

BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est***INTRODUCTION**

1. "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides 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. In the same verse, Saint John also offers a kind of summary of the Christian life: "We have come to know and to believe in the love God has for us".

We have come to believe in God's love: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Saint John's Gospel describes that event in these words: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should ... have eternal life" (3:16). In acknowledging the centrality of love, Christian faith has retained the core of Israel's faith, while at the same time giving it new depth and breadth. The pious Jew prayed daily the words of the *Book of Deuteronomy* which expressed the heart of his existence: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might" (6:4-5). Jesus united into a single precept this commandment of love for God and the commandment of love for neighbour found in the *Book of Leviticus*: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (19:18; cf. *Mk 12:29-31*). Since God has first loved us (cf. *1 Jn 4:10*), love is now no longer a mere "command"; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us.

In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant. For this reason, I wish in my first Encyclical to speak of the love which God lavishes

upon us and which we in turn must share with others. That, in essence, is what the two main parts of this Letter are about, and they are profoundly interconnected. The first part is more speculative, since I wanted here—at the beginning of my Pontificate—to clarify some essential facts concerning the love which God mysteriously and gratuitously offers to man, together with the intrinsic link between that Love and the reality of human love. The second part is more concrete, since it treats the ecclesial exercise of the commandment of love of neighbour. The argument has vast implications, but a lengthy treatment would go beyond the scope of the present Encyclical. I wish to emphasize some basic elements, so as to call forth in the world renewed energy and commitment in the human response to God's love.

Franciscan Prayer – Ilia Delio OFS pgs 183-185

The problem today is that we love many things—our freedom, independence, financial wealth, status, power and whatever else our culture tells us will make us happy; thus, there is little room within us to fully embrace God. God, in a sense, has to push through all the things that clutter our lives in order to dwell within us. Franciscan prayer calls us back to poverty, penance, conversion and a heart full of mercy, values and attitudes that are counter-cultural but life-giving. Only when we acknowledge our need for God can we begin to find God. Prayer begins in the poverty of the desert and is the cry of the poor person who is far from home and seeks the way to the source of life.

The mark of our relationship with God is freedom. Franciscan prayer reminds us that God loves us freely and calls us to love freely. We are not forced to become the body of Christ, we are invited by God's grace into the banquet of life. It is precisely for this reason that Christian life is obscure today in western culture. We have so many other invitations to consider, it is difficult to discern the invitation of a humble God bent over in love. Our tendency, therefore, is to participate in the rituals of prayer and worship with little extra effort. We do what is perfunctory and then we expect God to do the rest. The Franciscan path of prayer, centered on the Incarnation, tells us that God

Con't

is with us, but will not bring about the fullness of life without us. *Our complete participation is required.* We are not simply to pray—we are to become prayer—living flames of love that ignite the world. Fire is a constant image in the writings of Bonaventure primarily because it represented for him the intensity of love. Love is attractive, and living in the intensity of love is alluring, but when we come to understand the demands of love we withdraw our resolution to pray. We fear the demands of love and prefer mediocre lives that remain unfulfilled. We prefer the safety and comfort of individualism and isolationism than the risk of relationship. For love, like prayer, is relational. Only when we attain a deep relationship with God can we dare to love in a way that is transforming. Prayer is to lead us into the depths of transforming love, so that the image in which we are created can shine out as the presence of God among us, and we can proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ: “This is my body, this is my blood”—not with words but with the example of our lives.

At the heart of it all, Franciscan prayer is about gospel living. It is not really concerned with knowledge or intellectual contemplation. It is concerned with the human person and the transformation of the human person in God. It is about living Christ and making the Good News of the Incarnation alive. How desperately this path of prayer is needed in our world today! We seek healing of divisions, hate and violence. We desire wholeness, unity and peace. How shall these things come about? Are they merely ideas or values that must be given flesh and blood? To live the gospel is to put flesh and blood on God and proclaim throughout the universe, the glory of God is fully alive! Without flesh and blood, the Good News that God has become human and healed the divisions of humankind and all creation is not news at all. Christian life demands human participation or it simply does not exist. It is an empty title in a broken world. If we desire justice, peace and love among humankind and throughout creation, then we humans must become justice, peace and love. This is the Good News of Jesus Christ and the Good News of being Christian—to live in the depths of God’s faithful love in a way that resounds throughout all creation. The path of Franciscan prayer is a way to live fully the Gospel life by living fully

in the mystery of Christ. We must descend with Christ into the darkness of our humanity so that we may rise with Christ in the unity of love. In a world marked by violence and death, suffering does not have the last word. The last word is love and that love is the fullness of Christ, the Word of God.

O God,
 I pray that I may know You and love You
 So as eternally to rejoice in You.
 And if, in the present life, I cannot do so fully,
 Grant that my love and knowledge may at least grow on earth
 That my joy may be fully in heaven:
 A joy expected here and there fulfilled.
 O Lord our Father,
 You counseled, or rather commanded through Your Son,
 That we ask for this fullness of joy, and You promised to grant it.
 I ask of You, O Lord, that which, through Your Wonder-Counselor,
 You encouraged us to ask and promised to grant:
 That our joy may be full!
 Let my mind meditate on this joy, my tongue speak of it,
 My heart desire it, my words extol it,
 My soul hunger for it, my flesh thirst for it,
 My whole substance yearn for it,
 Until I enter into the joy of my God
 Who is Triune and One,
 Blessed forever.
 Amen.

—Bonaventure
 Soliloquy

Poverty & Joy Wm Short OFM pages 74-75**FOLLOWING THE FOOTSTEPS OF JESUS**

In his care for people with Hansen's disease, Francis was following that example of Jesus that he knew from the gospel. Jesus calls others, after his wilderness retreat, to conversion, to repent, to change their lives. To show the effects of this turning to God Jesus does something specific: he heals people who are suffering from disease, both physical disease and sickness of spirit (Matthew 4:23-4). Later in the Gospel, Matthew says, 'When he came down from the mountain, great crowds followed him, and a leper came to him,' whom Jesus healed (Matthew 8:1-3).

The special role of people with leprosy appears in the exceptions that Francis makes where they are concerned, even in the Rule. Despite his strict prohibitions about receiving money, he makes special provisions for one group of people: the brothers 'may accept money for urgent needs of the lepers'.⁶ He places in his list of the 'companions of Jesus' the sick, those who beg, and lepers, including them with the Lord Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the disciples among those who live by alms. The brothers should 'rejoice' to be in their company.

In his own writings Francis does not speak of the voice from the crucifix at San Damiano telling him to 'rebuild the church'.

He never refers to the marks on his body (the stigmata), which others associated with his profound compassion for the sufferings of Christ. Rather Francis speaks about people with leprosy as the context for his conversion to the gospel way of life, the practical experience of 'being with' them, and serving them. Here he found the suffering members of Christ's Body, and beginning with this experience he participated in the passion of Christ.

Penitents served in the leper hospital of Assisi already, so Francis 'did mercy' most likely in the midst of other brother and sister penitents who had taken on this service at the risk of contracting the disease themselves (a widespread fear at the time). To go 'among the lepers' meant exposing himself to risk, for the sake of others considered 'dead to the world'. There may even be reasons to suggest that Francis' multiple illnesses in later life may have derived from infection with the tubercular form of Hansen's disease. And during his lifetime, or shortly thereafter, a place for the brothers who contracted the disease was established at San Lazzaro del Valloncello, outside Assisi.⁷

Scripture Reflection**Acts 4:13-22**

¹³Observing the boldness of Peter and John and perceiving them to be uneducated, ordinary men, they were amazed, and they recognized them as the companions of Jesus.

¹⁴Then when they saw the man who had been cured standing there with them, they could say nothing in reply.

¹⁵So they ordered them to leave the Sanhedrin, and conferred with one another, saying,

¹⁶"What are we to do with these men? Everyone living in Jerusalem knows that a remarkable sign was done through them, and we cannot deny it.

¹⁷But so that it may not be spread any further among the people, let us give them a stern warning never again to speak to anyone in this name."

¹⁸So they called them back and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus.

¹⁹Peter and John, however, said to them in reply, "Whether it is right in the sight of God for us to obey you rather than God, you be the judges.

²⁰It is impossible for us not to speak about what we have seen and heard."

²¹After threatening them further, they released them, finding no way to punish them, on account of the people who were all praising God for what had happened.

²²For the man on whom this sign of healing had been done was over forty years old.