

Benedict's First Encyclical Shuns Strictures of Orthodoxy

By IAN FISHER

VATICAN CITY, Jan. 25 — Pope Benedict XVI issued an erudite meditation on love and charity on Wednesday in a long-awaited first encyclical that presented Roman Catholicism's potential for good rather than imposing firm, potentially divisive rules for orthodoxy.

The encyclical, titled "God Is Love," did not mention abortion, homosexuality, contraception or divorce, issues that often divide Catholics. But in gentle, often poetic language, Benedict nonetheless portrayed a tough-minded church that is "duty bound," he wrote, to intervene at times in secular politics for "the attainment for what is just."

He also suggested that terrorism — which violates Christ's command to "love your neighbor" — had helped inspire his first major statement.

"In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant," he wrote. "For this reason, I wish in my first encyclical to speak of the love which God lavishes on us and which we in turn must share with others."

The encyclical is the highest form of papal teaching, and there had been much anticipation in the church for Benedict's first, given his long service as Pope John Paul II's outspoken, conservative defender of the faith.

But in contrast to his public reputation, Benedict, 78, who was elected in April, began his encyclical with a perhaps surprising first premise: conceding that the church has at times viewed sexuality as something "negative," he placed erotic love between married men and women at the center of God's plan.

Sex, he wrote, should mature into unselfish concern for the other, creating a love that leads to working for charity and justice for others.

"Love is indeed 'ecstasy,' " he wrote in a document that ran 71 pages in the English translation. "Not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus toward authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God."

In some measure, this is an encyclical of two popes: its second half, on charity and the role of the church in society, was begun under John Paul, who died in April. But church officials said the finished document, beginning with a section on love, was very much the work of Benedict.

"You cannot say that this pope added the first or the second part," said Archbishop Paul Josef Cordes, the pope's top adviser on charities. "You have to see that this pope is always following the steps, the traces, of John Paul II, and in this way it is a continuation, but not much."

Before becoming pope, when he was known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict was often seen as a divisive figure, lauded by conservative Catholics for his devotion to orthodoxy and criticized by liberal ones for not sharing their vision for a changing, more modern church.

But Benedict's elaboration on love and charity was largely praised across the church on Wednesday as a document that sought to express what is common to all Catholics.

"He's not wagging his finger about what's wrong with contemporary culture," said Msgr. Kevin W. Irwin, dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at Catholic University of America, in Washington. "He's saying, this is the big picture, and out of that you get a positive, optimistic ultimate vision of what Catholicism is."

Christian Weisner, spokesman for the German chapter of the liberal Catholic group We Are Church, called the encyclical "a sign of hope" that Benedict would prove to be a "human face for Christianity and for the Catholic Church."

He said, however, that he hoped that the pope's emphasis on love would make him more open to opposing views. "Loving your neighbors also means loving critical theologians, he said. "He also has to apply these ideas within the church itself."

The Rev. Joseph Fessio, editor of the conservative St. Ignatius Press, which publishes Benedict's books in English, said the themes and gentle tone of the encyclical should finally put to rest the stereotype of Benedict as a conservative ideologue.

"I can suggest a subhead for all the major media: 'Is this the Panzer Cardinal?' " Father Fessio said, referring to a nickname for Cardinal Ratzinger that was sometimes used in the press.

Nonetheless, Father Fessio said that in the encyclical Benedict was true to traditional church teachings: his definition of love in it applied to men and women, married and monogamous "forever."

"What is he doing there?" Father Fessio asked. "He is saying no divorce. He is saying no promiscuity. He is saying no multiple wives. No homosexuality. He's completely positive, but if you accept the teaching, consequences follow."

The subject of love, some church officials said, was not the most obvious one for a first encyclical. Monsignor Cordes joked this week to reporters that some people considered celibate priests talking about love as they would "a blind man talking about colors."

But the encyclical presents love as a fundamental force, and Benedict sought to unite the ideas of sexual love and a broader, more altruistic love. He paraphrased Nietzsche as saying Christianity's moral rules had blown "the whistle" on sexuality, a vital part of human nature. Benedict admitted the charge to some degree, but said the church was not alone in distorting sex.

"Nowadays Christianity of the past is often criticized as having been opposed to the body; and it is quite true that tendencies of this sort have always existed," he said. "Yet the contemporary way of exalting the body is also deceptive. Eros, reduced to pure 'sex,' has become a commodity, a mere 'thing' to be bought or sold."

He said that through monogamous relationships between married men and women, love grew and was "less and less concerned with itself, increasingly seeks the happiness of the other." This love, he wrote, mirrors God's love for humankind, reflects Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, and leads to a larger love for neighbors, then for mankind.

This leads to the second part of the encyclical, on charity, which he said represented love as an "ordered service to the community."

The new document also carefully outlines the church's rationale for weighing in on political issues.

"The church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible," Benedict wrote. "She cannot and must not replace the state."

"Yet at the same time," he added, "she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice."

Laurie Goodstein contributed reporting from New York for this article.

Zuletzt geändert am 09.05.2006