

THE FUTURE OF LOVE

A reading of Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*

Pope Benedict's choice of love as the topic of his first encyclical exhibits an unswerving boldness combined with a calm judgement. Love is the proper topic for the early 21st century because in the personal field there is a crisis over its meaning; in the religious field there is an increasing substitution of violence for loving persuasion and finally in the world at large the global tightening of human bonds is not accompanied by an equivalent increase of solidarity secured through the exercise of charity.

At the same time, love is the most perennial human need; Christianity is the religion which most places love at its heart and the Catholic Church is the corporate body which has attempted the largest systematic organisation of human love in response to the gift of divine grace.

By bringing together the immediately pressing with the perennial, Pope Benedict contrives to convey with both simplicity and subtlety just how the Catholic faith is able to offer a surprising fulfilment of universal human aspirations towards a loving peace and harmony. His thoughts are in continuity with those of his predecessor, yet they are marked by the fact he is a theologian before he is a philosopher and a theologian in the lineage of the *nouvelle théologie* who tends to stress the implicit

yearning of reason towards faith and the completion of reason by faith, even within its own proper sphere of human understanding.

In consequence, this encyclical exhibits a strong stress upon the priority of the spiritual and the mystically theological over practical details, ecclesial programmes and theoretical controversies. At the same time, the religious is linked, from the outset of the document, to a warm humanism, readily comprehensible by all. Nor is there any sign of a backing away from John Paul II's commitment to a thinking through of the moral and political issues of our day. One glimpses instead something like an accentuation of an insistence upon the relevance of the specific perspectives of faith to these issues, rather than just a reliance upon sound reason and natural law, although the fundamental importance and non-constrained character of human reasoning is not, of course, denied.

Correspondingly, there seems to be here an increased stress on the Church itself as an agency of justice and charity and on the Church itself as the final site of true human society. For this reason the encyclical moves from a general consideration of love in the first part to a consideration of the role of the diaconate in the second. This is the driest part of the document, but also, perhaps, the part which most invites interpretation. It would conceivably be possible to read it in a 'neo-conservative' fashion, and yet there are ample indications that such a reading would be totally mistaken. I shall return to this presently.

A correct reading of the second part of the document requires one, I think, to bear in mind the full implications of the analysis of love in the first. Here again, somewhat

more than his predecessor, Benedict shows that he is very aware of recent debates in theology and philosophy about the nature of love, giving and friendship. Broadly speaking, these hover about the issue of whether love is primarily an agapeic self-obliteration, or whether, to the contrary, it is an erotic reciprocity and mutual fulfilling of desire. Here Benedict adroitly holds a balance between both emphases, and in doing so also undermines completely the claims of those who see Christianity as the enemy of erotic love.

In the face of the commodification of sex, and an illogical exaltation of homosexual relations to equal exemplarity with heterosexual ones, Benedict here makes heterosexual faithful union the central paradigm of love for human beings in a way that would surely have startled his 19thC forebears. Indeed he says that unless *agape* is instanced in this mode of love and in other, less acute instances of *eros*, it would be something merely abstract and without effect. For while, indeed, *agape* is the descending love of God that is totally self-giving and self-abandoning, it is still also a preferential erotic sort of love. God has elected all of humanity for his love; more specifically he has elected Israel and then Mary and the Church. The latter is the Bride of God the Son: hence the gospels are precisely, as Benedict says, a 'love story', the story of God's seeking out of his lost love, the highest possible romance.

But even within his own Trinitarian life, God is not just a free-giving; he is equally a constant receiving. Thus Benedict insists that insofar as the Bible qualifies a Greek metaphysical presentation of the absolute with a personalist emphasis, it accentuates and purifies, rather than abandoning, the Greek concern with *eros*. As personal God himself not only exhibits preference but also receptivity.

Likewise, the Pope cunningly turns the conventional tables in the case of human *agape* also. To be sure, this concerns a love for the neighbour that must be self-sacrificial and include love for enemies and even the unknown. Yet how is such a superhuman and heroic love possible for us? Not because it is commanded. Rather, because its possibility is *given* to us insofar as it arrives along with our *agape* for God. But this love of God is overwhelmingly receptive and therefore has an erotic dimension: to love God is obviously not to meet his needs but rather is to encounter him in personal union that issues in a merging of will and purpose.

At the heart of the gospels, moving a subtle degree beyond the Old Testament in this respect, lies the *absolute merging* of the commands to love God and the neighbour, without priority given to one or the other. The source of inspiration for unstinting love of the neighbour lies in mystical union with God: yet Benedict insists (in keeping with the *nouvelle théologie* perspective) that the only true mysticism is Eucharistic. Hence we encounter God only within the social body, only insofar as we also encounter the neighbour – and in a context of celebratory foretaste of the heavenly banquet rather than in a context of benefaction. Therefore, one might say, in an ‘erotic’ context. Nevertheless Benedict also insists that worship and ethics are entirely at one: it is part of the movement of Eucharistic worship itself for the body of the faithful to turn to active agapeic works of mercy.

These, however, insofar as they concern ‘love of the neighbour’, are not to do with a merely sacrificial devotion to ‘humanity in general’. Although the parable of the Good Samaritan insists that the far-one can be also the near-one, this is no abandonment of

the importance of proximity, but rather the paradoxical insistence that proximity can abolish alien distance while conserving the distance of respect.

So *agape* is also *eros*. But for Benedict the inverse equally applies. In pagan religion (he does not really discuss the role of *eros* in pagan philosophy) *eros* was ecstasy, in the mere sense of self-intoxication which often involved the gross exploitation of women. But in the Hebraic *Song of Songs* by contrast, the physically erotic is poetically intensified *precisely because* the erotic is now linked to preference for a single one, to fidelity and to commitment unto sacrificial death. Romance, one might say, is born here and not with the Greeks. Nor (and here Benedict is very acute) is this any neglect of ecstasy: rather the truly ecstatic is here discovered in terms of a self-abandoning movement towards the other that is also a paradoxical self-realisation. Far from this being a banning of pleasure, it is rather the first discovery of real pleasure – including, one could add, in a physical sense.

To put it bluntly: Benedict here boldly declares that not only is the Catholic Church not opposed to sexual love – to the contrary, it alone truly understands it and fully promotes it. In an epoch-making fashion, a Pope now declares that the literal sense of the *Song of Songs*, in other word its first intention of meaning, is indeed what the naïve reader would take it to be. The mystical meaning arises now only through a proper acceptance of the worth of this literal meaning, while at the same time the depth of the latter is lost if it is not read also allegorically: that is as pointing to the mystical marriage between Christ and the Church.

Now difficult questions certainly follow here about the relative worth of celibate and as opposed to married commitments and about the plight of those who appear to have an unalterable homosexual orientation – a plight that the Church now seems somewhat to concede. And these questions are linked to a deeper one: how to hold together such a rightly strong affirmation of the sacramental centrality of married heterosexual love to a continuing challenge to the ways of this world such as was upheld by celibate vocations in the past.

But perhaps the second part of the encyclical is in part a response to such a concern. Benedict here quite strikingly puts a new stress upon the exercise of *diakonia* as constituting one third of the Church's mission alongside the sacramental and teaching vocations. Clearly, this diaconate is today increasingly exercised by the Catholic laity within a huge range of voluntary charitable and teaching vocations. Quite rightly the Pope is concerned that these functions, as much as clerical ones, be exercised as part of the Church's specific ethos, rule and pedagogy, and do not occupy some sort of uneasy limbo between theological justification and secular ideology. He desires then, one might interpolate, that an often married Catholic laity carrying out ecclesial vocations should be able to stand outside the world while being immersed wholly within the world. Obviously this is the sort of challenge that organisations like *Opus Dei* have tried to meet: whatever one's opinions about their success, their concern is unavoidable.

But it is this part of the encyclical that may most invite controversy. The Pope strongly insists that the offering of welfare is a proper aspect of the Church's own life and cannot be altogether handed over to the state. He also affirms that this offering

must not be directed by worldly ideologies and continues to excoriate Marxism for sometimes suggesting that the giving of charity might inhibit the demand for justice. (While of course one agrees with Benedict, there is a slight sense here of flogging a dead horse – a rare moment of lack of relevance in a document whose sense of the global present is in general admirable.)

One can imagine then, that certain neoconservative supporters of Bush, Blair or Marcello Pera (the lay Catholic leader of the Italian Senate) would read into this an encouragement for the privatisation of all welfare functions. And one might say that the temptation offered by the Grand Inquisitor to the Church in our time (a temptation to which all too many Catholics have already succumbed) is the following: accept extreme free-market liberalism in return for increased Church power in the spheres of welfare, education and medicine.

Yet it is very clear from previous publications as well as the present one, that Benedict wholly refuses such a temptation, in accordance with a general political orientation which includes a commitment to world peace, opposition to the Iraq war, nuclear weapons and the armaments trade, plus a determination to end global economic injustice and an insistence that the market must be regulated -- though not wholly controlled -- in terms of a hierarchy of truly human ends (a stance which implicitly condemns most modern 'economics'). As the American Catholic neoconservative Jody Bottum laments, he is essentially a German 'social democrat', if anything to the left of his predecessor. His famed criticisms of Liberation Theology arose in part from a perfectly correct perception that it failed to derive its Catholic

social radicalism from the heart of the gospel (rather than secular ‘scientific’ diagnosis) and so in consequence distorted it.

Accordingly, Pope Benedict is no ideological dogmatist of the Right about welfare. He advocates collaboration with state and international secular agencies pursuing the genuine human good in every respect. So his insistence on the diaconate is not to be read as lining up with a privatisation of welfare, but rather as a new and typically *nouvelle théologie* stress on the Church itself as the fulfilment of human society: with and yet beyond justice the Church is the place of the exercise of charity. State agencies can never displace ecclesial ones because what the human person needs is direct attention and appreciation of his uniqueness beyond the mere just granting of him his due – and in the *Catechism* of the Church, which Benedict prior to becoming Pope oversaw, it is insisted that charity cannot *displace* the demands of the poor for justice. Moreover, Benedict suggests that even secular projects of justice will only reach fruition if they are infused by a grace-given sense of charity – by the sense that through the eucharist and in Christ we are becoming at one with an infinite and all-powerful love.

In this way we can begin to see that the inseparability of *agape* and *eros* in the first part is the hermeneutic key for reading the lessons on the diaconate in the second. The ecclesial society of love exceeds the secular society of justice in part because it involves infinite concern for others beyond what is merely due to them; or rather this *is* what is due to them -- perfect justice is charity. But it also exceeds just society in terms of a kind of extended *eros*: the true giver of charity, says Benedict, also *receives*

love from the one he cares for. Such an arising of a personal bond cannot be planned for, nor commanded: it rather arises by divine gift, by grace.

It is, I suggest, for this theological reason and not for politically conservative ones, that Benedict opposes all secular ‘plans’ for the improvement of the world. Of course, as he says, we should be trying to improve the world. However, this should never involve the sacrifice of present people to the future, in part because this is wrong anyway, but also because a perfected harmonisation of people in truth and love (of which the Pope spoke in his New Year’s address) cannot be planned, precisely because it is composed of a myriad of ‘erotic’ as well as agapeic events of coming to a complex consent that blends differences into an analogical unity. A truly radical politics would therefore involve a hoping for such a future, and a kind of blind but trusting working towards this future through many particularities. But to suppose one had a blueprint for it would be, as Benedict says, to suppress the most specifically personal dimension of human life.

In this way, more successfully than secular ideologies, the Pope is here able to link the personal with the political. What humans yearn for is inter-personal love. But the extension of this through tempered measures of organisation committed to social justice and fraternity is the key to the arrival of a global loving community.

