

# What is Christian Love? Theological Writings and Perception of Selected Filipino Youth

Asia Pacific Journal  
of Management and  
Sustainable Development  
Vol. 9 No. 1, 19-26  
March 2021 (Part II)  
ISSN 2782-8557 (Print)

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*Date Received: October 23, 2020; Date Revised: February 28, 2021*

**Abstract** - *The paper explores how the implications of the relevant insights of the two contemporary theological writings on love which are the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* of Benedict XVI and John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* to the young people nowadays. The study discusses three interactions between the theological points on love as explicated by Benedict XVI and John Paul II and the results of Del Castillo Love Attitude Scale, a study of the youth's perception on love in 2015.*

**Keywords** - *Theological writings, love, youth study, *Deus Caritas Est*, *Theology of the Body**

## INTRODUCTION

An excerpt from the National Catechetical Directory of the Philippines tells us: Catholic schools constitute a significant ministry of the Church in the Philippines. Guidelines regarding religious education in catholic schools are founded on the principle that the teaching of religion /theology should be the distinguishing mark of a Catholic school [1]. The primary purpose of religious education is to deepen people's capacities to see and be taken by God's loving activity in the world and empower their capabilities to love and participate in this activity of love [2]. This is supported by the encyclical letter of Pope Benedict XVI, where Christ is the love of God incarnated [3]. Hence, every member of the Church is invited to practice love through agape. Agape is love grounded in and shaped by faith. This love is no longer self-seeking. Instead, it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation, and it is ready and even willing for sacrifice [3].

Pope John Paul II often used the word *springtime* in referring to the Church in the Third Millennium. In his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, he wrote: "As the third millennium of the redemption draws near, God is preparing a great springtime for Christianity, and we can already see its first signs" [4]. In his address to the United Nations, Pope John Paul II said, the tears of this century have prepared the ground for a new springtime of the human Spirit. Furthermore, in his remarks to pilgrims gathered in Rome for Pentecost, he spoke of the Holy Spirit's bringing a new springtime in the Church. In this third millennium, the Church is invited to teach religion in the light of the new evangelization. The expression New Evangelization was deepened in Pope Paul VI *Evangelii Nuntiandi* encyclical as a response to the unique challenges that the

contemporary world posed in the light of the mission of the Church [5]. In the encyclical *At the Beginning of the Third Millennium*, Pope John Paul II [6] re-launched the new evangelization: the faithful must witness to one's faith in Christ. This means that the Church must put faith into action. As a response, the Philippine Church has been consistent in calling her leaders and catechists to use integral faith formation among her members. Indeed, religious educators must know whom their students are by understanding their context [7].

## OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

Thus, this study aims to help religious educators and catechists deepen their understanding of love based on the contemporary theological writings on John Paul II and Benedict XVI's love. This will lead them to reflect on these writings' relevant insights to today's Filipino youth's life. This study also shows the Filipino youth's perception on love based on Del Castillo Love Attitude Scale survey. This study discussed the interplay of the survey results and the theological writings on love to gain new insights. It will be valuable for religious educators to know the kind of love that the young must have to fully translate the message of Christ and thus evaluate how faith can be more meaningful for them.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### **Filipino Youth's Perspectives on Love based on DCLAS**

In 2016, Del Castillo made an empirical study on the youth's perception of love. The results of the statistical analysis of the Del Castillo Love Attitude Scale (DCLAS) showed four factors, namely: (1)

Engaged, (2) Committed, (3) Rooted, and (4) Integrated [8]. The data showed that the respondents perceived love as: a free choice, committed action towards the beloved, originating from God, non-superficial; and influenced by one's gender, context, and romantic experience.

Love, according to the respondents, is a free choice of engagement. Love for them is a committed action towards others, especially their family and friends. A person can choose to love others and elicit a response to his or her loving acts. However, they made it clear that a person must first be engaged *with* and committed *to* their loved ones for love to be truly manifested.

The Filipino youth of this study agreed that the foundation and source of love is God. God, who *is* love, sent his Son Jesus Christ to the world to exemplify humankind's agapeic love. Furthermore, the respondents perceive love as a non-superficial act. Loving actions are manifested not to gratify the self or stroke one's ego. Instead, love is made for others' good with utmost respect and consideration for his or her human dignity.

### Descriptive Statistics of DCLAS

In this study, the mean and standard deviation measure the central tendency and variability regarding the participants' attitude towards love. Tables 1, 2, 3, & 4 described and summarized the distribution of the forty (40) attitude items. The tables were grouped according to the four factors of DCLAS: (1) Engaged, (2) Committed, (3) Rooted, and (4) Integrated.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Factor 1 Engaged (N = 904)

Factor 1: Engaged	Mean	SD
1. Love is seeing my significant other happy	4.41	0.71
2. It is important that I give in to what my partner asks of me even if I do not like it	3.53	1.15
3. I believe that love is a special connection between two persons	4.51	0.77
4. Honesty and loyalty is a sign of love	4.65	0.64
5. I support my loved one in good times and the bad	4.57	0.70
6. Loving others means caring for them	4.73	0.53
7. A successful relationship requires trust and openness	4.79	0.49
8. Being fair is an act of love	4.07	0.86

Table 1 (cont.) Descriptive Statistics of Factor 1 Engaged (N = 904)

Factor 1: Engaged	Mean	SD
9. Loving means giving without expecting anything in return	4.57	0.68
10. Love requires loyalty	4.75	0.57
11. Loving consists of respecting the beliefs of my partner	4.62	0.61
12. Love is a natural human act	4.61	0.65
13. Taking care of my old parents and elderly relatives is an act of love	4.77	0.54

In Table 1, item numbers 1 to 13 of DCLAS pertains to Factor 1, Engaged. Results show that high mean scores were obtained for the statement "a successful relationship requires trust and openness." While the statement "It is important that I give in to what my partner asks of me even if I do not like it" has the lowest mean. Table 1 also shows that the respondents believe that love requires care not only for oneself but also for family members, friends, and significant other. Love necessitates loyalty, care, honesty, respect, giving, support, and fairness. As a cognitive construct, the student-participants perceive love as a natural human act and a special connection between two persons [8].

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Factor 2 Committed (N=904)

Factor 2 Committed	Mean	SD
14. Members of a community can show their love for one another	4.62	0.61
15. I am happy when someone makes me feel special	4.66	0.62
16. I feel loved when people accept me for who I am	4.74	0.55
17. Spending a lot of time with my peers ( <i>barkada</i> ) is a sign of love	4.10	0.89
18. Love is shown in good deeds	4.43	0.77
19. Attending a community service is an act of love	4.06	0.90
20. Sharing my things to others is an act of love	4.15	0.85
21. Helping the needy is a sign of our love for God	4.52	0.74
22. Supporting my friends especially when they have problems is an act of love for God	4.51	0.75
23. To follow the commandments is to love God	4.59	0.76
24. To love is to be holy	4.13	1.01

In table 2, item numbers 14 to 24 of DCLAS pertain to Factor 2, Committed. Students' responses to the survey questions under Committed revealed that it is crucial for the student-participants to be accepted in the community and for someone to make them feel special. They also believe that community members can show their love for one another as a way of adhering to God's commandment of love. Love can also be directed to the community by helping and caring for the needy, supporting friends in times of need doing good deeds towards others, sharing material belongings, and spending time with peers and friends. Loving gestures towards the members of the community are viewed as acts of holiness. On the other hand, the Filipino youth gave the lowest rate for attending community service as an act of love [8].

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Factor 3 Rooted (N=904)

Factor 3 Rooted	Mean	SD
25. God is the source of love	4.62	0.77
26. Love is respecting God's name	4.61	0.77
27. Loving my family is my way of showing love for God	4.62	0.73
28. Worshipping God in prayers is a manifestation of my love for God	4.60	0.74
29. The very foundation of love is the Triune God	4.38	0.86
30. To love others means to love them just like what Jesus did	4.57	0.77
31. God gives man the capacity to be charitable	4.52	0.73
32. God wants me to be a loving person	4.65	0.67

Table 3, item numbers 25 to 32 of DCLAS pertain to Factor 3, Rooted. The data showed that the mean scores of Factor 3 were significantly high. Students' responses to the survey questions revealed that the respondents believe that God wants everyone to be a loving person and that loving acts are first demonstrated to family members. The respondents believe that God is the source of love and that God's name should be respected. Furthermore, they believe that God is worshipped through prayer. Also, when a person follows the examples of Jesus, he/she manifests his/her love for God. They also believe that God gave man the capacity to be loving and charitable towards

other people. Lastly, they believe that the very foundation of love is the Triune God [8].

Table 4 Descriptive Statistics of Factor 4 Integrated (N=904)

Factor 4: Integrated	Mean	SD
33. I love a person when I want him or her to be happy	4.49	0.73
34. Accepting a person's weaknesses is a sign of love	4.62	0.62
35. Being in a romantic relationship means that I am loved	3.79	1.06
36. People love me when they care for me	4.33	0.79
37. Saying "I love you" is a manifestation of love	3.88	1.05
38. Love makes me forgive the mistakes of another	4.39	0.82
39. Love means committing to accept everyone despite our differences	4.61	0.63
40. Volunteering as teacher-catechist in a public school is an act of love towards neighbors	4.28	0.84

In Table 4, item numbers 33 to 40 of DLAS pertain to Factor 4, Integrated. Students' responses to the fourth factor revealed that the respondents view the acceptance of others' human weaknesses as a manifestation of love. Love is also shown when we accept other people despite their difference from us. Different ways of expressing love are making our loved ones happy, forgiving their mistakes, and caring for them at all times. The respondents also believe that serving others through volunteerism is an expression of love towards humankind. On the other hand, two items received fair or moderate acceptance among the participants: Item 35 "being in a romantic relationship means that I am loved" and item 37 "saying "I love you" is a manifestation of love."

The results have shown the different notions of love among the Filipino youth. To deepen the view of the Filipino youth about true love, the researcher engaged in the analysis of Papal teachings about love, specifically the book *Deus Caritas est* [3] and the catechism on the *Theology of the Body* [9]. These theological writings are important Church documents that explain the meaning of Christian love. The following theological points were used highlighted: (1) difference and unity of eros and agape, (2) God is love, and (3) charity as a responsibility of the Church.

### Exposition of the Theological Writings on Love

The encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and the lecture series *Theology of the Body* of Saint John Paul II are contemporary teachings on love from a Christian perspective. Benedict XVI [3] opens *Deus Caritas Est* with a passage from the First Book of John (4:16): "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." In beginning his first encyclical with a succinct description of who God is, Benedict XVI anchors us to the core of the Christian faith, which is "God's love." Pope Benedict explained that he chose love as the central theme of his first encyclical because he wanted to invite the faithful to understand that God was the first to have loved [3]. Out of God's love, He created Adam and gave him Eve, a companion to love. God sent his only Son into the world to teach human beings how to exercise love authentically.

*Deus Caritas est* is divided into two main parts. The first part presents a theological and philosophical reflection on the different dimensions of love and highlighted the difference and unity of eros and agape. He then illustrated the intrinsic connection between God's love and human love. Benedict XVI mentioned that *eros* is the anti-thesis of *agape* [3]. *Eros* is the "ascending, possessive love" which seeks to receive from another, while *agape* is the "descending, oblation love" in which one gives of oneself to another [3]. It was said that love as *eros* have been practiced even during the pre-Christian world wherein love (i.e., sexual act) is considered as "intoxicating" and a manifestation of "divine madness." *Eros* was celebrated in "fertility cults," where sacred prostitutes were used to arousing divine beings. However, the Old Testament firmly opposed such acts of love (i.e. *eros*) because it "dehumanizes" and disrespects the "dignity of human persons" [3]. He further discussed that at the present time, *eros* is manifested when a person's body and sexuality is considered as a commodity. Love is reduced to sex, and the human person is reduced to a thing that is bought and sold. Such debasement of the human body exploits the person and disrespects human dignity [3].

Although, Benedict XVI also explained that *agape* stands in sharp contrast to *eros*. The first letter of John articulated the centrality of *agapeic* love in the Christian faith, "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 John 4:16). *Agape* is a love that is grounded in and shaped by the Christian faith. But the differences between the love categories *eros* and *agape* find unity. He further

explained that the purification of our worldly love and disciplining of the *eros* leads us to mature towards divine love (*agape*) [3].

Benedict XVI [3] believed that *eros* and *agape* are expressions of the human person who is made up of body and soul. He pointed out that it is "neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man and woman, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves." Thus, human beings express love through their physical bodies.

The second part of *Deus Caritas Est* dealt with the actual practice of the commandment of Jesus to love one's neighbor. Benedict XVI pointed out that it is the responsibility of each Church member to be committed to love, especially those in society's peripheries [3]. He defines the essential elements of Christian love. This includes responding to the immediate needs and specific situations of the needy. This quick response calls for heartfelt concern and a personal commitment. Benedict XVI firmly said that "Love is free; it is not practiced as a way of achieving other ends [3]. But this does not mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside."

The *Theology of the Body* [9], considered to be the first major teaching of John Paul II, was a collection of the former pontiff's lectures (or catechism) that he gave to his Wednesday audiences at St. Peter's Square and Paul VI's Audience Hall. John Paul II's catechesis is a scriptural reflection on the human experience of embodiment. He revolutionizes the understanding of the human body and sexuality. As he discussed in one of his Wednesday audiences, "The body, and it alone is capable of making visible what is invisible, the spiritual and divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world, the invisible mystery hidden in God from time immemorial, and thus to be a sign of it. The theology of the body is a clear call of John Paul II for the Church not to become more spiritual, but to become more incarnational [9].

The catechism on the *Theology of the Body* is divided into two parts. The first part focused on the study of Christ's words, concentrate on the total vision of man and woman in the beginning, in history, and the life everlasting [9]. The second part teaches the sacramentality of the human vocation as presented in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians and reflections from Paul VI *Humanae Vitae*. The series of addresses presented John Paul II's reflections on the creation of human persons, the sanctity of the human body, the gift of love, Christ's redemptive love, and human's vocation to love [9].

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Discourse Between DCLAS and the Theological Writings on Love

This section explores the three interactions between the results of DCLAS and the theological points on love as explicated by Benedict XVI and John Paul II. The first interaction is between the results of the study on love as “engaged” and “committed” and the theological point on love as a “responsibility of the Church.” The next discourse is the connection between DCLAS result on “love as Rooted in God” and the theological point on “God is Love.” and, finally the interactions between DCLAS result on “love as Integrated” and the theological point on the “difference and unity of eros and agape.”

### Interaction between Love as Engaged and Committed and Theological Point on Love as a Responsibility of the Church

The first discussion is about the interaction between love as engaged and committed and the theological point on love as a Church's responsibility. The study results showed that the Filipino youth believes that love is a natural human act in which a person engages and commits oneself to another person. Although the survey results showed that the respondents' engagement and commitment are exclusive to family. Their love towards their neighbor, specifically the poor, is seldom manifested or practiced. In *Deus Caritas est*, Pope Benedict XVI explained that “Love of neighbor, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each member of the faithful. It is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community, the Church must love” [3]. Pope Benedict XVI adds, “The Church's deepest nature is thus expressed in her three-fold duty: to proclaim the Word of God (*kerygma-marturia*), celebrate the sacraments (*leiturgia*), and exercise, the ministry of charity (*Diakonia*). These duties presuppose integration of one another and are inseparable” [3].

The theological point of love as a responsibility of the Church is better understood in the term “*diakonia*.” For the Greeks, *Diakonia* ( *διακονία* ) means a “ministry or active service that is done with a willing attitude” (Helps Ministries, 2011). However, Christians view *diakonia* as a “ministry of love of neighbor exercised in a communitarian and orderly way — a concrete but at

the same time spiritual service” [3]. In his Lenten Message, Pope Francis (2013) describes *diakonia* further when he linked the “ministry of love” as an act of charity to those who are destitute.

Thus, the Church tells us that fellowship and service to everyone are necessary manifestations of love for one's neighbor. At the same time, it is commendable that a person, moved by Christian charity to give special attention to family, friends, and loved ones, we are also called to be charitable and reach out to the needy, the poor, the suffering, the oppressed, and those who are genuinely in need.

The church teachings' concepts of fellowship and service are related to factors “Engaged” and “Committed”. According to the study of Del Castillo [8], the factors Engaged and Committed showed the participants' firm belief towards engagement and commitment to others. Yet, among the Filipino youth, the concrete ways of showing Christian love are manifested in spending quality time with their loved ones, making someone feel special, sharing .” They also believe that love consists of communion with their loved ones and the people who need their help. They feel the need to share their time, skills, material goods, and self to show their love for others concretely. They feel joyful when they help other people and are satisfied when they make people happy. These perceptions towards love among Filipino youth show their willingness to be engaged and committed to their loved ones' service.

However, the study also revealed that participating in community service received the lowest score among the Filipino youth. They look at “service” as helping family and friends and showed little consideration to people living in the “peripheries.” The church teaching on love as a responsibility of the Church poses a challenge to the youth. The Church calls upon all men and women to extend their engagement and commitment to those in need.

### Interaction between Love as Rooted and Theological Point on God is Love

The study indicated that respondents strongly believe that love is rooted in God. The third factor's high mean scores indicated that they consider God as the source of love and that the Trinity is the very foundation of love. This belief moves the participants to “see God through other people in the community.” The results revealed that the respondents prefer to love those within their circle of influence like family, friends, relatives, and loved ones. If the respondents are

aware of their vocation to love others, why do they have a limited view of who should receive their loving? The answer to this query will be framed in the context of the Church teaching "God is love."

Deus Caritas Est explicitly expresses that "God is love" and that this love is imagined in the Trinity [3]. It means that the Trinitarian love of God is a community of love. The Father images this perfect example of personal, loving communion as originating love, the Son as a judgment of value expressing that love, and the Spirit as originated loving. In his *Theology of the Body*, John Paul II further explains that God's love is perfect because it is Trinitarian in structure and human beings share in God's Trinitarian love when they are in communion with God and all His creation [9]. The catechism also explained that persons are created in God's image to enjoy personal communion with the Trinity and with all His creation.

The theological teaching on God is love is related to the high mean score of factor Rooted. The Filipino youth believe that love is rooted in God. They also think that God is calling each person to actualize love through acts of charity towards his or her neighbor. This belief is strongly correlated with the students' religious affiliation, wherein 94% of them are Christians, and all of them are studying in a Christian school. The Church's teachings on love resonate with the young people's perception and influence how they view love. Hence, the respondents' understanding of love is influenced in and shaped by their Christian faith.

The results of the study also revealed that participants view Jesus Christ as the incarnate love of God. The high mean score of the results on the participants' view of Christ as the incarnate love of God is in consonance with Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's theological teachings. The youth look at Jesus Christ as the model of agapeic love. Understanding the loving acts of Jesus as proclaimed in the gospels serves as the model of the Filipino youth in exercising loving acts towards their family and loved ones. They highly recognize that Jesus Christ is the Son of God sent by the Father and the Spirit to reveal God's deep love for humanity. They also believe that Jesus Christ demonstrated God's faithful love to humanity. The loving acts of Christ are examples that a loving individual can follow. Benedict XVI explained that Jesus Christ, "the incarnate love of God" [3], is the most accurate image of God's love. He further explained that the incarnation and death of Christ on the cross is the culmination of giving himself to human beings to raise them and show his love in its most radical form [3].

Factor 3 also indicated that the respondents view themselves as "called by God and tasked to be loving persons." This call to love moves them to be charitable to their loved ones and their neighbors. This strong belief in their vocation to love allows them to practice a self-giving love and engage in interpersonal communion with other people.

John Paul II explained that God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion [9]. God has placed in the very nature of human persons the ability to love and calls every person to interpersonal communion and self-giving love. This love is shown to humanity by Jesus in the Gospels.

### **Interaction between Love as Integrated and Theological Point on the Difference and Unity of eros and agape**

Factor 4 Integrated results showed that the respondents were able to distinguish the difference between love as physical attraction and love as authentic and self-giving love. Few respondents believe that love is associated with just being in a romantic relationship or simply by saying the words "I love you."

In his catechism *Theology of the Body*, Saint Pope John Paul II taught that there is a *difference* between love as eros and love as agape. However, there is also the *unity* between them. *Eros* is the "ascending, possessive love" which seeks to receive from another, while agape is the "descending, oblation love" in which one gives of oneself to another [9]. In ancient times, love as *eros* has been practiced and accepted wherein love (i.e. sexual act) is considered as "intoxicating" and a manifestation of "divine madness." *Eros* was celebrated in "fertility cults" where sacred prostitutes were used to arousing divine beings [9]. However, the Old Testament firmly opposed such acts of love (i.e. *eros*) because it "dehumanizes" and disrespects the "dignity of human persons" [3]. At the present time, *eros* is manifested when a person's body and sexuality are considered commodities. Love is reduced to sex, and the human person is reduced to a thing that is bought and sold. Such debasement of the human body exploits the person and disrespects human dignity [3]. On the other hand, agape stands in sharp contrast to eros. Agape is a love that is grounded in and shaped by the Christian faith.

The theological discussion on the difference and unity of eros supported the insights gleaned from the survey results. There is a connection between the

Church's teachings on eros and agape and the understanding of the young people. The concept of eros in the Filipino youth's perception is the superficial expression of love, while agape is the authentic love that thinks and cares for the other. The respondents were aware of the differences between physical expressions of love and a love that cares for another person's totality. They see physical attraction as a shallow indication of love compared to a love that is self-giving. Although the study results did not specifically mention the respondents' perception of sexual activities with a partner, item number 2 of the DCLAS revealed that participants find it important not to give in to whatever their partner asks of them, especially if they do not approve of the request. This shows that the Filipino youth believe that love is made out of freedom.

The study results showed that the respondents were able to identify the difference between eros and agape but fall short of understanding the unity of eros and agape. Benedict XVI and John Paul II agree that *eros* and *agape* are expressions of the human person who is made up of body and soul. Benedict XVI pointed out that it is "neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man and woman, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves" [3]. Thus, we express love through our physical bodies. John Paul II further explained that "the human body bore an unquestionable sign of the image of God" and "God created man and woman in such a way that through their bodies it would be self-evident to them that they are called to love" [9]. It means that the physical body and human sexuality show the beauty of God's love. It is through the body that human shares the divine love of God to other human beings. The human body then is used as a gift to express love and fulfill the person's vocation to love. The teachings on the unity of eros and agape make it clear that human beings concretely express acts of love through the human body.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In summary, the contemporary writings on love of Benedict XVI and Saint Pope John Paul II support the results of the study. The theological point on love as a Responsibility of the Church validates factors Engaged and Committed. It presents the duties of Christians towards their neighbor, especially the poor. It is imperative then that Filipino youth see themselves as responsible members of the bigger community and the

society. The theological point on God is love supports the result of love as Rooted in God. It explains that God is the source of love. It affirms that the participants' have an empirical understanding of love anchored on Christian beliefs. However, the participants must manifest this "knowledge of God and His love" to those living in the peripheries. The last theological point on the Unity of Eros and Agape shed light on the respondents' view on love as Integrated. While the respondents regard love not as superficial but as a profound way to exercise self-giving love towards other people, they must be taught to understand that there is also a unity between eros and agape. In the understanding, appreciation, and loving acts based on the unity of eros and agape, people can genuinely manifest integrated love. All three theological points present the link between the Church teachings on the Filipino youth's perceptions of love.

This study bridges the gap between the Filipino youth's empirical notions on love [8] and the theological points on love of the Christian faith. The previous discussion presented the teachings on love of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI [3] and Saint Pope John Paul II [9] shed light on the results of the survey. The theological point on love as the Church's responsibility is related to the participants' view on love as a human act manifested in others' service. The theological fact 'God is love' is cast in the respondents' belief that the foundation and source of love is God. At the same time, the theological point on the difference and unity of eros and agape revealed the value of understanding the role of the human body in the exercise of authentic and integrated love. This Church teaching finds embodiment among the respondents who believe that love is integrated. The interactions between the results of the survey and the Church teachings on love provide an opportunity for educators to have a deeper understanding of the meaning of Christian love.

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