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The Franciscan Legionnaire

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POPE BENEDICT'S FIRST

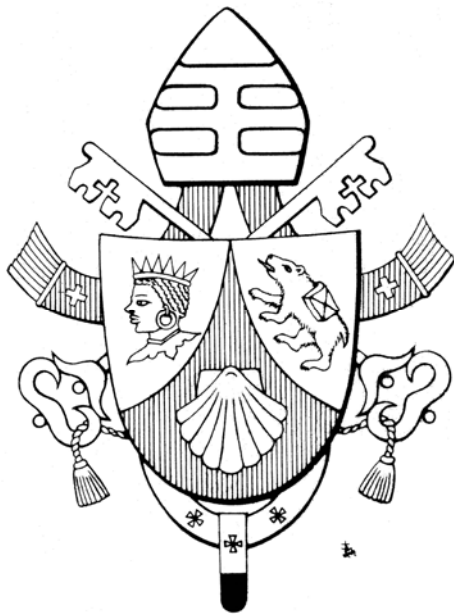
Ecclesiastical pundits and commentators see the first encyclical of a newly elected pope the way a practitioner of divination will look at the tea leaves left in the cup – with a long hard squint, and with an eye to the future. Certainly there is good reason for doing so, at least since March 4, 1979 and the appearance of Pope John Paul II's first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*. In it the recently elected pope clearly set forth the ideas and themes that would echo throughout his long papacy. 1979 is not all that long ago, but already it seems like a different world. The Soviet empire and its Communist ideology stood as a threat to international order and a challenge to the gospel of Christ. As a bishop and university professor in Soviet controlled Poland, Karol Wojtila had come to know that the real danger did not lie so much in the Soviet Union's military or economic might as it did in the Communist anthropology, a philosophy of the human person that was not simply inadequate, but wrongheaded from the beginning. In his first encyclical, John Paul II presented his alternative view of man. He insisted that man was created in the image of God and redeemed by the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, and that this truth continues to stand at the heart of the message and mission of Christ's Church. Far from being antiquated and obsolete, it has a new relevance and an increased urgency in the modern world. He would repeat and develop this theme over the next twenty-six years.

The situation is very different in 2006. The Soviet Union has been dissolved and nobody thinks that Communism is the wave of the future. We have other concerns and other worries. We see the greatest threat to peace as coming not from a philosophy that regards itself as materialistic and scientific, but from a specific and particular religious center. Islamic fascism claims to be true Islam, the pure religion given by the Prophet in the Qur'an, and the practical execution of the only valid revelation of God and God's commands to the faithful. The challenge of Islamic fascism raises questions that the Soviet challenge did not: What stands at the heart of revealed religion? Who is God? What does he offer us? What does he expect of us? It is to these questions that Pope Benedict XVI directs his attention, and ours, in his first encyclical letter, *God Is Love*.

Benedict begins by quoting the First Letter of John 4:16, "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him." Here, he says, we have the definitive image of God, as well as the image of mankind and its destiny. And in the continuation of the same verse – "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us" – we find the summary of the Christian life. Thus at the heart of Christianity one finds not a lofty ideal, nor an abstract body of doctrine, nor even an ethical system; one finds, rather, a person, an encounter with the living God in his Son, "which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." The Christian faith inherited this centrality of love from ancient Israel, and gave it a new depth and breadth. This fundamental truth we hold by faith in Christ. It is not a self-evident truth, nor is it accepted by all. Indeed, today it is under attack and categorically denied by some. Referring to Islamic fascism without naming it explicitly, the pope states that "in a world where the

name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence,” the message at the heart of Christianity is “timely and significant.” He divides the encyclical into two closely related parts – first, a reflection on the love that God has lavished upon us in his Son; and second, a teaching on how we in turn must share that love with others.

Part I begins with a frank admission that it isn’t easy to write about love today. The word means so many different things in so many different contexts that anything said about it is in danger of being misunderstood, even when the world of discourse is explicitly limited, as it is here, to the world of the Bible and the Church’s tradition. Within this world of discourse and the Greek language of the New Testament, the word for *love* is not *eros*, the word most commonly used in pagan Greek literature, but *agape*, which is seldom seen in Greek usage. This alone indicates that there is something distinctive about the Christian understanding of love, but Benedict refuses to see a simple antithesis or hostility between the two. Instead, he insists that there is both difference and unity in the Christian view of the two kinds of love.



Eros is the “divine madness” of love, falling in love with another person, being overwhelmed by love and driven by it, in a way that is charged with sexual attraction and passion. It, and only it, seems to hold out the promise of supreme happiness. Perhaps the best expression of its motto was devised by the poet Virgil: “Love conquers all, so let us yield ourselves to love.” The Bible does not reject root and branch this kind of love, but neither does it approve it unreservedly. It sees “an intoxicated and undisciplined *eros*...[as] a fall, a degradation of man.” *Eros* must be disciplined and purified, and if it is to help the person to true happiness, then it must go by the path of renunciation. The best Old Testament expression of this insight is in the *Song of Songs*, where “Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.” At this stage of development, *eros* seeks to rise above itself, to become truly selfless, to reach out for what is eternal. *Eros* is ready to meet up with *agape*.

God is *agape*, the love that strives not to possess the other but to give oneself to the other. One finds the expression “God is love” only in the New Testament, but the entire Old Testament is the history of God’s love, his entering into a relationship with Israel so that he can give himself to them. God loves his people with an everlasting love, he chooses them and makes them his own. The prophets and the sages of Israel use imagery taken from erotic love and marriage to present this love of God, and this shows the fundamental unity between *eros* and *agape* – they are certainly not the same thing, but the experience of both is necessary to the experience of God who is love. As lovers of God, of course we will imitate God in love, and offer ourselves totally to him. Yet our self-offering in love is only possible because God has first loved us. Love must be received before it can be offered. This mutuality and reciprocity of love finds its most powerful expression in the two becoming one flesh of marriage. For Benedict, it is no accident that Israel’s profession of faith in one God develops hand in hand with her understanding of marriage as the union of one man with one woman. “Corresponding to the image of a monotheistic God is monogamous marriage. Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people, and vice versa.”

The revelation of God as love reaches its climax in the incarnation of God’s Word. “The real novelty of the New Testament lies not so much in new ideas as in the figure of Christ himself, who gives

flesh and blood to those concepts—an unprecedented realism.” His death on the cross becomes the culmination of God’s giving himself to man in order to save him and raise him up. The sacramentalization of this culmination is the Eucharist, in which Jesus anticipates his self-offering to the Father and draws his disciples into it. In the Eucharist we do not simply receive his self-offering, but we become part of it. It is union with the Lord and union with one another.

The Last Supper, the institution of the Eucharist, thus is the perfect setting for the giving of the new commandment of love. The disciples are to love one another even as Jesus has loved them. This love of neighbor, of course, is not realized primarily in prayer or worship, but in the ordinary time of our lives, in the little moments of self-sacrifice and concern for others that are to make up our length of days. “Love of God and love of neighbor are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love of God who has loved us first.”

Having established the basis in faith of the law of love, Benedict turns in Part II of his encyclical to the question of how that law of love is practiced by the Church. Jesus clearly intended love of neighbor to be a personal responsibility, one that would be felt and acted upon by every individual believer. But it is also the responsibility of the community of believers. As such, it needs to be organized, and organized at every level of the community’s being, from the smallest and most particular to the largest and most universal. Benedict reads the early chapters of the *Acts of the Apostles* as the first efforts at the organization of the ecclesial dimension of the law of love. Providing for the physical needs of the poorest members was not just the prototype of modern social work, but an act of genuine spiritual service; by it the Church proclaimed her faith in God who is love. As the Church grew, so did her charitable works, and “the exercise of charity became established as one of her essential activities, along with the administration of the sacraments and the proclamation of the word.” Indeed the driving force behind the development of the Church’s legal structures was this service of charity, a fact which favorably impressed even the virulently anti-Christian emperor, Julian the Apostate.

One of the most powerful ways that the Church carries forward her work in obedience to the law of love is through her social teaching and her labor on behalf of justice. Justice and the development of the just society obviously belong to the realm of politics and civil society, and here the Church does not rule or command. She proposes rather than imposes. The lay faithful, who are directly involved in the formation of political and civil society, must “configure social life correctly, respecting its legitimate autonomy and cooperating with other citizens according to their respective competences and fulfilling their own responsibility.” The pope insists that the arrival of the just society, if it comes, will not eliminate the need for charity, any more than the performance of the works of charity eliminates the need to labor on behalf of the creation of a just society. Man does not live by bread alone; his needs can never be reduced to the material level. Hence, “there will never be a situation where the charity of each individual Christian is unnecessary, because in addition to justice man needs, and will always need, love.”

God Is Love is not long as encyclical letters go. At a bit more than fifty pages it is about average for a first encyclical. We will have to wait and see whether Benedict’s exercise of the Petrine ministry will be picking up and carrying forward the themes so powerfully expressed in this, his first encyclical. I suspect, however, that we will not have to wait too long. His insistence that “God is love” is the heart of the gospel, and that the command to love God and to love our neighbor is really a single command and response to God’s love, all point to an emphasis on the practical nature of love, which tends to be both visible and discomfiting.

—Fr. Bob Spratt, O.F.M.