



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 9 August 2006*

John, the theologian

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Before the holidays I had begun sketching small portraits of the Twelve Apostles. The Apostles were Jesus' travelling companions, Jesus' friends. Their journey with Jesus was not only a physical journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, but an interior journey during which they learned faith in Jesus Christ, not without difficulty, for they were people like us.

But for this very reason, because they were Jesus' travelling companions, Jesus' friends, who learned faith on a journey that was far from easy, they are also guides for us, who help us to know Jesus Christ, to love him and to have faith in him.

I have already commented on four of the Twelve Apostles: Simon Peter; Andrew, his brother; James, the brother of St John; and the other James, known as "The Lesser", who wrote a Letter that we find in the New Testament. And I had started to speak about John the Evangelist, gathering together in the last Catechesis before the holidays the essential facts for this Apostle's profile.

I would now like to focus attention on the content of his teaching. The writings that we want to examine today, therefore, are the Gospel and the Letters that go under his name.

If there is one characteristic topic that emerges from John's writings, it is love. It is not by chance that I wanted to begin [my first Encyclical Letter](#) with this Apostle's words, "God is love (*Deus caritas est*); he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4: 16). It is very

difficult to find texts of this kind in other religions. Thus, words such as these bring us face to face with an element that is truly peculiar to Christianity.

John, of course, is not the only author of Christian origin to speak of love. Since this is an essential constituent of Christianity, all the New Testament writers speak of it, although with different emphases.

If we are now pausing to reflect on this subject in John, it is because he has outlined its principal features insistently and incisively. We therefore trust his words. One thing is certain: he does not provide an abstract, philosophical or even theological treatment of what love is.

No, he is not a theoretician. True love, in fact, by its nature is never purely speculative but makes a direct, concrete and even verifiable reference to real persons. Well, John, as an Apostle and a friend of Jesus, makes us see what its components are, or rather, the phases of Christian love, a movement marked by three moments.

The first concerns the very Source of love which the Apostle identifies as God, arriving at the affirmation that "God is love" (I Jn 4: 8, 16). John is the only New Testament author who gives us definitions of God. He says, for example, that "God is spirit" (Jn 4: 24) or that "God is light" (I Jn 1: 5). Here he proclaims with radiant insight that "God is love".

Take note: it is not merely asserted that "God loves", or even less that "love is God"! In other words: John does not limit himself to describing the divine action but goes to its roots.

Moreover, he does not intend to attribute a divine quality to a generic and even impersonal love; he does not rise from love to God, but turns directly to God to define his nature with the infinite dimension of love.

By so doing, John wants to say that the essential constituent of God is love and hence, that all God's activity is born from love and impressed with love: all that God does, he does out of love and with love, even if we are not always immediately able to understand that this is love, true love.

At this point, however, it is indispensable to take another step and explain that God has concretely demonstrated his love by entering human history through the Person of Jesus Christ, incarnate, dead and risen for us.

This is the second constitutive moment of God's love. He did not limit himself to verbal declarations but, we can say, truly committed himself and "paid" in the first person.

Exactly as John writes, "God so loved the world", that is, all of us, "that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3: 16). Henceforth, God's love for humanity is concretized and manifested in the love of Jesus

himself.

Again, John writes: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn 13: 1). By virtue of this oblation and total love we are radically ransomed from sin, as St John writes further: "My little children... if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (I Jn 2: 1-2; cf. I Jn 1: 7).

This is how Jesus' love for us reaches us: by the pouring out of his own Blood for our salvation! The Christian, pausing in contemplation before this "excess" of love, cannot but wonder what the proper response is. And I think each one of us, always and over and over again, must ask himself or herself this.

This question introduces us into the third moment of the dynamic of love: from being the recipients of a love that precedes and surpasses us, we are called to the commitment of an active response which, to be adequate, can only be a response of love.

John speaks of a "commandment". He is, in fact, referring to these words of Jesus: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (Jn 13: 34).

Where is the newness to which Jesus refers? It lies in the fact that he is not content with repeating what had already been requested in the Old Testament and which we also read in the other Gospels: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lv 19: 18; cf. Mt 22: 37-39; Mk 12: 29-31; Lk 10: 27).

In the ancient precept the standard criterion was based on man ("as yourself"), whereas in the precept to which John refers, Jesus presents his own Person as the reason for and norm of our love: "as I have loved you".

It is in this way that love becomes truly Christian: both in the sense that it must be directed to all without distinction, and above all since it must be carried through to its extreme consequences, having no other bounds than being boundless.

Those words of Jesus, "as I have loved you", simultaneously invite and disturb us; they are a Christological goal that can appear unattainable, but at the same time they are an incentive that does not allow us to ensconce ourselves in what we have been able to achieve. It does not permit us to be content with what we are but spurs us to keep advancing towards this goal.

In *The Imitation of Christ*, that golden text of spirituality which is the small book dating back to the late Middle Ages, on this subject is written: "The love of Jesus is noble and generous: it spurs us

on to do great things, and excites us to desire always that which is most perfect. Love will tend upwards and is not to be detained by things beneath. Love will be at liberty and free from all worldly affections... for love proceeds from God and cannot rest but in God above all things created. The lover flies, runs and rejoices, he is free and not held. He gives all for all and has all in all, because he rests in one sovereign good above all, from whom all good flows and proceeds" (Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book III, Chapter V, 3-4).

What better comment could there be on the "new commandment" spelled out by John? Let us pray to the Father to be able, even if always imperfectly, to live it so intensely that we share it with those we meet on our way.

To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the groups from Scotland, Ghana, China, India, Korea and Canada. May your pilgrimage renew your love for the Lord and his Church, after the example of the Apostle St John. May God bless you all!

Appeal for peace in the Middle East

My ardent thoughts go once again to the beloved region of the Middle East. With regard to the tragic conflict under way, I propose anew the words of Pope Paul VI to the United Nations Organization in October 1965. On that occasion he said: "No more against one another, no more, never again!... If you want to be brothers and sisters, let the weapons fall from your hands".

In the face of the efforts being made to obtain a ceasefire and a just and lasting solution to the conflict, I repeat, with my immediate Predecessor the great Pope John Paul II, that it is possible to change the course of events when reason, good will, trust in others, fidelity to commitments and cooperation between responsible partners prevail (cf. *Address to Diplomatic Corps*, 13 January 2003; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 15 January, n. 5, p. 4). What John Paul II said then, also applies today, to everyone. I renew to all the exhortation to intensify prayer in order to obtain the gift of desired peace.

Lastly, as usual, I address a greeting to you, dear *young people*, *sick people* and *newly-weds*. Today, we are celebrating the Feast of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, Co-Patroness of Europe. May this heroic witness of the Gospel help each one of you to always have trust in Christ and to incarnate his message of salvation in your own lives.

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