

The Sting of Death: The Unavoidable Question and the Response of Faith

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IN A 1984 essay of Joseph Ratzinger entitled “Faith, Theology and Philosophy” occur these striking lines:

Both faith and philosophy confront the primordial question which death addresses to man. Now the question of death is only the radical form of the question about how to live rightly. It asks whence man comes and whither he is going. It seeks an origin and a destination. Death, the one question which it is impossible to ignore for ever, is thus a metaphysical thorn lodged in man’s being. Man has no choice but to ask what might be the meaning of this final limit.¹

The general purpose of the 1984 essay is to stake out a proper relationship between theology and philosophy. In the earliest centuries of our era, Christian apologetics and iconography could present Jesus—the Logos incarnate—as “the Philosopher.” At its best, secular philosophy provided categories that—subject to transformation—could aid the confession of Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel. In modern times, the relationship, both from the philosophical and from the theological side, has become more adversarial. Ratzinger wants to see philosophy as helping to

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, “Faith, Philosophy and Theology,” in *The Nature and Mission of Theology: Essays to Orient Theology in Today’s Debates*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 13–29, here p. 23; originally included as “Glaube, Philosophie und Theologie,” in *Wesen und Auftrag der Theologie: Versuche zu ihrer Ortsbestimmung im Disput der Gegenwart* (Freiburg: Johannes Verlag, 1993), 11–25, here pp. 19–20.

frame the provocative questions, to which theology, on the basis of the Gospel and the Christian faith, seeks to offer answers, which in turn will stimulate philosophy in its search for truth. Death raises questions that can be philosophically formulated and that require a theological response. Ratzinger sees faith and reason—in their respective and related ways—as serving the one Truth; and in this he matches Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et Ratio* (1998), issued while Cardinal Ratzinger was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Returning, then, to the primordial and unavoidable problem of death: death sharply poses a complex set of questions concerning both the very being of man and also humankind's concrete existence—as particular persons and as a race with a social constitution and a history. In the words of a Lenten antiphon that can be traced back to Notker of St. Gall and has found its way into traditional English and German liturgical use: “Media vita in morte sumus” (“In the midst of life we are in death”; “Mitten wir im Leben sind mit dem Tod umfassen”). Pope Benedict XVI's programmatic first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, can be seen as offering, at least in outline, this pontificate's answer to the question of death; and the very title of the encyclical—its opening phrase, “God is Love”—will prove to be of the greatest significance.² In the present essay, a cluster of six themes in *Deus Caritas Est* will be noted, and a series of flashbacks will show how these components in the Pope's most recent answer to the question of death were presaged in the earlier writings—both scholarly and pastoral—of the theologian Joseph Ratzinger (professor at the Universities of Bonn, Münster, Tübingen, and Regensburg, 1959–1977; archbishop of Munich and Freising, 1977–1981; and prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1981–2005). Besides showing the consistency in Joseph Ratzinger's thinking, recourse to the previous texts will provide richer materials from which the necessarily brief hints in the encyclical can be filled out. Quotations will permit readers to catch the flavor of Ratzinger's style in various modes, and references will then permit the more substantive pursuit of his thoughts. With each of the six sub-topics, we shall at least mention some of the contemporary ways in which the question of death comes to expression and the (inadequate) answers that are advanced from outside the Christian faith (and sometimes from within theology). The six themes may be

² Pope Benedict's first encyclical was “given in Rome, at Saint Peter's, on 25 December, the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord, in the year 2005, the first of [his] Pontificate.” For a brief initial comment of mine on *Deus Caritas Est*, see G. Wainwright, “Reflections on Pope Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*,” *Pro Ecclesia* 15 (2006): 263–66.

provisionally formulated as follows: first, the essential constitution of the human being; second, the existential vocation of humankind; third, and crucially, the human need for redemption and its divine provision; fourth, the ethical challenge of faith; fifth, the quality and direction of society and culture; sixth, the final prospect of the human person and the race. The emphasis in this exposition will fall on Pope Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, but towards the end of the article we shall note how some, at least, of these themes have been amplified in his second encyclical, *Spe Salvi*.

The Being of Man

In an initial comment on the semantic range of the word "love" at the human level, Pope Benedict singles out "love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness" (*Deus Caritas Est*, §2). The phrase "body and soul" might almost appear off-hand in this context, although it is interesting that the writer seems confident that this near-colloquialism will be immediately understood by the readers he is seeking to captivate. By the time of paragraph 5, he is ready to bring out the theological import of "body and soul": Christian faith "has always considered man a unity in duality, a reality in which spirit and matter penetrate, and in which each is brought to a new nobility":

Man is a being made up of body and soul. Man is truly himself when his body and soul are intimately united. . . . Should he aspire to be pure spirit and to reject the flesh as pertaining to his animal nature alone, then spirit and body would both lose their dignity. On the other hand, should he deny the spirit and consider matter, the body, as the only reality, he would likewise lose his greatness. . . . Only when both dimensions are truly united . . . is love—*eros*—able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur.

In his reading of contemporary society, Pope Benedict finds "the erotic" assuming what amounts to a character of morbidity:

[T]he contemporary way of exalting the body is deceptive. *Eros*, reduced to pure "sex," has become a commodity, a mere "thing" to be bought and sold, or rather, man himself becomes a commodity. This is hardly man's great "yes" to the body. On the contrary, he now considers his body and his sexuality as the purely material part of himself, to be used and exploited at will. Nor does he see it as an arena for the exercise of his freedom, but as a mere object that he attempts, as he pleases, to make both enjoyable and harmless. Here we are actually dealing with a

debasement of the human body: no longer is it integrated into our overall existential freedom; no longer is it a vital expression of our whole being, but it is more or less relegated to the purely biological sphere. The apparent exaltation of the body can quickly turn into a hatred of bodiliness. (Ibid.)

In reference to our main question of death, it seems that contemporary people may indeed be quite close to confirming Sigmund Freud's theory of the "death-wish" (*Todeswunsch*) as a universal instinct—where *eros* and *thanatos* finally coincide. For the Christian faith, the two remain polar opposites—until resolved in and through the divine *agape*.

The constitution of the human being as "a unity in duality," "a unified creature composed of body and soul" (*Deus Caritas Est*, §5) was insistently expounded by the theologian Ratzinger in his *Eschatologie*—the one volume that he himself contributed to the *Kleine Katholische Dogmatik*, undertaken with his Regensburg colleague Johann Auer.³ The vital importance of an ontology in any Christian answer to the inescapable question posed by death is clear. That Joseph Ratzinger, now as Pope Benedict, still believes that to be the case is shown by his allowing *Eschatologie* to be reprinted—and indeed with a confirmatory new preface, signed "Joseph Ratzinger—Benedikt XVI" and significantly dated on the Feast of All Saints 2006.⁴

In his *Eschatology*, Ratzinger refutes the view of some twentieth-century exponents of an allegedly "biblical theology" that saw an irreducible dichotomy between "Hebrew" and "Greek" understandings of man, in which the "corporeality" and "total death" of the former are set against the "dualism" and "the soul's release" in the latter.⁵ Exegetically, historically, and systematically, Ratzinger shows that both the Old Testament and Plato are more complex than that, while both find their correction, completion and transformation in the life, teaching, passion, death

³ *Eschatologie: Tod und ewiges Leben* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 1977); the sixth, expanded edition of 1990 will be used here. An intermediate English translation was *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. M. Waldstein and A. Nichols (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988).

⁴ Joseph Ratzinger/Benedikt XVI, *Eschatologie* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2007). The American publisher also reissued *Eschatology*, with the author's new preface now included. Both in the German and in the English-language versions of 2007, the pagination in the body of the book remains the same as in the editions cited in note 3.

⁵ On the "Greek" side in particular, "the frequently encountered notion of a Hellenic-Platonic dualism of soul and body, with its corollary in the idea of the soul's immortality, is something of a theologian's fantasy" (*Eschatologie*, 123; *Eschatology*, 145).

and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was the presence of the crucified and now risen Christ to faith—coupled with the availability of eternal life and yet the persistence of earthly death on this side of the Parousia—that constituted the real foundation on which Christian theological thinking could gradually develop a corresponding anthropology. Needed was “an anthropology which in the first instance recognized that man is, in his unified totality, the creature of God, conceived and willed by him. But at the same time, this anthropology was also obliged to distinguish between an element that perishes and an element that abides—though in such a way that the path towards the resurrection, the definitive reunification of man and creation remained open.”⁶ It took until Thomas Aquinas to formulate precisely that “the soul belongs to the body as ‘form,’ but that which is the form of the body is still spirit. It makes man a person and opens him to immortality.”⁷ This “strictly Christian” idea of the soul—“as found in Catholic liturgy and theology up to the Second Vatican Council”⁸—is not “substantialistic” but rather “the vehicle of a ‘dialogical’ concept of humanity: man is defined by his intercourse with God.”⁹ That capacity for relatedness to God implies no “escape” from the concrete reality of creation but rather the very opposite:

[I]t is the man who makes himself open to all being, in its wholeness and in its ground, and becomes thereby a “self,” who is truly a person. Such openness is not a product of human achievement. It is given to man; man depends for it on Another. But it is given to man to be his very own possession. That is what is meant by creation. . . .

[F]rom belief in creation there follows the integral character of Christian hope. What is saved is the one creature, man, in the wholeness

⁶ *Eschatologie*, 125; *Eschatology*, 147–48.

⁷ *Eschatologie*, 126; *Eschatology*, 149.

⁸ *Eschatologie*, 126; *Eschatology*, 150. Ratzinger may here be hinting at a lamentable feature of postconciliar liturgical revision: “Even the Missal of Paul VI dared to speak of the soul only here and there, and that in timorous fashion, otherwise avoiding all mention of it where possible. As for the German rite of burial, it has, so far as I can see, obliterated it altogether” (*Eschatologie*, 216; *Eschatology*, 246). Ratzinger notes (*Eschatologie*, 209) that at least one Methodist theologian “begründet in präziser Gedankenführung die Notwendigkeit von ‘Seele’ und ‘Zwischenzustand’ vom biblischen Zeugnis her”—referring to my chapter “The Last Things” in *Keeping the Faith*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 341–70, in particular pp. 356–58.

⁹ *Eschatologie*, 127–29; *Eschatology*, 150–53. “Soul is nothing other than man’s capacity for relatedness with truth, with love eternal” (*Eschatologie*, 233; *Eschatology*, 259). “And that truth and eternal love reside, of course, in the God who is ‘not a God of the dead but the God of the living (cf. Mk 12:26–27)’” (*Eschatologie*, 99–100; *Eschatology*, 113–14).

and unity of his personhood as that appears in embodied life. . . . This does not mean that nothing in man is transient. But it does mean that in the transfiguration of the transient, what takes shape is the abiding. Matter as such cannot provide the underpinning for man's continuing identity. Even during our life on earth it is changing constantly. . . . Hence the indispensability of the body-soul distinction. Nevertheless, the Christian tradition . . . has conceived this duality in such a way that it is not dualistic but rather brings to light the worth and unity of the human being as a whole. Even in the continuous "wasting away" of the body, it is the whole man in his unity who moves towards eternity. It is in the life of the body that God's creature grows in maturity in expectation of seeing God's face.¹⁰

As to the resurrection at the end of earthly history: the biblical witness—itsself grounded in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ—is encapsulated in the phrase "pneumatic realism"; in the doctrinal tradition, help was afforded by the Thomistic insight into "the unity of body and soul, a unity founded on the creative act and implying at once the abiding ordination of the soul to matter and the derivation of the identity of the body not from matter but from the person, the soul"; systematically, Ratzinger declines to speculate much beyond "the certainty that the dynamism of the cosmos leads towards a goal, a situation in which matter and spirit will belong to each other in a new and definitive fashion."¹¹ The Incarnation and continuing bodiliness of Christ mean that history in all its concreteness retains its eternal seriousness for each and every person amid the complex network of human relationships in time and the purposes of God for creation.¹²

¹⁰ *Eschatologie*, 130, 133; *Eschatology*, 155, 158–59.

¹¹ *Eschatologie*, 137–60; *Eschatology*, 165–94.

¹² *Eschatologie*, 152–57; *Eschatology*, 184–90. On the question of immortality and the possibility of eternal separation from God, Ratzinger writes: "As a created being [man] is made for a relationship [with God] which entails indestructibility" (*Eschatologie*, 130; *Eschatology*, 154). "Man as we know him wants to generate his own immortality. He would like to fabricate it out of his own stuff. . . . But in this attempt to manufacture eternity, the vessel of man must, at the last, founder. What endures after one is not oneself. Man falls headlong into the unreal, yielding up his life to unreality, to death. The intimate connection of sin and death is the content of the curse we read of in the book of Genesis [Gen 3:3]. An existence in which man tries to divinize himself, to become 'like a god' in his autonomy, independence and self-sufficiency, turns into a Sheol-existence, a being in nothingness, a shadow-life on the fringe of real living. This does not mean, however, that man can cancel God's creative act or put it into reverse. The result of his sin is not pure nothingness. Like every other creature, man can only move within the ambit of creation. Just as he cannot bring forth being of himself, so

In contemporary secular philosophy, the basic anthropological question is posed, for example, in terms of consciousness or even cybernetics. According to the American sociobiologist E. O. Wilson, "All tangible phenomena, from the birth of stars to the working of social institutions, are based on material processes that are ultimately reducible, however long and tortuous the sequences, to the laws of physics," and the arts are described by Wilson as embracing "not only all physically possible worlds but also all conceivable worlds innately interesting and *congenial to the nervous system*."¹³ Those who, like Wilson, wish totally to remove any residue of metaphysics will see human judgment as the spurious exercise of an illusory self within a consciousness that is merely epiphenomenal. In old-fashioned philosophical terms, that is materialism, which remains alive and well despite the difficulties inherent in the notion of matter *understanding itself* as material. The questions currently take form in these ways: Is the brain a computer? Can machines think? A recent two-volume "history of cognitive science" by Margaret A. Boden bears the title *Mind as Machine*.¹⁴ Much is at stake in the Christian ontology of man as body and soul, Ratzinger recognizes, in the face of "a modern anthropology, worked out on the basis of natural

neither can he hurl it back into sheer nothingness. What he can achieve in this regard is not the annulment of being, but lived self-contradiction, a self-negating possibility, namely 'Sheol.' The natural ordination towards the truth, towards God, which of itself excludes nothingness, still endures, even when it is denied or forgotten" (*Eschatologie*, 131; *Eschatology*, 156). "And this," says Ratzinger further, "is where the affirmations of christology come into their own. What happened in Christ was that God overcame this self-contradiction from within—as distinct from destroying human freedom by an arbitrary act from without. The living and dying of Christ tell us that God himself descends into the pit of Sheol, that in the land of absolute loneliness he makes relationship possible, healing the blind [John 9] and so giving life in the midst of death. The Christian teaching on eternal life takes on, once more, a thoroughly practical character at this point. Immortality is not something we achieve. Though it is a gift inherent in creation it is not something which just happens to occur in nature. . . . Immortality rests upon a relationship in which we are given a share, but by which, in sharing it, we are claimed in turn. It points to a praxis of receiving, to that model for living which is the self-emptying of Jesus, as opposed to the vain promise of salvation contained in the words 'Ye shall be as gods,' the sham of total emancipation. If the human capacity for truth and for love is the place where eternal life can break forth, then eternal life can be consciously experienced in the present" (*Eschatologie*, 131–32; *Eschatology*, 156–57). See further *Eschatologie*, 176–79; *Eschatology*, 215–18.

¹³ Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (New York: Knopf, 1998), 266 and 268 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Margaret A. Boden, *Mind as Machine: A History of Cognitive Science*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006).

science, and identifying the human being with his or her body, without any remainder that might admit a soul distinct from that body.”¹⁵

The Human Vocation

According to our opening quotation from the essay of 1984, death raises the questions of “whence man comes, whither he is going”; it is looking for “an origin and a destination.” Where the English translation reads “Man has no choice but to ask what might be the meaning of this final limit,” the German original makes a clearer echo to Martin Heidegger: “Der Mensch muss danach fragen, was es mit diesem Ende auf sich habe.” For Heidegger, human existence is an “existence unto death” (“Dasein zum Tode”). According to Pope Benedict’s encyclical, the Christian faith—through its “image of God and the resulting image of mankind and its destiny”—offers for human existence a different possibility: “[T]he encounter with an event, a person,” namely Jesus Christ, “gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus Caritas Est*, §1).

In four sermons delivered as adult catechesis in the Liebfrauentum in Munich in Lent of 1981, Archbishop Ratzinger makes clear that “the story of creation and the fall” is not to be “demythologized”—even in a benevolent sense—and thus reduced to an “existentialist” interpretation.¹⁶ Rather, human existence is to be grounded in creation realistically understood. The Genesis stories—when read in light of the Torah and the New Testament, to which they were leading—teach that “only if [and because] it is true that the universe comes from [divine] freedom, love, and reason,

¹⁵ *Eschatologie*, 94; *Eschatology*, 106. In the preface to the edition of 2007, Ratzinger recommends an article by Tobias Kläden, “Die aktuelle Debatte um das Leib-Seele-Problem,” in *Theologische Revue* 102 (2006), cols. 183–202, and a review by F. A. Peters, in the same issue (2006, no. 3, cols. 201–204), of a book by Ewald Richter, *Wohin führt uns die moderne Hirnforschung? Ein Beitrag aus phänomenologischer und erkenntniskritischer Sicht* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2005).

¹⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Im Anfang schuf Gott* (Munich: Erich Wewel Verlag, 1986); *In the Beginning: The Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, with an appendix (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995). In the preface to the published version of the Munich sermons, dated from Rome on the Feast of St. Augustine 1985, Cardinal Ratzinger declared that his new responsibility as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had further persuaded him of the urgency of bringing the doctrine of creation to the fore in Christian proclamation. The point against demythologization is made in a note to the preface (pp. 60–61 in the German; pp. x–xii in the English). In the next couple of paragraphs I cite page references in parentheses (first the German, then the English edition). Into my brief quotations I have sometimes introduced—within brackets—phrases from the context for the sake of clarity; and in further citing this work I have occasionally adapted the published translation in other ways also.

and that these are the real underlying powers, can we trust one another, go forward into the future, and live as human beings" (p. 22; p. 18): "God created the universe in order to enter into a history of love with humankind, . . . to be able to become a human being and pour out his love upon us and to invite us to love him in return" (pp. 29–30; p. 30).

Temporality belongs to creation, and speaks to us of "the passage from a beginning to an end" (p. 25; p. 22). To be formed from the dust of the ground [Gen2:7a] means being, like all earthly creatures, "destined for death" (p. 37; p. 43). But to "bear God's breath" [Gen 2:7b] is to be "God's image" [Gen 1:26f.], to be "addressed by him" (p. 38; pp. 44–45) and to be, in turn, "capable of addressing God" (p. 40; p. 47f.). In Jesus Christ, the "definitive Adam" (p. 40f.; p. 48), "we can discern what the human being, God's project, is, and thereby our own status" (p. 46; p. 57). But Christ's entry into the world needed to occur in redemptive mode on account of the Fall.

According to Ratzinger's interpretation of Genesis 3 in the fourth of the Munich sermons of Lent 1981, the story of Adam reveals the nature of human guilt and thus concerns the existence of us all. The Fall consists in the refusal to recognize "the boundary of good and evil," the moral order that the God of the covenant has built into creation as its "inner standard or norm (*das innere Mass*)."¹⁷ The Fall is thus a denial both of the proximity of God and of our own creaturehood. Whatever death might have been, had Adam not sinned, death now holds negative sway:

[S]in is, in its essence, a renunciation of the truth. Now we can also understand the mysterious meaning of the words: "If you eat of it [that is, if you deny the boundary, if you deny your creatureliness], then you will die" (cf. Gen. 2:16f.; 3:1–5). This means that human beings who deny the boundary of good and evil, which is the inner standard of creation, deny the truth. They are living in untruth and in unreality. Their lives are mere appearance; they stand under the sway of death. We who are largely surrounded by a world of untruths, of unlife, know how strong this sway of death is, which even negates life itself and makes it a kind of death. (pp. 54–55; p. 71)¹⁷

¹⁷ The contemporary Orthodox theologian and hierarch John Zizioulas, in *Communion and Otherness: Further Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London and New York: T. & T. Clark/Continuum, 2006), also views death as the ontological and existential problem (see, for example, pp. 40–41, 226–29, 257–58). Zizioulas locates the fallenness of humankind in its perversion of the particularity of "personhood" (which resides in being made "in the image of God"; cf. Genesis 1:26–27) in favor of an "individualism" that is in fact absorbed into an undifferentiated "nature" (which, as creatureliness, is inherently mortal). According to Zizioulas, there is no "natural immortality" for the creature, and certainly not for fallen humankind; but eternal life can be freely and graciously given by

The story of God's "project" for humanity, its frustration, its retrieval, and its promised triumph, is the comprehensive content of the Scriptures. The biblical structure is what grounds Ratzinger the systematic theologian's exposition of the origin and destination of human existence—of human history and of each person—as a movement of *exitus* and *reditus*, beginning in God's free and loving act of creation and ending in a free and loving response of the finally perfected creatures to God the consummator. Within the great "arc from *exitus* to *reditus*," the "great historical process by which the world moves towards the fulfillment of God being 'all in all,'" the smaller units "carry within themselves the great rhythm of the whole, give it concrete forms that are ever new, and so provide it with the force of its movement"; these smaller units include not only "the lives of the different cultures and communities of human history, in which the drama of beginning, development, and end is played out," but also "the many small circles of the lives of individuals."¹⁸ Because of the Fall—humankind's self-assertive refusal of God's gracious offer in creation—the "return" can take place only by the way of the Cross, a "death to self." In *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Ratzinger puts this in staurological and sacramental terms that anticipate what he will say in *Deus Caritas Est*:

The great gesture of embrace emanating from the Crucified has not yet reached its goal; it has only just begun. Christian liturgy is liturgy on the way, a liturgy of pilgrimage toward the transfiguration of the world, which will only take place when God is "all in all."¹⁹

the Father of the risen Christ (pp. 265–69). A negative outcome also is allowed by the freedom that properly goes with personhood: "A man remains eternally free to aspire after the destruction of himself and others. However, being unable to attain it, . . . he will be eternally tormented by the non-accomplishment of his freedom. . . . Hell is the existential space where all those who desire the loss of others—and cannot obtain it, because of the Resurrection [of Christ]—are held. Hatred is, *par excellence*, the foretaste of hell" (p. 268). Thus Zizioulas holds in check the quasi-universalism fashionable among other admirers of Gregory of Nyssa: "Hell is the place of the dead precisely because what is absent is the personal identity which personhood gives, the positive relationship with God, our being recognized as beings by God. It is the condition of 'I do not know you' (Mt 25:12)" (p. 281).

¹⁸ *Der Geist der Liturgie: Eine Einführung* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2000), 25–29, cf. 52, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 29–34, cf. 59. I have drawn heavily on this book in my essay "A Remedy for Relativism: The Cosmic, Historical, and Eschatological Dimensions of the Liturgy according to the Theologian Joseph Ratzinger," in *Nova et Vetera* 5 (2007): 403–30; also to be found in Geoffrey Wainwright, *Embracing Purpose: Essays on God, the World and the Church* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2007), 265–90, 351–52.

¹⁹ *Der Geist der Liturgie*, 43; *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 50. For the *exitus-reditus* theme, Ratzinger himself directs his readers (*Der Geist der Liturgie*, 195; *The Spirit of the*

In sum, death belongs to our concrete human existence both as historical creatures and as sinners. The Gospel proclaims the possibility of death's transformation under both those aspects by the redeeming and renewing work of God. We thereby return to the "encounter" that "gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (*Deus Caritas Est*, §1).

Redemption, or the Retrieval of the Lost

Invoking Hosea 11:8–9 and God's refusal to abandon adulterous Israel, Pope Benedict notes that "God's passionate love for his people—for humanity—is at the same time a forgiving love. It is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice. Here Christians can see a dim prefigurement 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" (*Deus Caritas Est*, §10). With the Incarnation, God's engagement with the world "now takes on dramatic form when, in Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of the 'stray sheep,' a suffering and lost humanity. . . . His 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. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (cf. John 19:37), we can understand the starting-point of this Encyclical Letter: 'God is love' (1 John 4:8)" (*Deus Caritas Est*, §12).

In the strongly trinitarian paragraph 19, Pope Benedict summarizes the first half of the encyclical through a configuration of images that frequently recur in his theological writings as Joseph Ratzinger:

In the foregoing reflections, we have been able to focus our attention on the Pierced one (cf. John 19:37; Zechariah 12:10), recognizing the plan of the Father who, moved by love (cf. John 3:16), sent his only-begotten Son into the world to redeem man. By dying on the Cross—as Saint John tells us—Jesus "gave up his Spirit" (John 19:30), anticipating the gift of the Holy Spirit that he would make after his Resurrection (cf. John 20:22). This was to fulfill the promise of "rivers of living water" that would flow out of the hearts of believers, through the outpouring of the Spirit (cf. John 7:38–39). The Spirit, in fact, is that interior power which harmonizes their hearts with Christ's heart and moves them to love their brethren as Christ loved them, when he

Liturgy, 227) to his own habilitation-thesis *Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura* (Munich and Zurich: Verlag Schnell & Steiner, 1959; 2nd ed., St. Ottilien: Eos, 1992); *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure*, trans. Zachary Hayes (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971). See especially pages 140–48 in the German (1st ed.), pages 138–48 in the English.

bent down to wash the feet of the disciples (cf. John 13:1–13) and above all when he gave his life for us (cf. John 13:1; 15:13).

At least four elements figure in this sketch, and they are all characteristic of Ratzinger the theologian. The first element is the strictly redemptive and unique character of Christ's death: it was "the death of death," or, as the Orthodox liturgy puts it, "by death he trampled down death, and gave life to those in the tomb," and the anaphoral acclamation in the Missal of Paul VI says: "Dying, you destroyed our death. Rising, you restored our life. Lord Jesus, come in glory." Joseph Ratzinger finds "the origin of the Eucharist in the paschal mystery," that is, in "the turning point of the Cross and the Resurrection, . . . the basis for Christianity in all its novelty, . . . the very center of the mystery of Christ."²⁰ The fundamental christological and soteriological themes of Pope John Paul II's first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) and his later *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) were, of course, taken up in the declaration *Dominus Iesus* from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000. That last-named document bears the matching imprint of the then Cardinal Prefect Joseph Ratzinger in these crucial matters.

Second, we find in paragraph 19 of *Deus Caritas Est* the "attractive" power of Christ's saving death: we are drawn to him by the contemplation of his wounded side. In *The Spirit of the Liturgy* we find it said that "[i]n the pierced heart of the Crucified, God's own heart is opened up—here we see who God is and what he is like."²¹ Already in an address to the Congress on the Sacred Heart of Jesus held at Toulouse in 1981, Joseph Ratzinger had invoked Hosea 11:8–9 and found in "the pierced Heart of the Crucified . . . the literal fulfilment of the prophecy of the Heart of God, which overturns its righteousness by mercy and by that very action remains righteous." In contrast with the Stoic view, where "the task of the heart is self-preservation, holding together what is its own," Ratzinger finds that "[t]he pierced Heart of Jesus has truly 'overturned' this definition":

²⁰ From Archbishop Ratzinger's four Lenten sermons delivered at the Michaelskirche in Munich in 1978, first published in *Eucharistie: Mitte der Kirche* (Munich: Erich Wewel Verlag, 1978). These sermons were later republished, together with other pieces, in Joseph Ratzinger, *Gott ist uns nahe: Eucharistie, Mitte des Lebens*, ed. S. O. Horn and V. Pfnür (Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich Verlag, 2001); *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003). Here *Gott ist uns nahe*, 25–39, 64 ; *God Is Near Us*, 27–41, 65.

²¹ *Der Geist der Liturgie*, 40; *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 48. The theme of "the pierced heart of Jesus" returns in *Deus Caritas Est*, §39.

This Heart is not concerned with self-preservation but with self-surrender. It saves the world by opening itself. The revolution of the opened Heart is the content of the Easter mystery. The heart saves, indeed, but it saves by giving itself away. Thus, in the Heart of Jesus, the center of Christianity is set before us. It expresses everything, all that is genuinely new and revolutionary in the New Covenant. This Heart calls to our heart. It invites us to step forth out of the futile attempt of self-preservation and, by joining in the task of love, by handing ourselves over to him and with him, to discover the fullness of love which alone is eternity and which alone sustains the world.²²

In another of Ratzinger's favorite images, the outstretched arms of the crucified Christ are ready to embrace us and all men (cf. Jn 12:32).²³ In the Munich catecheses of 1981, he said this:

Christ is the new Adam, with whom humankind begins anew. The Son, who is by nature relationship and relatedness, reestablishes relationships. His arms, spread out on the Cross, are an open invitation to relationship, which is continually offered to us. The Cross, the place of his obedience, is the true tree of life. . . . From this tree there comes not the word of temptation but that of redeeming love, the word of obedience, which an obedient God himself used, thus offering us his obedience as a context for freedom. The Cross is the tree of life, now become approachable. By his passion Christ, as it were, removed the fiery sword, passed through the fire, and erected the Cross as the true pole of the earth, by which it is itself once more set aright. Therefore the Eucharist, as the presence of the Cross, is the abiding tree of life, which is ever in our midst and ever invites us to take the fruit of true life To receive it, to eat of the tree of life, thus means to receive the crucified Lord and consequently to accept the parameters of his life, his obedience, his "yes," the measure of our creatureliness. It means to accept the love of God, which is our truth—that dependence on God which is no more an imposition from without than is the Son's sonship. It is precisely this "dependence" that is freedom, because it is truth and love.²⁴

²² See Joseph Ratzinger, "The Mystery of Easter: Substance and Foundation of Devotion to the Sacred Heart," in *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 47–69, here pp. 64 and 69 (slightly altered); "Das Ostergeheimnis: tiefster Gehalt und Grund der Herz-Jesu-Verehrung" in *Schauen auf den Durchbohrten: Versuche zu einer spirituellen Christologie* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1984; 2nd ed. 1990), 41–59, here pp. 54–55 and 58–59.

²³ He quotes Lactantius from the fourth century: "In his Passion God spread out his arms and thus embraced the globe as a sign that a future people, from the rising of the sun to its setting, would gather under his wings" (*Div. Inst.* IV, 26, CSEL 19, 383 quoted in *Der Geist der Liturgie*, 157; *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 182–83).

²⁴ *Im Anfang schuf Gott* (as in note 16 above), 58–59; *In the Beginning*, 76.

Third, Christ's death and resurrection released the Spirit, whose special work is to join and conform us to Christ. Elsewhere—and without, of course, any contradiction—Ratzinger will again highlight the role of the sacraments in this regard:

In this connection, the Fathers always had at the back of their minds the conclusion of the Passion narrative according to St. John: blood and water flow from the opened side of Christ; Baptism and Eucharist spring from the pierced heart of Jesus.²⁵

Jesus is the New Adam, who goes down into the darkness of death's sleep and opens within it the beginning of a new humanity. From his side, that side which has been opened up in loving sacrifice, comes forth a spring that brings to fruition the whole of history. From the self-sacrifice of Jesus in death stream blood and water, Eucharist and baptism, as the source of a new community.²⁶

Fourth, the benefits of Christ's saving death take shape among believers as an imitative participation. Another favorite image of Ratzinger's is that of the grain that must die in order to produce fruit. In paragraph 6 of *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict writes:

Love is indeed “ecstasy” [*ek-stasis*], 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 towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God: “Whoever seeks to gain his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will preserve it” (Luke 17:33), as Jesus says throughout the Gospels (cf. Matthew 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; John 12:25). In these words, Jesus portrays his own path, which leads through the Cross to the Resurrection: the path of the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies, and in this way bears much fruit. Starting from the depths of his own sacrifice and of the love that reaches fulfillment therein, he also portrays in these words the essence of love and indeed of human life itself.

In a Munich sermon of 1978, Archbishop Ratzinger had preached this:

It was alone that [Christ] died, as the grain of wheat, but he does not rise alone, but as a whole ear of corn, taking with him the communion

²⁵ *Der Geist der Liturgie*, 191, cf. 73; *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 222, cf. 84.

²⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Wellspring of Life from the Side of the Lord, Opened in Loving Sacrifice,” in *God Is Near Us* (as in note 20 above), 42–55, here pp. 42–43 (slightly altered); *Gott ist uns nahe*, 41–54, here pp. 41–42. Ratzinger notes that “for the side of Jesus, when it is pierced, John has chosen exactly the same word as is used in the creation story to tell of the creation of Eve, where we normally translate it as Adam’s ‘rib’” (ibid.).

of the saints. Since the Resurrection, Christ no longer stands alone but is—as the Church Fathers say—always *caput et corpus*: head and body, open to us all. Thus he makes his word come true: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (John 12:32). . . . The magnitude of Christ’s achievement consists precisely in his not remaining separate, over and against us, which might thus relegate us once more to a merely passive rôle; he does not merely bear with us; rather, he bears us up; he identifies himself with us to such an extent that our sins belong to him and his being to us: he truly accepts us and takes us up, so that we ourselves cooperate and join in the sacrifice with him, participating in the mystery ourselves. Thus our own life and suffering, our own hoping and loving, can also become fruitful, in the new center (*Mitte*) he has given us to our existence.²⁷

In his firm insistence on the saving death of Christ, the Pope in his encyclical is offering no facile theodicy. Recalling Job’s “complain[t] before God about the incomprehensible and apparently unjustified suffering in the world” (Job 23:3, 5–6, 15–16), Benedict confesses:

Often we cannot understand why God refrains from interfering. Yet he does not prevent us from crying out, like Jesus on the Cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). We should continue asking this question in prayerful dialogue before his face: “Lord, holy and true, how long will it be?” (Revelation 6:10). It is Saint Augustine who gives us faith’s answer to our sufferings: “*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*”—“if you understand him, he is not God.” Our protest is not meant to challenge God, or to suggest that error, weakness or indifference can be found in him. For the believer, it is impossible to imagine that God is powerless or that “perhaps he is asleep” (cf. 1 Kings 18:27). Instead, our crying out is, as it was for Jesus on the Cross, the deepest and most radical way of affirming our faith in his sovereign power. Even in their bewilderment and failure to understand the world around them, Christians continue to believe in the “goodness and loving kindness of God” (Titus 3:4). Immersed like everyone else in the dramatic complexity of historical events, they remain unshakably certain that God is our Father and loves us, even when his silence remains incomprehensible. (*Deus Caritas Est*, §38)

The Ethical Challenge

According to Pope Benedict, “the command of love of neighbor is inscribed by the Creator in man’s very nature”; and Christians engaged in charitable work—and, by implication, all Christians—“need to be led

²⁷ “The Wellspring of Life” (as in note 26 above), 50 (slightly altered); *Gott ist uns nahe*, 49.

to that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others. As a result, love of neighbor will no longer be for them a commandment imposed, so to speak, from without, but a consequence deriving from their faith, a faith which becomes active through love (cf. Gal. 5:6)" (*Deus Caritas Est*, §31). As "the typical biblical expression for the biblical notion of love," *agape* "expresses the experience of a love which involves a real discovery of the other, moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier. Love now becomes concern and care for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking in the intoxication of happiness; instead it seeks the good of the beloved: it becomes renunciation and it is ready, and even willing, for sacrifice" (ibid., §6). The divine love manifested and enacted in Jesus Christ is the inspiration and example: "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" (ibid., §33). And again: "Faith, which sees the love of God revealed in the pierced heart of Jesus on the Cross, gives rise to love. . . . Love is possible, and we are able to practice it because we are created in the image of God. To experience love and in this way to cause the light of God to enter into the world—this is the invitation I would like to extend with the present Encyclical" (ibid., §39).²⁸

In the line of Joseph Ratzinger's sacramental faith and liturgical theology, the encyclical presents the Eucharist as the paradigm and power for the exercise of love through death to self:

Jesus gave [his] act of oblation an enduring presence through his institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. He anticipated his death and resurrection by giving his disciples, in the bread and wine, his very self, his body and blood as the new manna. . . . The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate Logos, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving. (*Deus Caritas Est*, §13)

²⁸ Joseph Ratzinger would likely endorse Eberhard Jüngel's definition of love as "die sich ereignende Einheit von Leben und Tod zugunsten des Lebens": love can be understood as "the occurrence of unity between life and death for the sake of life" because "[o]n the Cross of Jesus God defined himself as love." See E. Jüngel, *Gott als Geheimnis der Welt* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1977), 298, 434; cf. *God as the Mystery of the World*, trans. D. L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 220, 317. Agreement on this definition is probable despite Ratzinger's rejection (*Eschatologie*, 68–70, 201; *Eschatology*, 72–75, 266) of the Lutheran theologian's version of the theory of "total death" (i.e., with no intermediate state of "the soul" before the general resurrection), found in E. Jüngel, *Tod* (Stuttgart: Kreuz-Verlag, 1971).

[I]n sacramental communion I become one with the Lord, like all the other communicants. . . . Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. . . . Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become “one body,” completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself. . . . [T]here God’s own *agape* comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us. . . . Faith, worship and *ethos* are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God’s *agape*. (Ibid., §14)

The saints—consider the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta—constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbor from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others. (Ibid., §18)

In writing on “charity as a responsibility of the Church,” Pope Benedict recalls that “Justin Martyr († c. 155), in speaking of the Christians’ celebration of Sunday, also mentions their charitable activity, linked with the Eucharist as such. ‘Those who are able make offerings in accordance with their means, each as he or she wishes; the Bishop in turn makes use of these to support orphans, widows, the sick and those who for other reasons find themselves in need, such as prisoners and foreigners’ [*First Apology*, 67]” (*Deus Caritas Est*, §22). And of Lawrence the Roman deacon and martyr († 258) Pope Benedict says: “As the one responsible for the care of the poor in Rome, Lawrence had been given a period of time, after the capture of the Pope and of Lawrence’s fellow deacons, to collect the treasures of the Church and hand them over to the civil authorities. He distributed to the poor whatever funds were available and then presented to the authorities the poor themselves as the real treasure of the Church” (*Deus Caritas Est*, §23). Martyrdom itself, of course, is the supreme instance of the triumph of life through death. In his *Eschatology*, Joseph Ratzinger already speaks of it as “a new assurance of life, and a new way of enduring death”; and martyrdom is a soteriological pattern that casts its light forward on the whole of Christian existence: “[T]hat justification is by faith and not by works means that justification happens through sharing in the death of Christ, that is, by walking in the way of martyrdom, the daily drama by which we prefer what is right and true to the claims of sheer existence, through the spirit of love which faith makes possible.”²⁹

The paradigm and power can be expounded through “the eucharistic words of Jesus,” as in two other Munich sermons from 1978:

²⁹ *Eschatologie*, 81, 87–89; *Eschatology*, 90, 98–100.

In these words Jesus transforms death into the spiritual act of affirmation, into the act of self-sharing love; into the act of adoration, which is offered to God, then from God is made available to men. . . . [T]he two together constitute this new event, in which the senselessness of death is given meaning; in which what is irrational is transformed and made rational and articulate; in which the destruction of love, which is what death means in itself, becomes in fact the means of verifying and establishing it, of its enduring constancy. If, then, we want to know how Jesus himself intended his death to be understood, how he accepted it, what it means, then we must reflect on these words; and, contrariwise, we must regard them as being constantly guaranteed by the pledge of the blood that was his witness.³⁰

“This is my Body” means: This is my whole person, existent in bodily form. What the nature of this person is, however, we learn from what is said next: “which is given up for you”. That means: This person is: existing-for-others. It is in its most intimate being a sharing with others. But that is why, since it is a matter of this person and because it is from its heart an opening up, a self-giving person, it can then be shared out.³¹

Reverting to the encyclical, we could therefore define the human love that corresponds to the divine love embodied in Christ as “being there for the other” (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, §7). That would give us a view of true human existence as “Dasein für Andere.”

The Quality of Culture

In the second half of *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict ventures more concretely into “the social context of the present day.” Thus in paragraph 30(b) of the encyclical, for instance, he says: “For young people, this widespread involvement [in voluntary works of charity] constitutes a school of life which offers them a formation in solidarity and in readiness to offer others not simply material aid but their very selves. The anti-culture of death, which finds expression for example in drug use, is thus countered by an unselfish love which shows itself to be a culture of life by the very willingness to ‘lose itself’ (cf. Lk. 17:33 et passim) for others.”

The contrast between a “culture of life” and a “culture of death” runs as a leitmotif throughout John Paul II’s encyclical of 1995 on “The Gospel of Life” (*Evangelium Vitae*), issued while Cardinal Ratzinger was prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the theological confidant of the Pope. Thus in paragraph 21 of *Evangelium Vitae*:

³⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, “God’s Yes and His Love Are Maintained Even in Death,” in *God Is Near Us*, 27–41, here pp. 29–30; *Gott ist uns nahe*, 25–39, here p. 28.

³¹ Joseph Ratzinger, “The Presence of the Lord in the Sacrament,” in *God Is Near Us*, 74–93, here p. 79; *Gott ist uns nahe*, 75–95, here p. 80.

In seeking the deepest roots of the struggle between the “culture of life” and the “culture of death,” . . . we have to go to the heart of the tragedy being experienced by modern man: the eclipse of the sense of God and of man, typical of a social and cultural climate dominated by secularism, which, with its ubiquitous tentacles, succeeds at times in putting Christian communities themselves to the test. Those who allow themselves to be influenced by this climate easily fall into a sad vicious circle: when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life; in turn, the systematic violation of the moral law, especially in the serious matter of respect for human life and its dignity, produces a kind of progressive darkening of the capacity to discern God’s living and saving presence.

A “culture of death” can include a willful blindness to death itself. In his *Eschatology* Joseph Ratzinger analyzes the various ways—only superficially contradictory—in which contemporary North Atlantic society refuses to face the metaphysical questions posed by death.³² On the one hand, death is “hidden away,” both in medical and in funerary practice as well as in the loss of “the family home” as a “sheltering space which brings human beings together in birth and living, in sickness and dying.”³³ On the other hand, there is “the materialistic trivialization of death”: “On television, death is presented as a thrilling spectacle tailor-made for alleviating the general boredom of life.” The price is high: “When human sickness and dying are reduced to the level of technological activity, so is man himself. . . . Repression and trivialization can only ‘solve’ the riddle by dissolving humanity itself.” As a side-thought, Ratzinger mentions the “nihilist defiance of death”: “Such an attitude is for the chosen few who, refusing to play the game of hide-the-slipper with death, attempt to bear the meaningless by looking straight into its eyes.”

This latter, more sophisticated attitude has come increasingly to attract Ratzinger’s philosophical and theological attention, whether in its starkest end-form as nihilism or in its ideological preparation by way of relativism. It shows itself “esthetically”; all that matters is “artistic competence”: “There are no such things as good and bad books but only well-written or poorly written books, only well-produced or poorly produced films,

³² For the phrases cited in this paragraph, see *Eschatologie*, 66–68; *Eschatology*, 69–72.

³³ In this connection, one might think of Jessica Mitford’s *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963) and *The American Way of Death Revisited* (New York: Knopf, 1998). She begins: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? Where indeed. Many a badly stung survivor, faced with the aftermath of some relative’s funeral, has ruefully concluded that the victory has been won hands down by a funeral establishment—in a disastrously unequal battle” (*The American Way of Death*, 15; *Revisited*, 14).

and so on. The good and the moral no longer count, it seems, but only what one can do. . . . Whatever is feasible is permitted.”³⁴ Even more drastically, technology is governed by “the desire to do and the actual doing of what it is possible to do”; but, as Ratzinger explains,

We should see that human beings can never retreat into the mere realm of “art” or “skill.” In everything that they do, they are themselves agents. Therefore they themselves, and creation with its boundary of good and evil, are always present as their moral standard (*Mass*), and when they reject this standard they deceive themselves. They do not free themselves, but place themselves in opposition to the truth. And that means that they are destroying themselves and the world.³⁵

Or again:

The immense growth in man’s mastery of the material world has left him blind to the questions of life’s meaning that transcend the material world. We might almost call it a blindness of the spirit. The questions of how we ought to live, how we can overcome death, whether existence has a purpose and what it is—to all these questions there is no longer a common answer.³⁶

In the document *Dominus Iesus* issued from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000 under the name of Cardinal Ratzinger, the catalogue of “propositions of both a philosophical and theological nature which hinder the understanding and acceptance of the revealed truth” is headed by “relativistic attitudes toward truth itself, according to which what is true for some would not be true for others.”³⁷ By the time of his address to the college of cardinals on the eve of his election as pope, Joseph Ratzinger could speak of “la dittatura del relativismo.”

“People today know of no standard [coming from the inner goodness of creation],” says Archbishop Ratzinger in his Munich catecheses of 1981; “to be sure, they do not want to know of any because they see standards as threats to their freedom.” He points to the “aggressiveness” in society, which might also be labeled egotism.³⁸ There is, in fact, a sting in the tail of the hedonistic proverb, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die.” “Mit dem Tod ist alles aus,” they say— “When you’re dead,

³⁴ *Im Anfang schuf Gott*, 52–53; *In the Beginning*, 68 (slightly altered).

³⁵ *Im Anfang schuf Gott*, 54; *In the Beginning*, 69 (slightly altered).

³⁶ *Der Geist der Liturgie*, 112; *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 130–31.

³⁷ *Dominus Iesus*, §4.

³⁸ *Im Anfang schuf Gott*, 49–50; *In the Beginning*, 62–63.

you're dead." Well, perhaps—unless the soul remains liable (cf. Lk 12:19–20; Mt 10:28). Solemnly put:

The crisis of the Western world turns not least on a philosophy and program of education which try to redeem man by bypassing the cross The only sufficient answer to the question of man is a response which discharges the infinite claims of love. Only eternal life corresponds to the question raised by human living and dying on this earth.³⁹

The Future and Final Prospect

In paragraph 31(b) of *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict notes that “the modern age, particularly from the nineteenth century on, has been dominated by various versions of a philosophy of progress whose most radical form is Marxism.” This amounts to “an inhuman philosophy”: “People of the present are sacrificed to the *moloch* of the future—a future whose effective realization is at best doubtful.” To the charge that Christian charity diverts attention from “the struggle for a better world,” the Pope retorts that “one does not make the world more human by refusing to act humanely now. We contribute to a better world only by personally doing good now, with full commitment and wherever we have the opportunity, independently of partisan strategies and programs.”⁴⁰

Already in his *Eschatology*, Ratzinger had pointed to the inadequacies—even the sheer falsity—of Marxism; and, as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it was for his correction of Marxist incidences in “theologies of liberation” that he most attracted journalistic attention. In introducing “the current state of the eschatology question,” Professor Ratzinger characterized Marxism as an “anti-theistic messianism”—“demanding an unconditional commitment through its claim that here at last all reality has become scientifically knowable, the past, present and future of humankind receiving their exact interpretation.” Yet “[t]he very attack on God and the historical religions fosters a religious pathos which attracts the often deracinated religious energies of numerous

³⁹ *Eschatologie*, 91; *Eschatology*, 103.

⁴⁰ This refutation of Marxism—and indeed of other forms of utopianism—in favor of a much more modest view of the path towards God’s goal for humanity was a constant theme of Lesslie Newbigin, British theologian and bishop in the Church of South India, beginning with his Bangalore lectures of 1941, “The Kingdom of God and the Idea of Progress.” See Lesslie Newbigin, *Signs amid the Rubble: The Purposes of God in Human History*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); and, for instance, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 102–20, where Newbigin writes that “[d]eath is the dark mystery that mocks any hope for a total liberation of humans in history” (p. 103).

contemporary men and women to itself, as a magnet draws ore. This pathos also affects theology, which detects in it the opportunity to fill the eschatological message with a tangible, realistic content.” True, “the question of the future and its relation to the present, and with that the whole theme of hope and its attendant ‘praxis,’ rightly belongs to the subject matter of eschatology”—but not divorced from “what is specific in the Christian view of the age-to-come and its presence here and now,” which includes “the classical themes of the doctrine of the last things—heaven and hell, purgatory and judgment, death and the immortality of the soul.”⁴¹ To account for the historical development of those traditional doctrines and continuing theological reflection on them, Ratzinger emphasizes that “[t]he question of the meaning of one’s own dying cannot be suppressed. To attempt to obliterate or to shelve the progressive deepening of that question in Christian reflection would not be a return to the source but a barbarianization that would quickly recoil on its perpetrators. We have only to look at the complete impotence of Marxist thought when it comes to the topic of death to see how little chance there is of sidestepping that particular question.”⁴² (It may perhaps be observed that “liberation theologies” scarcely outlasted the end of “real-existing socialism” with the collapse of the Soviet empire.)

It is the teaching of Pope Benedict in *Deus Caritas Est* that love looks to eternity. After the hint in paragraph 2 at that “love between man and woman, where body and soul are inseparably joined and human beings glimpse an apparently irresistible promise of happiness,” we find this observation in paragraph 6:

It is part of love’s growth towards higher levels and inward purification that it now seeks to become definitive, . . . in the sense of being “for ever.” Love embraces the whole of existence, including the dimension of time. It could hardly be otherwise, since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal.

In Ratzinger’s *Eschatology* this is stated in more formal, “dogmatic” terms:

⁴¹ *Eschatologie*, 19–20; *Eschatology*, 3–4. Elsewhere, Ratzinger formulates his critique of Marxism in terms of the rejection of creation: “Creation is the total contradiction of Marxism and the point at which Marxist ‘redemption’ shows itself to be damnation, resistance to the truth. The decisive option underlying all the thought of Karl Marx is ultimately a protest against the dependence that creation signifies: the hatred of life as we encounter it.” See “The Consequences of Faith in Creation,” in an appendix to *In the Beginning*, 79–100, here p. 91.

⁴² *Eschatologie*, 25; *Eschatology*, 12.

In all human love there is an implicit appeal to eternity, even though love between two human beings can never satisfy that appeal. In Christ, God enters our search for love and its ultimate meaning, and does so in a human way. God's dialogue with us becomes truly human, since God conducts his part as a man. Conversely, the dialogue of human beings with each other now becomes a vehicle for the life everlasting, since in the communion of saints it is drawn up into the dialogue of the Trinity itself. This is why the communion of saints is the locus where eternity becomes accessible for us. Eternal life does not isolate a person, but leads him out of isolation into true unity with his brothers and sisters and the whole of God's creation.⁴³

The Munich catecheses of 1981 put the orientation towards the future and eternity in more pastoral terms, setting it also explicitly in relation to the initial question put by death concerning "origin and destination":

Human beings are the creatures that can become one with Christ and thereby become one with God himself. Hence this orientation of the creation to Christ, of the first to the second Adam, signifies that human persons are beings en route, beings characterized by transition. They are not yet themselves; they must ultimately become themselves. Here in the midst of our thoughts on creation there suddenly appears the Easter mystery, the mystery of the grain of wheat that has died. Human beings must die with Christ like a grain of wheat in order truly to rise, to stand erect, to be themselves (cf. John 12:24). Human persons are not to be understood merely from the perspective of their past histories or from that isolated moment that we refer to as the present. They are oriented toward their future, and only it permits who they really are to appear completely (cf. 1 John 3:2). We must always see in other human beings persons with whom we shall one day share God's joy. We must look upon them as persons who are called, together with us, to be members of the Body of Christ, with whom we shall one day sit at the table of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, at the table of Jesus Christ himself, as their brothers and sisters, as the brothers and sisters of Christ, and as the children of God.⁴⁴

As to "the content of eternal life, its *Was* as distinct from its *Dass*," the theologian Ratzinger says that divine revelation offers only "hints," and the tradition of faith is but "a helpful signpost for those in the here and now."⁴⁵ In his *Eschatology* he lights on Psalm 73—"one of Augustine's favorites"—as "one of those texts where the Old Testament stretches forth to touch the New and most fully possesses its own deepest implications":

⁴³ *Eschatologie*, 134; *Eschatology*, 159–60.

⁴⁴ *Im Anfang schuf Gott*, 41; *In the Beginning*, 49 (slightly altered).

⁴⁵ *Eschatologie*, 135; *Eschatology*, 161.

Thou dost guide me with thy counsel,
 and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory.
 Whom have I in heaven but thee?
 And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.
 My flesh and my heart may fail,
 but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.⁴⁶

Certainly, “[h]eaven must first and foremost be determined christologically”: “Jesus Christ, as God, is man, and makes space for human existence in the existence of God himself. One is in heaven when, and to the degree, that one is in Christ. . . . Heaven is thus primarily a personal reality, and one that remains forever shaped by its historical origin in the paschal mystery of death and resurrection”; and christology bears an ecclesiological aspect:

If heaven depends on being in Christ, then it must involve a co-being with all those who, together, constitute the body of Christ. . . . It is the open society of the communion of saints, and in this way the fulfillment of all human communion. . . . It is because the Church knows this that there is such a thing as the Christian cult of the saints. That cult does not presuppose some mythical omniscience on the part of the saints, but simply the unruptured self-communion of the whole body of Christ—and the closeness of a love which knows no limit and is sure of attaining God in the neighbor, and the neighbor in God.⁴⁷

So, then, we may take up again from Pope Benedict’s encyclical the theme of the communion of the saints:

⁴⁶ *Eschatologie*, 80–81; *Eschatology*, 88–90. Ratzinger’s doctoral dissertation is devoted to Augustine: *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* (Munich: Karl Zink Verlag, 1954). Almost inevitably, the young German theologian’s work thus has an eschatological orientation built into it from the start: the *populus Dei*—the Church as the eucharistic body of Christ—appears in Augustine as the earthly “pilgrim colony” of the *civitas Dei*; and Ratzinger concludes with Augustine’s vision of the endless Kingdom which has been the end of all our living (see pp. 324–328). In terms of the problem of sin and death, the concluding chapter of Augustine’s *City of God* has this to say: “Because our nature, when it was free to sin, did sin, it took a greater grace to lead us to that larger liberty which frees us from the very power to sin. For just as the first immortality, which Adam lost by sinning, was a mere possibility of avoiding death but the last immortality will be the impossibility of dying, so the first free will was a mere possibility of avoiding sin but the last becomes an utter inability to sin”; sins will be forgotten, but not the love that redeemed them (*De civitate Dei* 22.30.3; PL 41:802).

⁴⁷ *Eschatologie*, 190–91; *Eschatology*, 234–35

The lives of the saints are not limited to their earthly biographies but also include their being and working in God after death. In the saints one thing becomes clear: those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them. (*Deus Caritas Est*, §42)

Joseph Ratzinger has written movingly of the singing of the Litany of the Saints by the entire congregation at his own priestly and episcopal ordinations:

The fact that the praying Church was calling upon all the saints, that the prayer of the Church really was enveloping and embracing me, was a wonderful consolation. In my incapacity, which had to be expressed in the bodily gesture of prostration, this prayer, this presence of all the saints, of the living and the dead, was a wonderful strength—it was the only thing that could, as it were, lift me up. Only the presence of the saints with me made possible the path that lay before me.⁴⁸

And in terms of liturgical history, which has its own doctrinal and pastoral importance, Ratzinger writes this in his *Eschatology*:

The immediate stuff of the prayer life of the Christian people in its corporate anxiety and hope is perhaps best grasped in the Litany of the Saints. By a development not all of whose phases are as yet clearly seen, this litany grew up by degrees from the Late Antique period onwards. It absorbed into itself all those concerns with which time harries us, while counterposing to them the pledge of hope through whose agency we may endure them. The first thing to strike us here is that the person who is thus set about by dangers in time and eternity finds a shelter in the communion of the saints. He gathers the redeemed of all ages around him and finds safety under their mantle. This signifies that the walls separating heaven and earth, and past, present and future, are now as glass. The Christian lives in the presence of the saints as his own proper ambience, and so lives “eschatologically.”⁴⁹

The Drawing of the Sting

We may end this exposition where we began, with death as what Joseph Ratzinger calls “the metaphysical thorn lodged in man’s being.” According to the Apostle Paul (and we have seen Ratzinger fully recognizing the point), the “metaphysischer Stachel” is sharpened by sin (1 Cor. 15:56; cf. Rom. 6:20–21, 23a).⁵⁰ But now, with the death and resurrection of Christ,

⁴⁸ *Der Geist der Liturgie*, 161–62; *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 188.

⁴⁹ *Eschatologie*, 23; *Eschatology*, 89.

⁵⁰ The one German word “Stachel” covers both Ratzinger’s metaphysical “thorn” and what the Apostle calls the “sting” of death.

“death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” (1 Cor. 15:55; cf. Rom. 6:22, 23b). And Joseph Ratzinger can write for us:

The sting of death is extinguished in Christ, in whom the victory was gained through the plenary power of love unlimited. Death is vanquished where people die with Christ and into him. This is why the Christian attitude must be opposed to the modern wish for instantaneous death, a wish that would turn death into an extensionless moment and banish from life the claims of the metaphysical. Yet it is in the transforming acceptance of death, present time and again to us in this life, that we mature for the real, the eternal, life.⁵¹

As Christians, we may celebrate the paschal mystery. And Methodists in particular may join in with the words of Charles Wesley, “Love’s redeeming work is done”:

Lives again our glorious King;
Where, O death, is now thy sting?
Once he died our souls to save;
Where’s thy victory, boasting grave?

Soar we now where Christ hath led,
Following our exalted Head;
Made like Him, like Him we rise;
Ours the cross, the grave, the skies:

King of glory! Soul of bliss!
Everlasting life is this,
Thee to know, Thy power to prove,
Thus to sing, and thus to love: Alleluia!⁵²

“Saved in Hope”

Pope Benedict’s second encyclical letter appeared on November 29, 2007, under the headline of a phrase from St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans (8:24): *Spe Salvi*, “Saved in Hope.” There the ultimate and unavoidable question posed by death for the meaning and conduct of life re-emerges at three (interconnected) levels: that of each and every human being, that

⁵¹ *Eschatologie*, 87; *Eschatology*, 97–98. “The sting is extinguished . . .”: on this occasion, the word “sting” is actually an importation of the English translator, who is perhaps making a word-play; the German reads “Der Tod als Tod ist besiegt in Christus. . . .”

⁵² *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley*, ed. G. Osborn (London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1868–1872), vol. 1, pp. 185–86.

of the social constitution of humankind, and that of the human race as a whole and its history.

As individuals, we appreciate and desire life, and yet we do not wish for its endless extension in our present state. "There is a contradiction in our attitude," says Pope Benedict, "which points to an inner contradiction in our very existence. On the one hand, we do not want to die; above all, those who love us do not want us to die. Yet on the other hand, neither do we want to continue living indefinitely, nor was the earth created with that in view" (*Spe Salvi*, §11). Thus a paradox marks our condition, certainly as sinners if not already as creatures. The Pope quotes an admittedly delicate passage from the funeral discourse of St. Ambrose for his deceased brother: "Death was not part of nature; it became part of nature. God did not decree death from the beginning; he prescribed it as a remedy. Human life, because of sin . . . began to experience the burden of wretchedness in unremitting labor and unbearable sorrow. There had to be a limit to its evils; death had to restore what life had forfeited. Without the assistance of grace, immortality is more of a burden than a blessing".⁵³ Ambrose had already said: "Death is, then, no cause for mourning, for it is the cause of mankind's salvation." That, clearly, is a confession of the Christian faith and of the hope that is founded on Christ's death and resurrection. The "blessed life," "eternal life," says Benedict in dependence on St. Augustine and St. Paul, is something we can as yet know only in "a certain learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*)":

To imagine ourselves outside the temporality that imprisons us and in some way to sense that eternity is not an unending succession of days in the calendar, but something more like the supreme moment of satisfaction, in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality—this we can only attempt. It would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love, a moment in which time—the before and after—no longer exists. We can only attempt to grasp the idea that such a moment is life in the full sense, a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed with joy. This is how Jesus expresses it in St. John's Gospel: "I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (16:22). We must think along these lines if we want to understand the object of Christian hope, to understand what it is that our faith, our being with Christ, leads us to expect. (*Spe Salvi*, §12)

While salvation is a personal reality, begun now and perfected beyond death, it must not be conceived individualistically. Following Christ entails

⁵³ *Spe Salvi*, §10; citing St. Ambrose, *De excessu fratris sui Satyri*, II, 47, found in CSEL 73, 274.

the giving of one's life for the sake of others, and that is the way of present and final salvation for all parties in the particular relationship. From his earliest theological days Joseph Ratzinger has been inspired by St. Augustine, and it is the City of God according to that Church Father which stands behind what Pope Benedict says in his second encyclical also about the implications of life and death for social relations and for the entire human community and its history. Here come again into play what in my earlier exposition of Ratzinger's thought on life and death I called "the ethical challenge" and, more broadly, "the quality of culture." Invoking the "communal salvation" implied in the "city" of the Letter to the Hebrews (11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14), Benedict notes that "sin is understood by the Fathers as the destruction of the unity of the human race, as fragmentation and division": "Hence 'redemption' appears as the re-establishment of unity, in which we come together once more in a union that begins to take shape in the world community of believers" (*Spe Salvi*, §14). St. Augustine, himself quoting St. Paul, is immediately quoted: "In order to be numbered among this people and to attain to everlasting life with God, 'the end of the commandment is charity that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and sincere faith' (1 Tim 1:5)."⁵⁴ Pope Benedict concludes that "this real life, towards which we try to reach out again and again, is linked to a lived union with a 'people', and for each individual it can only be attained with this 'we'. . . . It presupposes that we escape from the prison of our 'I', because only in the openness of this universal subject does our gaze open out to the source of joy, to love itself—to God" (*Spe Salvi*, §14; cf. §§28–29, again with appeal to St. Augustine).

As to the future prospect for humanity and the world, Pope Benedict says: "While this community-oriented vision of 'the blessed life' is certainly oriented beyond the present world, as such it also has to do with the building up of this world—in very different ways, according to the historical context and the possibilities offered or excluded thereby" (*Spe Salvi*, §15). In reference to humankind as a whole and its history, earthly hope is not wrong, but modesty befits it, even in what can be achieved through the inspiration of the Christian faith and the practice of Christian love, let alone through reliance on unaided reason and technical prowess (material and technical "progress" remains insignificant without moral, and indeed metaphysical, standards). As death brings the passage of the generations, inherited social structures—morally grounded—can help and guide, but each new generation has to engage in freedom with the challenges of its

⁵⁴ *Spe Salvi*, §14; citing St. Augustine, Ep. 130 *Ad Probam* 13, 24 (CSEL 44, 67).

time (*Spe Salvi*, §§22–27). For a pilgrim people on its way to the homeland, the “firm basis” of hope (thus Benedict, in paragraphs 7–9 of *Spe Salvi*, interprets the *hypo-stasis/sub-stantia* of Hebrews 11:1) remains Jesus Christ himself, crucified and risen, in whom faith is placed. **N.V.**