

“Jesus, I love You”: The Sum and Summary of Joseph Ratzinger/ Pope Benedict XVI's Theology

Bitrus Emmanuel Wazamda

Abstract

The last and watershed witness of the deceased Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI, “Jesus, I love you” is legendary. Its rootedness is in the love of God, which the love of neighbour is its litmus test, and so becomes the central guide of the Christian life. This abiding message is understood retrospectively since “Man's ability to deal with the future is dependent upon what sort of root he has, how capable he is of assimilating the past and consequently forming standards of conduct and judgment” (Ratzinger, 2005, p. 80). From this perspective, one could rightly grasp the profundity of the supporting basis of his life and theology that chronicle his conviction in charity.

Key words: Love, charity, truth, summary and theology

Introduction

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI ended his earthly pilgrimage of ninety-five (95) productive years on 31 December 2022 at 9: 34am. With this profound and thought-provoking statement, “Jesus, I love you”, he traversed the threshold of the next life. It was an expression of his inward proximity to the Lord as the orientation of his entire life had been toward the encounter with Jesus. This statement has populated the social media and made global headlines as if it were a novelty. As a matter of fact, it was in the 24/7 news cycle. Thus, this article looks into what is known and not known in the public domain about his unreserved love for Jesus that has significantly constituted the universal scope of his theological vision.

The Backstory

Born into the family of Joseph and Maria Ratzinger and baptised on Holy Saturday, 16 April 1927 in Marktl am Inn, he had a challenging childhood and adolescence, which were affected by events before, during and after the Second World War. He was ordained priest on 29 June 1951 and obtained his doctorate in theology in 1953 with a dissertation titled *The People and House of God in St Augustine's Doctrine of the Church* and in 1959, he wrote his *habilitatio* on *Theology of History in St Bonaventure*. These treatises are an evident indication of the

immense influence that St Augustine and St Bonaventure had exerted on his theological trajectory. Of this, he wrote: “Augustine has kept me company for more than twenty years. I have developed my theology in a dialogue with Augustine, though I have tried to conduct this dialogue as a man of today” (Nichols, 2005, p. 27). On the basis of his research on Bonaventure's Theology of History, he wrote: “Scripture points to the future. But only he who has understood the past can grasp the interpretation of the future” (Ratzinger, 1979, p. 81). He taught at Bonn (1959- 1963) and Munster (1963- 1966) during which he was a theological *peritus* to Joseph Cardinal Frings of Cologne Archdiocese at the Vatican II Council where he himself “had a hand in drafting that Vatican II document” (Hahn, 2009, p. 14).

Joseph Ratzinger was appointed Archbishop of Munich and Freising by Pope Paul VI on 24 March 1977 and was consecrated on 28 May with the episcopal motto: “Fellow Worker of the Truth”; he was created a cardinal in the consistory of 27 June 1977. On 25 November 1981, Pope John Paul II appointed him Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) and President of the Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) as well as that of the International Theological Commission (ITC). He also presided over the Preparatory Commission for the New Catechism of the Catholic Church. Pope John Paul II approved his election as the Vice Dean and consequently Dean of the College of Cardinals on 9 November 1998 and 30 November 2002, respectively. Sequel to the *sede vacante* created by the death of Pope John Paul II, he was elected Pope on 19 April 2005 with the regnal name “Pope Benedict XVI.” He resigned as Pope on 28 February 2013 on the grounds on ill health and physical weakness, which according to his interviewer and Rome based journalist, Paul Badde, was prompted by love and devotion (2016, p. 230). Similarly, the Korean Bishops regarded it as his act of “love and care for the Church” that filled “his heart to the full” (*asianews*, 14 February 2013).

Pope Benedict XVI was an avid reader, a brilliant leader, besides being one of the most faithful theologians in the most recent past. He was, also, a prolific writer with exceptionally profound thoughts and encyclopaedic knowledge of Christian theology characterised with a distinctively subtle and lucid style. Sixty six engaging and edifying books above and beyond three encyclicals and four apostolic exhortations are credited to him. Indeed, he was an extraordinary gift to the Universal Church and humanity. A lot and much can be learnt from his writings and catechesis/ teachings.

The Misrepresentation of Love

In attempt to reclaim, rehabilitate and restore the Christian understanding of love to its “original splendour” and strengthen the Catholic faith, Pope Benedict XVI drew our attention to the use and misuse of the word “love” by paralleling them. While stating the obvious, he stressed, “Today, the term 'love' has become

one of the most frequently used and misused of words, a word to which we attach quite different meanings" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 2). This continuing "use and misuse" of the word, "love", makes it ambiguous; lust, infatuation and sex are often misconstrued for love. Of note, regardless of the association of "love" with "sex" in human experience, "love" is not essentially about "sex."

The misconstruction of love for sex and vice versa debases a person and violates their dignity. It is in this regard that Pope Benedict XVI bemoaned the commercialisation of love since it demeans the human person. On the one hand, it is frightening since "Eros, reduced to pure 'sex', has become a commodity, a mere 'thing' to be bought and sold, or rather, a man himself becomes a commodity" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 5). Man is neither an object to be used nor a product to be merchandized; he is *Imago Dei* (Image of God); he is not an object to be used, but a being to be loved unconditionally.

Besides, the glorification of sex in the guise of love is as the result of the separation of the soul from the body, which are constitutive and integral of man. Hence, he observed, "The apparent exaltation of the body can quickly turn into a hatred of bodiliness. Christian faith, on the other hand, has always considered man a unity in duality, a reality in which spirit and matter compenetrate, and in which each is brought to a new nobility. True, eros tends to rise 'in ecstasy' towards the Divine, to lead us beyond ourselves; yet for this very reason it calls for a path of ascent, renunciation, purification and healing" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 5).

The Top Spot

Love has been a recurrent and a central theme in Joseph Ratzinger/ Pope Benedict XVI's theology and a central theme in his pontificate; his very first encyclical is titled *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love) and his third and last encyclical also dealt with love, *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth). In between these two encyclicals, he issued a Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation pertaining to love, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (Sacrament of Charity) in reference to the Eucharist. The leading encyclical was a charter for his papacy that provided a basis for the most of his writings as Pope. Instructively, he adduced reasons that radiantly explained the choice of the designation for the leading encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*: "For now, while we are in this world, love is the sign of Christians. It sums up their entire life: what they believe and what they do. This is why at the beginning of my pontificate I chose to dedicate my first Encyclical to this very subject of love: *Deus Caritas Est*" (*Angelus*, 31 January 2010). Without an iota of doubt, *Deus Caritas Est* is his favourite encyclical (Benedict XVI, 2016, p. 208).

It is to be, first and foremost, noted that love is the origin and orientation of every Christian as being made in the image and likeness of God "means that humanity was created from love and for love: both love of God and neighbour"

(*Deus Caritas Est*, 1). In addition, “everything has its origin in God's love, everything is shaped by it, everything is directed towards it” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 2). For a fact, love begets love; our love of God is merely our response to His love for “He has loved us first and he continues to do so; we too, then, can respond with love” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 17). The love from above (descending love) breeds love from below (ascending love) that significantly has a twofold direction, namely, vertical and horizontal; love from below ascends to God (vertically) in and through our love of neighbour (horizontally). As reminded by John the Beloved, God has first loved us (1 Jn 4: 10). Therefore, our own love is at best a response to the gift of love that we have first received from God. It is through this response that “God draws near to us” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 1).

Pope Benedict XVI brought a fresh perspective on the relationship between love and truth with a profound theological insight. Love and truth are two sides of a coin. An act of love, then, must be carried out in truth. He said it well: “Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 3). God is love; God is also truth. Both serve and complement each other without constructing opposites as “only in truth does charity shine forth, only in truth can charity be authentically lived” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 3). Love always aims at truth and vice versa thereby the two almost indistinguishable. In one of his most favourite books, a renowned Swiss theologian, Hans Urs Von Balthasar, retells: “truth and love are inseparable wings- for truth cannot fly without love- and love cannot hover without truth” (2004, p. 67). There is an interaction between the two. It is now crystal clear and intelligible that he tagged his third and last encyclical *Caritas in Veritas* (Charity in Truth), which is on social teaching. A good Christian life is one inspired by love and guided by truth. Then again, he reminded us: “But love can also be hated when it challenges us to transcend ourselves” (Benedict XVI, 2012, p. 86). All the same, a positive strengthening of Christian love is a prerequisite, even amid hate.

As gleaned from Pope Benedict XVI, the Holy Trinity is the revelation that God is love. He stated, “Three Persons who are one God alone because the Father is love, the Son is love and the Holy Spirit is love” (Angelus, 6 June 2009). Love, which is identical with the Blessed Trinity as St Augustine held that “If you see charity, you see the Trinity” (*De Trinitate*, VIII, 8, 12), runs through the theology of service of charity that constitutes the second part of the encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*. According to him, “Love is therefore the service that the Church carries out in order to attend constantly to man's sufferings and his needs including material needs” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 20). At this point, charity becomes the sacred obligation of the Church as he insisted that “The Church cannot neglect the service of charity any more than she can neglect the Sacraments and the Word” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 22). In addition, 1 Corinthians 13: 3 which states: “If

I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing", love must be the *magna carta* of all ecclesial service (*Deus Caritas Est*, 34).

In an age and time where some faith based organisations across the spectrum are engrossed in conversions and belief by allurements of the credulous in the guise of charitable service, Pope Benedict XVI strongly stressed that the stimulus for charity is not and should not be conversion: "Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends." However, "this does not mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 31) since Jesus Christ, who is the example of charity par excellence (cf. Mt. 4: 23; Mk 6:6; Acts 10: 38), inspires all charitable works. He points out that "The criterion inspiring their activity should be Saint Paul's statement in the Second Letter to the Corinthians: 'the love of Christ urges us on' (5: 14)" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 33). As a result, a Christian humanitarian undertaking should have his positive response to Christ's love. Pope Benedict XVI corroborates that "The consciousness that, in Christ, God has given himself for us, even unto death, must inspire us to live no longer for ourselves but for him, and, with him, for others" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 33). And so, he stressed further that "Each of us is loved by God" (Homily, 24 April 2005). Therefore, charitable service is an expression of God's love for those at the margin of the society as Christianity is essentially about a person and encounter with that person. However, whoever wants to encounter him must know him in the deprived. But, "How does that come about?" He re-joined, "Love knows him, the gospel tells us" (Ratzinger, 1989, p. 69). Grippingly, while commenting on St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (12: 31- 13: 13: 4-7), he held that "love is the sign of Christians. It sums up their entire life. What they believe and what they do" (*Angelus*, 31 January 2010). He added, "Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No Longer is it self-seeking...." (*Caritas Deus Est*, 6). It is the freedom from the custodial of self-centredness.

In consequence of the aforesaid, "The entire activity of the Church is an expression of love that seeks the integral good of man" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 19) and to serve Christ is above all a question of love, which is deeply engrained in Christ's call to the Petrine Ministry: "Peter, do you love me? Feed my sheep" (Jn 21: 15-17). This underscores that love is an essential quality of a shepherd. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI: "One of the basic characteristics of a shepherd must be to love the people entrusted to him, even as he loves Christ whom he serves" (Homily, 24 April 2005). Furthermore, for him, "Loving, feeding and following: these three key-words are used by the gospel to describe the essential nature of the priestly ministry. Because loving is the core of everything else...." (Ratzinger, 1989, p. 70-71).

And again, there is a striking continuity with his signature theme on love. Here he drew on the nexus between love and justice; the two of a kind are in conversation with each other since love “prompts us to give the other what is 'his', what is due to him by reason of his being or his acting” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 6). Love is a *sine qua non* for justice. Accordingly, it is not love or justice, but love and justice; both are irreplaceable as “Charity cannot take the place of justice that has been denied; nor can justice, on the other hand, replace charity that has been refused” (*Address to the Members of the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 7 January 2013). At the same time, “A love that overthrew justice would create injustice and thus cease to be anything but a caricature of love. True love is excess of justice, excess that goes farther than justice, but never destruction of justice, which must be and must remain the basic form of love” (Ratzinger, 1990, p. 325).

The last testament of Pope Benedict XVI, “Jesus, I love you”, could be best described as his well-informed response to God's love, his conformity to Him and his total submission to Him because he reasoned that “At the same time love is, so to speak, the 'style' of God and of believers, it is the behaviour of those who, in response to God's love, make their life a gift of themselves to God...” (*Angelus*, 31 January 2010). It is also an answer to his prayer, “May the Lord help us to learn from John the great the lesson of love so we may realise we are loved by Christ 'to the very end' and decide to spend our lives for Him” (*General Audience*, 5 July 2006).

In the final analysis, love transcends time and space; it is everlasting as God is eternal. Consequently, Pope Benedict XVI asserted: “In the end, when we find ourselves face to face with God, all the other gifts will no longer matter; the only one that will last forever is love, because God is love and we will be like him, in perfect communion with him” (*Angelus*, 31 January 2010). Love itself is infinite as “God is love” (cf. 1 Jn 4: 8). And “The sacrament of charity, the Holy Eucharist is the gift that Jesus Christ makes of himself, thus revealing God's infinite love for every man and woman” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 1).

A Pierced Heart: The Cost of Love

Although the Encyclical Letter, *Caritas Deus Est*, begins with a biblical fragment from 1 Jn 4: 16, which says: “God is love and he who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him”, the concept of love is exhaustively understood in relation to the “pierced heart.” Worthy of note, only a heart, the locus of feelings, which genuinely loves is hurt and pierced. Using the narrative of Simeon's personal prophecy to the Blessed Virgin Mary at the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple as a launching point, he avowed: “The theology of glory is inseparably linked with the theology of the Cross” (Benedict XVI, 2012, p. 85). It is, then unsurprising that “His death on the Cross is the culmination of the

turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise up man and save him. This is love in its radical form. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (cf. 19: 37), we can understand the starting-point of this Encyclical Letter: '*God is Love*' (1 Jn 4:8)." Those who unreservedly love God make the love of God noticeable through the concrete practice of sacrificial love towards their neighbour as the "love of neighbour is the path that leads to the encounter with God, and closing our eyes to our neighbour also blinds us to God" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 16). It challenges us "to enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 13) that will give legitimacy to our vocation for the reason that "Contemplating 'him whom they have pierced' moves us in this way to open our hearts to others, recognizing the wounds inflicted upon the dignity of the human person...." (Benedict XVI, 2007). Love, then, is well and fully understood in the death of Jesus on the Cross and in the martyrdom of his disciples even as it becomes worthy of emulation.

As a priest, he gave himself for the love of Christ and as a Pope, he loved the Church as much as he would do and suffered much because of her, a love that made him one with Jesus. It is, now, noteworthy that the Petrine office is not unconnected with suffering and martyrdom; there is an intrinsic connection. In this regard, Pope Benedict XVI explained that "And as the Lord declares to Peter after conferring upon him the office of shepherd, this includes accepting the cross, being prepared to give his life" (2007, p. 277). He was even gnawed at by his countrymen. Indeed, love cannot be truly understood if it is not relation to love. Not unlike Jesus who loved his own to the end, (Benedict XVI, 2011, p. 169). Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI loved Jesus as Jesus has loved him to the end. "This end", according to him, "is attained in the moment of death" (2011, p. 169).

It would be recalled that the deceased Pope Emeritus, Benedict XVI has a phenomenal reputation for his conservation, clarification and defence of the doctrines of the Church; he would neither hurt his conscience nor his faith. For him, "To defend the truth, to articulate it with humility and conviction, and to bear witness to it in life are therefore exacting and indispensable forms of charity (*Caritas in Veritatis*, 1). In bearing witness to the truth, he was despised and gnawed at even by his compatriots. He was referred to as "God's Rottweiler" by the Americans and to others as the Vatican doctrinal czar. In response to a question concerning his relationship with his countrymen, he grinned and said: "Of course I was aware that the forces of this established Catholicism would not agree with what I said...." (Benedict XVI, 2016, p. 217-218). Additionally, Paul Badde bewailed that "the Germans have recently taken an increasingly hostile attitude toward Benedict XVI, the Catholics almost even more than the Protestants. It is enough to make you weep" (2016, p. 226). Despite the misunderstanding and misrepresentation, he showed strength and

love for the Church before, during and after his papacy. He was absolutely in support of the Church accompanying the sinner but not at the expense of truth. Still, doctrinal fidelity is neither in tension nor at odd with pastoral concerns. For this, a young Italian woman has learned to love the Germans in and through him (Badde, 2016, p. 232).

Being at odds with the contemporary world's denunciation of God and Christianity's eternal truths, misunderstanding, misrepresentation, vilification and assaults have been a constant in Joseph Ratzinger/ Pope Benedict XVI's life, theology and papacy. Mario Cardinal Grech sheds more light on this: “Ratzinger was not understood even when he resigned [as pope]. His figure and memory are sometimes used and politicized to create an antagonism between Him and Pope Francis” (Catholic News Agency, 21 January, 2023). Yet, at no time was he in doubt of God's love; he was always strongly convinced in God's love and allowed it to guide and shape the course of his life. According to him, “he is love and he loves me- and as such, life should be guided by him, by this power called love” (Benedict XVI, 2016, p. 242).

Notably, he regarded the Eucharist as “a source of strength for those who are tired, weary and disoriented” (*General Audience*, 11 January, 2012). Yes and besides all this, it is in this regard that the “Logos now truly becomes food for us - as love” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 13); the food that kept, sustained and made him pull through those torturous years.

Conclusion

Late Pope Benedict XVI was an apostle and servant of love. His last words remind us of our vocation and orientation as Christians. “Hundreds of times in recent years he has extolled 'the Face of God'” (Badde, 2016, p. 229). Through this last testament, his theology shines once more in a farewell, no wonder then that sequel to renouncing the ministry of Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter, entrusted to him by the Cardinals on 19 April 2005, the Cardinal Secretary of State remarked with tears in his voice: “Thank you for giving us the shining example of a simple and humble worker in the Lord's vineyard, a worker, however, who was able at every moment to do what is most important: ... it has let the rays of truth and God's love stream in, giving light and warmth to us as we go on our way, even and especially when the clouds are gathering above” (Badde, 2016, p 230). Gleaned from his life, ministry and theology, he was rightly referred to as “'Papa d' amore' [Italian: 'Pope of love']...” (Badde, 2016, p. 232). Certainly, Pope Benedict XVI has played an outsized theological role in reshaping and restoring the concept of love to its originality by delineating “ascending love” and “descending love.”

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