

The Real Presence of Hope and Love

The Christocentric Legacy of Pope Benedict XVI¹

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Abstract: *The author notes that a media that focuses only on progressive or conservative issues can capture only the surface of Christianity. Cardinal Ratzinger delves below the social and moral issues to Christology, the place of Christ at the center of Christianity. By looking at Deus Caritas Est (his 2005 encyclical on love) and Spe Salvi (his 2007 encyclical on hope), the author notes that by focusing on Christ, we find what Ratzinger calls “an encounter, a love story, . . . an event.” It is this reality of Christianity that Catholics and Evangelicals should discuss: the visibility of God in Christ and what this means for the*

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life of a Christian. What we find in Christ is God and God’s will for humankind. It is not the laws of matter that rule us but a Person, the Spirit revealed in Jesus as Love. Ratzinger speaks of being “touched” by Christ in ways that prove his presence in this life and the promise of eternal life. This real presence of faith, love, and hope anchor Christians to Christ and to each other. Here is the heart of Christianity that we share. The author presents stories Ratzinger told about those who have been touched by this presence and made true Christians. They are the historical testament of the central power of Christology in the lives of Christians.

The legacy of Pope Benedict XVI may well prove to be, as Edward Oakes has argued, his insistence on a Christocentric theological approach.² The Christocentrism of Benedict’s thought is worth highlighting for at least two reasons. First, we have developed a nasty tendency in contemporary Western society to classify theological approaches under the remarkably nontheological rubrics of “conservative” and “progressive.” In this taxonomy, Benedict mostly gets qualified as a “conservative.” He is, after all, as the media remind us ad nauseam, opposed to abortion, euthanasia, contraception, and same-sex marriage. To the degree that theological language does enter the media, Ratzinger becomes the moralist, the one who as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith shut up “progressive” theologians, such as Thomas Reese, Leonardo Boff, and others, who opposes genuine interfaith dialogue, who writes off Protestant believers as

2. Edward T. Oakes, “Christ Our Center,” presentation delivered at the Catholic-Evangelical Conversation at Mundelein Seminary, April 18, 2013.

subpar, and whose liturgical leanings would have us return to the horrors of the ritualism and authoritarianism of the pre-Vatican II period. Needless to say, in the media frenzy that developed after Pope Benedict's resignation, most of the media pundits dutifully followed this well-trodden path, as they repeatedly wondered out loud whether the next pope would be just as "conservative" as Benedict had been, or whether perhaps we could finally hope to move on to someone more "progressive."

There are, however, exceptions to this non-theological approach. On Wednesday, March 6, exactly one week before the election of Pope Francis, the Canadian *National Post* carried a column written by George Jonas, a Jewish immigrant from Hungary, who is not in any way religious. Jonas recognizes the cultural mood for what it is. He titled his column "Ask not how God is relevant to you, but how you are relevant to God." Reflecting on the cultural pressures that might be brought to bear on the cardinals in the conclave, Jonas worried out loud about the desire to be seen as "up-to-date" or "relevant"—to find a pope, in other words, who would accept the non-theological bifurcation of "conservative" versus "progressive" in order to do obeisance to the cultural demand for an up-to-date Catholicism. Jonas concludes with the following comment:

As I mentioned before, I'm not religious. If I were, however, I think I'd have something more important to worry about than God's relevance to me. I'd worry about my relevance to God. And in the unlikely event that the cardinals asked me, I'd say that worrying about what's relevant instead of what's right is the quickest way to irrelevance.³

3. <http://georgejonas.ca/journalism/2013/03/06/ask-not-how-god-is-relevant-to-you-but-how-you-are-relevant-to-god>

There is nothing quite like being reminded by an outsider of what genuinely counts in matters related to the faith. With regard to Benedict, what stands out is not his alleged "conservatism" but his focus on Christ in matters both theological and moral. That is what will render him relevant for many years to come.

The second reason the Christocentrism of Ratzinger is notable has to do with how we look at dialogue between Catholics and Protestants. Protestants have long been afraid that Catholics take their starting point in human realities. Human merit before God, Mary, and the saints as objects of our adoration, the concrete materiality of Baptism and the Eucharist—these, and other aspects of Catholic theology and spirituality, seem to Protestants attempts to place ourselves in the position of the risen Lord, in a move from Christocentrism to anthropocentrism. Oakes's insistence, therefore, that Ratzinger's theology is marked first and foremost by its Christocentrism should make Protestants sit up and listen. And I think there is a sense in which it should make both Protestants *and* Catholics sit up and listen. If, after all, Oakes is right that Christocentrism lies at the heart of Ratzinger's thought, then this is the key also to how we can deconstruct the relativism of our culture that thinks only in terms of the binaries of "conservative" and "progressive." To place Christ at the center is to gainsay the need to be "up-to-date" or "relevant." To place Christ at the center is, therefore, also to stab at the heart of the relativism that underlies this division between "conservative" and "progressive." There is good reason, I think, that Ratzinger's most stringent rejection of relativism comes under the title of *Dominus Iesus* (2000). It is the Lord Jesus who sent us on a mission in the world, and it is his Lordship and the definitive character of his revelation that are "the true lodestar' in history for all humanity," as the document's concluding paragraph puts it. Evangelicals and

Catholics should be drawn together by this theological—that is to say, Christological—focus, which is the real antidote to so much of the nontheological humbug that typifies most media interest in Catholic thought and in the Christian faith in general. The insistence that Christ is the beginning, the center, and the end of theology has always served as reminder that in terms of theology and morality there is something more important to worry about than God’s relevance to us—namely, our relevance to God.

I want to reflect on this Christocentrism of Pope Benedict’s thought, and I will do so by focusing on his first two encyclicals, which are my favorites: *Deus Caritas Est* (his 2005 encyclical on love) and *Spe Salvi* (his 2007 encyclical on hope). In some ways, the first is the most significant. Here we have the newly appointed pope—known the world over as “God’s Rottweiler” because of his dogged protection of Catholic orthodoxy as leader of the so-called Inquisition (the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith)—presenting the world with a profound meditation on the centrality of love. What is more, the new pope made clear in the first paragraph that love is not God; rather, God is love (1 John 4:16) and offers his love to us in Jesus Christ:

Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person. . . . 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).

I will skip over Benedict’s remarkable and profound reflections on *eros* and *agape* (“ascending” and “descending” love), which he regards as different dimensions of a single reality. I want to

highlight instead Benedict’s insistence that the love of God has become incarnate: “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.”⁴ For Benedict, it is only by starting out with Christ that we can understand what love is like: By contemplating the pierced side of Christ, we can understand the starting point of this encyclical letter: “‘God is love’ (I Jn 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin.”⁵ For Benedict, then, “Christianity is not an intellectual system, a collection of dogmas, or a moralism. Christianity is instead an encounter, a love story; it is an event.”⁶

If it is true that a proper understanding of love begins with Christ, then we will take this-worldly realities seriously. After all, Incarnation means that God has taken on human flesh. And so Benedict asks us to take the visibility of God seriously: “God has made himself visible: in Jesus we are able to see the Father (see Jn 14:9).”⁷ This visibility results from the fact that God gives himself to us in Jesus. The visibility of God’s presence in Christ is something Catholics and Evangelicals need to reflect on in dialogue, because it touches on Catholic sensibilities that Evangelicals should perhaps appreciate more than they usually do. For Pope Benedict, the visibility of God in Christ immediately implies what he calls a “sacramental ‘mysticism.’” The visibility of God is meaningful for

4. *Deus Caritas Est*, 12.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Joseph Ratzinger, “Homily for Msgr Luigi Giusanni,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 31 (2004): 685.

7. *Deus Caritas Est*, 17.

us precisely because we are drawn into Christ in the Eucharistic celebration. Benedict puts it this way:

[The] *Logos* now truly becomes food for us—as love. The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving. The imagery of marriage between God and Israel is now realized in a way previously inconceivable: it had meant standing in God’s presence, but now it becomes union with God through sharing in Jesus’ self-gift, sharing in his body and blood.⁸

I earlier mentioned the Protestant fear that Catholic thought places this-worldly, human realities too much in the center. And Protestants may well be right to question how Catholics sometimes interpret Christ’s “real presence” in the Eucharist. But Pope Benedict’s theology provides an excellent starting point for a discussion on this: the beauty of his reflections lies in the twofold focus on love and Christology. In Christ’s self-giving in the Lord’s Supper, God makes visible his eternal love for us.

We see a similar sacramental mysticism at work in Pope Benedict’s second encyclical, *Spe Salvi*. Here, too, the grounding is Christocentric. Prior to our encounter with Christ, Benedict reminds us with a reference to Ephesians 2:12, we were “without hope and without God in the world.” Christ is the “personal God” who “governs the stars, that is, the universe,” so that “it is not the laws of matter and of evolution that have the final say, but reason, will, love—a Person.”⁹ The Bishop of Rome reiterates the message

from his earlier encyclical on love when he comments: “Life is not a simple product of laws and the randomness of matter, but within everything and at the same time above everything, there is a personal will, there is a Spirit who in Jesus has revealed himself as Love.”¹⁰

Also here, it is for Benedict this personal love of God in the Word that has taken on human flesh that should encourage us and that gives us the true substance of our hope. Hope, in other words, is not a pie-in-the-sky sort of dream we make up; instead, it is grounded in the reality of people who “have been touched by Christ.” The word “touched” is surely significant here. According to *Deus Caritas Est*, God allows us to *see* him; *Spe Salvi* makes clear that he also allows us to *touch* him. As we reflect on the lives of people who have been touched by Christ, these lives become meaningful also for us: “[T]heir way of acting and living is *de facto* a ‘proof’ that the things to come, the promise of Christ, are not only a reality that we await, but a real presence.”¹¹ The lives of those who have touched Christ become a “real presence,” argues Benedict. The sacramental language—“real presence”—is hardly accidental. The reason our hope is not an irrational mirage lies in the fact that, in Christ, God has entered history and that people can actually touch him. Hope, therefore, “is the expectation of things to come from the perspective of a present that is already given. It is a looking-forward in Christ’s presence, with Christ who is present, to the perfecting of his Body, to his definitive coming.” Again, the sacramental language of “presence” is striking.

The two encyclicals are obviously similar. Both are Christocentric and both are sacramental. But the way in which sacramentality

8. *Ibid.*, no. 13.

9. *Ibid.*, 5.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 8.

gets expressed differs from one encyclical to the other. *Deus Caritas Est* zeroes in on Christ's presence in the Eucharist; union with God becomes ours in and through the Eucharist. *Spe Salvi* hardly mentions the Eucharist. It does something rather different. It tells stories—stories of saints, one after another. After mentioning our acceptance of suffering through union with Christ, who himself suffered with infinite love, Benedict shares with us a letter from the nineteenth-century Vietnamese martyr Le-Bao-Tinh, which reads:

The prison here is a true image of everlasting Hell; to cruel tortures of every kind—shackles, iron chains, manacles—are added hatred, vengeance, calumnies, obscene speech, quarrels, evil acts, swearing, curses, as well as anguish and grief. But the God who once freed three children from the fiery furnace is with me always; he has delivered me from these tribulations and made them sweet, for his mercy is for ever. In the midst of these torments, which usually terrify others, I am, by the grace of God, full of joy and gladness, because I am not alone—Christ is with me. . . . In the midst of this storm I cast my anchor towards the throne of God, the anchor that is the lively hope in my heart.¹²

Le-Bao-Tinh's "letter from Hell" becomes a hope-filled "hymn of praise" thanks to his union with Christ.

Both encyclicals know of sacramental presence. But the first encyclical sees the real presence of love in the Eucharist, while the second locates it in the real presence of hope in the narratives of

12. *Spe Salvi*, no. 37.

the real lives of flesh-and-blood people such as Le-Bao-Tinh. He is but one instance of this real presence of hope. *Spe Salvi* is filled with stories and examples of this real presence. There is Josephine Bakhita, a slave from Sudan who gets to know the heavenly master in slavery in Italy. There is St. Francis of Assisi, who from the "substance" of his hope spreads hope to others. There is St. Augustine, who gets ordained in spite of himself and as a result sets out to "transmit hope." There is Cardinal Thuận Văn Nguyễn, who is imprisoned for thirteen years and writes his *Prayers of Hope*. And, of course, there is Mary, who becomes for us "the image of the Church to come, which carries the hope of the world across the mountains of history." Benedict is convinced that we need these examples, these narratives of hope's real presence:

I need the certitude of that true, great hope, of which we have spoken here. For this too we need witnesses—martyrs—who have given themselves totally, so as to show us the way—day after day. We need them if we are to prefer goodness to comfort, even in the little choices we face each day—knowing that this is how we live life to the full.¹³

The real presence of hope is Christocentric; it is given with God's presence in Christ. This same real presence also comes to us in the lives of the saints who have gone before us. Heirs of John Calvin cannot but be struck by the similarities between Benedict's focus on God's real presence in the saints and Calvin's theology of union with Christ.¹⁴

13. *Ibid.*, no. 39.

14. See J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift: The Activity of Believers in Union with Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

I do not think there is a contradiction between the two encyclicals. For one, *Deus Caritas Est* is not without the presence of the saints. The last two sections hold out for us several models of charity. And the emeritus Bishop of Rome would probably argue that the two kinds of real presence—that of love in the Eucharist and that of hope in believers’ lives—are complementary and that the second flows from the first.

The legacy of Pope Benedict is the witness of a thoroughgoing Christological focus. This Christocentrism should warm the heart of Evangelical believers, for it is the centrality of Christ that enables us to overcome the narrow-mindedness of a culture whose only remaining norms are those of the flattened horizons of this world. Evangelicals do well to listen attentively to their Catholic friends as they speak to us of “real presence.” The relativism of a flat culture—a culture that knows only of “conservatives” and of “progressives”—can be overcome only in one way, by turning to the real presence of love and of hope that are anchored in Christ; all this is about union with Christ. More than ever before, Evangelicals and Catholics belong together. Love and hope cannot but make them look out for each other. In no way do I mean to suggest that the “how” of Christ’s “real presence” is a matter of indifference or that we should ignore the significant doctrinal issues at stake in our continued divisions. But this ecumenical task is one that we may undertake in the knowledge that faith, hope, and love bind us together. After all, as Pope Benedict puts it:

Only the great certitude of hope that my own life and history in general, despite all failures, are held firm by the indestructible power of Love, and that this gives them their

meaning and importance, only this kind of hope can then give the courage to act and to persevere.¹⁵

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15. *Spe Salvi*, no. 35.