

## **Charity as Virtue in Non-Christians: A Positive Assessment in Light of Augustine, Aquinas, Pope Benedict XVI, and the Catholic Church's Inclusivism**

Todd E. Johanson  
Theology Department  
Duquesne University

### **Abstract:**

*Charity is a foundational theological concept in Christianity that is variously defined and related to other theological concepts throughout the tradition's history. The author charts the trajectory of charity as virtue from Augustine to Aquinas to Erasmus, then to Benedict XVI and to Marion. He attempts to demonstrate that Augustine, Aquinas, and Erasmus can be used in a complementary way to emphasize each other's strengths, while compensating for each other's weaknesses, in order to provide a solid foundation for both the Church's inclusivist stance, and the availability of charity as true virtue in non-Christians.*

*In inclusivism, the Church is living in the tension between trying to hold to the notion of exclusive truth of revelation, and the pluralistic push to acknowledge and accommodate the truth and goodness of other traditions as much as possible, without compromising her faith. Interreligious dialogue is therefore all the more important, and is in fact indispensable, in light of a pluralistic push as the Church comes to more profoundly seek and find mutual understanding that the goodness and truth of God's revelation as love is reflected in all of the world and its great traditions.*

Charity is, of course, a foundational theological concept in Christianity. It has been variously defined and related to other theological concepts throughout the tradition's history, and recent Catholic scholarship has placed a renewed emphasis on love as the preeminent concept in theological discourse. Prominent examples of this include the theological works of Pope Benedict XVI and of Jean-Luc Marion. This essay will trace a trajectory of charity as virtue from Augustine to Aquinas to Erasmus, then to Benedict XVI and to Marion. Finally, the implications of this study of charity for the contemporary Church's inclusivism will be addressed. Utilizing the work of Jennifer Herdt, I will attempt to demonstrate that Augustine, Aquinas, and Erasmus can be used in a complementary way to emphasize each other's strengths, while compensating for each other's weaknesses, in order to provide a solid foundation for both the Church's inclusivist stance, and the availability of charity as true virtue in non-Christians. My argument is for a holistic, innate development of charity both through infusion by grace and through habituation by practice as essential to our human nature as created in the image of God. I will also attempt to show that the encyclicals on love by Benedict XVI and the Church's official teachings in general lend themselves to an interpretation of the high availability of charity as virtue universally, and that this interpretation fits well with the Church's general inclusivist stance toward non-Christian traditions. This conclusion bolsters a more open and positive assessment of non-Christian traditions and the mutually enriching possibilities presented by the challenging context of our postcolonial, globalizing world.

## Augustine

In Augustine's anthropology, a form of ancient eudaimonism plays a major role. Happiness, or the happy life, is the greatest goal. In order to be happy we must attain our chief good, that is, we must both love and possess it. The chief good of the body is the soul, which is the chief good of humanity, and the chief good of the soul (what brings perfection to it) is virtue. Virtue is attained and developed in pursuit of or following God. "God then remains, in following after whom we live well, and in reaching whom we live both well and happily"(Augustine, *Of the Morals*, 10). So virtue itself is not the ultimate end (although exercising it is partly constitutive of that end), but virtue is developed in following after God, who is "the perfection of all our good things and our perfect good" (*Of the Morals*, 13). The desire of happiness is to follow God, and "...to reach God is happiness itself. We follow after God by loving Him; we reach him...in nearness to Him, and immaterial contact with Him, and in being inwardly illuminated and occupied by His truth and holiness" (*Of the Morals*, 18). This beatific vision is our ultimate end, in union with God. Virtue development leads us toward and conforms us to God, through love, by the Holy Spirit. Virtue is the perfect love of God. "The greatest commandment, therefore, which leads to happy life, and the first, is this: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and soul, and mind.' For to those who love the Lord, all things issue in good" (*Of the Morals*, 18). While we know and love God through the mind or the intellect, virtue refers primarily to action, and it comes from Christ. "And I know nothing comparable to these two things, that is, to efficiency in action and sobriety in contemplation, which the virtue of God and the wisdom of God, that is, the Son of God, gives to them that love Him" (*Of the Morals*, 27).

Augustine identifies love as virtue as having a unity with a fourfold division within it, what he calls the four forms of love. These are the virtues of temperance, fortitude, justice, and prudence. Since God is the ultimate object of this love, he defines these virtues with the focus on God: "...temperance is love keeping itself entire and incorrupt for God; fortitude is love bearing everything readily for the sake of God; justice is love serving God only, and therefore ruling well all else, as subject to man; prudence is love making a right distinction between what helps it toward God and what might hinder it" (*Of the Morals*, 25). Loving God necessitates loving oneself and also one's neighbor; they are necessarily intertwined. Loving one's neighbor is an assured step toward the love of God. Loving one's neighbor as oneself implies trying to draw them toward God's love and goodness, being benevolent, and showing compassion. He identifies this love of neighbor as the "cradle" of our love for God, or what leads us to the higher love of God. God's love is primary, but it is easier to develop and perfect love of neighbor as the "lower thing" (*Of the Morals*, 51).

Augustine emphasizes the two greatest commandments and their interconnectedness in love, so love of God, neighbor, and self, in that order, is how we are to love (*On Christian Doctrine*, 27-8). In the end, Augustine puts a heavy and primary emphasis on love as the foundation and font of virtue and of the happy life. He also notes the close connection of faith, hope, and love, with love as the greatest, because when its desire is fulfilled in our ultimate *telos*, it will increase while the other two fade away (*On Christian Doctrine*, 43, and *Enchiridion*, 3 and 8). Love is also the greatest grace, the measure of a person's goodness, and the end or aim of all of the commandments-God himself is love (*Enchiridion* 117 and 121). Love comes from Christ, who is the perfection of

love, and we move toward this perfection and grow in charity through loving action for others. This loving action secures charity in our hearts for eternal life (*Homilies*, 10-12).

While God's grace is primary, Augustine does leave room for Christian habituation in virtue, but it must be based on conversion to Christ and falling in love with God, reorienting one to desire and to seek the beautiful vision of God. It must also be based on true humility as recognizing our dependence on God and his grace for loving and pursuing God and true virtue, rather than on oneself and the mere semblance of virtue. It must come from and be directed to God and his love. We are restored to this grace, love, and virtue development through the incarnation, the cross, and mimesis of Christ, which reunites us with God by grace. Augustine therefore does not acknowledge the possibility of any form of virtue, salvation, or grace for non-Christians. Conversion to Christ is the key. Augustine views natural or pagan virtue development in habituation as simply an entrenching of the vices of pride and self-love, leading to even the best pagan apparent virtue as merely "splendid vices" or "simulacra" of true virtue. This is due to a failure to acknowledge the dependency of their agency on God's grace (Herdt, 2008; Wetzell, 1992).

Augustine's virtue ethics has a strong, explicit Christological emphasis. He frequently refers to the New Testament, including: a repeated emphasis on the centrality of Christ through his commands, especially the two great precepts; his death for us; our being called to be conformed to him through mimesis; his unique and exclusive role in our loving and being loved by God; and his unique, exclusive role in our attaining of salvation (*Of the Morals*, 22-3 and 28-9). This strong Christocentric emphasis on charity emerges prominently in Benedict's encyclicals also.

*Deus Caritas Est* begins with an emphasis on the Christ event as an encounter with God's love drawing near to us in Christ. The opening line of *Caritas in Veritate* states that the love of God, to which Christ bore witness by his life, death, and resurrection, is the force at the heart of our nature, development, and goodness (Benedict XVI, 2005 and 2009). Benedict seems to follow Augustine's lead in this explicit, Christocentric respect vis-à-vis charity. While Aquinas does emphasize Christ by implicitly recognizing Christ's importance for understanding the moral life, Augustine and Benedict seem to do so even more prominently and explicitly.

### **Aquinas**

Similar to Augustine, Aquinas emphasizes the significance of the happy life. Eudaimonism also plays an important role in Aquinas. Humanity can achieve happiness, since it is the attainment of our perfect good, and it can be attained through the apprehension of the intellect and the fulfillment of the desire of the will. Happiness is attained through the right ordering of the will to our last end. Our perfect good is what completely satisfies our will, which is God. "The ultimate and principle good of man is the enjoyment of God" (Aquinas, II-II, q. 23, a. 7). While a certain natural, imperfect happiness can be attained in this life through our nature alone, as can imperfect, natural virtue, perfect happiness can only be attained in the vision of the divine essence as our ultimate, supernatural *telos* (I-II, q. 5, a. 1,5,7,8). Aquinas seems to place more of an explicit emphasis than Augustine on the role of the will in happiness, as well as in charity. Charity is identified solely with the intellective appetite of the will, directed toward its object which is the last end, the Divine Good (II-II, q. 24, a. 1). But they agree that love is an intellectual, and not a corporeal, reality; it is

properly of the mind, not of the body. This seems to imply a certain kind of mind-body dualism.

While Augustine's perspective on charity makes a stronger, more unified connection between charity and the virtues as aspects or divisions of (or within) love, Aquinas' perspective is somewhat less unified and more nuanced. Aquinas distinguishes love and charity to a certain degree. Love is somewhat wider in scope ("every dilection or charity is love, but not vice versa"), and is also expressed as act or passion, while charity is additionally habit, and is "...a certain perfection of love" (I-II, q. 26, a. 1-3). Charity is a "special virtue" along with faith and hope, what Aquinas calls the three theological virtues, which are infused in us by God's grace. Charity is also a "special kind of love." All of the virtues depend on charity, and so it is included in the defining of all of the virtues, but charity is not identified univocally with all of the virtues. Charity is not essentially every one of the virtues, as it is in Augustine (II-II, q. 23, a. 4).

Aquinas agrees with Augustine that charity necessarily involves love of neighbor as well as love of God, and that this love entails a certain friendship and care for others. He states that "...the aspect under which our neighbor is to be loved, is God, since what we ought to love in our neighbor is that he may be in God. Hence it is clear that it is specifically the same act whereby we love God, and whereby we love our neighbor. Consequently the habit of charity extends not only to the love of God, but also to the love of neighbor" (II-II, q. 25, a. 1). Aquinas distinguishes between a certain imperfect, natural love of neighbor, and the supernatural virtue of charity as habit and a sort of perfecting of love. The virtue of charity is mainly distinguished from this more generic love by its infusion from and ordering toward God (II-II, q. 25, a. 1). Augustine

and Aquinas both emphasize the relational aspect of charity, as necessarily involving God, oneself, and one's neighbor. But a distinction between Augustine and Aquinas on neighbor love relates to the order of love. Aquinas specifically emphasizes that one should love oneself more than one's neighbor. He states that "...just as unity surpasses union, the fact that man himself has a share of the Divine good, is a more potent reason for loving than that another should be a partner with him in that share. Therefore man, out of charity, ought to love himself more than his neighbor" (II-II, q. 26, a. 4). For Augustine, the proper order of love is God, neighbor, and self, but for Aquinas it is God, self, and neighbor. Nonetheless, the interconnectedness of charity in these relations, as flowing from and ending in God, is in common between them.

For Aquinas, charity, as a theological virtue, is superior to the other kinds of virtue since its object is God. The object of the moral and intellectual virtues is not God, but human reason. Charity is also superior to faith and hope, because it attains God himself and implies union with the Good. Faith and hope both imply distance from God (e.g. we have faith in what we cannot know for certain, and we hope for what we cannot yet see) (II-II, q. 23, a. 6). Both Augustine and Aquinas assert the primacy of charity, as both the foundation of virtue and of relationship with God, and also as the virtue that will not only remain in the eschaton, but grow stronger. This is opposed to faith and hope, which will yield to knowledge and sight in the beatific vision, and thus disappear. Aquinas calls charity the form of the virtues, because charity is what directs them through the will to its own end, the final end in God. Charity is their efficient cause (II-II, q. 23, a. 8). The theological virtues are supernaturally infused in humanity by God's grace, so charity as fellowship and friendship with God is a free, supernatural gift which surpasses our



natural capacities. Charity is not in us naturally, and we cannot acquire charity through our natural powers. It is infused in us by the Holy Spirit, “who is the love of the Father and the Son” (II-II, q. 24, a. 2). But we can grow in charity, in a cooperative way with God’s grace that resembles habituation in virtue:

*...each act of charity disposes to an increase of charity, in so far as one act of charity makes man more ready to act again according to charity, and this readiness increasing, man breaks out into an act of more fervent love, and strives to advance in charity, and then his charity increases actually... every act of charity merits an increase of charity; yet this increase does not take place at once, but when we strive for that increase...Man advances in the way to God, not merely by actual increase of charity, but also by being disposed to that increase (II-II, q. 24, a. 6).*

In comparison with Augustine, Aquinas also acknowledges God’s grace as primary, as well as the possibility of Christian habituation in the virtues, including in charity. This maintains both the necessity of God’s agency through grace, and the cooperation of human agency with God. But an important distinction is that while Augustine denies virtue to non-Christians, Aquinas’ distinction between infused and acquired virtue allows for genuine virtue development in others. Aquinas holds that certain moral and intellectual virtues have both an ultimate end directed by charity toward God, and a proximate end directed toward earthly, good pursuits. While this kind of natural habituation in virtue is imperfect and inferior, it is nonetheless true virtue. Instead of all love being ordered either to God or to oneself (as in Augustine), Aquinas allows for love and for the pursuit of good beyond the self,

but not necessarily directed to or ordered toward God either (although potentially it could be). This habituation in virtue can be ordered toward the perfection of the individual and/or toward the common good. This means that non-Christians are capable of good love of both self and the commonwealth, but they still lack the infused grace that orders us toward our final end in a way that can lead to salvation (Herdt, 2008). Herdt notes that Aquinas can thus be interpreted in a way that leads to the conclusion that:

*Pagan virtue, on this reading, is true but imperfect, resting on an incomplete grasp of our final end. To the extent that pagan virtue does allow both for proper self-love and love of the common good, it is beginning to change us into the sort of persons we must be in order to be brought into the divine community, but it cannot do so fully, and so is not salvific. Virtue and salvation rest on a proper ordering of all goods, not on pursuit of a distinct isolable end of heavenly bliss (Herdt, 2008:76).*

In the end, Aquinas allows a movement closer to complete, holistic virtue in non-Christians that can be salvific, but does not get there. One could perhaps contend that Aquinas is silent on the question of whether infused grace and charity are available to non-Christians. But the fact that he does contend that pagan virtues are directed toward proximate ends, as opposed to the ultimate end, strongly suggests Herdt's conclusion. Even if one maintains the assertion of Aquinas' silence, this still does not make a positive case for full, salvific virtue development through infusion and habituation in non-Christians. To further open up the possibility of true and full virtue development in non-Christians, Herdt turns to Erasmus.

## Erasmus

She notes that Erasmus' offering lacks the systematic, nuanced development of Aquinas, and tends to lend itself to Pelagian interpretations. Nonetheless, it offers something critical: a mimetic account of virtue that is similar to Augustine's, but without his suspicious preoccupation with pagan virtue as merely splendid vice in disguise. For Erasmus' Christian humanism, "the pursuit of virtue...has ultimate religious significance and is not simply an avenue to private glory or to communal security...Erasmus...can be seen as...striving to articulate a robustly Christian virtue capable of generosity toward splendid vices and pagan moral aspirations" (Herdt, 2008:106). Erasmus posits mimesis of Christ as a gradual process, with a slow progression toward perfection in Christ. Imitation of the saints and of popular religious practices "...have the potential to habituate us in Christ-like virtue" (Herdt, 2008:109). External practices can have an internal, transforming effect as they center us on Christ and draw us deeper into charity. Formation in virtue through charity is not something passively received or infused, but is actively pursued through humble cooperation with grace by mimesis. Nonetheless, Erasmus demonstrates a reliance on God's transformative power working through mimesis as a participation in the exemplarity of Christ. This seems to be more of an outside-in process rather than Aquinas' inside-out process of formation in infused charity. Erasmus extends this idea to non-Christians, since human examples can also serve to help conform us to Christ. "Virtue, conformity to Christ's charity and humility, rather than

constituting our final end, seems to be a prerequisite for an external goal, one that can be conceived of independently of the means or path that leads to it” (Herdt, 2008:122).

Erasmus contends that this final end as heaven or eternal happiness is given to all who have truly sought it instead of settling for mere earthly, temporal happiness. Everything in creation has the potential to lead us toward the final end, including the non-Christian exemplars in other traditions helping to lead their people toward this end. They too are taking steps toward being conformed to Christ, even though they do not yet recognize this, and thus they can have true virtue development in the full sense that leads to salvation. This seems similar to Rahner’s concept of the anonymous Christian. Pagan virtue as mimesis is true conformity to Christ that leads to an increase in charity and to salvation, even if to a lesser degree, or as “baby steps” in comparison to an explicit, Christian mimesis (Herdt, 2008). This is drawing us closer to the contemporary Church’s inclusivist stance.

### **Benedict**

Turning to the theme of charity in contemporary Catholic thought, a prominent figure is Pope Benedict XVI. His encyclicals *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate* have implications for charity as virtue that bolster a more positive assessment of charity, virtue, and salvation outside of the Church than what is found in either Augustine or Aquinas. In *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict begins by noting the “intrinsic link” between God’s love and human love, where humanity’s love is always a response to the love given gratuitously and mysteriously by God first (2005). He notes that love points toward a reality and a *telos* that are “far greater than and totally other than” our everyday

experience. Just as there is inherent unity in the duality of our existence as body and soul, there is an inherent unity to love, whether it is considered in its form of *eros* or of *agape*.

Growth in love and moving toward the goal of love in communion with God requires not just living by the instinctive impulses of love that are associated with *eros*, but also by “purification and growth in maturity” that help to heal and reorient *eros*, moving along a path of ascent toward ecstatic union with God, restoring the “true grandeur” of *eros* (Benedict, 2005:5). In referring to how love as *agape* works synergistically with love as *eros*, Benedict indicates that *agape* transforms the tendency of *eros* to seek one’s own happiness into a seeking of “the good of the beloved” in care and in discovering the other, whether God or one’s neighbor. “It is part of love’s growth towards higher levels and inward purification that it now seeks to become definitive...since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal” (Benedict 2005:6).

Since love is essentially a unity with different dimensions, the passion of *eros* is directed and purified by *agape* toward the ultimate goal in God as a reflection of God’s love in human nature. In other words, *eros* and *agape* are God’s way of loving being reflected in our nature as made in God’s image. Not only have love as *eros* and as *agape* become one, so have love of God and love of neighbor. This unified love moves toward maturity as one directs one’s will toward God and God’s will, engaging the self holistically and in a “process of purification and maturation” that is always open-ended and continuous, so “love is never ‘finished’ and complete; throughout life, it changes and matures, and thus remains faithful to itself” (Benedict, 2005:17). This love is not imposed from

without like a command, but is a “...freely-bestowed experience of love from within, a love which by its very nature must then be shared with others. Love grows through love” (Benedict, 2005:18). This indicates love as an experience of the inherent relationality of the Trinity, through grace. This love as “...*caritas-agape* extends beyond the frontiers of the Church” as a universal love (Benedict, 2005:25).

In this encyclical, Benedict indicates that love has an essential unity manifested through various aspects or dimensions, and is something that is inherent to our human nature as being in the image of the Triune, relational God of love. Furthermore, love is something that permeates us and engages us holistically, in body and soul, intellect, emotions, and will. It has both natural and supernatural dimensions, in a unified reality, as we do as persons. Love is also an ongoing process of maturation as we move toward our ultimate goal of communion with God through loving God and our neighbor, that is, growing in love as we experience and share it in the world. This leads to the conclusion that love: is universal; is first given by and has its source in God; is inherent to our human nature; directs us toward our supernatural end; requires our agency through engagement and cooperation with God’s loving movement of grace in response to God’s love; and necessarily involves a relatively slow, continuous, intentional, holistic process of growth and maturation in love. The influence of Augustine and Aquinas is apparent in Benedict’s analysis.

Some of these themes emerge even more strongly in the introduction to *Caritas in Veritate*. He begins by stating that “charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the

authentic development of every person and of all humanity...It is a force that has its origin in God, Eternal Love and Absolute Truth...All people feel the interior impulse to love authentically: love and truth never abandon them completely, because these are the vocation planted by God in the heart and mind of every human person” (Benedict, 2009:1). He notes that the person and work of Jesus Christ purifies and elevates this vocation toward its highest potential. He notes that “charity is at the heart of the Church’s social doctrine,” and charity is what “...gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbor...everything has its origin in God’s love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it. Love is God’s greatest gift to humanity, it is his promise and our hope” (Benedict, 2009:2).

This strongly emphasizes and continues the universal theme present in *Deus Caritas Est*, where Benedict declares that “the Church’s social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being” (2005:28). Love is essentially who we are as human beings, because Love is where we are from and to whom we are innately oriented. If we respond to this gracious self-gift, then Love is where we are going in the end, and Love is with us along the way as well. Benedict also expounds upon the connectedness of charity and truth, the universal essentiality of charity to all human relationships, and the integration of the natural and supernatural in charity:

*“Through this close link with truth, charity can be recognized as an authentic expression of humanity and as an element of fundamental importance in human relations, including those of a public nature...Truth is the light that gives meaning and*

*value to charity. That light is both the light of reason and the light of faith, through which the intellect attains to the natural and supernatural truth of charity” (Benedict, 2009:3).*

Benedict also notes the inherent connection between charity and grace, as well as charity’s Trinitarian and innately relational nature: “Charity is love received and given. It is ‘grace’ (*charis*). Its source is the wellspring of the Father’s love for the Son, in the Holy Spirit. Love comes down to us from the Son. It is creative love, through which we have our being; it is redemptive love, through which we are recreated” (Benedict, 2009:5).

Benedict’s perspective in these encyclicals lends itself strongly to the idea that love is universally infused in humanity by God’s gracious action, orienting us toward God as our ultimate end, and is therefore available as the virtue of infused charity outside of the Church. Charity is also given in a way that is inherently united and holistic, thus allowing for the innate orientation of all people to God in love toward our salvific *telos*.

Charity is also something in which we grow by our free will in response to God’s call and grace. Growing in love is a cooperative movement of God’s and humanity’s agency, involving infusion by grace and then habituation by learning to respond more and more fully to the ongoing, grace-filled call to love. This call is universal, hence so is the gracious love-gift that enables a free response of love into which we grow as we cooperate with God’s grace in learning to love more fully. We are innately oriented toward love’s supernatural end as created in the image of the God who is triune, relational, gracious love, and we move toward this end through our natural development in loving relationships with others. This enables holding to a



certain Thomistic distinction between infused charity by grace and growth in charity through habituation, while maintaining an inherent connectedness in the unity of a grace-initiated, grace-enabled, grace-filled love as cooperation with God's and our own inherent being-as-love as universal human nature. We come from love, and we return to love, by way of a life of love chosen in grace.

However, grace is necessary but not sufficient. We must receive infused love and grace initially, and then continue in its enabling power to lead us to our end, but still it must be chosen freely, and continually. The life of love in grace is living in tension between the poles of infused grace and habituation, something universal to humanity as created in love and grace in God's image with a love-infused nature and free will.

Jesus Christ is the paragon of this love in humanity, and he is the key to a maximal instantiation of love in our lives. This points to the universal availability of infused charity and habituation in it, in their distinction and unity, with both of them as genuine virtue and potentially salvific. Yet this also points to the maximum potential for charity's development as virtue in the Church through explicit faith in Jesus Christ and his givenness in the proclaimed Word and in the Sacraments. I will turn to this aspect of the Church's inclusivism shortly, but first, I will look at one more example of charity in a contemporary Catholic theological context that echoes and further develops some of the themes highlighted by Benedict.

### **Other Theologians on Love**

In our postmodern context today, other Catholic theologians, in addition to Benedict, are pursuing charity-centered theologies that lend themselves to a view of the

high availability of love as grace outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition, thus opening the way for a more positive assessment of virtue development in the world at large. For example, Jean-Luc Marion asserts that love is God's first name, that God is love, or rather that God loves in the absolute givenness of the gift of Godself as charity in the distance of grace that is world- and self-constituting of all that is, preceding even Being itself.

This idea provides a strong model for the availability of God's saturated, iconic presence as gracious charity in the world. Charity then is the very gift of Godself, a charity that gives us to ourselves. God loves, and then being arises, or Love loves, and then the world worlds (Marion, 1995 and 2002). This is not such a large leap from the notion of charity being absolutely given in a way that gives rise to our very selves in every aspect, or to the notion of the same subject-constituting charity that gives us to ourselves continuing to play a strong role in our development throughout our lives. This includes our development in genuine virtue, that we all share because of our human subjectivity is absolutely given by the gracious self-gift of charity, or God-as-Love.

Charity gives us to ourselves. We are created in God's image, hence reflecting the relational love of the Trinity in our inherent nature, in our very being. Love itself gives rise to our Being as humanity and to our Being as particular beings. Does God-as-Love give us to ourselves out of the absolute givenness of charity, only to then withdraw in a deistic fashion unless we happen to find ourselves in the happy accident of epistemological privilege of the Christian tradition? It seems implausible. But what does the Catholic Church itself say about these matters? What can be concluded from official Church

teachings on this issue in addition to what has been gleaned from *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate*?

### **Official Church Teaching**

The Church's official teachings, particularly since Vatican II, are still open and disputed on this and many issues regarding the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions and to the world as a whole. Nonetheless, they definitely assert the availability of love, grace, and salvation universally, and also lend themselves to an interpretation that is favorable to the availability of genuine virtue, both infused and acquired, outside of the Church. To see how this interpretation can be made, it is first necessary to establish the Church's general stance vis-à-vis non-Christians, which can be characterized as a somewhat conservative form of inclusivism. The Church's inclusivist stance is based on the foundation of three broad, general faith claims.

First is the claim of the absolute uniqueness of the Incarnation as God himself coming into the world in the Christ event, which gave the world the ultimate revelation of God through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Second Jesus Christ uniquely established the Catholic Church as the one faith tradition that comes from or flows out of that absolute revelatory event, the tradition to which Jesus Christ entrusted his revelation, which was promised to be secured and guided by the Holy Spirit that he would send. These broad faith claims are the basis of the dogma that the Catholic Church contains the fullness of the revelation of God in the world, and that only the Catholic Church does. This gives rise to the exclusive aspect of inclusivism, establishing the claim of the Church as the only religious tradition with this fullness; no other

tradition is equal to it. No other religious tradition is equally mediating of the divine, or equally salvific. In as much as other religious traditions are mediating and salvific, it is only in a derivative way, as a participation in the salvific mediation of the Logos that is given *par excellence* and in a unique way in the Catholic tradition. This highly Christocentric perspective seems well supported by the strong, explicit Christology in Augustine's virtue ethics and explications of charity.

Third, the Church also makes a general faith claim of particular relevance here, which is that the Christ event as the manifestation *par excellence* of the Logos is universal in scope, given for all of humanity. We all have the same human nature as created in the image of God, and Jesus Christ came for all of humanity, as one of us. This leads to the inclusive aspect of the Church's position, where other religious traditions are real participations in the gracious activity of God in the world. However, this participation is always in some sense to a lesser degree, a position which is well supported by appeal to both Aquinas' and Erasmus' perspectives. Aquinas begins to open up Augustine's strong Christocentrism to a more positive view of non-Christians, and Erasmus brings back both a strong, explicit Christology and an even more generous view than Aquinas' vis-a-vis religious others, placing them on the same continuum or spectrum in terms of their ultimate *telos*. These perspectives can be combined for a solid foundation for supporting current Church teachings. Some more specific doctrines then follow from these general claims, all of which can be elaborated from the Church's official teachings.

## Inclusiveness

A prominent question that enters into the discussion and debate around the Church's inclusivism at this point is whether those in other religious traditions are saved *through* or *in spite of* their traditions. This seems to be perhaps one of the most challenging questions regarding inclusivism, and it has implications for the question of the availability of virtue-including infused charity outside of Christianity. How one answers this question has a strong bearing on one's view of grace and of how God interacts with those outside of the Christian tradition. An important first step in attempting to answer this question is to try to be as clear as possible about what exactly the terms *through* versus *in spite of* mean in this context. From the perspective, of someone seeking to be faithful to the Catholic Church's tradition and teachings to the best of his or her ability, some relevant principles can be laid down to guide the process of proposing an explanation in this matter, as further elaborations of the three broad faith-claims mentioned previously.

First, the Church teaches that revelation, in the specific, strong sense, as that term is typically used in the Catholic tradition, has been given only in or through the Judeo-Christian tradition. (Or rather, only the Judeo-Christian tradition is developed from or out of revelation). Revelation means something we can only know about God if God specifically communicates that knowledge to us. In certain Protestant traditions this is sometimes called "special revelation." We cannot arrive at that knowledge through our nature, reason, and observation of or interaction with the world alone (natural law/theology, or "general revelation"). Second, the highest, or fullest, or ultimate revelation came in the Incarnation.

Third, the Catholic Church is the only tradition that has the fullness of this revelation (*Dei Verbum*, 1965; *Redemptoris Missio*, 1990; *Dominus Iesus*, 2000; and *Catechism*, 1993). This all seems to lead to the conclusion that revelation is an absolute. Revelation occurred only in this Judeo-Christian tradition, not in any others, and it occurred the most fully in the Catholic tradition specifically (as opposed to Judaism or Protestant traditions). For example, only the Bible is God's word. Other sacred texts may contain truth, but not revealed truth. God did not inspire those authors, so nothing else is God's word. This seems to lead to the conclusion that in as much as those other texts contain truth, it is because of natural law/theology, and/or the influence of the revelation given only in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is derived truth, not something directly revealed by God outside of the biblical tradition.

Fourth, many traditions do contain a significant amount of truth and goodness (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965). Fifth, the Holy Spirit is at work in the world, including in other religious traditions (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965; *Ad Gentes*, 1965; *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991). Sixth, the work of the Spirit is inseparable from the person and work of Christ, so Christ is active in the world and in other religious traditions (*Redemptoris Missio*, 1990; *Dominus Iesus*, 2000). Seventh, God's grace is given through that work of Christ and the Spirit (*Redemptoris Missio*, 1990; *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991; *Dominus Iesus*, 2000). Eighth, because of these truths, other traditions can also be salvific (*Redemptoris Missio*, 1990; *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991; *Dominus Iesus*, 2000). Ninth, Jesus Christ is the only ultimate mediator or savior, so everyone from all traditions who ultimately receives salvation does so through Jesus Christ, even if they are unaware of this truth

(*Redemptoris Missio*, 1990; *Dialogue and Proclamation*, 1991; *Dominus Iesus*, 2000).

### **Conclusion**

So, what can be concluded from all of this? The tension between holding to dogmatic truth claims and also trying to acknowledge religious others as much as possible in the process of discernment and dialogue in a pluralistic world is apparent here. It seems that based on these principles, we can affirm that religious others are saved through their traditions, as long as it is acknowledged that the working of God through those traditions to save others is not based on direct revelation in the sense explained above. This still leaves a lot of room for the Spirit of the Logos to work “in a way known to God” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965:22) to affect the salvation of others. It only makes sense to say that they are saved through their traditions, as salvation does not just come upon one out of the blue or in a vacuum. The presence and working of the Spirit is always mediated somehow, whether through the working of revelation, or natural law and theology, both of which are present in other traditions (although again, revelation in other traditions would be a derived reflection of that given in the Judeo-Christian tradition). Ultimately how exactly God works to save people, even in Christianity, is a mystery as an act of grace. But if religious others can receive salvation, but do not have direct revelation, then the Spirit must be working by grace through their traditions, through their epistemic locations, to save them.

So how does all of this relate to the issue of charity as a virtue, particularly as an infused one that is dependent on a supernatural act of grace? If other traditions do in fact share in the Spirit, if the Spirit is inseparable from the Logos, and if the Spirit imparts truth to others (or at least

leads or draws them to it), as the Church teaches, then this leads to the conclusion that other traditions not only can contain truth and be salvific, but must be capable of true virtue infusion and development as well. Otherwise, one is positing that those in other traditions can receive salvation without infused charity, which seems to be either forcing an implausible wedge between salvific grace and the grace of infused charity, or falling into Pelagianism, and is also contrary to dogma (*Catechism*, 1993:1987-2003 and 1810-1832).

If the availability of grace in truth by the Spirit of the Logos that potentially leads to salvation and virtue development is universal, then this also means that we do have things to learn from religious others, as Christ is at work by grace through the Spirit, imparting wisdom and genuine growth in charity as virtue by grace in them. This bolsters the case for interreligious dialogue as a *mutually* enriching process, and not merely as a pretense for proclamation of the Gospel and attempted conversion. This view of the availability of charity as infused virtue by grace can sustain dogma and also lead to a more positive view of and interaction with those in other religious traditions, helping maintain a delicate balance in living in the tension between one's *de jure* inclusivism and the *de facto* pluralism of our globalizing, post-colonial world.

However, one must keep in mind that such an inclusivist view, maintains that the grace available in the Church is at least greater in degree, if not in kind (e.g. in the Sacraments); otherwise, one seems to slip into a conflating syncretism that leads to at least a universalist, dogma-denying, *de jure* pluralism, and possibly a form of relativism. Nonetheless, since dialogue can be a mutually enriching process by virtue of the availability of salvific grace and virtue outside of the Church, in terms of praxis



our task is to push as far toward pluralism as we can, while holding to and fully affirming dogma in principle, to see just how much of the Spirit is present in the other and acting graciously in the world. We should give religious others the benefit of the doubt, assuming the best unless and until there is compelling evidence to the contrary. Honoring the Spirit at work in religious others and in the grace-filled world as a whole as God's beloved creation demands this kind of humble, discerning, open seeking of the truth and goodness of God in others with faith, hope, and love.

One can appropriate the strengths of the perspectives of Augustine, Aquinas, and Erasmus, using them to bolster and to affirm the Church's inclusivist stance, while overcoming their weaknesses with the strengths of the others. This allows their perspectives to help bring a balance to the tension necessarily involved in holding to an inclusivist stance that at once holds to exclusive, Christocentric, dogmatic truth claims, and also to an openness toward a positive, affirming assessment of other religious traditions as grace-filled, potentially salvific, and capable of genuine virtue development. Thus we can affirm with Augustine that Christ is necessarily the heart of all love and virtue, and that apart from his gracious person and work there is no love, salvation, or virtue. But we can also begin to correct his negative assessment of non-Christians as not able to acquire salvation or virtue with Aquinas' more nuanced notion of infused versus acquired virtue, and the possibility of genuine virtue development outside of Christianity. Then we can correct Aquinas' assessment of the lack of infused virtue and of a salvific *telos* with Erasmus' view of the availability of salvific grace and virtue outside of the Church as a sort of continuum or spectrum, rather than an all-or-nothing thing (like Augustine, where there is neither true virtue nor

salvation outside of the Church, or Aquinas, where there is true acquired virtue, but not infused virtue or salvation). Finally, we can correct Erasmus' Pelagian tendency with the strength of Augustine's explicit emphasis on the uniqueness and necessity of Christ and our dependence on him and his grace, and Aquinas' emphasis on the necessity of grace-infused charity for salvific virtue development. The Church's recent teachings and the perspectives of contemporary theologians continue to allow further development and refinement of these ideas as we come to understand more fully the implications of the Church's inclusivism in our postmodern, pluralistic, globalizing context.

The Church's inclusivism is a right and true acknowledgement of the real value, the truth and goodness, and the salvific potential present in other religious traditions. This necessarily includes the potential for true virtue development through charity in religious others. If it were not for this acknowledgement, the Church would be exclusivist. In a sense one could see the Church's inclusivism as an attempt to accommodate other religious traditions as much as possible, because of this recognition of the truth, goodness, and value in them. The Church acknowledges the work of the Spirit as active in the other traditions, on the one hand, and maintains her firm commitment to hold fast to the revealed truths at the core of her identity, on the other. In inclusivism, the Church is living in the tension between this justified holding to the exclusive truth of revelation, and the pluralistic push to acknowledge and to accommodate the truth and goodness of other traditions as much as possible, without compromising her faith. Interreligious dialogue is therefore all the more important, and is in fact indispensable, in light of this pluralistic push as the Church comes to more profoundly seek and to find mutual understanding and the

goodness and truth of God's revelation as love reflected in all of the world and its great traditions. Acknowledging the possibility in the world's religious traditions of genuine virtue development through infused charity and acquisition of virtue through habituation, all coming from God's gracious activity in the world in cooperation with human agency, leads to a stronger valuing and affirming of the genuine goodness of religious others, more understanding and respect, a stronger basis for true, mutually enriching interreligious dialogue, and a better honoring of the Spirit of the Logos at work in the world at large by grace.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

Todd E. Johanson is currently an adjunct faculty member in the Theology Department and a doctoral student in Systematic Theology at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh,

Pennsylvania. His main areas of interest and research are Interreligious Theology and Christology.  
Email address: johansont@duq.edu