

# LOVE AND HOPE

## Pope Benedict's Spirituality of Communion

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## Introduction

FOR several years I have been noticing that when I am preaching my remarks often are directed toward myself as well as toward the congregation. What I am preaching not only expresses my interests and, I hope, insights, but it has an almost immediate application to my own life. Not only am I telling those in the congregation what I think is important for them to hear but my remarks turn out to be about what is important for me to hear! How conscious this pattern is on my part, how aware I am when I prepare a homily that I will be saying something about the Christian faith that has a direct application to my own life is not clear to me. The genesis of this book and its theme and content remind me of my experience with preaching. Though I hope others will be helped by what I have written, I know that I have been helped through the writing.

Through two philosophy courses that I teach at St. John's University in Jamaica, New York, some images of God and the human person have changed my way of thinking about both God and us. The two courses are "The Problem of God," which students refer to as "The Problem of Lauder" and "Personalism," a course in which the students and I study insights into freedom, love and commitment from personalist thinkers such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Mounier, John Mac Murray and Gabriel Marcel. In the course entitled "The Problem

of God," even the denial of God's existence by famous and influential atheists such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Jean Paul Sartre and Ernst Bloch has provided, at least indirectly, insights into the meaning and mystery of God and us. By understanding how many of the more famous atheists did not only deny God's existence but were avid anti-theists, I hope the students and I have been able to purify our notions of God and human persons and gained some knowledge into possible relationships between the Divine and the human.

While the material in the courses both stimulated me and even inspired me, the writings that ultimately moved me to write this book are the creations of two famous contemporary theists, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. By chance, (or was it Providence?), I was invited to be on a committee that was asked to create a spirituality of communion for the Brooklyn Diocese and to link this spirituality to evangelization.

This invitation to be on the committee came from Msgr. Neil Mahoney, a former student and close friend, who died shortly after convening the committee. Neil's life was evidence of the power of a spirituality of communion to foster evangelization. I offer this book as a small tribute to a dear friend and great priest.

Because of my membership on the committee I read carefully Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*<sup>1</sup> ("At the beginning of the New Millennium") in which the Pope encourages the living out of a spirituality of communion. John Paul's ideas and insights are so beautiful, so illuminating and so obviously relate to some of the truths I had discovered

through my two philosophy courses that I knew I wanted to develop and make them more accessible to as many people as possible. Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical "God Is Love,"<sup>2</sup> which I consider a marvelous statement about love and his second on hope, *Spe Salvi*,<sup>3</sup> further encouraged me in my project to help Christians grasp the meaning of a spirituality of communion and perhaps live that spirituality daily. I knew if I tried to help others live it I also would be helping myself live it.

In his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millenio Ineunte* the Holy Father points out that a spirituality of communion helps us to be aware of the mystery of the Trinity living within us and also living in our brothers and sisters. This presence of the Triune God is a gift to us and to our brothers and sisters, and we creatures can become gifts to one another. The Holy Father notes that a spirituality of communion can deepen our membership in the Mystical Body of Christ and help us to share the burdens of others.<sup>4</sup> Obviously a spirituality of communion will call us to be evangelizers, that is, people who wish to share their faith with others. A spirituality of communion calls us to be living signs of the loving presence of Father, Son and Spirit.

Pope Benedict's third encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, ("Charity in Truth")<sup>5</sup> applies Christian Revelation and the Pope's profound insights into love to the social order. Unfortunately, *Caritas in Veritate* is not as accessible to a wide audience as his first two letters. Writing in *The New York Times* Peter Steinfels noted the brilliant insights that are present in *Caritas in Veritate* but also noted that the length of the letter and the scope of the topics it deals with make the letter especially difficult

reading. Sections of the encyclical contain dense prose and the letter seems cluttered because of the Holy Father's attempt to cover too many topics. Steinfeld writes:

*"Caritas in Veritate* is a document about human nature and the Trinity and the current economic crisis and inequality and the energy problem. It argues a link between Catholic teaching on sexuality and life issues like abortion and Catholic stances on social issues like poverty and the environment." <sup>6</sup>

What struck me most positively in reading *Caritas in Veritate* was how beautifully sections of it illustrate a spirituality of communion. Though scholars may be interpreting and even arguing over some of the Holy Father's statements about various social problems and his application of Catholic social teaching to those problems, it is crystal clear that while details of the letter might be debated, the vision that animates the entire encyclical is a spirituality of communion. The following is the second paragraph of *Caritas in Veritate*:

"Charity is at the heart of the Church's social doctrine. Every responsibility and every commitment spelt out by that doctrine is derived from charity which, according to the teaching of Jesus, is the synthesis of the entire Law (cf. Mt. 22:36-40). It gives real substance to the personal relationship with God and with neighbor; it is the principle not only of micro-relationships (with friends, with family members or within small groups) but also of macro-relationships (social, economic, and political ones). For the Church instructed by the Gospel, charity is everything because, as St. John teaches (cf. 1 Jn. 4:8, 16) and is recalled in my first *Encyclical Letter*,

‘God is love’ (*Deus Caritas Est*) everything has its origin in God’s love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it. Love is God’s greatest gift to humanity, it is our promise and our hope.”<sup>7</sup>

This book is a set of reflections stimulated by Pope John’s *Novo Millenio Ineunte* but especially by the insights into love and hope in Pope Benedict’s three encyclicals, and his book *Jesus of Nazareth*,<sup>8</sup> insights which fit beautifully into a spirituality of communion.

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<sup>1</sup> *Novo Millenio Ineunte*, at the close of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000

<sup>2</sup> *God is Love* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2006)

<sup>3</sup> *Spe Salvi* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007)

<sup>4</sup> *Novo Millenio Ineunte*, op.cit.

<sup>5</sup> *Caritas in Veritate* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009)

<sup>6</sup> *The New York Times*, July 18, 2009

<sup>7</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, op. cit.

<sup>8</sup> *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Doubleday, 2007)

# Chapter 1

## The Divine and the Human

It all starts with God!

In the course on personalism the students and I discovered that what an individual believes about human persons will affect the view that he or she has about God. This awareness of the relationship between beliefs about human persons and beliefs about God that became more clear to the students and me as we explored personalist philosophy echoed a discovery that other students and I were making in “The Problem of God” course. In that course we found traditional proofs for God such as those offered by Saint Anselm, Saint Thomas Aquinas and Rene Descartes interesting, but equally interesting was the adamant atheism of thinkers such as Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre and Bloch. The atheism of these thinkers shed light on both the meaning of the human person and false views of God.

Some of the atheists were correct to reject the god they rejected because that god was a false god. It was not the God that Jesus preached or that Jesus called “Abba.” It was not the God Who is totally in love with us and Who calls us into a loving relationship. The god who was rejected by the famous atheists was in one way or another

er against human beings. It was a god who was made in the image and likeness of the worst in human beings. This false god dominated the consciousness and conscience of human beings and kept some human beings immature and infantile or worse, sick. Each atheist thought that he was liberating human persons from an impossible burden. In a sense each atheist was doing just that. Coming to recognize the false god that atheistic philosophers have rejected can free us to be receptive to the God that Jesus presents to us and invites us to know and love.

### **Projecting Images of God**

Each of us has many images of God. Some images are closer to the truth than others. Some images are so false that they are really terrible. For several years of my life I had a terrible image of God. Unfortunately all of us are tempted to make God in our own image and likeness instead of recognizing that God has created us in His own image and likeness. Both those of us who profess belief in God and those who deny that there is a God can have images of God that are to some extent erroneous. In fact no one can have an image of God that is completely adequate or totally clear. The reason for this is relatively simple: it is impossible for a finite mind to grasp the Infinite; a limited mind cannot adequately grasp an Unlimited Being. God is too much for our minds. This does not mean that whatever we think about God is untrue, but it does mean that whatever we think about God is mysterious. God is Ultimate Mystery. What we think of God may be true but it is never adequate. We can always say that God is *more* and *better* than the images that we have of God.

Reflecting on this, I almost spontaneously think of the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), the first atheist that the students and I study. Looking at the histories of religion, Feuerbach noted that images of God had become purified over the years. In the past some people thought of God as the sun or as thunder or lightning but gradually people moved toward a more spiritual understanding of God. Christianity has an exalted vision of God as eternal Spirit and as Father. However Feuerbach insisted that though Christianity's ideas about God are better than material images, all ideas of God are nothing but projections made up by human beings. According to Feuerbach there is no God and when we speak about God we are really only speaking about ourselves. Because we project or place outside ourselves onto another whom we call God something from our own experience of ourselves, we are alienated from ourselves. We are believing in something or Someone who does not exist. When we stop placing our best attributes onto God and realize that all talk about God is really nothing but talk about ourselves, we will no longer be alienated from ourselves. We will know ourselves as we really are. We will be able to appreciate our greatness. Belief in God does not allow us to appreciate ourselves thought Feuerbach.

In their book *Religion and Atheism* William A. Lijpen and Henry J. Koren explain Feuerbach's philosophical vision as follows:

"Thus the object of religion is within man; God is man's own hidden self and religion is but the solemn unveiling of man's own hidden riches. The religious man doesn't realize at once that his first consciousness of God is consciousness of