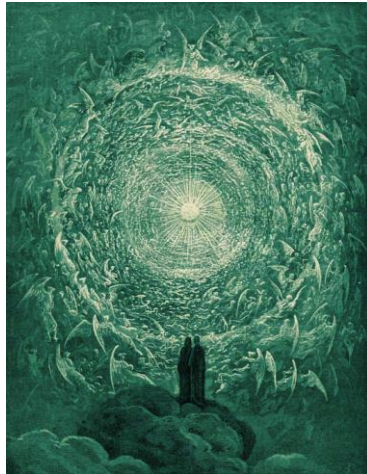


KEEP YOUR LAMPS LIT

Two days before he published his first encyclical, Pope Benedict explained how, in writing it, he had been inspired by the vision of the poet Dante. After a long journey, the poet describes his arrival at the brilliant light of God's presence. And what he finds is that this dazzling light is "the love that moves the sun and the other stars" (*Divina Commedia, Il Paradiso, XXXIII, 145*).



Two things in particular impressed the Pope about Dante's vision. First of all, "Light and love are one and the same. They are the primordial creative power that moves the universe" (BENEDICT XVI, Address to Cor Unum, 23 January 2006). Even more strikingly, the poet tells us that this light, "Within itself and in its colouring, seemed to be painted with our human likeness" (*Il Paradiso XXXIII, 130*). The light and love that move the universe, as the Pope put it, "have a human face and... a human heart" (Address to Cor Unum).. The love of God is made visible in Jesus Christ.

One hundred and forty eight years ago tomorrow, the first thing that Bernadette noticed in this grotto was a gentle light. Then, in that light, she saw the Virgin Mary. That is what has made this a place of pilgrimage for nearly a century and a half.

Many people come here for years without realising one very distinctive thing about the grotto – direct sunlight never shines on it. But for Bernadette that day, and for thousands upon thousands of people ever since, a light has shone *from* the grotto.

The Blessed Virgin appeared surrounded by light. The light that surrounds her is the love that moves the universe. To put it another way, she is full of grace, full of God's love; and the light that shines on her and through her enlightens us. The Preface of our Mass will say that "her virgin-motherhood brought forth the true Light... Her hidden life brings light and warmth to the Church in every place."

Her Son was the true light that enlightens everyone (Jn 1:9). The light of God's love shone in his face. He came so that his joy might be in us and our joy might be complete. We all know from our experience of Lourdes that it is a place of joy and peace. Here we see large numbers of ill and suffering people, yet we know that the invalids feel touched by the light of God which shines around Mary and shines from the grotto.

But we don't just rest, consoled and contented, in that light. At the Annunciation, as the poet put it, "Within (Mary's) womb was lit once more the flame of that love..." (*Il Paradiso, XXXIII, 7,8*). But no sooner had she heard the greeting, 'full of grace' and heard the

astonishing message of the angel, than she 'went with haste into the hill country' to be with her cousin Elizabeth.

That light shines on us in this grotto and in this celebration of the Eucharist. It is the love that moves the universe. If we have really understood that truth, being surrounded by that love changes the way we see one another. It moves us to love one another as he loves us.

"Union with Christ", the Pope says, "is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own"¹.

We see that love at work in Lourdes when the sick and suffering are given the place of honour; when they experience the light and love of Christ shining around Mary in this grotto, when they see it shining through those who care for them and through their fellow pilgrims.

Every evening of our pilgrimages in Lourdes, we respond to Mary's request, "I wish people to come here in procession." We come in procession and we come carrying our candles. It is a sign that the light that Bernadette saw here, the light of God's love surrounding Mary and surrounding us is meant to be carried by us out into the wider world. We learn lessons here about sensitivity towards the sick, about the importance of prayer, about getting our priorities straight, about the human face of the love which moves the universe. Those lessons are a light that is meant to be carried into the whole of our lives.

When we go home, we can too easily allow that light to be dimmed and overwhelmed by the busyness and pressure of our lives – but the truth is that the light we have seen here is the love that moves the universe. When we forget that light, we may think that we are doing very important things, that we are successful and realistic and productive. The truth is that we are losing sight of the meaning of our existence, which is to live in the light of God's love and to share it in practical, concrete ways, giving people what they really need, "loving personal concern"².

That will be the theme of our pilgrimages this summer – "Keep your lamps lit!"

10 February 2006

¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 14.

² *Deus Caritas Est*, 28.