this difficulty is that He who thus draws us back to Him *is* the love that does not fail, cannot fail: *deus caritas est*.

Part II  
*Deus caritas est*

1. The Introduction as the Key:  
The Theological Context of the Encyclical

The Holy Father divides *Deus caritas est* into an Introduction and two parts under the titles, I. “The Unity of Love in Creation and in Salvation History” and II. “*Caritas: The Practice of Love by the Church.*” He contrasts these, the encyclical’s two, substantive, parts as “speculative” and “more concrete.”<sup>28</sup> We must understand by “speculative” not “conjectural,” but “aimed at understanding”: *speculare* means “to see.” In the encyclical’s first part, then, Benedict intends to sharpen and refine that vision of truth which is ours in the light of faith. Again, by “concrete” (the Latin has *certiorem speciem* or “a more determinate character”), he intends that specificity or concreteness which is required for authoritative direction on the conduct of affairs.

The parts are, Benedict observes, “profoundly interconnected.”<sup>29</sup> His observation is certainly true of the encyclical’s argument. It also suggests, as it were, in the background of his argument, the interconnection between the speculative and the concrete (or practical), between knowing and doing, that is inscribed in the structure of our defining human character, rationality. Human reason is, as St. Thomas teaches, a single power ordered to two formal objects: to what is and to what ought to be, to the true and to the good. While knowing what is and attaining what ought to be are, accordingly, activities as distinct as changing one’s mind and changing one’s socks, they are

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<sup>28</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, Introduction, 1.

nonetheless inseparable. The true grasped as our good—as what perfects or fulfills us as knowers—induces inquiry that, if successful, terminates in understanding; the good grasped as true—truly good, then as good “for us”—induces striving that, if successful, issues in the deed achieved.

Moreover, the intertwining of the speculative and practical in our rational nature extends to the distinction, and relation, between intellectual and moral virtue. For example, prudence, the mold and mother of excellence in deeds, is referred by St. Thomas to “reason perfected in the cognition of truth,” regulating—inwardly shaping—choice and deed.<sup>30</sup> Again, St. Thomas identifies temperance, in the form of *studiositas*, as the ordered desire for the natural good of knowledge (sensual and intellectual) in default of which knowing ceases to nourish, and poisons, the spirit.<sup>31</sup> Again, just as the unqualified judgment of truth engages the will: “It is so—Amen! let it be so!” so the desiderated object involves a claim to truth: “This is the very—that is, the true—thing.”<sup>32</sup> Questing desire—*eros*, *amor*, love—is, then, at the root of our knowing and of our doing. It (*amor*) is, as Dante (in this, following St. Thomas) has it, “the seed in [us] of every virtue”—and we may add, whether intellectual or moral virtue—“and of every action deserving punishment”—and we may add, including the culpable assertion of falsehood.<sup>33</sup> Having briefly cited this natural background to the encyclical’s argument, I

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* The Latin, *quae inter se arte nectuntur*, like the German, *eng miteinander verbundenen*, could be more literally rendered “closely (or tightly)—that is, inseparably—connected to one another.”

<sup>30</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata de virtutibus in communi* 9; cf. the discussion of Josef Pieper, *The Four Cardinal Virtues* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 3 – 9.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Pieper, *op. cit.*, 198f.

<sup>32</sup> Upon completing the work of creation, Genesis reads, “God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good” (*Gen* i 28; *Jerusalem Bible*), in contrast to the works of the individual days, each characterized simply as “good.” “Very,” then, should not be read as an intensifier, but as a “completer”: the creation *in toto* is truly—in all ways, it is describable as—good.

<sup>33</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1973), XVII 104 – 105. In a famous passage, and in the like vein, St. Augustine writes: “A body by its weight tends to move toward its proper place. The weight’s movement is not necessarily downwards, but to

ask leave to set it aside for the time being, and to return to the foreground of the encyclical's Introduction.

In the supernatural foreground of Pope Benedict's introductory argument stands Christ Jesus, who unites in Himself the saving Word and Deed, the Truth and the Goodness, of God. If, to recapitulate the Introduction's core assertion, [*W*]e have come to believe in God's love, then we have come to believe in Him who testifies, as Word and Deed, just how *God so loved the world*. Hence, the Holy Father draws the conclusion that grounds and organizes the balance of the whole encyclical's argument (I translate, following the Latin and German texts):

At its inception (*ad initium, am Anfang*), being Christian (*quis christianus fit, das Christsein*) involves neither an ethical resolve (*ethica voluntas, ethischer Entschluß*) nor a lofty conviction (*magna opinio, große Idee*), but the encounter (*congressio, Begegnung*) with an event, a person, that gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.<sup>34</sup>

The German text—Pope Benedict's holograph text?—offers the term *Christsein* where I have translated “being Christian.” Staying just on the safe side of the corresponding Latin (*Ad initium, cum quis christianus fit . . .*), which might be rendered (a little loosely) “At the start, the point at which [one] becomes Christian . . .,” *Christsein* might also be rendered “being-in-Christ.”

The Pope's meaning, then, may be explicated as follows: At its inception, being-in-Christ—which is the sole and necessary ground for becoming-in-Christ—can involve neither an ethical resolve (that is to say: the deliberate choice of means to an end) nor a lofty conviction (that is to say: enlistment under an idea, as one might adopt the Marxian

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its appropriate position: fire tends to move upwards, a stone downwards. . . . Things which are not in their intended position are restless. Once they are in their ordered position, they are at rest. My weight is my love. Wherever I am carried, my love is carrying me. By your gift, we are set on fire and carried upwards:

Idea or the European Idea, viz.: as the architectonic of one's thinking and doing). Rather, being-in-Christ so as to become-in-Christ supposes an encounter—a forceful encounter (the Latin text gives *imponit*, which can be rendered “imposes,” where I translate “gives”) with that Person whose force lies in His being (absolutely, and for its subject) an Event. Such an “encounter” might happen to *anyone* on his life's way anywhere—say, on the road to Damascus—because the initiative rests *wholly* with the Person in question.

At least three features of the proposition before us—again, if I am reading well, the organizing affirmation of the encyclical—simply demand further reflection. First, the Holy Father's proposition suggests that we must understand *Christsein*, “being Christian” (as the English text has it), existentially (forgive the ponderous word) or in the sense suggested (in another context) by Josef Pieper: “To be Christian is a qualification of being, of the *whole* of a person's *being*.” Second, and relatedly, it denies categorically that any personal act on the order of resolve or conviction is commensurate with the inception of *Christsein*. Third, it insists that the sole alternative to resolve or conviction is “encounter,” and that with the Person who is also and inseparably—so to speak, appositively—the Event called Christ Jesus.

The close relation between the first two features we have cited bids us consider them together. Becoming Christian is not, on Benedict's showing, comparable—again—to resolving on principled vegetarianism or declaring for strict materialism, consequential as either initiative would certainly be for the conduct of a human life. To be sure, becoming Christian precipitates (as Benedict will argue in the sequel) ethical resolutions and inspires architectonic convictions that deserve to be called “Christian”—we might

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we grow red hot and ascend . . .” (*Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991], XIII ix 10 [p. 276]).

say, “derivatively Christian”—owing to their source. *Ab initio*, Christians can hardly avoid resolving on pious practices or resisting the imperious *Weltanschauungen* of this world with counter-convictions. And that is the point: these efflorescences—if they are genuine, these out-flowings and expressions of a new way of being—must not be confused with their source. One *has* convictions; one *holds* to standards of conduct. But *Christsein*, *being-in-Christ*, reduces to no sort of having or holding on the Christian’s part, since it precedes all that the Christian (as Christian) may be said to have or to hold.

Accordingly, becoming Christian cannot be grounded in the acceptance of “Gospel values”—for values are values precisely as *elected* and *held*. Still less can becoming Christian turn on “choice”—of “life-style” or of practices designed to promote exalted states of consciousness (or unconsciousness). Least of all can becoming Christian turn on giving oneself to a quest for satisfactions—or for assurances—in the form of spiritual “experiences.” These things certainly qualify those who elect or pursue them, but they are rather the sort of “qualifications” one might list in a *résumé* than answers to the question “Who and what are you?” Only the latter question goes to one’s being, to what one is as opposed to what one has. Recurring to Pope Benedict’s metaphors: the “new horizon” in point must be conceived to stretch a clear 360 degrees, unbroken and unbounded; and the new “direction” must be conceived to be “decisive,” because it summons—as the Pope explicitly notes—now, as in Israel’s eventful encounter beneath Mount Sinai, each believer’s heart, soul, mind, and strength *in toto*.<sup>35</sup>

The Pope’s affirmation entails, further, that what is proposed for Christian faith is neither certain religious propositions—a “belief system,” or a confession (like the

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<sup>34</sup> *Deus caritas est*, Introduction 1; emphasis added.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Deus caritas est*, n. 1.

Reformation Confessions of Augsburg or of Utrecht)—nor yet a spiritual discipline—like the Way of the *Tao*—but, again, Event. In this connection, an eye for the literal Latin text (*cum eventu quodam, cum Persona*, the Holy Father writes) is helpful. *Eventus* (v. *evenio*: to come forth, to go from hidden to manifest)—the English “event”—means “a disclosure.” God, thitherto hidden in unapproachable light, appeared in space and time, available for encounter, seeking encounter, with human persons.

What is proposed for faith, then, is no proposition, but the Passover of the Lord, accomplished in the person and action of Christ Jesus, our Pasch. The Encounter and the Event overflow in propositions, but evade “capture” by the net of propositions that stem from them. To be sure, the Church proposes authoritative dogmatic and moral teachings, together with a model of theological perspicacity, St. Thomas, the Common and Universal Doctor. But the Church proposes for saving faith the Paschal Mystery, Event in Person: the Church’s central act of divine service proposes Him—literally: *proponit eum*, sets Him forth—and declares Him to the world with the words of John the Baptist: *Ecce Agnus Dei, ecce qui tollit peccata mundi!* Behold the Lamb of God, behold He who takes away the sins of the world!

In short, the “encounter” to which the Holy Father alludes is sacramental; it transpires through a sign that effects what it signifies. The encounter that qualifies our very being comes above all in and through the “Sacrament of sacraments,” the Sacrament to which “all others are ordered as to their end,”<sup>36</sup> the Holy Eucharist. Under what “new horizon” does this encounter establish human life? In what direction does it decisively point? We may answer each question by reference to a single term: radically Catholic.

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<sup>36</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III 65 1, cited in *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #1211 (p. 311).

For, Pope Benedict's phrases "new horizon" and "decisive direction" point to what is radically Catholic, viz.: sacramental identification with the person and action of Jesus Christ, Son of Man and Son of God, offered to the glory of the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I propose the phrase and the concept *sacramental identification* correlatively to Benedict's own, chosen phrase and concept *sacramental "mysticism"* (this correlation will structure the sequent treatment of the body of the encyclical's first part).<sup>37</sup> *Identification* supposes a likening: many becoming one by way of assuming a common character (*kharaktēr*)—literally a likeness or an image (reflection)—that can therefore be univocally attributed, in view of the original, to each of its many receivers or to all together. Immediately in view, of course, is the doctrine of configuration to Christ, and the *character* thus impressed upon the regenerate soul, in Christian baptism.<sup>38</sup> Beyond that, the phrase and concept *sacramental identification* may be explicated by a "Scriptural syllogism":

God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (I *Jn.* iv 16);

He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him (*Jn.* vi 56).

Encounter by eye and ear, though they be the eye and ear of faith, is not enough for the inception (*initium*) of that abiding in the God of Love that makes for *Christsein*—not enough even for those privileged to be present *ad initium initiorum*, those who saw His face and reclined upon His chest (cf. *Jn.* xiii 23 -25). Christ makes himself their

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<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Deus caritas est*, n. 14. I owe *sacramental identification*, phrase and concept, to Joseph Lanigan, Professor of Philosophy (Emeritus), Saint Mary's College; I am, of course, solely responsible for the comparatively crude use here made of both.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 1272 – 1274 (p. 324).

sacramental sacrifice even before He sheds His blood on the cross.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, moved by the command of the Victim-Lord—no, embodying the will of the Victim-Lord, acting *in persona Christi*, and speaking only what Christ Himself has heard eternally from the Father—the Church’s ministers intone: *Take this, all of you, and eat it . . . Take this, all of you, and drink from it . . .* Take life: take heart, mind and strength to love as He loves, from this encounter with the Word of life. For the whole Event-In-Person—the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ our Passover—is present in the Sacrament of the altar.<sup>40</sup>

Take this: *This*, we know, is Christ, present in the Body and Blood, present Soul and Divinity:

Christ in the Body:  
betrayed, arrested, deserted and denied by Peter, by us, by His friends,  
falsely accused, falsely condemned,  
mocked, tortured,  
murdered before His mother;  
Christ in the Blood:  
spilling from His beaten back and  
and His punctured brow,  
defiled by the spittle of contemptuous Roman soldiers;  
blood spattered in the praetorium,  
at the feet of Pilate,  
on the streets of Jerusalem;  
blood running from His hands and feet  
down the very emblem of fallen humanity’s  
unholy genius for torment;  
blood mingling, finally, with water on the shaft of a spear;  
blood soaking a makeshift linen shroud.

*Take, eat: This* is Christ present in the Body and the Blood, present Soul and Divinity:

Christ in human nature:  
in tears before the tomb of Lazarus,  
in wrath at the Court of the Temple,  
in mourning for Jerusalem,  
in wonder at a soldier’s faith;  
Christ divine:  
consoling Mary Magdalen in the Garden,

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. *Mtt.* xxvi 26 – 29, *Mk.* xiv 22 – 25; *Lk.* xxii 14 – 20, and John Paul the Great, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiae de eucharistia*, nn. 11 – 15.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. *Ecclesiae de eucharistia*, *loc. cit.*

offering his hands and side to Thomas' nervous fingers,  
expounding Scripture to bewildered, grief-stricken disciples  
on the road to Emmaus,  
revealing Himself in the breaking of bread;  
Christ bestowing the Charism of the Keys,  
promising the Paraclete,  
gently educating from Peter three-fold reparation  
for his three-fold denial;  
Christ ascending to His Father: our Advocate, our Brother,  
Our Lord and our God.

*Take, eat, this is Encounter, this is Event: this is Christ in His Passion and in His Glory, in His death and in His resurrection: Christ the Suffering Servant and Christ the Lord of All— Christ, the very Love by which we take Him for our Beloved.*

What we have called sacramental identification with the Person and Action of Christ, above all through the Eucharist, describes the theological context in which Benedict XVI develops the argument of *Deus caritas est*. God offers no school of love except that we find by “becoming-in-Christ”; our becoming-in-Christ finds inception each time our being-in-Christ, our abiding in love, is renewed by Love Himself: Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, Person and Action.