CARITAS DEUS NON EST
Reflections on the Insufficiency of Christian Love

One might suppose that Pope Benedict XVI's Encyclical on Christian Love (***DEUS CARITAS EST***) would be of interest only to those who believe, whether firmly or vaguely, in the God of Christianity. But it must in fact also be of interest to all those who believe in love, again whether firmly or vaguely. A critical examination of this well-formulated restatement of traditional beliefs and understandings can throw light on both the nature of love and the nature of religion, and help us guard against fatal misapprehensions.

I.

The Encyclical addresses with refreshing frankness and directness the issue of whether love is one or many: "... [W]e speak of love of country, love of one's profession, love between friends, love of work, love between parents and children, love between family members, love of neighbour and love of God. Amid this multiplicity of meanings, however, one in particular stands out: love between man and woman, ...". And later: "We began by asking whether the different, or even opposed, meanings of the word “love” point to some profound underlying unity, or whether on the contrary they must remain unconnected, one alongside the other." There is also a historical discussion of the words used in Antiquity (eros, philia, agape) and the adoption of the last of these words by the scriptures.

The issue for those of us who stand outside the Christian faith is whether subsuming this vast range of meanings of the word "love" in a single concept is helpful for our understanding, or whether it is a hindrance. Not that we could easily dismiss the word love from our discourse, but we could go over to using it less liberally. Moreover, we have a multitude of alternatives for expressing the substance of love in the various contexts. One might be committed to one's country; be at ease with oneself in one's profession; appreciate one's friends, perceiving them to be an important part of one's life, both day-to-day and across the years; one might enjoy one's work, care for and give priority to one's children or parents, be affectionate to family members and maintain good terms with neighbours. Spelling out precisely what is involved in these different contexts surely requires rather more reflection than simply applying the epithet love. It might on the other hand seem that love, properly speaking, involves rather more in the various contexts than the

ready-made descriptions I have given. But it could also be that often we deceive ourselves: In erotic situations people may speak of love when they mean desire. Patriotism turns to an unwholesome nationalism, while neighbours may best be embraced at a distance. Focus may be a form of fascination, but fascination need not be kind or indeed welcome.

The question can be put differently: If we did not have the word love to cover what might be experienced in the great variety of contexts outlined above, would we ever want to invent this word? If psychologists or philosophers argued for some grand concept to link the different experiences and attitudes, would we be convinced and want to take up the concept and a corresponding term into the general language? The question is less theoretical than it seems. Generally speaking, other languages and cultures, untainted by the Christian tradition, do not render a single word or concept as their equivalent of "love", preferring instead different words to denote the loving relationships which exist in various roles (parental, marital, friendship, etc.).

Or the question can be put differently again: Is it not the case that to use the one word love to describe what is experienced or intended in all the many contexts is to speak at best metaphorically, and at worst loosely? Is not "love" often a cliché for those too lazy or cowardly to express themselves clearly?

Benedict would concur with this last objection: "Today, the term “love” has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words, a word to which we attach quite different meanings."

Yet (predictably, he is after all the Pope) Benedict still wants to keep the word. He could, theoretically, jetisson the modern word love and its equivalents in other modern (European) languages, and propose that the Christian concept be termed *agape* or, to take the Latin of the title of the Encyclical, *caritas*. This would, granted, not have the same ring to it. Indeed, a close examination of the wording in the English translation of the second part of the Encyclical betrays sleights of hand, with now the one, now the other word being used.

"Love—*caritas*—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society. There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love.

Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such. There will always be suffering which cries out for consolation and help. There will always be loneliness. There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable."

Consider what is being said here, and how it relates to love in its various senses.

i) Even in the most just society, something more will prove necessary (sometimes or continuously, depending on how the word "always" is meant). The more that will prove necessary is practical help, or human attention and warmth, or both of these elements together.

ii) "There is no ordering of the State so just that it can eliminate the need for a service of love." The expression "service of love" is an ecclesial, or theological, expression: in ordinary language, it does not make sense (it is self-contradictory): It would be straining the expression to make it mean something different, such as "practical help with a smile".

The sentence as a whole seems to be saying that the nature of the State and the nature of justice are such that certain human concerns always fall outside their sphere (some human concerns are not the proper object of the State). Which is certainly the case. But this does not mean that the Church and its Faithful have a monopoly in the addressing of those concerns. The sentence is presumably not saying that the attempt (to "eliminate the need for a service of love") is doomed to fail due to the impracticability of the enterprise.

iii) "Whoever wants to eliminate love is preparing to eliminate man as such."

In its context, this seems to be a rhetorical condemnation of anyone seeking to construct a perfectly just society and the perfect bureaucracy it would require. It seems to say that the nature of man is such that something essential would be lacking in a perfectly just society. There is indeed an age-old conflict between the principle of justice and the quality of love, and it is a conflict that can occur both within an individual and within society, in which latter case we observe persons and factions who struggle in a public arena, with now one, now the other side (like right and left) taking the upper hand.

See what happens to this sentence if we replace the word love by others:

(a) Whoever wants to eliminate *a charitable frame of mind (a generosity of spirit)* is preparing to eliminate man as such.

(b) Whoever wants to eliminate *almsgiving* is preparing to eliminate man as such.

(c) Whoever wants to eliminate *freedom* is preparing to eliminate man as such.

(a) would seem closest to the statement that Benedict wanted to make. It fits in with his argument, and makes, if somewhat rhetorically, indeed clumsily, a substantial claim the essence of which we could all agree on. But fewer would concur with (b).

By using the word "love" instead of charity or almsgiving, Benedict is canvassing our assent to a standpoint which some of us would not necessarily assent to if he had spelled out his thoughts.

Sentence (c) helps us to see the structure of the original statement. Freedom, like love, is something you can have more or less of. Some might argue that one can have too much freedom, but not too much love. (I am not so sure, though it would odd not to concur that one might have too little love, or too little freedom.)

iv) "There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable." Why does Benedict use the word love here? No-one disputes: "There will always be situations of material need where concrete help from neighbours (or passers-by) is indispensable."

II.

The point here is not to criticise a particular formulation (there is inevitably a measure of redundancy and inexactitude in a piece of prose, if it is to read well, and in any case, we are presumably examining the Encyclical in translation, although it is not clear what it is a translation from: German, Italian, Latin?). The point is that the Encyclical uses specific expressions (such as "love of neighbour") which leverage the word love when what is meant in context is something quite banal, that ordinarily would be expressed accurately without recourse to the word love. The Vatican might well have given a briefing to a public relations company and specified that the word "love" was to be used as much as possible, i.e. even when other terms would be more idiomatic or clearer. "Love", despite its frequent abuse, remains a powerful word, which is to say that it retains great emotive force. If you want to win someone over, see that you bring the word "love" into play. With luck, they won't notice the semantic substance shifting as they are seduced by the rhetoric.

"There will always be situations of material need where help in the form of concrete love of neighbour is indispensable." The sub-text is: "Who can deny that Christian love is indispensible?" And so the hijacking of the common word love proceeds surreptiously.

One can take the analysis a step further. There is one word that the Encyclical, unsurprisingly, uses even more than Love, and that is God. As I am examining the Encyclical from the perspective of an infidel, for me and my fellow atheists if not agnostics all the talk of God is irrelevent and I have left it out of account. My concern is that the Christian churches (i.e. not just this one) propagate a certain conception of love that has a great influence on people throughout Western society (and increasingly across the wider world) whether they consider themselves to be Christians or not. My standpoint is that that conception is confused and confusing, and that consequently it is harmful. But, it might be argued, this is because it is taken out of context. Similarly, I might be charged with amputating the Christian concept of love, embedded as it is in talk of God and Faith, and then complaining that the limb is dysfunctional.

There is a straightforward reply to this charge, and a subtle one. First the straight reply. The Church has a word that says precisely what it means, and that word is caritas. True, it is not a common English word, but it is easy to pronounce, and the Church has not otherwise shied away from obscure terms to denote thoughts that are unfamiliar to non-Christians. (The Encyclical uses without explanation several times the word oblative, which you'll not find in every dictionary, not even. e.g. in the massive – 2003 – edition of the Oxford Dictionary of English.) The word caritas has, of course, often also been translated as charity, but this noun has come to mean commonly something akin to almsgiving and has lost much of the connotation that is still found more readily in the adjective charitable, as used to describe someone who is lenient in their judgement. If nonetheless it has pleased the Church to insist on the word Love, this has much to do with the prestige of that ancient Germanic word (related distantly to libido).

The subtle reply involves seeing religious language as a language apart, reflecting a whole form of life and thought which is not readily translatable into secular speech. On this understanding, a word such as

God is inextricably bound up with a host of other ideas and practices, maybe what Wittgenstein termed a form of life. But there has nonetheless to be a bridge between the secular vision and the religious (in this case, the Catholic) one. The bridge that the Church is keen to use is precisely the word Love. The strategy is to straitjacket this charismatic word into the language of theology and hence make it the word of God.

But our question, i.e. the challenge posed by us infidels, is whether the form of life and the interwined language are attractive, persuasive, coherent; in a word, whether they have the ring of truth, the feel of authenticity, the promise of salvation (whatever you may hope from salvation). And whereas there may be something to be said for the form of life; i.e. the sacraments beginning with regular holy communion, the communal nature of this sacrifical rite, the adherence to a sometimes rigid and often vague moral code, a belief in the virtue of suffering (as symbolised by the Cross), the preference of one set of texts (the scriptures and the liturgy) over and above the wider canon of literature; one might equally choose to seek one's own salvation and authenticity along other paths, using other landmarks, signs and reminders.

Here the debate shifts from the focus on a few key concepts to a broader conception, more aesthetic than moral or logical, and it is here doubtless that the controversy will be decided in the wider world.

III.

What is the nature of the personal love that is extolled by the Christian tradition? Benedict gives an analysis of a change in tone that occurs in the course of the Song of Songs:

> By contrast with an indeterminate, “searching” love, this word [a Hebrew word similar to agape] expresses the experience of a love which involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier. Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice.
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> It is part of love's growth towards higher levels and inward purification that it now seeks to become definitive, and it does so in a twofold sense: both in the sense of exclusivity (this particular person alone) and in the sense of being “for ever”.

There are many ideas here, which we need to distinguish. In particular, as I interpret the train of thought:

- Love becomes a concern for the other, (i.e. a feeling, a sentiment).
- Love becomes care for the other, (i.e. action).
- Love seeks the good of the beloved (close to moralism)
- Love becomes renunciation (a turning away; but from what?)
- Love is ready for sacrifice (making a hard choice, or seeking to pacify a magical power?)
- The growth and inward purification of love lead to a focus on the particular person who is loved, i.e. love becomes exclusive. (I.e to the exclusion of others.)
- Love is "for ever" (and ever; i.e. ceases to be dynamic).

These elements, even without my asides, are not a logical or inevitable sequence; they are more like episodes that might constitute a particular story, a story which, although perhaps compelling, could also have run differently.

One element to bear in mind in particular is the idea of love becoming exclusive. This would seem to conflict with the idea later developed of "love of neighbour" – a love that is extended indiscriminately. Of course, the conflict might be resolved easily by speaking of different categories of love, perhaps by using two distinct words, but this resolution is avoided. The conflict could also be alleviated by speaking of different levels of intensity. But love is surely, by definition, of a certain intensity. It would be an abuse of the word to understand it to mean merely being well-disposed towards a person.

to be continued