CENTER VALLEY (February 14, 2006) – Love is once again in the air. Flower bouquets and Hershey kisses brighten this day. Candy hearts provide snippets of delectable delight and affection. Hallmark cards give us poetic verses to tug at another’s heart strings.

Beyond the giving of traditional Valentine’s Day gifts, today’s culture also offers enticing novelties along the way to love. Newly concocted perfumes are marketed as attractive to would-be mates. Online matchmakers claim to aid in the search for interpersonal harmony. And pharmaceutical innovations promise enhanced performance.

But even with these amorous advances, or perhaps because of them, love has been detached from its relational associations. Sex can be had in the city without being in love. Children can be conceived in a laboratory without making love. And marriage means “I do” only for as long as “I want to” love.

Amid this shifting cultural landscape, Benedict XVI has sent a Valentine message to the world. It’s longer than a romantic card, but his first encyclical letter - “Deus caritas est” (God is love) - adopts poetic prose to focus squarely on the same universal human phenomenon. Atypical in its approach, and surprising to those who expected a panzer-like presentation of strictly orthodox beliefs, this papal manifesto reveals a passionate concern about passion itself.

For all our talk about it, there seems to be little or no consensus regarding what “love” really is. We desire it, we find it, we fall in it, we make it. We are called to love our family, our neighbor, and our God, yet we also “love” our jobs, our cars, our pets, our desserts. Hollywood gives us a Love Boat and a Love Bug. No wonder the pope opens his letter by remarking that love “has become one of the most frequently used and misused of words.”

But loose language is not the pope’s real concern. Rather, he addresses the divergent meanings that we ascribe to love and its singular meaningfulness for human fulfillment. In this magisterial teaching the pope discloses the intimate connections that true love offers – within a person, between persons, and to
God “who is love.” Put simply, love is not just something we feel or do; it is inscribed in who we are and indicative of who we are to become.

In his letter, Pope Benedict brings biblical revelation to bear upon a philosophical examination of the mystery of love, acknowledging that “Fundamentally, ‘love’ is a single reality, but with different dimensions.” His analysis focuses on love as a twofold reality, which leads to both a challenge and an affirmation.

The first dimension – *eros* – concerns our power of passionate emotion. This love reflects the desire, the longing for union with another that enflames the human heart. In this ecstatic sense, love is not “a moment of intoxication, but rather … 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.” Thus, the pope challenges us to reckon *eros* rightly, as the love between a man and woman growing toward a definitive relationship “both in the sense of exclusivity (this particular person alone) and in the sense of being ‘for ever’.”

The second dimension – *agape* – focuses on our solicitous concern for another’s good. This love enacts a caring that “is not merely a sentiment” and “is never ‘finished’ and complete.” In this charitable sense, love causes us to see people not as “others” separate from or opposed to us, but as part of a “we” that comprises all of humanity. As a result, the pope affirms that charity is necessary in every society; for the Church it can never be simply “a kind of welfare activity” or mere social assistance, but is always and everywhere an “indispensable expression,” an essential duty, and a responsible task for the faithful.

The papal message about love surpasses a designated day of the year. What we celebrate with valentines actually encompasses all that we are – as persons created in love and for love. Romance is rooted in our human nature and directs us toward a unique and definitive bond that fulfills our deepest purpose in life.

Love, indeed, is a many splendored thing. That splendor, in Pope Benedict XVI’s view, shines as “the light – and in the end, the only light – that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working.” This love he invites the world to experience and celebrate today and throughout our lives.

*Click here to go back to the Commentaries page!*