

OP-ED

# Limited Love in *Deus Caritas Est*

In the Introduction to his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI characterizes the heart of Christian faith as that described in 1 John, chapter 4, verse 16: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.” After that, he ably deals with the “unity of love in creation and in salvation history” and describes “the practice of love by the church as a ‘community of love.’” In both Christian and non-Christian circles, indeed, even among inveterate critics of the Church, this encyclical has been praised. The initially skeptical attitude about this pope seems to have been replaced by a more positive expectation.

Yet, a careful examination of the encyclical’s exegetical underpinnings—which after all provide the basis for the pope’s message—raise serious objections to the intellectual validity of the work. For one thing, the love command in the writings attributed to “John” mentions the love of one’s brother—but not the love of one’s neighbor, let alone one’s enemy. By concealing an historical detail of key importance for understanding the Johannine epistles, the pope in effect renders his message inapplicable to those outside the Christian church. For another, the Johannine communities fell far short of exhibiting the love that Benedict recommends to the contemporary church.

For not only does the First Letter of John—from which the encyclical takes its theme and exhortation—restrict brotherhood to those of orthodox belief, but the Second Letter of John, which quite predictably is not mentioned in

the encyclical, takes the same approach and pushes it even further. In verses 9 through 11 of this very brief letter, its author, who identifies himself only as ‘the Elder,’ commands the community to receive into their homes only those brothers who confess Christ’s coming in the flesh. Any present or former brothers who have a different opinion concerning Christ’s incarnation should be spurned. Indeed, “John” forbids the members of his communities even to greet them. He deems this precautionary measure necessary, lest the community of right belief become infected by the evil doctrines and consequent guilt of its dissident brothers.

How strange it is to encounter such harsh and hate-filled expostulations in a letter overflowing with assurances of mutual love and attesting to a community’s unanimous recognition of sacred truth! And all this venom issues from “John” because he fears reconciliation with former brothers—and that only because they have arrived at a conclusion concerning Christ’s incarnation different from his own. Worse yet, he demonizes them as representatives of the Antichrist (verse 7) who have thus become taboo. One is reminded of the renowned German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach’s affirmation of the relationship of love to faith. He writes:

In the proposition “God is love,” the subject is the darkness in which faith shrouds itself; the predicate is the light, which first illuminates the intrinsically dark subject. In the predicate I affirm love, in the subject faith. Love does not alone fill my soul: I leave a place open for my uncharita-

bleness by thinking of God as a subject in distinction from the predicate.

An essential ingredient of biblical literacy is to interpret texts within their historical context. Unfortunately, this first encyclical of the new pope fails to do so. Its biblical authority is squandered by what must surely be a conscious distortion of historical reality and scriptural intent. By basing a modern hymn of reverence for love on the often rancorous and vindictive writings of “John,” Benedict XVI demeans his office by flinging sand in the eyes of Christians and non-Christians alike.



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Though much praised, the  
new pope’s encyclical on love  
bases itself on a starkly  
intolerant scripture.

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