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Deus Caritas Est
THE SPLENDOUR OF CHARITY

Your Eminence, Your Excellencies,
My Dear Brother Bishops,

As you well know, *Cor Unum*, my Dicastery at the Vatican is entrusted by the Holy Father with giving concrete signs of love and charity. It was a great joy for us then that Pope Benedict XVI chose for his first Encyclical the theme, “*Deus caritas est.*” In this, he gave decisive direction for his Pontificate. At the same time, he describes *Cor Unum* as “the agency of the Holy See responsible for orienting and coordinating the organisations and charitable activities promoted by the Catholic Church” (n. 32).

The Catholic Church in Britain has a long history of charitable outreach. Secular historians refer to the “nationalisation” of charity some 400 years ago through the Charitable Uses Act of 1601, but the Church much before and still today has recognised and fostered this virtue in word and deed through a plethora of initiatives – schools, hospitals, care homes for the elderly and dying, and prison outreach, to cite just a few examples. Many of these have gained a national reputation for the excellence achieved and the modern state has sought to emulate them. Even though Britain boasts of a national welfare system, this is no safety net for the very poor. In future years, their numbers are likely to increase, given the large influx of migrants coming to these shores. I cannot forget the plea of Mother Teresa to Margaret Thatcher to help Londoners sleeping out in the bitter cold beneath railway arches in what she chillingly described as “little cardboard coffins.”

My personal presence among you provides the opportunity to express the Pope’s encouragement and gratitude to those numerous witnesses of charity in this land who provide for our brothers and sisters in need: those agencies directly sponsored by the Bishops, and also religious institutes and associations, entities for human development and missionary service, groups involved in the civil sphere, and organisations for social, educational and cultural work.

I. HELPING: A SIGN OF THE TIMES

The charitable spirit of the British people is impressive. It is claimed that in the United Kingdom alone, there are almost 200,000 charities, diffusing over 25 billion pounds in charitable aid each year. In terms of giving as a percentage of gross domestic product, Britain ranks second only to the people of the United States. Each year, individuals generously donate billions to charitable causes – 9.5 billion pounds in 2006. To this, we must add the extensive hours spent in voluntary service. Some 20 million citizens in England and Wales are said to volunteer either formally or informally at least once a month, equivalent to 25 billion pounds of work hours. Recent years, I am told, have seen a significant increase in charitable giving to religious causes. 16 percent of all money donated to charity in 2006-07 was given to religious groups, the highest figure after medical research (17 percent).

It is clear then, also from my experience worldwide, that the willingness of people to alleviate misery has become a “sign of our times.” A few years ago, as I arrived at the airport of Saigon, one of the largest cities of the still communist country of Vietnam, I saw a huge, brightly illuminated billboard with the headline, “Charity.” I was pleasantly surprised. Even in a Communist country, “charity” is trendy. In some Western nations, the Caritas confederation has grown into an impressive service industry. Caritas Germany, for example, employs an incredible 500,000 professional staff, making it the second largest employer in Germany after the State. In 2006, the annual working budget for assistance to underdeveloped nations of Catholic Relief Services – the U.S. Bishops agency for international outreach – exceeded US\$400 million.

In a word: charity has expanded on virtually every level of society. Certainly, one cannot but rejoice over this development. Pope Benedict does so in *Deus caritas est*. But the Holy Father also cautions us: in the face of growth, “it is very important,” he says, “that the Church’s charitable activity maintains all of its splendour and does not become just another form of social assistance” (n. 31). It seems to me that this advice is especially significant for a nation such as yours, given its rapidly changing social and religious fabric. The Servant of God Pope John Paul II underlined precisely this challenge for you in his address at your last *ad limina* visit: “England and Wales, despite being steeped in a rich Christian tradition, today face the pervasive advance of secularism. At the root of this situation is the attempt to promote a vision of humanity apart from God and removed

from Christ ... The faithful look to you, the Bishops, with great expectation to preach and teach the Gospel which dispels the darkness and illuminates the way of life” (23 October 2003).

II. CHRIST: THE MODEL OF CHARITY

Dear brothers in Christ: I give thanks to God for the opportunity today to reflect with you on the charitable mission of the Church. I am grateful to His Eminence Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor for his kind invitation. For some time, I have considered it important to meet with the Pastors of England and Wales. Your bearing on the whole English-speaking world is significant. How pleased I am that the first Encyclical of Pope Benedict has made real this intention!

Our moment of communion and dialogue has been preceded by similar encounters with other Episcopal conferences, including Spain, the Ukraine, Austria, Russia and Poland, the Fourth General Assembly of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean last May in Aparecida, and most recently the Catholic Bishops Conference of India. In the coming months, I shall travel to the Philippines, Australia and France. Encouraged by the Holy Father himself, my wish has been to give *Deus caritas est* the echo it rightly deserves as the first doctrinal letter ever written specifically on the theme of love and charity.

The Church's responsibility to fight against all kinds of misery is given to us by the Lord Himself. Jesus instituted love of neighbour as the first commandment for behaviour among His disciples, acting Himself as a witness of this love. The Acts of the Apostles spoke of Him thus: “He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him” (*Acts* 10:38). This is His unmistakable description.

For this reason, the young Christian community made its own the mission and example of Jesus. In various places in the New Testament, we find concrete instances of help (cf. *Acts* 2:45; 4:32; 6:1; *Rom* 12:13; *Jam* 1:27; *Mt* 25:36). But not only material ones. The attentive reader of Sacred Scripture clearly sees that the charitable gestures of Jesus and the compassion of the first Christians were always intended to point to the loving-kindness of the heavenly Father. The multiplication of loaves and healing of the sick, the expelling of demons and raising the dead were always Christianity's way to move people to believe in Jesus, the Messiah and the Servant of Yahweh. The Gospel of

John then, does not even speak of “miracles,” but has another concept: it calls Jesus’ healing deeds *semeia*, that is, signs, pointers to something else. This indication is significant. The Church should never underplay the sense of good works that point to God. A double purpose of engagement must always remain impressed at least in our consciousness: the concrete action and the meaning beyond it.

III. PROTECTING THE HERITAGE

As I indicated earlier, anyone looking at society today can only be filled with joy that Christ’s commandment to love one’s neighbour finds concrete expression in extensive charitable outreach. On the other hand, the global popularisation of an idea also unfortunately often leads to its dilution. Inflation goes hand-in-hand with a reduction in value. For this reason, it falls still today to Christians, and, in a special way the Church’s Pastors, to be attentive. In other words: Catholic charitable organisations should be careful not to forget the meaning of their activity, influenced perhaps by the present climate or excessive reliance on public funds. The question is one of fostering the Christian roots of the Church’s activity and so preserving the “splendour” of our identity as *Catholic* charitable institutions.

This is especially important for a nation where the secular national welfare system has become pervasive and predominant. For centuries, care for the poor through charitable works was seen as a complement to the primary task of winning souls for God. This was a natural progression from the early Church, where both the preaching of the Word and *caritas* remained tied together. In this country, the Catholic Church guaranteed this essentially through religious men and women; other denominations through the establishment of a specific charitable organization such as Barnardo’s, born from the Church of Ireland, with its provision of education for the very poorest, or the Salvation Army, whose determining factor for charitable outreach was signified in its very name. But with the growing view since the start of the 20th century that government needed to supplant the charitable efforts of organisations through the provision of welfare, even among Christian groups concern for *earthly* improvement of the poor began to take first place over the previously primary task of proclaiming the Gospel. When the Welfare State was created after the Second World War, the role of charity was thrown into crisis, further deepened by the decline of the religious orders. The philosophy of organisations

such as Greenpeace and Oxfam, born in the 1960's with politically driven mandates, sometimes infiltrated Church-sponsored agencies. Today, there is yet another challenge. In order to remain "competitive" in the provision of services, the Church's charitable organisations have become more and more dependent upon government funding. While, as you well know, their good works are usually welcomed – and almost always needed – often their faith and beliefs are rejected by the authorities.

As Bishops of England and Wales, you are certainly aware of this question. You have faced challenges to the faith-identity of our agencies from government legislation that impinges on the provision of services, such as adoption or education. Even in the case of some so-called "Catholic" institutions, primarily in healthcare, that do not uphold moral teaching, you have been called to speak out courageously and decisively as prophets in the desert of secularism.

This, in part, is linked to the question of funding. In Britain, the largest source of income for charities in general comes from the public sector (37 percent). For Church run organisations, this is a sea change from the support of charitable works largely through religious congregations in previous centuries. Reliance on public funding invariably means external supervision and regulations, and necessitates bureaucratic procedures that can give charitable organisations a certain *modus operandi* in such areas as the employment of personnel, work contracts and the type of projects that can be funded. This movement can have consequences on the motivation for charitable helpers: if what counts is the efficiency of the action, one can easily forget that for Christians the action should carry a deeper meaning as a sign not only of human compassion but also of God's goodness. Where the bishops do not exercise oversight, Catholic agencies, little by little, can become indistinguishable from secular organisations, such as the Red Cross or Oxfam.

This rooting of the Church's engagement in God was undoubtedly one of the deepest motivations that led Benedict XVI to write as his first official doctrinal work the Encyclical *Deus caritas est*. I do not need to repeat the surprising commentaries all over the world that accompanied the text – the fact that the "Panzer Cardinal" would choose "love" as the subject of his first major teaching. Perhaps the history of the text's writing is less familiar to you. It shows clearly what was of most importance to the Pope.

Since *Cor Unum* is directly concerned with the praxis of the Church's love for our fellow human beings, Pope John Paul II had asked that I prepare for him a preliminary draft of a papal writing on charity. My intention was to begin with an inductive presentation: reflections on the general willingness of people to provide help today, followed by a description of Christian initiatives that exist, moving in the end to the rooting of love of neighbour in God. The former Cardinal Ratzinger was aware of my writings. When he was elected Pope, he decided to publish an Encyclical on charity, but he totally reversed my intended order. His starting point is Revelation's central message: "God is love." He initiates the Encyclical with a drumbeat, proclaiming the absolute precedence of Him "Who has first loved us" (*1Jn* 4:10), both in the order of time and in the scale of values.

IV. CHANGE OF PARADIGM

In my conversations on *Deus caritas est* with other Episcopal Conferences, the Pastors and those responsible for Caritas have been predominantly or exclusively interested in the second part of the Encyclical, "The Practice of Love by the Church as a 'Community of Love'." This section is important for offering structural and practical guidelines for the Church's charitable engagement, which are based on global experience and call for an observance of the papal teaching. When one delves into the details of this section, however, one discovers an important change of perspective. Namely, the Encyclical seems to present in this section a new message. Until now, the Church's teaching on the struggle against misery – like the social encyclicals – dealt with public defects, goals and programs; they addressed factual problems and they insisted on concrete changes outside of oneself. Besides all this, *Deus caritas est* turns now decisively to committed persons: the Pope wishes to shape the life of the *actors* through a "formation of the heart" (n. 31a). So, for the first time, he formulates basic guidelines for a "spirituality" of those working in help-agencies.

Clearly the first preoccupation of Caritas cannot intend to change society and unjust structures. It is the human heart that makes the structures. Therefore, the essential requirement for action – as the Pope says – is to "be persons moved by Christ's love, persons whose hearts Christ has conquered with his love, awakening them with a love of neighbour" (n. 33). This is the new "standard" that Jesus proclaims in the Sermon on the

Mount (cf. *Mt* 5-7). It is the justice of love that surpasses the political and social dimensions without negating them. We cannot then reduce or collapse charity into “social justice”; to do so would be to rob charity of its specificity and splendour. God certainly requires the actualisation of justice in societal relationships, as the Old Testament prophets repeatedly remind us: “Make justice your aim,” Isaiah affirms, “redress the wronged, hear the orphan’s plea, defend the widow” (*Is* 1:16ff). But ultimately this comes through conversion in the heart of the human person, whose self-giving example and source is the charity of Christ. As St. Paul affirms: *Caritas Christi urget nos* (*2 Cor* 5:14)!

Service to our neighbours, therefore, has not only its universally recognized technical and practical side; it also makes demands of the heart, not primarily in the emotional sense, but in the very rational decision to desire the best for the other person, even at the price of self-abnegation. Whoever dedicates himself to *diakonia* thus takes on the opposite of reputation, power, and rank that leaders and political entities claim for themselves. Benedict encourages us: “My deep personal sharing in the needs and sufferings of others becomes a sharing of my very self with them: if my gift is not to prove a source of humiliation, I must give to others not only something that is not my own, but my very self; I must be personally present in my gift” (n. 34). In the gift, the giver provides his material contribution; in loving service, his self-dedication. *Diakonia* is the antithesis of the egocentric society; Jesus with his self-oblation for the “ransom of many” is its model and prototype.

The source for this “spirituality of *diakonia*” is prayer. It is telling that, in this relatively short Encyclical, two quite detailed paragraphs are dedicated to prayer as the motor for charitable action. In a culture as frenetic as Britain or Germany, the Pope points to the need for prayer, not action alone: “People who pray are not wasting their time even though the situation seems desperate and calls for action alone.” And he offers concrete advice for those countries and people with an excessively “economic” mindset: “It is time to reaffirm the importance of prayer in the face of activism and the growing secularism of many Christians engaged in charitable work” (n. 37).

You have a wonderful example of what Pope Benedict describes in Saint Thomas More. Allow me to quote from the famous biography written on him, “The King’s Good Servant but God’s First” (James Monti, p. 77):

More's love of God found expression not only in his prayer life but also in his fulfilment of Christ's command, "Love one another; even as I have loved you" (*Jn* 13:34). The poor were regularly welcome guests at his table; he would also go to them himself, visiting indigent families and bring them financial support as needed ... The infirm and the elderly were particularly singled out for his favours; for these he provided a special home in his own parish of Chelsea where they could be lodged and cared for at his expense. To widows and orphans he provided his legal services gratis; a widow named Paula who had exhausted all her savings in the courts he took into his family and sustained as if she were his kinswoman.

V. THE PRIMARY ROLE OF THE PASTORS

There is no doubt that *Deus caritas est* directs itself to various groups in the Church. Nevertheless, the main burden of responsibility for its implementation in dioceses and parishes is placed squarely on the shoulders of the Bishops. It is not only the pastoral realism of the Pope, but also theological reasons that make the ordained Pastors the principle target group for the Encyclical.

Ever since her foundation, a threefold mission has been entrusted to the Church: she must proclaim Redemption through Christ; she must bear witness to this in her good deeds toward humanity; and she must celebrate the salvation offered through Christ in the Liturgy. *Martyria*, *Diakonia* and *Leitourgia* are therefore the three basic functions of the Church that express her deepest nature. In *Deus caritas est*, the Pope declares strongly: "The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the sacraments and the word" (n. 22). Indeed, the three are inextricably linked. Good deeds as the expression of the evangelical love proclaimed in the Word and celebrated in the sacraments, most especially the Eucharist, occupy a central place in the evangelising mission of the Church. This connection may well warrant further reflection, given the declining numbers of indigenous Catholics in our pews. As numerous saints have shown us, most recently Mother Teresa, in the witness of love a seed of belief can be sown in the fallen away, non-Christians and even the most sceptical.

In terms of the mission of *diakonia*, Benedict speaks emphatically in the Encyclical of the Bishop's overriding responsibility. He reminds these of the Rite of the Sacrament of Episcopal Ordination, in which the Bishop receives, through the imposition of hands, the full authority of the Spirit for the government of the Church. Prior to the act of Consecration itself, the candidate must respond to a series of questions posed by the

presiding Bishop, which, as the Pope writes, “express the essential elements of his office and recall the duties of his future ministry.” So the candidate is asked to pledge his special responsibility for individual services. He is called to promise “expressly to be, in the Lord’s name, welcoming and merciful to the poor and to all those in need of consolation and assistance.” Of course, this obligation incumbent on the Bishop does not prevent him from seeking assistance from others in his charitable mission, but he cannot set aside his ultimate responsibility for this essential service, placing it simply on others’ shoulders. Neither can those who practice the service of charity, either individually or institutionally, disregard the Bishop’s burden of leadership and this ultimate responsibility that belongs to him. Some Catholic aid agencies actively avoid acknowledging this fact and sometimes Bishops themselves fail to exercise their legitimate and necessary oversight, leading to approaches that are predominantly political or economic to the neglect of revealing through love of neighbour the love of the God of Jesus Christ.

The importance that Pope Benedict attaches to this responsibility of the Bishops may be further gauged by the gentle criticism he makes in *Deus caritas est* of the Code of Canon Law. The Encyclical remarks that in the canons on the ministry of the Bishop, the Code “does not expressly mention charity as a specific sector of Episcopal activity” (n. 32), implying that it lacks precision on this point. Indeed, we should remain surprised – as does the Pope – that Canon Law devotes many paragraphs to the Bishop’s role in *martyria and leitourgia*, but nothing regarding *diakonia*. Clearly, *Deus caritas est* envisages a need for clarification in this important area.

VI. THE QUESTION OF GOD

In speaking about the Encyclical, it is not seldom that the administrative concern leads many responsables of charitable agencies to focus principally or even perhaps exclusively on the second part. Such a focus would be to grossly ignore the fundamental vision of the author. It is not by accident that Pope Benedict, through this fantastic text about God as the source, lays down the foundation for the incontestable criteria of all charitable love. What is more: clearly, in the cultural context, he would like to establish the strongly felt love of neighbour as a way to bring contemporary man closer again to

the love of God. In his preaching, hardly an occasion goes by that he does not attempt to reach his listeners through proclaiming this love for God, the Father of Jesus Christ.

Just a few weeks ago on Palm Sunday, I was in St. Peter's Square when the Pope made exactly this point in his homily. He spoke of how Jesus entered Jerusalem and cleansed the Temple atrium, where the pagans gathered, of the animal vendors and moneychangers who had occupied the place of prayer with their own business. From this episode, Pope Benedict draws a parallel with the atria of faith today where non-Christians look for an answer to the deepest longings of their hearts. "Is our faith pure and open enough," he asks, "so that on this basis even the 'pagans,' the people who today are seeking and questioning, can glimpse the light of the one God, join in our prayer in the atria of faith, and through their questioning, perhaps, become worshipers themselves? Are we aware of how greed and idolatry affect even our own hearts and way of life?" And then the Pope turns yet again to Jesus' saving deeds, good works that infallibly point to God even when everything else seems hopeless. "Immediately after Jesus' words about the house of prayer for all peoples, the evangelist [Matthew] continues in this way: 'The blind and the lame approached him in the temple area, and he cured them.' To the selling of animals and the business of the moneychangers, Jesus opposes his own healing goodness. This is the true purification of the temple ... Jesus comes with the gift of healing. He dedicates himself to those who because of their infirmity are driven to the extremes of their life and to the margin of society. Jesus shows God as He who loves, and His power as the power of love."

Thank you very much.