



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS AT THE MEETING PROMOTED
BY THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL "COR UNUM"**

*Sala Clementina
Monday, 23 January 2006*

*Your Eminences,
Your Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

The cosmic excursion in which Dante, in his "Divine Comedy", wishes to involve the reader, ends in front of the perennial Light that is God himself, before that Light which is at the same time *"the love that moves the sun and the other stars"* (Par. XXXIII, v. 145). Light and love are one and the same. They are the primordial creative powers that move the universe.

If these words in Dante's *Paradiso* betray the thought of Aristotle, who saw in the *eros* the power that moves the world, Dante nevertheless perceives something completely new and inconceivable for the Greek philosopher. Not only that the eternal Light is shown in three circles which Dante addresses using those terse verses familiar to us: *"O everlasting Light, you dwell alone/In yourself, know yourself alone, and known/And knowing, love and smile upon yourself!"* (Par. XXXIII, vv. 124-126).

As a matter of fact, even more overwhelming than this revelation of God as a trinitarian circle of knowledge and love, is the perception of a human face - the face of Jesus Christ - which, to Dante, appears in the central circle of the Light. God, infinite Light, whose immeasurable mystery the Greek philosopher perceived, this God has a human face and - we may add - a human heart.

This vision of Dante reveals, on the one hand, the continuity between Christian faith in God and the search developed by reason and by the world of religions; on the other, however, a novelty appears that surpasses all human research, the novelty that only God himself can reveal to us:

the novelty of a love that moved God to take on a human face, even to take on flesh and blood, the entire human being.

The *eros* of God is not only a primordial cosmic power; it is love that created man and that bows down over him, as the Good Samaritan bent down to the wounded and robbed man, lying on the side of the road that went down from Jerusalem to Jericho.

Today, the word "love" is so spoiled, worn out and abused that one almost fears to pronounce it. And yet, it is a fundamental word, an expression of the primordial reality. We cannot simply abandon it, but we must take it up again, purify it and bring it to its original splendour so that it can illumine our life and guide it on the right path.

This is the understanding that led me to choose "love" as the theme of my first Encyclical. I wanted to try to express for our time and our existence some of what Dante boldly summed up in his vision. He tells of a "*sight*" that "*was altering*" as he "gazed on" it and was being interiorly changed (cf. Par. XXXIII, vv. 112-114).

It is precisely this: faith becomes a vision-understanding that transforms us. It was my aim to shed light on the centrality of faith in God; in that God who took on a human face and heart.

Faith is not a theory that can be personalized or even set aside. It is something very concrete: it is the criteria that determines our lifestyle. In an epoch where hostility and greed have become superpowers, an epoch where we support the abuse of religion to the point of deifying hatred, neutral rationality alone cannot protect us. We need the living God, who loved us even to death. And so, in this Encyclical, the themes "God", "Christ" and "Love" are fused together as the central guide of Christian faith. I wanted to reveal the humanity of faith, of which *eros* is a part; the "yes" of man to his bodiliness created by God, a "yes" that in an indissoluble matrimony between man and woman finds its form rooted in creation.

And here it also happens that the *eros* is transformed into *agape*: that love for the other which is no longer self-seeking but becomes concern for the other, ready to sacrifice for him or her and also open to the gift of a new human life.

Christian *agape*, love of neighbour in the following of Christ, is nothing foreign to, situated alongside of or even against the *eros*; on the contrary, in the sacrifice that Christ made of himself for man he discovered a new dimension which, in the history of charitable dedication of Christians to the poor and suffering, it has developed all the more.

A first reading of the Encyclical could possibly give the impression that it is divided into two parts that are not very connected: a first part, theoretical, which speaks about the essence of love, and a second, which speaks of ecclesial charity and charitable organizations.

I was particularly interested, however, in the unity of the two themes that are well understood only if seen as a whole. From the beginning it was necessary to speak of the essence of love as it is presented to us in the light of biblical testimony. Starting from the Christian image of God, it was necessary to show how man is created for love and how this love, which initially appears above all as the *eros* between man and woman, must then be interiorly transformed into *agape*, into gift of self to the other; and this, precisely to respond to the true nature of the *eros*.

On this basis, then, the essence of the love of God and neighbour as described in the Bible is shown to be the centre of Christian existence, the result of faith.

Subsequently, however, in the second part it became necessary to stress that the totally personal act of *agape* can never remain as something isolated, but must instead become also an essential act of the Church as community: meaning that it also requires an institutional form which is expressed in the communal working of the Church.

The ecclesial organization of charity is not a form of social assistance that is casually added to the Church's reality, an initiative that could also be left to others. Instead, it is part of the nature of the Church.

As the divine *Logos* corresponds to the human announcement, the word of faith, so must the *Agape*, who is God, correspond to the *agape* of the Church, her charitable activity. This activity, beyond the first very concrete meaning of helping one's neighbour, also essentially means that of communicating to others God's love, which we ourselves have received. It must make the living God in some way visible.

In charitable organization, God and Christ must not be foreign words; in reality, they indicate the original source of ecclesial charity. The strength of *Caritas* depends on the strength of the faith of all the members and collaborators.

The sight of a suffering human being touches our heart. But charitable commitment has a meaning that goes well beyond simple philanthropy. It is God himself who moves us interiorly to relieve misery. And so, after all, it is he himself whom we bring to the suffering world.

The more consciously and clearly we bring him as a gift, the more effectively will our love change the world and reawaken hope: a hope that goes beyond death. And only in this way is it true hope for man.

I hope that the Lord will bless your Symposium.

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