

# "GOD IS LOVE"

FIRST ENCYCLICAL BY POPE BENEDICT XVI

Presented by Sylvie PAYEUR-RAYNAULD

At the end of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, that is to say, on January 25, 2006, in the Diocese of Rome, Pope Benedict XVI made public his first encyclical entitled *God is Love*.

Speaking to the participants of a conference promoted by the Pontifical Council *Cor Unum* two days earlier, he explained, in these words, why he was proposing this text to the Catholics of the world:

"Today the word 'love' is so tarnished, so spoiled and so abused, that one is almost afraid to pronounce it... And yet, it is a primordial word, expression of the primordial reality.... We must take it up again... so that it might illuminate our life... This awareness led me to choose love as the theme of my first encyclical." (Zenit, Eng. ed., January 23, 2006)

## THE CHURCH OF JOHN

It is certainly a sign of the times that this first encyclical of Peter's successor brings us back to the Church of John. The Apostle of Love is abundantly quoted by Pope Benedict XVI, from the very beginning of the document, whence its title:

"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God and God in him" (1 Jn 4:16). These words from the *First Letter of John* express with remarkable clarity the heart of the Christian faith: the Christian image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny." (no. 1)

There are more than thirty references to St. John's writings in this encyclical (much more than the total of references to the three other Gospels), and the beloved disciple is named a dozen times by the Pope. The one who is quoted most after St. John is the Apostle Paul.

## CHRIST'S PIERCED SIDE MAKES US UNDERSTAND WHAT LOVE IS

The first part of the Encyclical presents the different meanings of the word "love" as it is used in Holy Scripture and the Church's Tradition, as well as "in the different cultures and in present-day usage". Finally, Pope Benedict XVI explains how this word is to be defined for the Christian:

"When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are not mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity. His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ [mentioned by John] (cf. 19:37), we can understand the starting-point of this Encyclical Letter: 'God is love' (1 Jn 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move." (no. 12)

## THE EUCHARIST, THE SACRAMENT OF UNITY

The Pope goes on to say that the Eu-

charist "draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation..., but now it becomes union with God..., sharing in his body and blood.... This sacramental 'mysticism' is social in character... Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself.... Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians.... Love of God and love of neighbour are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself." That is why "a Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented." (nos. 13-14)

And the Pope quoted John the Apostle: "If anyone says 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn 4:20). The love of God and the love of neighbour are so closely connected "that to say that we love God becomes a lie if we are closed to our neighbour or hate him altogether. Saint John's words should rather be interpreted to mean that love of neighbour is a path that leads to the encounter with God, and that closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God." (no. 16)

It is "God who has loved us first.... Love is 'divine' because it comes from God and unites us to God; through this unifying process it makes us a 'we' which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is 'all in all' (1 Cor 15:28)." (no. 18)

## A "COMMUNITY OF LOVE"

The second part of the encyclical is entitled "The Practice of Love by the Church as a 'Community of Love'".

After having recalled "the promise of 'rivers of living water' that would flow out of the hearts of believers, through the outpouring of the Spirit (cf. Jn 7:38-39)," the Pope states that "the Spirit is also the energy which transforms the heart of the ecclesial community, so that it becomes a witness before the world to the love of the Father, who wishes to make humanity a single family in his Son." (no. 19) — Here we find the fundamental message of the Lady of All Peoples.

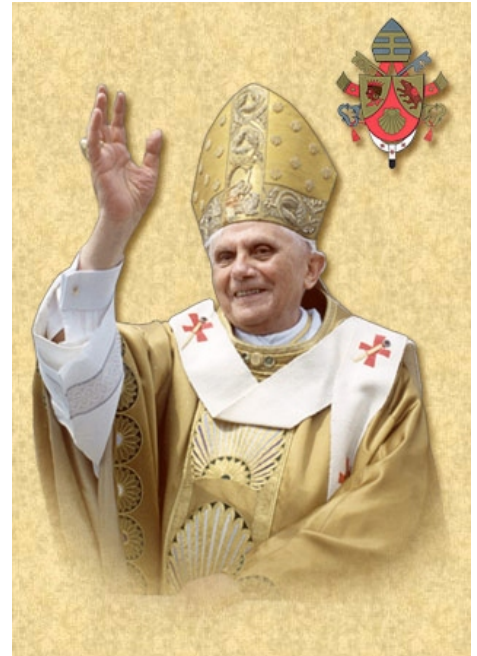
The Pope continues on with this theme: "As a community, the Church must practise love" (no. 20), which it does through the administration of the sacraments, the proclamation of the Gospel and the exercise of charity (cf. no. 22).

## CHURCH AND STATE, JUSTICE AND CHARITY

After having recalled the Church's social doctrine, Pope Benedict XVI presents what distinguishes the responsibilities of the Church from those of the State:

"The just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics. As Augustine once said, a State which is not governed according to justice would be just a bunch of thieves... Justice is both the aim and the intrinsic criterion of all politics."

Through its social doctrine, the Church "wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate



His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI

greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice... The Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason [by faith] and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically." (no. 28)

"The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society... is proper to the lay faithful.... Charity must animate the entire lives of the lay faithful and therefore also their political activity, lived as 'social charity'." (no. 29)

## "THAT THEY MAY ALL BE ONE"

Pope Benedict XVI recalled that his "great predecessor John Paul II", having asserted "the readiness of the Catholic Church to cooperate with the charitable agencies" of other ecclesial Churches and Communities, emphasized in his encyclical *Ut unum sint* (That they may all be one), "that the building of a better world requires Christians to speak with a united voice in working to inculcate 'respect for the rights and needs of everyone, especially the poor, the lowly and the defenceless.'" (no. 30)

In fact "the command of love of neighbour is inscribed by the Creator in man's very nature." Pope Benedict XVI defines the program of a Christian in this way:

"We contribute to a better world only by personally doing good now, with full commitment and wherever we have the opportunity, independently of partisan strategies and programmes. The Christian programme — the programme of the Good Samaritan, the programme of Jesus — is 'a heart which sees'. This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly.... A pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love." That is how we become "credible witnesses to Christ". (no. 31)

The Pope reminds us of St. Paul's hymn to charity (cf. 1 Cor 13): "If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing" (v. 3). This hymn must be the *Magna Carta* of all ecclesial service; it sums up all the reflections on love which I have offered throughout this Encyclical Letter. Practical activity will always be insufficient, unless it visibly expresses a love for man, a love nourished by an encounter with Christ." (no. 34)

## BEING "AN INSTRUMENT IN THE LORD'S HANDS"

After the example of Christ who "took the lowest place in the world – the Cross"–, "those who are in a position to help others... recognize that [they] are not acting on the basis of any superiority or greater personal efficiency, but because the Lord has graciously enabled [them] to do so.... In the end, we are only instruments in the Lord's hands.... It is God who governs the world, not we. We offer him our service only to the extent that we can, and for as long as he grants us the strength. To do all we can with what strength we have, however, is the task which keeps the good servant of Jesus Christ always at work: 'The love of Christ urges us on' (2 Cor 5:14)." (no. 35)

## "TO EXPERIENCE LOVE"

Pope Benedict XVI concludes the second part of his encyclical by exhorting us "to experience love": "Love is possible, and we are able to practise it because we are created in the image of God. To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world – this is the invitation I would like to extend with the present Encyclical." (no. 39)

How can we not think here of the example of our Foundress who, at the request of Heaven, wrote her *Life of Love*?

In his conclusion, the Pope mentions several saints who have been models of social charity. "The saints are the true bearers of light within history, for they

are men and women of faith, hope and love." (no. 40)

## MARY PLACES HERSELF "AT THE DISPOSAL OF GOD'S INITIATIVES"

"Outstanding among the saints is Mary, Mother of the Lord and mirror of all holiness.... [Through her Magnificat] she expresses her whole programme of life: not setting herself at the centre, but leaving space for God, who is encountered both in prayer and in service of neighbour – only then does goodness enter the world.... She knows that she will only contribute to the salvation of the world if, rather than carrying out her own projects, she places herself completely at the disposal of God's initiatives.... Her thoughts are attuned to the thoughts of God, her will is one with the will of God.... Finally, Mary is a woman who loves. How could it be otherwise? As a believer who in faith thinks with God's thoughts and wills with God's will, she cannot fail to be a woman who loves." (no. 41)

"The words addressed by the crucified Lord to his disciple – to John and through him to all disciples of Jesus: 'Behold your mother!' (Jn 19:27) – are fulfilled anew in every generation. Mary has truly become the Mother of all believers. Man and women of every time and place have recourse to her motherly kindness and her virginal purity and grace, in all their needs, their joys and sorrows, their moments of loneliness and their common endeavours. They constantly experience the gift of her

goodness and the unfailing love which she pours out from the depths of her heart....

"As a result of the most intimate union with God, [Mary's] soul is totally pervaded by him – a condition which enables those who have drunk from the fountain of God's love to become in their turn a fountain from which 'flow rivers of living water' (Jn 7:38). Mary, Virgin and Mother, shows us what love is and whence it draws its origin and its constantly renewed power. To her we entrust the Church and her mission in the service of love." (no. 42)

## THE PROGRAM OF A RENEWED CHURCH

The Holy Spirit who "breathes wherever He wills" marks out the road leading to the Church of John, the Church of Love. The themes dealt with by Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical lay out the program for a renewed Church in which justice and charity will be fully lived in obedience to God and His Laws. A mystical Church, attentive to God's voice who always speaks to us through the men and women He places at the head of the Community of Love which, one day, will become the great family of peoples.

"It is God who governs the world, not we," said Pope Benedict XVI. May we always be docile instruments in His hands.

## As a Footnote to the Encyclical "God Is Love"

"The Army of Mary is the Catholic religion lived intensely." That is how this Work has been defined from its very beginning, and its development in 35 years has been a proof of this.

The program set out by Pope Benedict XVI in his first encyclical *God Is Love* is the same program that was proposed to the members of the Community of the Lady of All Peoples.

It all began with the Army of Mary which proposed to its members an evangelical program of life based on interior reform and devotion to the Triple White: the Eucharist, Mary and the Pope. To this were added: the observance of the commandments of God, attendance at Mass daily if possible, the daily praying of the rosary and if possible of the fifteen or twenty decades, the respect of the duties of one's state, spiritual reading, and a spirit of prayer.

The Family of the Sons and Daughters of Mary came to remind each one of us that we are all members of the great family of God and of the Immaculate, and by this very fact, it promoted the family which is the basis of our society.

The Community of the Sons and Daughters of Mary attracted young people, but also some who were not so young, who desired to give themselves to God and to Mary in the religious life. The members of the Community who have worked in different dioceses throughout the world have done a remarkable job in their milieu, where they were deeply appreciated.

The Oblate-Patriots added to the Work the aspect dealing with the Church's social doctrine which the members study with a view to serving their country in the respect of God's laws.

The Marialys Institute was founded to bring together the priests who are faithful to the Pope and for the renewal of the youth.

Grouping together these five Works, the Community of the Lady of All Peoples is a full-fledged "ecclesial community" willed by God and by the Immaculate who have guided it all along its history. And if certain Church authorities have attacked this Work – Cardinal Vachon had even declared, in 1975, that he wanted to "destroy the Army of Mary and elimi-

nate its future priests" (the Sons of Mary) –, this ecclesial community has overcome all the obstacles because it was protected by God.

The Community of the Lady of All Peoples continues to form its members and to progress in the shadow of the Cross. That was the path chosen by Christ and the one He proposed to His disciples. The cross is a school of love, and we can see its blessed fruits in the life of our Foundress, Mother Paul-Marie, who, in order to live a Life of Love, accepted to be crucified at all levels: personal, family, social and ecclesial.

But, accepted in this way, the Cross blossoms one day into a sowing of glory...

January 30, 2006

**Sylvie Payeur-Raynauld**

**Note:** All the articles in this issue, except for those which bear a different signature, were written by Sylvie Payeur-Raynauld. Our sincere thanks.

The Directors



Sylvie Payeur-Raynauld

## "A Ruthless War"

I was rereading the paper *Le Royaume* of July-August 1990, and on page 9, there was the title: "The Sacred Heart: In the Wake of a Jubilee". I drew a parallel between the devotion to the Sacred Heart and the one to the Lady of All Peoples.

Here are its main elements: the devotion to the Sacred Heart added a new dimension to and brought about renewed fervor in the devotion to the Holy Eucharist. However, this devotion encountered

many obstacles. Those who know the truth must make it their duty to define it clearly when its enemies are so cleverly deforming it.

It was heaven's will that this devotion be propagated throughout the Christian universe. Initially, this "novelty" was not favorably received. Later, after much procrastination, the Church reversed its decision and gave full scope to the devotion by approving it. In spite of a ruthless war waged upon it from all sides – both from within and without the Church –, devotion

to the Sacred Heart continued to expand, slowly but surely. We learn that Margaret Mary was discredited by the calumnies concocted against her, for "no one is a prophet in his own country".

"I was forbidden to display any longer pictures of the Sacred Heart, and the most I could be permitted was to render Him some secret honor."

The same thing is happening with the devotion to the Lady of All Peoples. But May will be victorious.

**Emile Robillard**