

Love and Divine Wisdom

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One early Wednesday morning I received an emergency call from the father of a young woman who worked on our parish pre-school. The girl had recently given birth to an extremely premature baby boy and, unfortunately, serious complications emerged with the child. He was born blind, suffered from terrible seizures, and had a malformed heart. After several days of consultations a painful decision was reached. The child had no chance of survival and there were simply no treatment options. The child was to be taken off life supports that very day and the grandfather's wish was that I come to the hospital and baptize his grandchild. I of course said yes and made my way to the hospital.

When I arrived several members of the family had already gathered. They were, as one might imagine, in various stages of grief and bewilderment. I could not help but notice, however, the demeanor of the young woman whose child I was to baptize. I had only been at the parish a few months and thus I cannot say that I knew her very well. I was aware that she was in her late teens, a high school dropout, and that she had this child by a man she barely knew. What struck me on that day was, for want of a better word, her composure. She was, to be sure, sorrowful and grave, yet there was another quality that radiated from her. This quality is hard to describe. It was not calmness or any sort of stoic resolve. I would also say that her comportment far transcended any sort of sense acceptance that supposedly completes the grieving process. I only gained a glimmer of this nature of this quality as the morning progressed.

The child was still connected to life supports during the baptismal rite (they were to be removed as soon as the service concluded). As is standard in the celebration of the sacrament I asked the mother "what name do you give this child." She responded "Wisdom."

After the baptism I stayed with the family during their grim vigil. We were in a small chapel praying and united in our wish to comfort the mother at the time her child died. During the course of this long, tragic day, I asked this young woman why she named her child Wisdom. Her response was straightforward. She said, "I named him Wisdom because this is what I need from God." This response left me speechless.

It has been my privilege to be able to study under some of the great theological minds of our time. I am also honored to be a member of this esteemed and brilliant faculty. I have to say, however, that it was this young woman, this unwed mother and high school dropout, who, more so than any other person I have ever met, got at the heart of the nature and meaning of wisdom. When she told me the name she chose for her child, I also finally was able to name that quality she radiated in the midst of that tragic day. She manifested not acquiescence to fate, not resignation to a situation beyond her control, nor ultimately mere acceptance of catastrophe. No, what she possessed and exhibited was wisdom.

There was something almost biblical about how this young mother understood wisdom. When Scripture speaks of Wisdom it does not mean abstract or theoretical knowledge. The Old Testament also does not intend Wisdom to mean simply calculating or utilitarian information. No, something far deeper is intended by the term. Gerhard von Rad states that in the Old Testament Wisdom is matter of, "looking and listening to discover whether in the tangle of events something like conformity to law, an order, cannot here and there be discovered." What von Rad is getting at is that, for the ancient Hebrews, Wisdom is not something that can be determined through pure reason; it can only emerge from historical experience. Wisdom literature does assume an order to the world and points to intelligibility in existence, but this is a far cry from the ahistorical order and intelligibility imagined by Greek philosophy. If in fact Wisdom and history go hand in hand, this means that one cannot claim to have wisdom without an encounter with the tensions, and even tragedies, embedded within the flow of history. For the Jews, wisdom is

something painfully garnered. It is definitely not something that can be experienced by the disinterested, passive observer. Wisdom in Scripture is only finally for those who experience bondage, wandering in a desert, exile and occupation.

To put it another way, Israel's wisdom is the wisdom of Job. Job does, at the end of the story, apprehend the truth of himself, God, and the world – but how? He arrives at the true sense of the created order only when his previous assumptions of truth and order were violently overturned. Loss and wisdom seem to be the basis of the dialectics we find in this book. Job loses his home and his family, but this is not his ultimate suffering. Ultimately what he lost was a sense of meaning. The absence of those things which gave order to his life now seems to render his life meaningless.

Job, however, does find wisdom and meaning. But this can only come by dying to what he previously thought was wisdom. Like the young mother I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, he loses one wisdom and receives another. Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it this way, “man, with all of his problems, lives in a world with a wisdom which he has not established.” This is a wisdom that can only come by way of God's self-revelation and which can only be received in awe and faith. Job ultimately finds the wisdom of God and the truth of being not in his previous assumptions, not within in the contours of his stable life and certainly not within the heartless and facile answers of his so-called friends. No, he finds Wisdom in the God who speaks in whirlwinds and whose radiant glory illuminates the paucity of all human claims to authentic knowledge. Job responds to this God in this way:

I have dealt with great things that I do not understand; things too wonderful for me, which I cannot know. I have heard of you by word of mouth, but now my eye has seen you. Therefore I disown what I have said, and repent in dust and ashes. (Job 42:3-6)

This sort of purification of wisdom that Job experiences, painful and aweful as it is, does create now the condition of possibility for his love of God to likewise be purified and thus

reach its goal. Thus the logic of the scriptural vision of wisdom is that the purification of understanding and the purification of love are intimately related.

This is something that is understood by our Holy Father. According to Pope Benedict, love has to undergo purification if it is to reach its destination. He writes:

[T]here is a certain relationship between love and the Divine; love promises infinity, eternity—a reality far greater and totally other than our everyday existence. Yet we have also seen that the way to attain this goal is not simply by submitting to instinct. Purification and growth in maturity are called for; and these also pass through the path of renunciation. Far from rejecting or “poisoning” Eros, they heal and restore its true grandeur.

What does Eros/desire look like without purification, that is, in the absence of wisdom? In many ways Pope Benedict’s answer seems to draw upon certain insights within the Augustinian tradition. For Augustine, man is literally made for God. All of our hopes, dreams and aspirations, can find their consummation only in the infinite. This is, however, the human dilemma. We are finite yet we long for the infinite; we are temporal yet our deepest desires are directed towards the eternal. Because of sin, we seek infinite satisfaction in limited, created things; we strive to make ephemeral entities yield eternal happiness. Thus our longings seem to go unfulfilled and life appears to take on a Sisyphean/futile quality.

What saves us from an absurd existence is that our Eros is met by divine agape. In the teachings of the Holy Father, our human ascending quest for the infinite is encountered by a descending divine quest for us. Thus agape is what allows for love’s purification. Moreover, it is in the mystery of God’s radical love that we find the definitive form of wisdom.

Pope Benedict is clear that the Old Testament is not devoid of a sense of God’s love. Indeed, the whole drama of Israel is a story of God leading His people back to fidelity and calling the nation to recognize Him as the Living God and hence the source of all life. For that reason it is not appropriate to view the novelty of the New Testament as revealing a loving God. For the Holy Father, the newness of the Gospel lies in the proclamation that

God's love has taken human form and divine dramatic activity is realized in one who is fully human. In other words, what we find in Christ is not just a union of natures but a union of loves. In the very person of Christ, the human Eros is fully united with divine agape. Divine Wisdom, the Logos, expresses itself through human words and invites a human response.

The mystery of the Incarnation, and indeed the whole drama of Christ, discloses to us how to make this response. The union of loves basic to Christ's own being can and must be the defining element of our existence, but this cannot transpire apart from following the path the incarnate Logos/Wisdom trod in His earthly journey. From the very first moment of his existence the mystery of Jesus Christ is defined by the mystery of *kenosis*. His life is the outpouring of divine love for our sake. In Christ, agape meets us as radical, self-emptying love, a love which holds nothing in reserve and which is willing to endure all for the sake of the beloved, even death and abandonment. Pope Benedict states:

His death and 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, we can understand the starting point of this Encyclical Letter: "God" is love." It is here that truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move.

The Holy Father in this passage is echoing a theme we also find in the writings of von Balthasar; namely, that *Eros* ultimately finds its consummation in *kenosis*. Our desire for the infinite can only be fulfilled through the following the logic of love to its absolute limit. This is what Christ experienced on this Cross. Von Balthasar writes:

The crucified One ... is the Word which the Father addresses to the world. At this moment, the Word cannot hear itself. It collapses into its scream for the lost God. And it will really be an interpretation of His heavenly meaning, as it were, of the voice of the Father and the Spirit in the Son, when the evangelists write the words, Forgive them ..., "Today you will be with me in paradise," "It is finished." We should receive such words as spoken to us by the Father through the Spirit in the suffering of the Son."

Let us pay attention to what von Balthasar is saying here. At that moment when all hope seemed lost, when any sense of meaning or rationality appears gone, when God is

experienced as absent, the total and radical love of God is revealed. What we have here at long last is God's full response to Job. In a real and profound way, God answers Job not with an explanation, not with a rational theodicy, but by taking on Job's condition. God in Christ becomes the just man who suffers unjustly; God takes upon Himself God-forsakenness.

As von Balthasar points out, however, this is also the moment when God reveals Himself as Trinity. The Trinity for us cannot be simply an abstract doctrine but *the* central Christian confession. The confession that God is triune is another way of saying that God is love; that is, we as Christians proclaim that God *is* a loving communion of persons.

In an earlier work Pope Benedict himself recognized the intimate link between the doctrine of the Trinity and the proclamation "God is Love." He maintains:

To him who believes in God as tri-une, the highest unity is not the unity of inflexible monotony. The model of unity or oneness towards which one should strive is consequently not the indivisibility of the atom ... the authentic acme is the unity created by love.

This revelation of the truth of God and the meaning of love is given on the cross. Thus for us the sign of the cross, the names of the divine persons, and the truth of love are inseparable (it is no accident that we as Catholics invoke the Trinity and makes the sign of the cross simultaneously). Thus it is finally on the cross that we find that wisdom which purifies our love and releases it so that it may reach its destination. This means that we find wisdom in what others view as foolish and scandalous.

The question for us is how are we to live with scandalous and foolish wisdom. What does discipleship in a paradoxical faith look like? I believe that it is no accident that *Deus Caritas Est* ends with a reflection on the Blessed Mother. In a moving passage the Holy Father says of Our Lady:

The *Magnificat*- a portrait, so to speak, of her soul- is entirely woven from the threads ... drawn from the Word of God. Here we see how completely at home Mary is with the Word of God, with ease she moves in and out of it. She speaks and thinks with the Word of God; the Word of God becomes her word, and her word issues from the Word of God. Here we see how her thoughts are attuned to the thoughts of God, how her will is one with the will of

God. Since Mary is completely imbued with the Word of God, she is able to be the Mother of the Word Incarnate.

This beautiful, almost lyrical passage is in many ways an exposition of the image of Mary as *Sedes Sapientia*, seat of Wisdom. She is the one in whom Divine Wisdom came to dwell.

And who is Mary? A young, uneducated, unwed mother who lost a child who was Wisdom.

The image of Mary holding her dead Son is also an image of the *Sedes Sapientia*. Wisdom lost and Wisdom received. This is the dialectics by which our wisdom is purified and our love made perfect.

Scripture Passages for Meditation:

James- 3:13-18

I Corinthians- 1:18-25