

Love and Ecstasy

by Frei Betto¹

Dominican Friar

The encyclical, "God is Love," the first by the new pope, surprises us positively in many respects.² However, the floral style makes it difficult to engage young readers. Benedict XVI breaks with the majestic rhetoric, agreeable to the tastes of popes and cardinals, so that he might speak in the first person: "In my first encyclical I wish to speak of love." He addresses love by referring to not only Christian and non-Christian authors, but also to those of pagan antiquity and others whose works were prohibited by the Church, such as, Plato, Aristotle, Virgil, Gassendi, Descartes, and Nietzsche.

The papacy is speaking with a new emphasis. Notably absent from the encyclical are condemnations, scrupulosity and moralizing. Love is incarnate in its total dimension, namely, that of relationship with God, neighbor, and society. The author does not retreat into poetic raptures. Rather, he rises above the habitual dualism of ecclesiastical tradition: "Love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness. This would seem to be the very epitome of love; all other kinds of love immediately seem to fade in comparison (no. 2)." In addition the author praises the "boldly erotic images" used by the prophets Hosea and Ezekiel, as well as those from the *Song of Songs* (See nos. 9-10).

¹ He is a Dominican friar from Brazil, internationally renowned as a theologian of liberation. He is an author of 53 books of various literary genres—novel, essays, detective stories, memoirs, youth and child stories, and religious themes. On two occasions, in 1985 and 2005, he received the Jabuti, the literary prize of his country. In 1986 he was elected "The Intellectual of the Year" presented by the Brazilian Writer's Union. Moreover, he moderates social movements such as Base Christian Communities and the Landless Rural Farmers. He has participated actively for 45 years in the political life of Brazil. From 2003-2004 he was a special assistant to President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, and coordinator of the program Social Mobilization of Zero Hunger.

² Text for the English translation, *Deus Caritas Est* (December 25, 2005) available found at based on the electronic format found www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html

Criticizing the Platonic vision, so frequent in the tradition of the Church, the pope offers a *mea culpa*: “Nowadays Christianity of the past is often criticized as having been opposed to the body; and it is quite true that tendencies of this sort have always existed (no. 5).” He stresses that “neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature. Only thus is love — *eros* — able to mature and attain its grandeur (no. 5).”

Benedict XVI evokes Greek pedagogy in order to interpret various dimensions of love: *eros*, the passionate attraction that subjugates reason; *filia*, the love shared by friends; and *agape*, the care of another, sacrifice of oneself, and the openness to the transcendent. This last type brings love to its fulfillment, and “not the immersion into the blissful drunkenness,” but the well-being of the beloved. “Love is indeed ‘ecstasy,’ not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God... (no. 6).”

Benedict XVI could have included a fourth destructive aspect, pornography. This perversion of love centers on the pleasure found in oneself at the cost of denigrating another.

The pontiff refuses the antinomy between *eros* and *agape*. “Were this antithesis to be taken to extremes, the essence of Christianity would be detached from the vital relations that are fundamental to human existence, and would become a world apart, admirable perhaps, but decisively cut off from the complex fabric of human life (no. 7).” He emphasizes: “Fundamentally, ‘love’ is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly. Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love (no. 8).”

The encyclical underlines this dimension of love which liberation theology emphasizes: Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. “As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (*Mt* 25:40). “Love of God and love of neighbour have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God (no. 15).”

In an exquisitely wrought statement, the Pope affirms the following: “The Church’s deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*) (no. 25).” The pope adds: “The Church is God’s

family in the world. In this family no one ought to go without the necessities of life (no. 25).”

“These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being (no. 25).”

In developing this manner of thinking, the papal document recognizes the pertinacity of the Marxist critique that contains “some truth” to its argument (no. 26). Benedict writes: “It must be admitted that the Church’s leadership was slow to realize that the issue of the just structuring of society needed to be approached in a new way (no. 27).” Moreover, in an intransigent defense of the autonomy of political life and the laity’s role in the State, Benedict underlines, that in the search for justice “politics and faith meet (no. 28),” and he makes clear that “it [the Church] has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith (no. 28).”

The Church is not able make politics a matter of confessing a faith, and neither does this view relegate religion to the sacristy: “The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice (no. 28).” Neither does the Church involve itself in works of charity as a means of proselytizing: “Those who practice charity in the Church’s name will never seek to impose the Church’s faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love (no. 31).”

The encyclical about love would be more complete if it would have integrated elements of the present world order by taking up the wholesale critique that John Paul II made concerning neo-liberalism, the invasion of Iraq, and neo-colonialism — as reflected in the debt that drains the life blood from poor nations. These realities constitute the present impediments to a “*civilization of love*” called forth by Paul VI.

(GREGORY J. SEMENIUK, C.M., translator)