The two most prominent authors we are reading in my course this semester for advanced undergraduates on the classics of spirituality are Augustine of Hippo and Dante Alighieri. I see by his first encyclical, Deus Caritas Est, that Benedict XVI has been reading them as well. It will come as no surprise that St. Augustine figures prominently in the pope’s reflection. Joseph Ratzinger is by his scholarship and, perhaps, by his temperament, an avowed Augustinian. Indeed, aside from the Bible itself, Augustine is cited more than any other writer in the encyclical. But Dante? The greatest Catholic poet is not even mentioned in the text of the encyclical.

But two days prior to the release of the letter, the pope himself gave as forthright a statement of authorial intent as one could wish for. In an address to a symposium organized by the Pontifical Council Cor Unum (the Vatican office that oversees Catholic charitable organizations), Benedict declared the remarkable ambition: “I wish to express for our time and our existence something of what Dante summed up in his daring vision.”

The vision to which the pope refers is the one at the culmination of the entire journey of the Divine Comedy. Dante achieves the full satisfaction of his spiritual quest in an ecstatic contemplation of the triune God in the form of three radiant circles of diversely colored light. But this achievement is not Dante’s doing. It is the gift of God’s condescension. Dante’s loving desire, eros, is subsumed and transformed in God’s self-giving love, agape. And what enables and undergirds this consummated union is the appearance of a human form within one of the circles of the Trinitarian mystery. Jesus Christ himself is the union of the two: God and humanity, agape and eros, eternity and time.

**Benedict’s encyclical** is a profound meditation upon what constitutes the newness of the new covenant and, hence, upon what is radically constitutive of Christian identity and discipleship. His response is: Incarnation and Trinity are the *novum* of Christian faith and existence. This theme of “newness” sounds as a leitmotif throughout. What is distinctive about the encyclical is not the pope’s notional assertion of this truth, but his profoundly Christocentric evocation and exposition of the revelation it affirms: God is love. He writes in No. 12, “The real novelty of the New Testament lies not so much in new ideas as in the figure of Christ himself, who gives flesh and blood to those concepts—an unprecedented realism.” Were we to ask, how does the Christian know that God is love, as the First Letter of John proclaims? The answer can only be the one given in that same letter: “In this is agape, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

If Dante is the great Catholic poet, the unsurpassed poet of the both-and, so Benedict develops this core vision in a manner that is comprehensively catholic. In a nonpolemical way, Benedict takes a stand against the dualisms that over the course of the centuries have sometimes bedeviled Catholic thinking. He resolutely appropriates the deeper biblical and patristic streams of the Catholic tradition. Thus human eros is not repressed, but fulfilled, in divine agape. Indeed, in a radical move to which commentators have given little attention, Benedict attributes eros to God. God shows himself, in Christ, to be passionate for humankind. Christ’s free self-gift reveals God’s passion for communion with us—a passion that renders God vulnerable, even to death on a cross.

Further, in Catholic understanding, reason and faith are not set in opposition to each other. They offer reciprocal illumination, as both Virgil and Beatrice were necessary for Dante’s journey. Faith leaves no place for irrationalism, though it transcends and transforms human reason. At the same time, faith should not seek to pre-empt those matters that are the proper domain of reason. The pope’s integral vision does not preclude, but is enriched by a nuanced recognition of complexity and distinctive competencies.

Thus, an area that will doubtless engage commentators in the future is his views regarding the proper competencies of church and state, the ecclesial order and the political order. Once again, one can hear echoes of Dante’s concern to affirm the complementary responsibilities of church and empire, of love and justice. Both Benedict and Dante advocate differentiation rather than dichotomy. To recognize distinctive
concerns is not to deny concrete interaction. It is to preclude hegemony on the part of either church or state.

Another dualism that both poet and pope strive to lay to rest is that between the present life and the life of the world to come. The love of the eternal God does not inhibit devotion to earthly justice, it promotes and sustains it in the face of discouragement and even defeat. Nonetheless, it recognizes that no earthly joy can satisfy its infinite desire. In Augustine’s classic formulation, which both poet and pope take to heart, “You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

A final dualism rejected by Pope Benedict is that between soul and body. So much is this the case that the nuptial love between man and woman is sacramental, “the icon of the relationship between God and his people, and vice versa” (No. 11). Not by accident has the Song of Songs of the biblical tradition become the canonical expression of both human and divine love, of eros purified and sanctified even to total self-gift for the sake of the other. The pope even calls the Song of Songs “a source of mystical knowledge and experience” (No. 10).

Yet, however potentially blessed and lifegiving the sexual component of erotic love is, eros embraces far more than merely sexual love. It is desire that is the wellspring of all human striving and achievement, intellectual, artistic and relational. But whatever its form, it must be redeemed from self-seeking, from turning in on itself at the expense of the other—what Augustine called cupiditas and Dante cupidagine. This is that original self-seeking that, since Adam and Eve, has corrupted relationships and perverted eros into violence.

In the face of this deeply rooted predicament, the cure must be radical, not superficial.

This is not Augustinian pessimism, but Christian realism. And the heart of the good news is that God has provided such salvation in Christ. The entire treasure of the church is the reality of Jesus Christ, who through his death and resurrection has become the savior of the world.

For all his intellectual acumen, Benedict has a keen visual sense (in this too he resembles Dante). The image which governs the entire encyclical is the Johannine one of the pierced side of Jesus on the cross from which flow water and blood (see John 19:33-37). The pope refers to it three times in the course of his exposition. Here is his most telling statement: “By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (John 19:37), we can understand the starting point of this encyclical letter: ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move” (No. 12).

As a patristic scholar, the pope knows full well that the fathers of the church saw in the water and blood flowing from the pierced side of Christ the lifegiving sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. From the baptismal waters the Christian is born anew; and this new life, this vita nuova, is continually nourished by the encounter with Christ in the Eucharist.

Personal encounter with Jesus Christ is key to the pope’s vision and proclamation. He states at the very opening of the encyclical, “The beginning of Christian existence is not an ethical decision or a sublime idea, but rather the encounter with an event, with a person, who gives life a new goal and, at the same time, a sure growth” (No. 1, translation modified; here, as elsewhere, the published English version does not convey some of the nuance of the pope’s thought). Moreover, without an ever-renewed encounter with the living Christ, Christianity risks becoming lifeless ritual or well-intentioned moralism.

Benedict is acutely conscious that being Christian is an endless adventure, a growth to maturity of faith and love. The encounter with Jesus Christ summons the disciple to newness of life. For the transformation of eros in agape entails the transformation of the subject, the lover. Encounter with the living Christ, especially in the Eucharist, if it takes place in Spirit and in truth, transforms the disciple so that she or he becomes a new self, a eucharistic self. “The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation. More than a merely static reception of the incarnate Logos, we enter into the very movement of his self-giving” (No. 13, translation modified). This is the moto spiritale, the spiritual maturation that moves Dante from the base of Mount Purgatory, through the heavenly spheres, to the ultimate vision of the communion of saints and of all creation transformed in the love of the Triune God.

For the pope the Eucharist inspires not only the growth of what I have called a “eucharistic self,” one who experiences deeply that he or she is a living member of the body of Christ. It also founds and promotes a eucharistic ethic. The great judgment scene in Matthew 25 makes clear the intimate connection between
loving service of the needy other and loving devotion to Christ himself. There is no opposition in the pope’s thought between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, authentic worship and authentic action, love of God and love of neighbor. Once more it is a question of the Catholic both-and, neither separating nor reducing one to the other.

One concern of the second part of the encyclical seems to be a perceived tendency to such reductionism, to the possible compromising of distinctive Catholic identity and understanding. Gospel proclamation (kerygma), liturgical celebration (leiturgia), and committed service (diakonia) are constitutive elements of church and must be integrally present in all ecclesial endeavors. This does not mean, of course, that they must all be explicitly to the fore in every instance. But it does mean that unless they are intentionally acknowledged, there may be a drift toward a less than fully Catholic expression and witness. In keeping with his pastoral and mystagogical sensitivity, the pope therefore urges that all who labor in the church’s charitable organizations receive, in addition to indispensable professional preparation, “a formation of the heart: that they might be led to the encounter with God in Christ which awakens love and opens hearts to others” (No. 31).

For one committed to teaching in a Catholic Jesuit university, the words of the pope strike a theme reminiscent of a declaration by the late superior general of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Arrupe. In an oft-cited address to alumni of Jesuit schools, Father Arrupe said, “Today our prime educational objective must be to form men and women for others; men and women who will live not for themselves but for God and his Christ—for the God-man who lived and died for all the world.” Arrupe’s statement is too often invoked in the abbreviated and less adequate version: “to form men and women for others.” Perhaps Benedict’s encyclical will serve as a challenge to reappropriate Father Arrupe’s words with their full Trinitarian and Christological weight and inspiration, and to draw from them relevant implications for mission and ministry.

From the first words of the encyclical to the last, the pope underscores the newness of the Christian image of God and correlates it with a new image of the human. As a biblical theologian, the pope knows well that the created image of the triune God is irreducibly communal: man and woman. But, as a patristic theologian, Benedict appreciates that many of the fathers of the church suggestively distinguished between image and likeness. We are made in God’s image; we are called to grow into God’s likeness in Christ. Hence the pope’s dynamic and processive vision of human existence and Christian life permeates the encyclical.

In the very first paragraph of the encyclical, he speaks of “the image of the human and of its journey” (itineris: not correctly translated in the English version). Like Dante, the pope understands the human as journey, as movement, as exodus from self into the promised land of communion with others in Christ. And the very last words of the letter sound a final Dante-like note, a lovely invocation of the Virgin, which wedds human yearning and divine grace, recapitulating eros and agape:

Show us Jesus. Lead us to him.
Teach us to know and love him,
so that we too can become
 capable of true love
and be fountains of living water
in the midst of a thirsting world.


Copyright © 2006 by America Press, Inc.