

What is real love?

By Msgr. Daniel B. Gallagher OSV News

The world is forever asking the question, in poetry and song, “What is real love?” In his first encyclical from 2005, the late Pope Benedict XVI proposed an answer. In fact, he reminds us that God has already revealed to us the answer:

“In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10).

The very title, “*Deus Caritas Est*,” states a fundamental truth of the Christian faith: “*God is love*” (1 Jn 4:16). Every Christian, and indeed many non-Christians, can agree on that. But unfortunately, if we have misunderstood what love is, we will surely misunderstand who God is.

“Today,” observes Pope Benedict, “the term ‘love’ has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words.” We seldom stop to reflect on the difference between loving our ice cream, loving our pets, loving our families and loving our God. We indiscriminately say we love each of these.

Pope Benedict suggests that we can begin to sort out the complex issues surrounding love with a preliminary observation: Love is two-fold. We love something or someone because we derive a benefit from that something or someone.

When we eat ice cream, we derive the pleasure of tasting its sweetness. But the ice cream derives no benefit from our love.

We love our pets because they provide us with protection and companionship. We also feed them because we don’t want them to go hungry, but if we had only one steak, we would give it to our children before giving it to a dog. Love means something quite different in each of these cases.

We love because we are fulfilled through love, but also when it seems to leave us unfulfilled. The ancient Greeks had a way of distinguishing between these two aspects of love. Eros is the love that overwhelms us without our thinking or willing it. It is the love that

moves Romeo to gasp, “for I ne’er saw true beauty till this night” when he catches his first glimpse of Juliet.

Agape, on the other hand, is the love we freely choose. It’s the love we extend to the other not for our own good, but for the other’s good. “*Amare est velle alicui bonum*,” taught St. Thomas Aquinas: “To love is to will the good for another.”

This is the love that impelled Mother Teresa to found her Missionaries of Charity in Kolkata, India. It’s the love that beckons you to forgo your favorite TV program so you can play a game of cards with a lonely friend in the nursing home.

God loves with an agape surpassing all others. He had no need to create us, nothing to gain by saving us. He is utterly perfect and self-sufficient within himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Yet, Paul writes, “God proves his love (agape) for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). God did not wait until we demonstrated our love toward him. He poured out his love for us “while we were still sinners.”

This total act of divine self-giving is a great mystery. Indeed, it almost seems that such a love contradicts God’s very nature. God, who needs nothing from us, gives everything for us.

Love Transforms

Pope Benedict summarizes this profound paradox when he writes that Jesus’ “death on the cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form”—the love that has transformed the world!

It is also, the pope teaches, the love that transforms eros. Eros is not stripped of its value in the face of Christian agape. To the contrary, agape sheds a whole new light on the true meaning of eros.

Eros, when it is properly understood, is the gateway to agape. Romeo would



NATIVITY OF OUR LORD—Turin—The detail of painting of Nativity in Duomo by Giovanni Comandu da Mondovi (1795). (Getty)

never have had the chance to love Juliet for her own sake if he had not first felt a strong desire to have her for his own sake.

In the classical tradition, eros was understood as a form of ecstasy (From the Greek “ek-stasis”), which literally means “to stand outside oneself.” The rapture we feel in the presence of something or someone beautiful arouses in us a strong desire to become one with that something or someone. Such a desire can even make us feel dizzy.

“Love,” writes Pope Benedict, “is indeed ‘ecstasy,’ yet ‘not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self toward its liberation through self-giving, and thus toward authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.’”

In this sense, Christianity affirms erotic love. In fact, because eros holds so powerful a sway over us, sacred Scripture repeatedly draws upon erotic images to help us fathom the bottomless depths of God’s agape. Erotic love is ordered to, and ultimately culminates in, the sacrament of matrimony.

Consequently, we shouldn’t be surprised to find that God speaks to us in marital images. “I will allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak to her heart,” God says to the people of Israel through the prophet Hosea. “I will espouse you to me forever. I will espouse you in fidelity and you shall know the Lord” (Hos 2:21-22).

Our experience of eros, if not denigrated by our sinful inclinations, can thus lead us to understand something about God’s passionate love for us.

Liturgy is Agape

The pope urges us to remember, however, that we should not stop there. The fickleness of desirous love (eros)

must give way to the purity of unselfish love (agape). This transformation can take place fully only through our participation in the divine agape of the Church’s sacraments, especially the holy Eucharist.

“The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation,” writes Pope Benedict. “We enter into the very dynamic of self-giving. The imagery of marriage between God and Israel is now realized in a way previously inconceivable.”

Pope Benedict’s encyclical challenges us to examine our motives for participating, or for neglecting to participate, in the holy Eucharist. Too often we view this great sacrament in terms of eros. We are too quick to ask, “What will I get out of going to Mass this Sunday?”

The pope invites us to view the liturgy instead in terms of agape. Our participation in the Mass is nothing short of a participation in Christ’s total and utter self-giving—an actual sharing in his very body and blood, offered up for us once on the cross, and continually offered to us week after week at the Lamb’s High Feast.

Romeo died for his beloved bride Juliet because of a tragic mistake. Shakespeare’s tale is one of eros gone awry. But Jesus’ death for his beloved bride, the Church, was no mistake. **The Gospel is the story of the triumph of agape.**

So just what is real love? “Love,” writes Pope Benedict, “is ‘divine’ because it comes from God and unites us to God. It makes us a ‘we’ which transcends our divisions and makes us one, until in the end God is ‘all in all.’”

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