

POPE BENEDICT AND THE CENTRALITY OF LOVE

Our task in this talk is to reflect on Pope Benedict's first encyclical, to relate it to the teaching of his predecessor and to outline some of the salient points. As often happens with encyclicals one is reminded of the wise householder in the Gospel who draws both new and old things from the treasure-house. And love is a very old thing, very deeply established and long recognised in the treasure-house of the Church. It is at the heart of its teaching and its life. As far as the old is concerned one has to say that there is scarcely anything expressed in the document that is surprisingly new. What strikes a fresh note is the choice of topic of the Pope for his first encyclical. This goes a long way towards indicating the special approach and emphases of his teaching; it is a topic he will have long reflected on and deserves the special attention of all in the Church at this time. I shall suggest that his choice of topic harmonises well with a key concern of his predecessor and in doing so provides an invaluable lead for the Church at the present time.

The Pope with the rest of us is aware how loosely and even lightheadedly the word 'love' is used in our culture. It is a 'pro-word', signifying something everybody is in favour of, and this invites a proliferation of false substitutes. It is a word with many associations and overtones; these have shaped our understanding of it. We need to make a special effort to see through the cultural fog and confusion to the reality that is so central and crucial for members of the Church.

GENERAL APPROACH

The Pope stays with the great lines of Christian reflection but is at pains to distinguish the authentic from the misguided on one or two important questions. One of those questions is that of the relationship between sexual love and the love that is distinctively Christian. As Fr. Duffy will deal with this I shall confine myself to a few comments; it is good to have someone else to deal with a difficult question. The title is taken from the First Epistle of John, "God is love and those who love abide in God and God in them." That could not be said in the same way of hope or courage or any of the other virtues. Love is special and the whole encyclical underlines this. We have to keep in mind too that love is very closely related to other qualities, such as compassion, concern, reverence, respect and so on. This roots it more fully in our experience and suggests that it has many variations, and is often more present in people's lives than they recognise. But even more

important is what is conveyed by the very title. When we speak of love, God is part of the picture; what we say about it has implications for our understanding of God. Love, in fact, leads us into the mystery of salvation, based as it is on life in the Blessed Trinity.

LOVE IN TRADITION

The crucial role of love is well recognised in Christian tradition. St. Paul in I Corinthians XIII explains that the other two virtues, faith and hope, that relate us to God belong to our present existence; they are transformed in the next life. But love remains and is brought to fulfilment in the next life. For St. Thomas Aquinas love is the soul of the other virtues; it is that which is present in each of them when 'alive' and gives them their significance. Dante in the fourteenth century spoke of love as moving the sun and the other stars. He is harking back here to Aristotle's theory of the heavens and how they moved. But the Christian, Dante, has much more in mind than the pagan, Aristotle. Dante is saying that the real dynamics of the world are energised by love.

It seems to be almost a contradiction to say that the role of love was often left in the shadows when there was question of expounding Christian conduct in Moral Theology. This had a very practical bent traditionally. The Church was conscious of catering for the vast number of peasants of Europe who laid little claim to education or high culture but lived close to the earth. Clear, specific directions seemed the appropriate pastoral strategy. The Church commandments to receive the sacraments once a year is a good example. As well as this the Church inherited a great respect for law from the old Roman Empire and this was gradually adopted as the primary lens through which to see morality; morality meant almost exclusively doing or not doing things that were prescribed. There were of course the commandments of the Old Testament and the Church had no intention of forgetting these. The Commandments are God's will and one could relate the whole of morality to the Commandments and distribute it among them. One might call it overdoing a good thing, not by what was included but by what was excluded. For the New Testament has other approaches as well. There is exhortation, promise, invitation, and perhaps most important, example. These are more positive, more suggestive of freedom, and more open-ended, but mention of them was for the most part confined to the spiritual writers. So we can say that while love was at the back of the minds

of the moralists, it was not at the front of their minds and did not figure in an obvious way in their writings.

Again if you notice the legal mode does not appeal to a person's heart or draw one's attention to the person before one. It does not invite you to use your imagination to see how you can be neighbour like the Good Samaritan, or invite one to imitate the compassion of Jesus in dealing with the widow of Naim, or tell one, Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. This would have linked Christian conduct to Jesus and to the whole mystery of salvation. A weakness in the legal mode of presenting morality is that it has a very narrow doctrinal base.

CONTINUITY WITH JOHN PAUL II

Here we connect Pope Benedict with his predecessor, Pope John Paul II. The latter placed special stress on the individual human person, on this particular person at this particular time and place, in this situation, the concrete person, as he puts it. An important 'discovery' in recent decades has been that of the individual person as such. In the typical traditional institution one was simply a student, or a patient, or whatever. Institutions prided themselves on treating all students, patients, etc. alike. The fact that in all such places today the person is called by his or her Christian name indicates that a new approach has gained ground. The encyclical is in keeping with this. Love of its nature is directed to individual whole persons, each with a personal name, background and life-story. Love relates one particular whole person to another such person. When an interviewer objected to Mother Theresa that she was making only the flimsiest impact on what was a huge problem, she replied, I take them one by one, each loved by God and do what I can for that person. This of course reflects Jesus' attention to the individual in the Gospel. Mother Theresa was doing much more than obeying a law. There was no law except the law of love and this is no ordinary law.

So Pope Benedict is inviting us into a deeper understanding and recognition of the concrete human person. He is inviting us to the heart of the Christian message. At the heart of it is love, God's love for us in the first instance, and our love, for God and for others, that God's love draws from us. "God so loved the world that he sent his only Son..." John III : 16 But not only is love at the heart of our faith, but a decision in relation to it is the fundamental decision we can make in our lives and the crucial stance we can adopt. The real choice in our lives is to love or not to love; love is the vital

element in all that we do. Underlying ordinary decisions or choices is the love or absence of love that gives them their positive or negative significance.

SCRIPTURAL AND DOCTRINAL ROOTS

In the Old Testament there are two commandments of love; You shall love the Lord, your God with your whole heart and your whole soul...and later; You shall love your neighbour as yourself. In the New Testament these are inextricably bound together. The love of neighbour is an expression of love of God; one cannot love one's neighbour without loving God. "Whoever dwells in love dwells in God." I John III : 16 Here we remember that in loving Jesus we are loving God, and since Jesus has identified himself with our neighbour especially the poor and needy, to love another person is to love Jesus.

The Encyclical is divided into two parts. The first is a close look at the nature and doctrinal foundations of Christian love. The second has to do with the practice of love, in particular how it works out in the life of the Church. The title of the document is God is Love. Three different forms of love are mentioned in the New Testament, each designated by a term of its own. There is erotic love, the love of desire, relating particularly to sexual love. This is the topic of another talk. There is the love of friendship, which is necessarily a restricted love. And there is distinctively Christian love, called agape, a term scarcely to be found outside the New Testament. Agape is self-forgetful love that focuses on the other person, their dignity, their true welfare and their needs. In connection with this the Pope retrieves the authentic Catholic tradition of its relationship to erotic love as this has been misunderstood and misrepresented. The tradition sees erotic love as directing the person beyond themselves to someone else, a very significant development, and preparing them for Christian love. Erotic love has, of course, a much wider reference than the sexual area; as human beings we never leave it completely behind. But it is attuned and subordinated to the higher love.

Another important point made by the Pope is that love of its nature belongs to eternity. This point has already been made. But the Pope's further reflection is illustrated by the writer who said that to tell a person one loves them is to tell them that they will not die. He did not have in mind that they would not go through the transition from this life to the next, but that they

would not fade from existence. Again, love can never be satisfied to cease to develop and grow, to reach a particular stage and to stop there. It has a built-in dynamism that directs it beyond where it is at the moment. To say thus far but no farther is the death of love.

The meaning of the title can best come home to us when we pay attention to the fact that in the Incarnation God came among us to share with us everything that is worthy of a human being. As the figure of Christ assumes shape in the New Testament so does the figure of love. In Jesus Christ it is God himself who goes in search of the lost sheep and rejoices so much in finding it. When Jesus speaks of the prodigal being embraced on his return from the foreign land by his father, he is telling us of his Father and of his love for us. When he tells the story of the Good Samaritan it seems clear that Jesus himself is the Good Samaritan who found the human race half-dead and did not pass by on the other side. Christ's death on the Cross is the culmination of love in a love-filled life. It is in Christ alone that we find true insight into what love is. In him we find the truth of love. The more deeply we enter the mystery of our salvation the better we understand love. Christ is at once the manifestation of love and the witness to God and his love as well as to truly human love.

LOVE IS DIFFERENT: LOVE IS SPECIAL

If you are considering whether you will go to the Test Match or see it on Sky TV you can postpone your decision until later. But you cannot postpone a decision on whether you will love your neighbour or not: this holds with even greater force when it is a case of deciding whether you will love God or not. God is too near to us and the issue of love is too deeply embedded in our awareness for such a postponement. A person is, in every situation, already positively disposed towards love or away from it; one can of course confirm this or go in the opposite direction through a particular decision. Again, love is in the first instance about doing; authentic thinking about love is subsequent to this. In the parable of the Good Samaritan the original question of the lawyer to Jesus had to do with dividing people into those who were neighbours and those who were not. But Jesus' final question to the lawyer was about behaving like a true neighbour and who had behaved in this way. He is urging the lawyer to follow the example of the Samaritan.

In the Eucharist we celebrate the Lord's great act of love. We rejoice in it and open ourselves to participating in it in our own lives. In this way we

become part of his great dynamic of love. The Eucharist is a celebration of the Church, the Body of Christ, in which we are bound to one another and committed to the welfare of the whole Body. So again we see that love takes us beyond morality in any ordinary sense of the word to our relationship with Christ in his work of salvation. So the Pope stresses that love is not just one more 'value'. It is what gives other values their significance. Our Eucharist is the great memorial of Christ's love celebrated by those who live by his memory. So there is no question of forgetting doctrine and concentrating on the practical living of love. The Life and particularly the Death of Jesus give a distinctive stamp to Christian love and to the difference it makes in the world about us. It is more than a benign attitude towards the world in general, and more than empathy with people who suffer.

There are two other insights into love that the Pope presents to us. He notes that while there are sentiments often associated with love, love is not a sentiment. Sentiments come and go; love is a stable, firm and active orientation towards a whole person which does not rely on the feelings of the moment. Again our attention is drawn to the fact that to see a person only in relation to ourselves and other human beings is to have a truncated understanding of them. We must see people in relation to God to see them in depth. It is that reference of ourselves and others beyond the merely human that opens up our human horizons. We value and love a person for whom we may have a strong dislike and who is intent on harming us. At the same time it is by this love of my neighbour and commitment to him or her that my love for God is anchored in my immediate experience, and that my love for Him is tested.

PART II : LOVE IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

Of its nature the Church is a community of love. It is directed towards mutual love and giving practical assistance within the Church; at the same time its mission is to the whole world and the practice of love must extend beyond the confines of the Church. The Spirit of Christ is active in our hearts so that we can resonate with Jesus in the many manifestations of love in his life, particularly with him at the Last Supper and when he was dying on the Cross. The call to active love is directed to each unit within the Church, the parish, the diocese, and of course the universal Church. The three great fields of activity of the Church are Proclamation and Witness, Liturgy, and Service. These do not exist in isolation; they are inter-

dependent. Each including Service is structured and has a stable form within the Church; all come under authority in the Church. The Church has at each level established forms of proclamation, and of worship. So it belongs to its nature to have established avenues through which it exercises its work of practical love. I am not sure that all Parish Councils think in this way.

Is not the political arena the only one in which practical charity can be promoted on an adequate scale? Should not the Church then become a political force in society and so make possible practical help in a way that on its own it can never hope to achieve? But the Pope rejects the idea of the Church becoming a political force, becoming a political party with its own agenda and strategy. This is far from saying that the Catholic should not take part in political life. Catholics are strongly urged to take part and make a positive contribution to their society and its needs. The task of the Church is to prepare people to do this by developing and making known its teaching on social questions and the principles that derive from this. This is the Church's contribution to the common good and to the dialogue and cooperation that are essential in society. It is not the task of the Church to provide a blueprint for the organisation of society. Catholics bring their insight into human dignity and Natural Law that they have gained in their Church life into the public arena where policies are discussed and promoted.

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