



“Be Not Afraid!”

By Archbishop Raymond L. Burke

“God Is Love” – IV

Biblical Faith and Love

The reflection on human love thus far leads Pope Benedict XVI to conclude that love “is a single reality, but with different dimensions” (n. 8). The two dimensions of love, human love or *eros* and divine love or *agape*, are both real. At times, one or another dimension may appear more strongly. They are, however, dimensions of one and the same reality. If they are not related to each other, love becomes distorted.

The Holy Father reminds us that Biblical faith does not oppose human love to divine love. Biblical faith recognizes us as we are and, therefore, recognizes the reality of human love, while, at the same time, it recognizes the reality of divine love which purifies human love of anything which betrays who we are and impoverishes the reality of our love.

To help us in understanding the Biblical teaching on love, the Holy Father first reflects upon the image of God and the image of man in the Sacred Scriptures. The teaching on God and man, discovered in the Sacred Scriptures, is, in fact, new and distinct in relationship to the understanding of God and man, found in other cultures and religions.

Love and the Image of God

To help us in understanding the Biblical teaching on love, the Holy Father first reflects upon the image of God in the Holy Scriptures. The image of God, which is presented in the Bible, is distinct from the image of God and of the gods in other ancient cultures, in two principal ways. The first way is seen in one of the most basic prayers offered daily by the people of Israel. The prayer, called the *Shema*, declares: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord” (*Dt* 6:4). The prayer is a clear expression of monotheism, that is, the belief that there is one God alone, Who is God of heaven and earth, “the God of all.” The prayer is brief but rich in doctrinal content, for it excludes completely the existence of other gods and acknowledges the one God as the source of all creation, of which He is the Creator. Implicit in the prayer is the truth that

the created order came into being because of God's will or desire, and is, therefore, "dear to Him"(n. 9a).

The second way in which the image of God in the Sacred Scriptures is distinct derives from the first way. God, for Whom all of creation is dear, "loves man." In other cultures and philosophies, the divinity is the object of desire and love on the part of man but does not love man. God, in the Bible, however, personally loves man. What is more, He chooses one nation, Israel, as the special object of His love, so that, through Israel, His love may reach to all nations. The love of God for us reveals the perfect union of *eros* and *agape*.

To delve more deeply into the fundamental vocation of Israel in the work of salvation, I recommend reading the book, *Salvation Is from the Jews: The Role of Judaism in Salvation History from Abraham to the Second Coming* by Roy H. Schoeman (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003). Roy Schoeman presents, in a striking way, the particular relationship of love between God and the Jewish people, and its critical role in the relationship of love between God and all the nations.

God's Love in the Prophets

Pope Benedict XVI recalls to our minds the use of the "metaphors of betrothal and marriage" by the Prophets to describe God's deep love of His people. Most significant in the message of the Prophets is God's gift of the *Torah* or Law to man. The books of the Prophets Hosea and Ezekiel are especially rich in the imagery of the spousal love of God for man.

Through the Law, essentially the Ten Commandments, God reveals to us our true nature and the path or discipline to follow, in order that we may mature, in accord with our nature. The Law defines the way of faithful love of God in response to His love. It shows the way of truth and justice, by which man loves God and neighbor (n. 9b).

The Law shows God's love of man to be the perfect union of *eros* and *agape*. God first loves us, even though we do not merit His love. What is more, He forgives our repeated betrayals of His love, which are described with the metaphors of adultery and prostitution. God's love for us is so deep that it leads Him to forgive us when He should condemn us because of our sins. The fullest expression of God's all-merciful love is the Crucifixion. Referring to the description of God's love in the Prophet Hosea, Pope Benedict declares:

Here Christians can see a dim prefiguration of the mystery of the Cross: so great is God's love for man that by becoming man He follows him even into death, and so reconciles justice and love (n. 10a).

God, Creator and Lover

The Holy Father concludes his treatment of the Biblical image of God as a new element of Biblical faith by pointing out the philosophical aspect of the image, which also constitutes something new and distinct. The Biblical image of God is philosophical or metaphysical, to be more precise. "God is the absolute and ultimate source of all being." At the same time, however, He is "a lover with all the passion of a true love." The passion in God, the *eros*, is real, but it is also "so purified as to become one with *agape*"(n. 10b). In God, the passion of love is totally disciplined by the pursuit of the good of the beloved, His holy people.

Pope Benedict XVI makes reference to *The Song of Songs*, a divinely-inspired collection of "love songs," in which Biblical faith finds a wonderful reflection of the relationship of love between God and man. This book of the Bible is also called *The Song of Solomon* or *The Canticle of Canticles*.

The faith which we are taught by the Sacred Scriptures and in *The Song of Songs*, in particular, at its very foundation, assures us that we can indeed have communion with God, the deepest desire in our souls. It also teaches us that the communion of love with God, which is God's gift to us, does not destroy man as His most beloved creature but enables man to be fully who he is. Regarding our communion with God, the Holy Father writes:

But this union is no mere fusion, a sinking in the nameless ocean of the Divine; it is a unity which creates love, a unity in which both God and man remain themselves and yet become fully one (n. 10b).

The Song of Songs leads us to an ever deeper appreciation of divine love, God's relationship with us and our relationship with Him, which is the source and the energy of our Catholic faith. For meditation on the love of God for us and our love of Him, using *The Song of Songs*, I recommend a book of spiritual reading, which I have found very helpful: *The Cantata of Love: A Verse by Verse Reading of The Song of Songs* by Father Blaise Arminjon, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988).