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# WHY IS LOVE CONSIDERED THE GREATEST OF THE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES?

Harry McClifty

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 “What is love?”

This age-old question rose again to the forefront of everyone’s mind in 1992 with the release of musical artist Haddaway’s now famous dance hit.<sup>1</sup> While the meaning behind this song is not the product of philosophical inquiry, nor the result of deep theological contemplation, this aptly named song does bring the question to one’s mind “indeed, what is love...?” However, this question is even more pressing in contemporary society where the definition of love seems to change every spring break. This is why it is essential that before one makes the claim that *caritas* is the greatest of the theological virtues, that the individual possess an orthodox understanding of Christian love, and its relation to the two other theological virtues faith and hope. This essay will, after providing a succinct yet necessary definition of Christian *caritas*, defend and expound upon the claim made originally by St Paul;<sup>2</sup> that “love is the greatest of the theological virtues.”

## 2. What is *Caritas*?

*Caritas* has a tripartite-dimension with a two-fold manifestation. Its primary manifestation is the adoration and benediction of God above all other created things;<sup>3</sup> for He is the creator and author of all things and in Him we live and move and have our being. Through *caritas*, man is able to surpass the “elementary,” yet inherently selfish choice to love God for His gifts and the promise of reward.<sup>4</sup> The Christian, infused with this virtue, renders all the

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<sup>1</sup> "Lyrics for What Is Love by Haddaway," SongFacts, Accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.songfacts.com/lyrics/haddaway/what-is-love>.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:13

<sup>3</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Strathfield: St Paul’s Publications, 1997), 1822; Paul O’Callaghan, "The Theological Virtues Faith, Hope, and Charity," *In God Ahead of Us: The Story of Divine Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 95; Deuteronomy 6:4-7

<sup>4</sup> Rev. Thomas Slater, S.J., *A Manual of Moral Theology for English-speaking Countries* 3rd ed. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908), 179.

glory and honor and praise to God simply for being God! It is a full-hearted and complete abandonment to the Ancient of Days for His infinite goodness and mercy.

However, out of the overflow of the love of God which has been poured into man's heart by the Holy Spirit, this same Spirit, who is the *spiration*<sup>5</sup> or the relationship of love between the Father and the Son, enables man to love his fellow neighbor with this exact same love.<sup>6</sup> This is the secondary manifestation, or necessary consequence of *caritas*; it compels man to communicate this divine ecstasy in both simplicity (word) and humility (deed) to his or her neighbor. This is not akin to natural likeness or affection, though it may possibly aid in one's love. It is neither 'here nor there,' it is an emotion that is not necessary to obtain the virtue of love; for no one can always maintain devout feelings for God.<sup>7</sup> Hence *caritas* is a grace, or more specifically a tripartite grace;<sup>8</sup> in as much as it is generative, (will increase over time) persuasive (changes our perception of others and ourselves) and redeeming (transforms man into a new creation).

### 3. Why is *Caritas* Considered the Greatest of the Theological Virtues?

Now *caritas* can be considered the greatest of the theological virtues in three ways. First, upon reception in the Fathers house,<sup>9</sup> faith is superseded by gazing upon the beatific vision and hope attained through the reward of eternal beatitude. Love does not reach its *telos* in eternity, but rather is truly fulfilled in the presence of pure love itself.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, while faith and hope are primarily geared towards the salvation of the individual, *caritas* is concerned with the good of the other and assisting ones neighbour in attaining eternal beatitude.<sup>11</sup> Thirdly, *caritas* is the infusion of strength which enables man to live out God's commandments in their entirety, bringing to birth the process of *theosis*. The following paragraphs will expound upon the afore mentioned reasons in their respective order.

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<sup>5</sup> Gilles Emery, O.P., *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, trans. Matthew Levering (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 11.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 12:31

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity* (London, United Kingdom: HarperCollins, 2017), 132.

<sup>8</sup> Fr Ken Barker, MGL, *Amazing Love*, (Cleveland, Queensland: Connor Court Publishing Pty, 2012), 53.

<sup>9</sup> John 14:2

<sup>10</sup> 1 John 4:7

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1766.

### 3.1 *Caritas and Eternity*

Let us address the first point. Faith is a grace by which man is able to believe in God for who He is and provides the “assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”<sup>12</sup> C.S Lewis sums up the nature of Christian faith succinctly when he writes “[faith] is the art of holding on to things your reason has accepted, in spite of your changing moods.”<sup>13</sup> The infusion of hope allows man to trust in the eternal beatitude of God<sup>14</sup> and His divine promise of salvation.<sup>15</sup> It is a continual looking forward,<sup>16</sup> so to speak, to the future joys of heaven. *Caritas* on the other hand, is considered greater even than these; “now these three remain, faith, hope and charity; and the greatest of these is charity.”<sup>17</sup> Aquinas, expounding upon the Apostle Paul’s claim, declares that charity is indeed the greatest theological virtue; for through this virtue man acquires the object of his desire, God Himself.<sup>18</sup>

### 3.2 *Caritas and Society*

Furthermore, *caritas* supersedes the afore mentioned virtues of faith and hope; for when man obtains eternal beatitude through the gift of the beatific vision, faith is replaced with sight and hope with reward.<sup>19</sup> It is love alone that carries on into eternity, for it is this love which gives man his freedom to live as an adopted child of God.<sup>20</sup> And as adopted children of God, this very source of one’s adoption is supposed to be the hallmark by which Christian’s are distinct from other members of society.<sup>21</sup> For example, the early Christians, acknowledging that they were brought with a price,<sup>22</sup> sought out works of charity where ever they could. In fact, St Paul was eager to complete good works.<sup>23</sup> For it is neither faith nor hope that urges man on to act.<sup>24</sup> The gifts of faith and hope, in order of perfection,<sup>25</sup> are moulded by charity and find their completion when charity is present within an individual. Love then, becomes a “journey

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<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 11:1 (*New American Standard Bible*)

<sup>13</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 140.

<sup>14</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1817.

<sup>15</sup> O’Callaghan, “The Theological Virtues Faith, Hope, and Charity,” 99.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 134.

<sup>17</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:13

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Aquinas, “Equality of the Virtues” in *The Theological Virtues* (Indiana, United States: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 159.

<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *Handbook on Hope, Faith and Love*, (New York: Start Publishing LLC, 2012), sec. 121. Google Play Books.

<sup>20</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1828.

<sup>21</sup> John 13:35

<sup>22</sup> 1 Corinthians 6:20

<sup>23</sup> Galatians 2:10

<sup>24</sup> 2nd Corinthians 5:14

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Aquinas, “Treatise on the Virtues” in *The Theological Virtues* (Indiana, United States: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), 123.

of ecstasy...an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward looking self towards its liberation through self-giving.”<sup>26</sup> This quote leads on to the next point.

### 3.3 *Caritas and the Other*

“Let us be concerned for each other, to stir a response in love and good works.”<sup>27</sup> This exhortation from the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews* presents the Christian with an emphatic mandate, albeit a rather challenging one, to live out in their everyday life. It does beg the question however, to what extent Christians are to be “concerned” with his “other”; and even more so, what does it mean to be “concerned?” The original Greek verb that was used for the English word concerned is “*katanoein*, which means to scrutinize, to be attentive, to observe carefully and take stock of something.”<sup>28</sup> Here it is clear that the author is referring to a form of beneficence, an acute awareness of the bodily and spiritual needs of the “other.”<sup>29</sup> Or to put it more succinctly, *caritas* is the queen of all the virtues for it is “the simple response to immediate needs and specific situations.”<sup>30</sup> There are however, certain requirements that need to be fulfilled in order for an act or the omission of an act to be aptly called a virtuous display of *caritas*. Much like faith is more than just a simple “yes” or blind trust in dogma or hope, an ignorant and stubborn determination in the face of reality, charity too has similar conditions that need to be met. Foremost, love is a free gift and shouldn’t be abused in order to convert others.<sup>31</sup>

### 3.4 *Caritas and Evangelization*

Because man has been freely given this great, unmerited gift of the Father’s love which He has lavished upon us, man is commanded to freely give this gift back to his neighbour in return.<sup>32</sup> This does not mean that the Christian should cease from evangelising, but quite the

<sup>26</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, encyclical letter, Vatican website, December 25, 2005, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html), sec. 6.

<sup>27</sup> Hebrews 10:24

<sup>28</sup> Benedict XVI, *Message of His Holiness Benedict XVI for Lent 2012*, Vatican website, November 3, 2011, [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/lent/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_mes\\_20111103\\_lent-2012.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/lent/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20111103_lent-2012.html), sec. 1.

<sup>29</sup> John Rziha, "Charity: Friendship with God," in *The Christian Moral Life*, 189-214 (Indiana, United States: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 202.

<sup>30</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, sec. 31.

<sup>31</sup> The Congregation for Bishops, *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops "Apostolorum Successores"*, Vatican website, 1974, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cbishops/documents/rc\\_con\\_cbishops\\_doc\\_20040222\\_apostolorum-successores\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cbishops/documents/rc_con_cbishops_doc_20040222_apostolorum-successores_en.html), sec. 196.

<sup>32</sup> Matthew 10:8

opposite. A Christian witness filled with the virtue of *caritas* should in fact possess an overwhelming “need to speak of the beloved [Jesus], point him out and make him known.”<sup>33</sup> *Caritas* clearly then is the primary reason for evangelisation.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, the rule of charity is not completed through a vague and equal esteem for all mankind.<sup>35</sup> This means that there are certain immoral acts, unscriptural practices and destructive lifestyles that the virtue of *caritas* cannot in good faith condone. Charity then, to be genuine must be well placed and discriminating.<sup>36</sup> “Proper charity must be adapted and tailored to the needs of others,”<sup>37</sup> even when this need may open the possibility for emotional wounding or loss of a friendship.

### 3.5 *Caritas and the Commandments/Divinization*

Finally, *caritas* enables man to fulfil the commandments of God in their entirety, thereby completing the process of *theosis* by which man is confirmed into the image of Christ.<sup>38</sup> In fact, *caritas* is considered the prime motivator of the inner man;<sup>39</sup> for it compels one to act and hence keep the precepts of God. For Christ, when speaking to His disciples, reminded them of the very reason by which they would long to obey the instructions of God; “If you love me you will keep my commandments.”<sup>40</sup> It is worth noting here that Christ does not include a conjunction. There is no “if you love me *and*... [insert] you will keep my commandments.” It is love and love alone that provides the endurance needed to live out the perfect laws of God which refresh the soul.<sup>41</sup> The theological virtue of hope, which is source of one’s joy and a cause of man’s salvation,<sup>42</sup> falls short in aiding man to keep the Divine Precepts. Even the gift of faith, which Christ described in the Gospel of Mark as powerful enough to cast mountains in the sea<sup>43</sup> and heal a man from blindness,<sup>44</sup> is not enough to keep the commandments. Augustine, speaking on this principle, teaches that without the gift of charity (in the person of the Holy Spirit), man cannot fulfil the law and instead stands accused before it.<sup>45</sup> For the

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<sup>33</sup> Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, apostolic exhortation, Vatican website, November 24, 2013, [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20051225\\_deus-caritas-est.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html), sec. 264.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>35</sup> Slater, *A Manual of Moral Theology for English-speaking Countries*, 189.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>37</sup> Josemaria Escriva, “*Furrow*,” *Opus Dei - Writings of the Founder*, Accessed April 7, 2020, <https://www.escrivaworks.org/book/furrow-chapter-23.html>, sec. 749.

<sup>38</sup> Romans 8:29

<sup>39</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16; Ephesians 3:16

<sup>40</sup> John 14:15

<sup>41</sup> Psalm 19:7

<sup>42</sup> Romans 8:24-25

<sup>43</sup> Mark 11:22-24

<sup>44</sup> Mark 10:52

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *Handbook on Hope, Faith and Love*, sec. 117.

Christian, even though he may be able to fathom all mysteries and comprehend all knowledge, is powerless to obey the precepts of God; for “carnal lust reigns where there is not the love of God.”<sup>46</sup>

### 3.6 *Caritas and the Holy Spirit*

Furthermore, this process of divinization, which has been recognised by the Church,<sup>47</sup> is the natural end of man and one sign of the Holy Spirit at work in an individual. Fully formed charity allows the *viator* to become partakers in the divine<sup>48</sup> by becoming conformed to the image of Christ. The notion of man existing as a *viator*<sup>49</sup>(traveller) on the Earth, provides the perfect imagery for this principle. For the attainment of charity unites the *viator* with his *telos* and initiates an embryonic relationship with the Trinity,<sup>50</sup> which only becomes fully actualised upon admission into the beatific vision. This is only possible through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, which is given in Baptism, brought to completion at confirmation and made manifest in works of *caritas*.<sup>51</sup> The *Ruach Elohim*,<sup>52</sup> the very Spirit of God which hovered over the waters, communicates to man this divine life by conforming the stubborn will of man to the perfect will of God and as such offers “nothing less than connaturality for Divine things.”<sup>53</sup> The infusion of *caritas*, a love so noble, unlike faith or hope places upon man a seal so powerful that it animates his mortal body and allows for a mutual indwelling of the triune God; whose essence is love itself.<sup>54</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay addressed the question “why is *caritas* considered the greatest of the theological virtues?”<sup>55</sup> The author went about answering this question by presenting

<sup>46</sup> Augustine, *Handbook on Hope, Faith and Love*, sec. 117.

<sup>47</sup> James R. Payton, *Irenaeus on the Christian Faith: A Condensation of Against Heresies*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: James Clarke & Co, 2012), 74; Ephesians 4:22-24; Galatians 3:27

<sup>48</sup> 2 Peter 1:4

<sup>49</sup> Reinhard Hütter, "The Road to Beatitude-Divinization and Friendship with God: The Virtue of Charity," in *Bound for Beatitude: A Thomistic Study in Eschatology and Ethics*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 247.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 250.

<sup>51</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1265; Titus 3:5; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1285; Acts 4:31; Acts 1:8

<sup>52</sup> Hermann Spieckermann, "Creation: God and World," in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion*, ed. John Barton, 271-292 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 277.

<sup>53</sup> Hütter, "The Road to Beatitude-Divinization and Friendship with God: The Virtue of Charity," 250.

<sup>54</sup> Hütter, "The Road to Beatitude-Divinization and Friendship with God: The Virtue of Charity," 250.

<sup>55</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:13

three reasons; with evidence given from scripture, magisterium, and tradition to argue in the case of the affirmative. The three main reasons as to why the author believes that charity is the greatest of the virtues were as follows. First, upon attainment of the beatific vision, *caritas* is the only theological virtue which does not get superseded or replaced. Secondly, faith and hope are graces which are primarily concerned with the good of self, whereas love is ordered towards the good of the other. And finally, the infusion of charity in the heart of the believer allows him to fulfil the whole of the commandments of God, activating the process of *theosis*. It is here that I would like to finish with a quote from St Bernard of Clairvaux; which I have included in the text box below. It is important to remember *caritas* is not something that can be empirically studied nor reduce to mere biology. It is at its core, a manifest revelation of a personal God...

*“When the bridegroom, Christ the word, came to me he never made any sign that he was coming; there was no sound of his voice, no glimpse of his face, no footfall. He made no movement by which I could identify his coming; none of my sense showed me that he had flooded the depths of my being. Only by the warmth of my heart did I know he was there...”*

- Barker, *Amazing Love*, 143.

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