# "DISCRETA CARITAS" *

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In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius sketches out a path for reaching love (SpEx 230). In his *Constitutions*, he invites men animated by love to launch themselves in that love on an apostolic service that is wholly driven by the purest of charity for God and for one's neighbour (Const. 101). However, Ignatius has already remarked, even in the *Spiritual Exercises*, that love can be self-centred, worldly. Even when it is the love of God that is at stake, we risk all too easily getting stuck at the level of words (SpEx 230). And therefore the *Constitutions* also teach a discernment that purifies our charity of every disordered inclination, of every exaggeration or unreflective precipitateness. The reason why this charity is 'discriminating' is certainly not that there is any wish to limit its ardour; this charity is and remains limitless, presupposing a gift of one's whole self, 'of all one's heart, one's soul, and one's strength' (Luke 10:27). And if we learn to distinguish between all the spirits haunting us on the path towards the service of God in 'pure love' (SpEx 370), we will reach the point where we remain solely under the sway of the interior law of charity and love that the Spirit writes and engraves on hearts (Const. 134). This essay will take as its chief starting point the vocabulary of the *Constitutions*, and will seek to set in clearer relief this feature which is so typically Ignatian.

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The semantic field of *discreta caritas* centres on the words *discerir*, *discreción*, and *discretio*. The word 'discern' that is so fashionable today only occurs three times in the *Constitutions*. Just once (729), the text says 'discern the various spirits'. The superior general must be a man of learning, because he will be at the head of so many learned men. More necessary still for him is that he be a prudent man experienced in spiritual things, precisely so that he can discriminate between the different sorts of spirits and give counsel to such a large number of people suffering from spiritual needs. Because he will be in contact with a wide variety of men in the Society and people outside it, and dealing with very different kinds of question (not only those of a spiritual character), he needs *discreción*—discernment or discrimination. This link between discernment and prudence is mentioned when there is a question of resolving the problem with the admission of a candidate with a serious impediment, but also some outstanding gifts. In that case (Const. 178), the matter 'is left to the *discreción* of the one who has the authority to admit'. Another problem with admissions to the Society comes when scholastics have been admitted without having been carefully examined. The text insists on the need for full light in order to discern better if it is appropriate to keep these scholastics 'for a greater praise and a greater glory of our God and Lord'. These three uses of *discernir* show clearly that the activity in question is not limited to the discrimination between interior movements on the model of the *Spiritual Exercises* (336); rather, it extends to any human situation where a difference comes to light and as such provokes choices about what contributes to a greater glory of God. Prudence is the central value in discernment, more central even than charity. Without prudence, charity is *caritas indiscreta* (Const. 217).

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*Discreción* is used forty times in the *Constitutions*. In half of these cases, the superior is being viewed as having discernment as his first responsibility. How to do one thing or another is left *broadly* to the discernment of 'the one in charge of the others' (Const.149). The *Constitutions* do not attribute the power of discernment to others apart from superiors, though we are told in passing that the candidate should have 'in respect to things to be done, *discreción* of evidence of the good judgment as a basis for acquiring it' (Const.154). And even the idea of a discernment

in common, or a community discernment, is completely absent from the *Constitutions*.

Quite evidently, the *Constitutions* bring out how discernment is necessary 'in view of the circumstances of places, times and persons' (382). Even in such areas as the time to be given to sleep, 'no precise rule is possible' (301) because of the great diversity of persons and temperaments. Thus the *Constitutions* let the superior's *discreción* take care of shortening or lengthening the duration of sleep. In a similar context, we find *prudencia* as an alternative to *discreción*. In a key text (Const.414) that seeks to teach all those working in the Society how to 'associate with so great a diversity of persons throughout such varied regions', using all possible means for a greater service of God, Ignatius underlines that this comportment 'can be taught only by the unction of the Holy Spirit and by the prudence which God communicates to those who trust in His Divine Majesty'. As regards one particular worker in the Company, the superior general, the *Constitutions* expect him to watch over the observance of these Constitutions 'while he takes account of the persons, places, times and other circumstances' (746). He will exercise this charge with the *discreción* that the Eternal Light will give him.

Translators who render *discreción* by 'prudence' rather than 'discernment' are not making a mistake. Such a policy goes right back to the beginning. The Spanish *discreción* is sometimes rendered as *prudentia* in the Latin of the official translation. It is therefore not surprising when we find alongside *discreta caritas* the *prudenta caritas* (Const. 754) that the superior general must practise when imposing penances that take account of the persons and other circumstances, but always for the glory of God. It can happen that one is expecting *discreción* and one finds 'prudence'. For example, when the text is talking about the choice of professors, it is prudence (458) that will decide the matter, depending on the places and the persons, and with an eye to the greater service of God. In redacting the *Constitutions*, Ignatius was not aiming to write a manual of spirituality with a consistent theory, grounded in well-honed concepts and well-defined words. Rather, he exploits the polyvalence of certain terms so that he can trace out a pathway towards God that passes through all the complexity of human existence, making use of the choices to be made, the decisions to be taken, the judgments to be issued. *Discreción* retains the connotation of any discernment of spirits, and therefore *discreta caritas* is a charity which can discriminate among the spirits that haunt us, the good and the bad, the

less good and a greater good, *amour propre* and the greater glory of God. This particular sense of the word establishes, or rather bears witness to, the link between the *Spiritual Exercises* and the *Constitutions*; it is the reference to discernment that makes the latter the institutional translation of the former. In this discernment, 'measuring' is an important feature. In a discernment process, one certainly needs to measure capabilities and capacities, whether of oneself or of others. The *Constitutions* stipulate that physical exercises must not be prolonged or undertaken 'beyond the measure of *discreción*' (298). Discerning the right path is often a question of finding the golden mean—the 'measure'—between extremes. It is this aspect of *discreta caritas* that we find in a controversial passage in the *Constitutions*. In the sixth part, the third chapter sets out for those in the Society what they should occupy themselves with, and what they should abstain from. The choices to be made about the time to be given to prayer, to studies, to penances, are not left to individuals' good pleasure. Rather, they are to be adapted to each one in accord with the diversity of situations and personal needs, under the direction of the superior in conformity with the *discreta caritas* that Ignatius has himself clearly explained. For what Ignatius wants to obtain through *discreta caritas* is a balance: there should not be the kind of excess that weakens the strength of the apostle and deprives him of energy with which to consecrate himself to his neighbour, but equally, it is important that the spirit's fervour not grow cold nor that low human passions are warmed. *Discreta caritas* is a matter of the golden mean: the proper measure between overheating and growing cold in the life of an apostle, and also between a life left to the good pleasure of each individual and a regulation obligatory for all, for it is impossible to have prescriptions taking account of all levels of physical capacity and all the public occupations of charity and obedience (Const.582-583). While being quite convinced of the need for a *discreta caritas* in order to find the right path towards God in the service of the neighbour, Ignatius presupposes a spiritual maturity. He addresses himself quite explicitly only to those Jesuits who are already spiritual men, and sufficiently advanced along the path of Christ our Lord to be able to be running along it.

Ignatius thus excludes those who are still in formation when he envisages the realistic possibility that a person can reach a spiritual level where no rule should be prescribed other than that which discriminating charity dictates. And even for those who are supposed to be among the formed, for those who have finished their formation in the juridical sense,

the observation made by GC 31 applies (77): 'we remain sinners, and our progress in the following of Christ will always appear to us as a continual conversion'. And if a superior comes to the conclusion that some people—Ignatius here makes no distinction between formed Jesuits and those in formation—need to have a determined time of prayer prescribed for them, in order to stop them doing too much or too little in the way of spiritual exercise, the superior will be able to do this (Const. 583).

In the history of the Society, there has been no lack of episodes where, above all in the area of personal and community prayer, there have been Jesuits invoking *discreta caritas* as a basis for rejecting all regulation, denouncing it as contrary to the Ignatian charism. Especially in the sixteenth century, superior generals had no hesitation in decreeing the way of prayer for the whole Society, and its duration, precisely in order to avoid there being too much or too little prayer. In the *Constitutions*, Ignatius does not exclude the possibility in appropriate cases, but he nevertheless opens up the horizon of a *discreta caritas* that no authority in the Society will ever suppress or modify. Thanks to this, GC 31 (1965-1966) could declare in a decree on prayer that it did not want to impose on all a universally valid law for the form and duration of prayer, mindful as it was of how people's awarenesses were evolving, and insistent though it was on the absolute necessity of daily personal prayer. The rule of an hour's prayer was to be adapted for each person, following the diversity of situations and personal needs, under the direction of the superior and in conformity with the *discreta caritas* that Ignatius himself had clearly set out in the *Constitutions*. After centuries in which *discreta caritas*, though never suppressed or condemned, had been considered as an Ignatian ideal that was inaccessible, and sometimes also as a mere pretext for irresponsible libertines, GC 31 drew it out as a distinctive trait of Ignatian spirituality—a kind of alliance between love and reason, ardour and prudence, spiritual freedom and necessary regulation. It kept the Latin expression *discreta caritas* in order not to betray its rich, polyvalent sense through translations such as 'enlightened charity', 'prudent charity', 'moderated charity' or 'intelligent charity'—expressions which render the spiritual ideal intended by the expression only very partially and tendentiously. In the same way, the obvious and standard translation, 'discreet charity', tends to reduce *discreta caritas* to a concern for avoiding dangers and, above all, risks. *Discreta caritas* is about moderation, about avoiding too much and too little and staying between the extremes. But it cannot be contradicting the Ignatian *magis*, and a third kind of humility in

which 'I desire to be held as senseless and crazy for Christ, who first was held for such, rather than as wise and prudent in this world' (SpEx 167). It is charity which drives this Christian desire. *Discreción* is there not to moderate this charity or make it somehow more sensible, but rather to place this desire within the will of our Lord, who Himself must choose me 'so that I can imitate him and serve him *more*, if the service and praise of His Divine Majesty would be equal or greater' (SpEx 168). *Caritas* is meant to be the fruit of a discrimination between spirits.

The first generation of Jesuits had a propensity for penances and mortifications, for long devotions and prayers. This led Ignatius to moderate the ardour of his brethren, and therefore to give *discreta caritas* the connotation of a balancing that will not go too far, 'towards an extreme of rigour or towards excessive laxity' (Const. 822). And yet, in the formation of scholastics, the rector makes a judgment about what each person individually should be assigned in order to do 'more' in spiritual matters, with discernment always being given a place (Const. 341). In order to be more helpful to their neighbours in the future, the scholastics are meant to avoid any obstacles that distract a spirit of study, such as devotions and mortifications. They will be doing this with a constantly growing desire for the service and glorification of God, but 'it will be left to the *discreción* of the one who holds the principal charge to consider how far he should go in these matters' (Const. 362-363). It is significant that the use of the word *discreción* diminishes as the *Constitutions* move beyond an account of formation. Formation is presented as a careful learning process, with the aim of arriving at *discreta caritas*.

So far, this study has presented *discreta caritas* within the context of the Jesuit's personal life. But in fact two of the actual uses of the expression in the *Constitutions* come during the account of dismissal from the Society. It is within *discreta caritas* that the superior must carefully weigh up before the Lord the reasons justifying a dismissal (209). A well-ordered *discreta caritas* (237) will dictate the measures to be taken with those who leave the Society in order to be clothed in another order. When the *Constitutions* trace the profile of the superior general, discernment is judged to be 'extremely necessary' (729) in exterior matters, in the way of dealing with questions that are so varied, and of being in relation with so many different types of people both within the Society itself and beyond. In the same way, when there is a desire to take on 'corporal works of mercy', the priorities—given that spiritual works are 'more important'—are to be fixed by the *discreción* of the superior, 'who will keep always in view the greater service

of God and the universal good' as a way of assessing 'how much of all this it is expedient to do' (650). The same applies when the subject is the undertaking of 'some pious works' that are not proper to the Society, but which are important for the service of God. It is *discreción* that will teach us the choice to be made (794). And of course we often find this appeal to *discreta caritas* in Ignatius' correspondence. One example among so many others is that of the Ethiopian mission that was dear to Ignatius' heart and on which he wrote a long instruction with some fundamental orientations (20/02/1555). Because he does not know the situation on the ground, Ignatius stresses that his directives are only pieces of advice, and that Fr Nunes Barreto must not regard himself as obliged to hold on to them: 'he should hold himself rather to what *discreta caritas*, bearing in mind the situation of the moment, and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, who must be his principal guide in all things, will dictate to him'. The link made here between *discreta caritas* and the anointing of the Spirit is not absent from the *Constitutions*, but it is less frequent there. Ignatius is well aware that 'the workers of this Company' will find themselves in situations that are unexpected and unforeseeable. Of course, he can at least open the way by giving some counsels about how to act in an apostolic field that is completely new, but the main point of these counsels from Ignatius is to help us listen to what only the Holy Spirit can teach, thanks to the *prudencia* that God habitually imparts to those who trust in His Divine Majesty (Const. 414).

The correspondence of Ignatius is particularly valuable in this regard. Often, when it mentions *discreta caritas*, it establishes a strong link, in apostolic contexts where it is difficult to foresee or envisage what one must do or choose, between the anointing of the Spirit who teaches about everything (1 John 2:27) on the one hand, and discernment or prudence on the other. Addressing companions being sent on mission (8 October 1552), Ignatius says that discernment is beyond any rule, given the variety of circumstances regarding times, places or persons. They need therefore to let themselves be taught principally by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. By diligent reflection and observation, people can learn to work in union with this unction. *Discreta caritas* is not actually named here, but well sketched. The same thing occurs when Juan de Polanco writes in Ignatius' name to the rector of Coimbra (1 June 1551). Ignatius recognises that he is in no position to put together something like maxims to help the rector in his government and to deal with questions in detail. 'But the Holy Spirit, whose anointing teaches regarding everything those who are disposed to receive

His holy light, and particularly regarding the duties that everyone has by virtue of their responsibilities, will be your teacher.' In a letter put together by Juan de Polanco to Arnold van Hus (25 May 1551), the expression *discreta caritas* is absent, but a number of its characteristics are made clear. The instruction is directed to certain Jesuits who are inspired by a 'sincere charity' to indulge in excessive practices that ruin their health and their apostolic zeal. Because of this, it is necessary to 'judge in the Lord' what should be done, so that this charity be directed and tempered by discrimination. One of the two Jesuits concerned has a problem with his studies. 'Charity and the anointing of the Holy Spirit will teach him' how to resolve this difficulty. Ignatius himself sums up his way of practising *discreta caritas* when he ends a letter to Adriaan Adriaenssens (12 May 1556), in which he has been giving some guidelines for the care of the sick in the poor community at Leuven, as follows: 'all this has been said in general terms. It is the role of prudence to come down to the detail, and to distinguish what is appropriate, after consideration of the circumstances.'

What has been said here about the correspondence is important. In the *Constitutions* there is sometimes a slippage from *discreción* to mere discretion or prudence, which might lead one to think that *discreción* only means 'common sense', *savoir faire*, or a good judgment that varies from the golden mean neither by excess nor by default. After all, isn't Ignatius supposed to be the master of discernment, a model of self-control and perfect balance? But such a way of thinking forgets this other element in *discreta caritas*, which is nothing other than the interior law of charity and divine love that the Holy Spirit habitually writes and engraves upon hearts (Const.134). This transforms the element of good judgment in discernment into a path of love towards God. It is because of this that discernment is holy (287) and a gift of the eternal Light (746). Those who enter the Society of Jesus should put aside 'all merely natural affection' and will need to discern how to convert all their carnal affection into spiritual affection, and how to love the people close to them only out of the love demanded by rightly ordered charity (61)—charity which consists in dying to the world and to self-love in order to live only for Christ our Lord, who for them holds the place of parents, friends and all things. To make the point which the image that Ignatius himself puts forward in the *Spiritual Exercises* (179), *discreción* seeks out the right path between desires and fears, what is possible and what is impossible, capacities and limits, good and bad spirits. It takes account of persons and circumstances, times and places. And all this so as

to arrive at that mid point where, like the needle of a balance, everything is disposed for the intervention of 'charity' so that the person can follow in *discreta caritas* what is felt to be more for the glory and praise of God our Lord. The person becomes 'indifferent' in the Ignatian sense, in a discernment which presupposes true liberty and an authentic familiarity with God, so that it is God who can make the difference when it is a matter of making choices in specific cases of present-day lived reality.

Francis Xavier had to make choices of this kind. In his letters, he does not use the phrase *discreta caritas*, but he lives it out fully. He made a major decision to leave India and move on to Japan, which he describes in his letter of 20 June 1549 to John III, King of Portugal, and in another to Ignatius dated 12 January 1549. *Caritas* is present here because Francis avows that 'it has pleased His Divine Majesty to make me sense at the interior of my soul that it is His service that I go to Japan'. This practice of *discreta caritas* was grounded in 'numerous pieces of information that I have about Japan' and in an awareness of the risks, given that 'of every four ships, there are two that fail in the business'. Despite all this, 'I will not abandon the idea of going to Japan, because of the abundance that I have felt within my soul, even if I were certain that I would be in dangers greater than those I have ever seen myself in'. Realistic though he is, it is God who makes the difference in a discernment that has weighed the pros and cons, the reasons for either option 'holding before one's eyes the greater glory of God and taking account of the common good' (Const.222). At many serious junctures, Francis, following Ignatius, engaged at the root of his being in this extremely complex business of *discreta caritas*—simple words and nice formulae rather mask the complexity involved. How does one reach this state of complete indifference, the point where a person is completely engaged—above all a man like Francis, one who is passionate about proclaiming the Good News? Then, on the other side, there is the Lord. In discernment, the Lord leaves the human person free to seek and to find, to conform to His will or not by a 'deliberated choice' (SpEx 98); yet the Lord is also the One of whom I ask the grace to choose what is more ordered to the glory of His Divine Majesty and the salvation of my soul.

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This complexity becomes apparent also in the correspondence and in the *Memoriale* of Pierre Favre. One's chief impression when reading the *Memoriale* is of continuous *discreta caritas*. Practical choices are constantly being put to Pierre's apostolic discernment; he is continually sensing the need for clear vision amid his experiences of devotions and prayers, and for a purification of his attitudes. Pierre Favre was quite happy to admit that he preferred obedience, as something holier and purer: a passive docility in contexts where *discreta caritas* implies an active participation in the quest for God's will. There is a passage which is difficult to translate in a letter to Ignatius (27 April 1542), where he describes obedience with the words 'prudence' and '*discreción*', words associated normally with *discreta caritas*. Pierre Favre is waiting impatiently for a letter from Ignatius containing his decision. He is wanting to know what he should do, because, as he stresses, there is a difference between acting according to one's liking and acting under the direction of obedience. In this context, he praises obedience as being the counsel of perfection, the last word: it is true prudence, and above all 'complete *discreción*'. Is this just a more or less successful rhetorical trope? It seems not. In an instruction directed to the scholastics at Coimbra, perhaps in December 1544, Favre puts the problem as follows. Imagine a Jesuit who sees and desires an apostolic project as a good thing to undertake, and that this desire comes to him from the Lord. And imagine, too, that what the same Lord actually wants him to do is what the superior lays down, which in no way corresponds to his desire. Now, Pierre Favre is recognising here, implicitly, the reality of *discreta caritas*, because it is the Lord who is moving the Jesuit in question towards the good. But, refusing any sense of contradiction, Pierre Favre concludes that the obedience which perfectly dictates the call of the Lord is blind, as a means of renouncing desires, gifts and opinions so as to carry the cross in accomplishing the desire and opinions of superiors. (MHSJ MF 284-287; IJS edition 371-372) This blind obedience is also mentioned in the *Memoriale*, where it seems to be the apogee of *discreta caritas*. The bishop of Mainz is wanting to send Pierre Favre to the Council of Trent (22 October 1542). As usual, Pierre is moved by different spirits, and he experiences above all different sorts of sadness, because he has no great opinion of himself as a theologian and he is well aware of the competence expected of a theologian at the Council. 'But the Lord delivered me from it all by the strength of a holy and blind obedience considering neither my personal incapacity, nor the importance and weight of what had been asked of me.' Everything happens as if, in the practice of *discreta*

*caritas*, there is first a movement from below where all our intellectual faculties are oriented towards a choice—a *discreción*—and then this movement is caught up by one from on high which integrates the first movement into a perfect abandonment to the loving will of God, culminating in a decision which is a real synergy, a real coming together of the divine and the human. Pierre Favre himself confirms this when he writes: 'And all that will come for good from this deliberation, or rather from obedience, will have to be attributed to the 11,000 virgins (after the Most Holy Trinity, the risen Christ, and the blessed Virgin of Virgins, Mary)' (22/10/1542—vigil of the feast of St Ursula and her companions). Because God is *caritas*, how can we do anything other that conceive the practice of *discreta caritas* as an obedience within the perspective of the Trinity, an obedience of Son to the Father, of a servant to the Son and of a disciple to the Spirit (2/7/1542), an obedience which comes to us as we listen to the voice of 'superiors'—firstly the voice of Christ's vicar on earth 'which is the clearest of calls' (June 1542), and then that of Ignatius, to follow Him in a life of poverty? There is no elaborated theology here clarifying the link between *discreta caritas* and obedience to superiors, but it is clear for Pierre Favre that the superior, in discernment, has an authoritative voice which normally perfects the practice of *discreta caritas* when he judges 'in the Lord'. It has been noticed that when the *Constitutions* speak of *discreta caritas*, the superior is rarely absent from the text. Often *discreción* is a task given to him. There is an invitation here to the radicality of blind obedience *à la* Pierre Favre, but not one that reduces the companion to silence and renders all *discreta caritas* mute. For when something occurs constantly to candidates 'as being conducive to the greater glory of God our Lord, they may, after prayer, propose the matter simply to the superior and leave it entirely to his judgment, without seeking anything more thereafter'.

This theme is taken up again later, in the *Constitutions*: 'To represent his thoughts and what occurs to him is permissible. Nevertheless, as is stated in the Examen, he should be ready in everything to hold as better that which appears to be so to his superior'. The superior who sends a companion on mission after a discernment may have manifested to him the outcome of a Jesuit's discernment—a Jesuit who is taken up with 'motions or thoughts which occur to him contrary to an order received'. Nevertheless, this companion will be 'submitting his entire judgment and will to the judgment and will of his superior who in the place of Christ our Lord' (Const.627).

Conflict is therefore possible, and GC 32 took up the problem of possible conscientious objection. Its declaration on the subject foresees dialogues, consultations and mediation, and it does not rule out the possibility of a parting of the ways in order to respect the formed conscience of both parties. The features of *discreta caritas* are not lost in a conflict of this kind. This is because if *discreta caritas* is being lived out in this context, it will preserve, amid the confrontation, both friendship and an absolute respect for freedom. This confrontation is nothing other than a new effort to find God's will. The *Constitutions* do not exclude the possibility of the conflictual situation, they encourage the subject's active participation in the superior's *discreta caritas*. If they feel that 'something else' other than what the superior has decided is necessary, then, after prayer and recollection, they should present the matter to him or one whom he appoints, in the conviction that 'what the superior decides after being informed is more suitable for the divine service and the subject's greater good in our Lord' (292).

Just the frequency of expressions like 'judge in the Lord' underlines the true significance of 'prudence', 'discernment', *discretio* and *discreta caritas* in the *Constitutions* and in the writings of the first Jesuits. All of which, one can note in conclusion, might make us surprised that we do not read in the *Constitutions*, alongside the words 'prudent' and 'prudence', the words 'wise' and 'wisdom'. When writing the *Constitutions*, Ignatius speaks of wisdom only as an attribute of God. It is the divine wisdom that has in its sovereignty deigned to begin the Society, and which must conserve it, guide it, and make it move forward (134), that calls or does not call to life in the Society (243), and that helps the very composition of the *Constitutions* for His own greater glory and praise (307, 136). Above all, it must be from the first and sovereign Wisdom that the light descends thanks to which one will be able to discern what one must decide (711). It is for this reason that prayerful discernment is a necessity. *Discreta caritas* must be in the image and likeness of the eternal Goodness and Wisdom, so that when a person takes the will and judgment of the superior as the rule for their own will and judgment, that person will be conforming themselves all the more closely to the first and sovereign rule of all good will and all judgment: the eternal Goodness and Wisdom (284). Thus *discreta cartas* appears in the *Constitutions* as the measure that one must hold to in all things: the measure which is the divine Wisdom's anointing, the measure which the divine Wisdom will teach to those who have received this charge for His service

and greater praise (161). And now we can understand why the wise *caritas* of God can encourage the kind of *discreta caritas* that makes people become fools for Christ (SpEx 167, Const. 101).

*Translated by: Philip Endean, S.J.*