

# FIRST THINGS

## Love, the Pope, and C.S. Lewis

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Pope Benedict XVI's 2006 encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, has two clearly distinct parts. In the first it deals with the nature of love and of charity, the highest form of love; in the second it treats the charitable activity of the Church. Most of the commentaries have focused on the second part, which raises interesting questions about the relation of Church and state, charity and justice. But the first part also merits careful study, for the encyclical is not primarily concerned with ethical problems but rather with communicating a philosophical worldview in which the Church's ethical teaching concerning love, marriage, and sexuality is intelligible.

In a famous 1908 study of the theology of love in the Middle Ages, the French Jesuit Pierre Rousselot identified two basic approaches: the more self-centered and the more altruistic. Some medieval thinkers emphasized love as desire (*amor concupiscentiae*); others emphasized love as benevolence or friendship (*amor benevolentiae* or *amor amicitiae*). Rousselot did not find two clear-cut schools in the Middle Ages, but he did find two tendencies. Theologians heavily influenced by Aristotle, such as Thomas Aquinas, argued that creatures who are imperfect continually seek to perfect themselves by embracing what is congenial to their nature. Rousselot called this theory of love "physical" in the sense of natural. The opposite theory, which emphasized self-forgetfulness and sacrifice, Rousselot called "ecstatic." He found it in certain writings of the Victorine and Cistercian schools and especially among the Franciscans (Alexander of Hales, Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus).

St. Thomas, though he exemplified the natural theory, was more successful than others in reconciling the two points of view. Taking his departure from Aristotle, he held that everything seeks its own good, but he added that God was the common good of the whole universe and that human beings, by their spiritual nature, were open to union with God. "Just because every creature belongs to God naturally by everything it is," wrote St. Thomas, "it follows that by the very movement of its nature a man or an angel must love God more than itself." Human beings, in particular, are made in the image of God and thus tend to the divine likeness as their own perfection. St. Thomas, then, while remaining fundamentally in the Aristotelian tradition, escaped the trap of egocentrism.

Some twenty years after Rousselot, the Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren gave a different analysis in his well-known book *Agape and Eros*. He agreed that there are two types of love: the self-seeking, which he called eros, and the self-giving, which he called agape. Holding that only agape was truly Christian love, he argued that such thinkers as Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, under the influence of Neoplatonism, had taken the wrong path. They improperly commingled the biblical idea of agape with the Greek philosophical idea that the soul was in quest of the divine as the supreme goal of its innate longing. Medieval theologians, therefore, mistakenly thought that God drew all things to himself by his infinite goodness. In Nygren's estimation, Augustine and the whole medieval tradition failed to grasp the true Christian idea of agape, which meant a totally free gift, unmotivated by any need or desire on the part of the recipient. For Nygren, we are faced by a clear choice between two types of love; no compromise or synthesis between eros and agape is possible.

Writing in France about 1939, Denis de Rougemont, son of a Swiss Protestant pastor, also drew a sharp contrast between eros and agape. The idea of eros as a frenzy or divine delirium, he maintained, was characteristic of the mystery religions, Plato, and the Neoplatonists. Love

as a dark passion continued to make its appearance in various forms of Manichaeism and medieval legends such as that of Tristran and Isolde. Whereas eros seeks to escape from the flesh and flee into a world beyond, agape represents God's embrace of this world and is symbolized by the marriage of Christ and the Church. De Rougemont, like Nygren, confronts us with a stark choice between eros and agape.

And yet, as Martin D'Arcy points out in his fine work *The Mind and Heart of Love*, Nygren and de Rougemont have different conceptions of both eros and agape. De Rougemont characterizes eros as an irrational passion that is always discontented with earthly and temporal existence; it moves the lover to a total surrender of self and absorption into the All. For Nygren, on the other hand, eros is an intellectual and possessive form of love. As for agape, de Rougemont sees it as an affirmation of this world and an acceptance of human limitations, including human life in its concrete conditions. Nygren, on the other hand, sees agape as an act of sovereign freedom, arbitrary in nature, totally unconcerned for human needs and values.

In summary, Christian thinkers tend to integrate the love of desire with the love of generosity or friendship. They grapple with the problem of showing how a love originating in desire can rise to the point of becoming purely disinterested and sacrificial. The Protestant thinkers we have examined set up an unbridgeable gulf between eros, as a passion arising from below, and agape, as a totally altruistic gift from on high. Catholicism, here as elsewhere, stands for a both/and; Protestantism, for an either/or.

In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict does not narrate the history of the problem but goes directly to the issues, taking eros and agape as the two principal forms of love, thus accepting the problematic of Nygren (though he reaches a different solution). He begins by distinguishing various meanings of eros. Citing Friedrich Nietzsche as a champion of eros as a passion for the infinite, he asks whether Nietzsche was right in charging that Christianity has poisoned and destroyed eros, forbidding us to taste the happiness God has prepared for us.

Nietzsche, Benedict says, is not wholly wrong. The Old Testament firmly rejects eros, if by it one means the "divine madness" that flourished in the fertility cults of ancient paganism and in rites such as temple prostitution. Biblical religion declared war on this intoxicated and undisciplined eros because, instead of elevating its votaries to the divine, it degraded them and stripped them of their dignity. Christianity equally opposes the modern tendency to equate eros with sexual and sensual self-indulgence, turning the body into a mere instrument of pleasure, an object to be bought and sold. The body in this hedonistic view is separated from the spirit and reduced to the status of a thing to be exploited at will.

Quite different, however, is the idea of eros that prevailed in classical philosophy, including in Plato and the Neoplatonists. Accepting this view in modified form, Christian spiritual writers have maintained that all men and women are born with a longing for a beatifying vision of God. They harmonize biblical passages on the ecstasies of Moses, the prophets, and Paul with the Neoplatonist mysticism that found its way into the patristic tradition.

Eros in this theological sense, according to Benedict, is not incompatible with agape. Eros inclines us to receive the gifts of God; agape impels us to pass on to others what we ourselves have received. Eros, then, corresponds to the ascending moment in the spiritual life whereby we turn to God, from whom every perfect gift descends. Eros and agape belong together as two phases of the same process. If we did not receive, we would have nothing to give; and if we were not disposed to give, we would be spiritually unprepared to receive.

In their highest expression, the two types of love reinforce each other. Contemplation of the divine gives us the spiritual strength to take upon ourselves the needs of others. Pope Gregory I explained how Moses, by engaging in dialogue with God in the tabernacle, obtained the power he needed to be of service to his people. Similarly, to become sources from which living waters flow, we must drink deeply from the wellsprings of life. The more deiform we become, the more capable we will be of agape. Conversely, the more concerned we are with service to others, the more receptive will we be to the gifts of God. This will become more evident if we examine what revelation has to tell us about the divine love, the next stage of our investigation.

For Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, God was the supreme object of love, but he was not himself a lover. Biblical revelation, however, gives us a totally different picture of God. John in his first letter makes the bold statement “God is love.” According to Christian theology, all God’s actions regarding the world are motivated and ruled by love. He does not create because of any need in himself but solely out of desire to share something of his own perfection with creatures. God’s action in salvation history is dominated by the mercy and forgiveness that proceed actively and freely from him.

Benedict describes even divine love in terms of agape and eros. The Bible makes it abundantly clear that God is and displays agape. His goodness communicates and diffuses itself. But because God lacks nothing, some theologians deny that there is anything in him corresponding to eros. The encyclical gives a more nuanced answer. It says that God’s love for man “may certainly be called eros.” (In a footnote, it cites Pseudo-Dionysius as calling God both eros and agape.) Because Scripture describes God’s love by metaphors such as betrothal and marriage, the pope thinks it important to recognize that God has a true affection for the persons he loves. But, Benedict adds, God’s eros for man is also totally agape.

The pope is careful to note that God’s love is not selfish and acquisitive. It is not the “ascending” love usually called eros. It corresponds neither to the egocentric desire described by Nygren nor to the dark passion described by de Rougemont under the name of eros. But God’s love for creatures includes an element of desire (*concupiscentia*). He lovingly wills that persons still on the way to salvation achieve the blessedness to which they are called. In saying that God’s eros is also agape, the pope recognizes that God’s desires for his creatures are for their good, not his own.

When reading the English translation, I was surprised to find that the encyclical describes God as “a lover with all the passion of true love.” After speaking of God’s “passion for his people,” it later calls God’s love “passionate.” I asked myself with some anxiety whether the pope was contradicting Thomas Aquinas and the normative theological tradition, which denies that there can be any passion or passivity in God. But, on consulting the original Latin text, I found that the pope never uses *passio* or its cognates in this context. In the passages just mentioned, he calls God’s marital affection for his people not a *passio* but a *cupiditas* (desire) that is fiery (*flagrans*), not passionate, and has the vehemence (*impetus*), not the passion, of true love.

This being said, we must recognize that the pope is on guard against allowing the realism of the Bible to be attenuated by the detachment of the philosophers. In his early book *Introduction to Christianity*, Professor Ratzinger, as he then was, charged that the philosophical idea of God was too self-centered and intellectualistic. God’s love, he contended, was not an unfeeling idea. Now, as pope, he insists that God, far from being self-

enclosed, involves himself in the world he has created. The prophets speak of God's relationship to Israel as that of a bridegroom to a bride, or a parent for a child, and the New Testament depicts Christ as the bridegroom of the Church. These metaphors imply bonds of deep affection.

It is by no means accidental, the pope believes, that Holy Scripture fixes on the metaphor of marriage to express the relationship between God and Israel and later between Christ and the Church. Among creatures, he declares, eros begins with a kind of passionate seeking but leads on to a communion with the other that can satisfy the lover's craving and supply what the lover lacked. The Song of Songs was accepted into the Hebrew canon because it was read as an allegory of the soul's mystical marriage with God. Marriage could not fulfill its purpose except by being a permanent and exclusive bond, making the two lovers "one flesh." "Marriage based on exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love."

The extravagance of God's love, according to *Deus Caritas Est*, is dramatically shown forth in the Incarnation and Redemption. "God so loved the world," says St. John, "that he gave his only Son." The gospel parables express the way in which God goes in search of the lost sheep. The death of Jesus on the cross is love in its most radical form.

Pope Benedict notes that as love grows it becomes less covetous and more concerned with the good of the other. The first and greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might. Our love of God must be continually purified. In order to love God with a pure, unselfish love surpassing our affection for any creature, we need the help of divine grace. Love of God in the sense of friendship with him could not be commanded unless it were first given. Twice in his encyclical, the pope refers to the statement in John's first letter, "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins."

Besides emphasizing the priority of grace, *Deus Caritas Est* is remarkable for the emphasis it places on the palpability of God's love as it comes to us through the Incarnate Word. This emphasis is also characteristically Johannine. John in his first letter speaks of how he and others have seen and heard the Word of Life whom he proclaims. Benedict dwells on the many ways in which God makes himself tangibly present to us: through the love story encountered in the Bible, through the public life of Jesus culminating in the mystery of the cross, through Christ's risen life; through the saints who reflect his loving presence; through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist; and through the Church's whole life of prayer and worship. All these manifestations of God's extravagant love for us evoke on our part a response of generous and grateful love for him.

In the final sections of Part I, Benedict speaks of the ways in which the mutual love between God and humanity results in new relationships of love within the human family. Jesus links the first commandment given in Deuteronomy with the commandment to love one's neighbor given in Leviticus. The two commandments, says Pope Benedict, are so intertwined that they become one.

St. Thomas Aquinas, who works in terms of an Aristotelian virtue ethics, explains that charity is a single infused virtue but that it expresses itself in two distinct acts: love of God and love of neighbor. God is to be loved simply because of himself, but creatures are to be loved

because they actually or potentially reflect divine perfections or because they are means that lead to God.

Working more from Scripture and experience, Pope Benedict reaches similar conclusions. Love of God and neighbor, he says, support each other. Religion becomes rigid and formalistic if it is divorced from communion with our neighbors. Relations with our neighbors, conversely, have no depth unless we can find in them the image of God. If we have learned to encounter others based on a genuine communion with God, we can truly love those whom we do not like or even know. We become capable of looking on them from the perspective of Jesus Christ and, as it were, with his eyes. Thinking and willing in union with the Lord, we experience a spiritual communion of minds and hearts with others who are also in communion with him.

Love of neighbor and love of God are most strikingly realized in the Church as the body of Christ. The sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist are social in nature. Besides uniting us vertically, as it were, with Christ, they unite us horizontally with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Holy Communion draws us out of ourselves and thus toward union with all other Christians. In the words of Saint Paul, “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.” It is impossible, says Benedict, to possess Christ simply for ourselves, for we belong to him only in company with all who have ever belonged to him. Every authentic celebration of the Eucharist therefore passes over into concrete acts of love.

Part I of the encyclical ends on this note. The concluding sentence reads, “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).

*Deus Caritas Est*, in its first part, maps out the elements of a rather complete theology of love. In my estimation, the encyclical should be classified as a theological rather than a philosophical document. The sources it cites as authorities are for the most part biblical and patristic. When it cites philosophers, it does not treat them as authorities. It speaks of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, but in each case the purpose is to point out how they failed to attain the full truth of biblical revelation. Patristic theologians such as Augustine, Gregory I, and Pseudo-Dionysius, by contrast, are always cited with the intention of reaffirming their views.

Interestingly, the encyclical makes no reference to scholastic authors, not even to Thomas Aquinas. The pope does not disagree with St. Thomas, so far as I can see, but he concentrates on the biblical and patristic roots, perhaps to make his theology more accessible. It is also noteworthy that the encyclical does not mention modern scholars who have traced what they have called the “problem of love” in its medieval and modern history. The pope, I suspect, does not wish to embroil himself in the scholarly disputes between Protestants and Catholics, or even among Catholics themselves. On the whole, his position resembles that of Rousselot, but he does not mention Rousselot or follow his debatable reading of St. Thomas and the medieval tradition.

Benedict instead moves the question forward by showing that the positive features of eros and agape can be combined in the highest expressions of human and divine love. In order to effect this synthesis, he is of course required to exclude certain sensual and demonic forms of eros. Although some authors prefer to say that God’s love is not erotic, the pope prefers to assert

that eros in God coincides with agape.

A further question is whether the reality of love is exhausted by eros and agape. Pope Benedict mentions a third Greek term, *philia* (“friendship”), but he does not indicate whether it is reducible to the other two. In his well-known 1960 book, *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis has chapters not only on eros and agape but also on friendship, which he treats as a distinct species of love. Friends, he says, are not oriented primarily toward one another, as lovers are, but toward a common task or area of interest. Erotic love is exclusive and jealous, whereas friendship is open and inclusive. Two friends are normally pleased to find a third and a fourth to join them.

Aristotle and other ancient philosophers praised friendship as the highest form of love. Cicero, among others, wrote a treatise on it, as did medieval authors such as Aelred of Rievaulx. In the gospels, Jesus calls his disciples friends and expects them to be ready, as friends must be, to lay down their lives for one another. The virtue of friendship has fallen into neglect since the rise of the romantic theory of love in the nineteenth century. Even today, friendship is little esteemed. Friendship with persons of the same sex, Lewis remarks, is sometimes disparaged as a hidden form of homosexuality. But Lewis shows that the properties of friendship and sexual love are very different, even contrary to each other. Perhaps, at some future time, Benedict will supplement *Deus Caritas Est* with a deeper examination of friendship.

The doctrine of the encyclical could also be developed by a discussion of the Latin term *caritas*, which appears in the title but is absent in the first part of the encyclical, except in several quotations from Scripture. For Augustine, St. Thomas, and their followers, *caritas*, or charity, is the highest form of love. It is an infused theological virtue, inclining us to love God and our neighbor with an affection that is a participation in the love proper to God.

C.S. Lewis communicates the same idea in less technical language. Eros and agape (which he prefers to designate as “Need-love” and “Gift-love”) can exist, he says, on either the natural or the supernatural plane. When, with God’s help, our Need-love rises to the point where we recognize our total dependence on God’s love for us, it can become a form of charity. And so likewise, when our Gift-love is so graced that it goes out to include persons who are naturally unattractive and unlovable, it deserves to be called charity in this theological sense of the word. Pope Benedict, it seems, has something similar in mind when he says that love at its most perfect combines in itself the qualities of eros and agape.

At the end of *The Four Loves*, Lewis makes an important statement that he does not develop at the length it deserves: Grace can arouse in us a higher kind of love than either eros or agape as he understands them. God, according to Lewis, “can awake in man, towards Himself, a supernatural appreciative love. This is of all gifts the most to be desired. Here, not in our natural loves, nor even in ethics, lies the true center of all human and angelic life.”

Earlier in the book, Lewis had drawn a helpful contrast among three forms of love: “Need-love cries out to God from our poverty; Gift-love longs to serve, or even to suffer for, God; Appreciative love says ‘We give thanks to thee for thy great glory.’ “ Corresponding to what the Scholastics called *amor complacentiae*, it rejoices in the consummate perfection of the divine. As Lewis’ citation from the Gloria indicates, the Church’s earthly liturgy contains anticipations of the hymns of the angels before the throne of God. They no longer seek from him anything that they do not have, nor do they intend to give him anything he might desire. They worship and praise him with loud hosannas, not because they thereby benefit either God

or themselves but simply to express their love.

In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI makes no mention of appreciative love, nor does he discuss the love of the saints in heaven. Nevertheless, from his writings on the liturgy, one may suspect that he would be open to the idea that *caritas* tends to an eschatological fulfillment that, in the opinion of Lewis, transcends the earthly realizations of *eros* and *agape* alike.

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