

Papal encyclical expounds on love: Deus Caritas Est, or "God Is Love"

by [ENI news](#)

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Pope Benedict XVI has issued the first encyclical of his papacy, dedicating Roman Catholicism's highest form of writing to a reflection on love and charity that calls for a "purification" of erotic love between men and women.

The encyclical, titled *Deus Caritas Est* ("God Is Love"), also calls on Catholic charities around the world to reaffirm their ties with the church hierarchy. It urges charities not to allow secular influences to blur their religious identity.

Benedict cites a "problem of language" that has led history to divide love into two distinct concepts based on the Greek words *eros*, or erotic love, and *agape*, or spiritual love. These distinctions, Benedict writes, distort the meaning of erotic love, reducing sexual attraction to a form of "intoxication" that transforms sex into a "debasement of the human body."

Adds the pope: "Evidently, eros needs to be disciplined and purified if it is to provide not just fleeting pleasure, but a certain foretaste of the pinnacle of our existence. Eros, reduced to pure sex, has become a commodity, a pure 'thing' to be bought and sold."

A pope's first encyclical is usually scrutinized for indications of what direction his papacy will take. However, Benedict, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of Germany, does not make any explicit policy changes in the 71-page treatise. Rather, it reflects longstanding church teaching on sexual morality.

The encyclical, released January 26, won plaudits from some commentators, including dissenting Catholic author Hans Küng, whose license to teach Catholic theology in official positions was revoked by the Vatican in 1979. Küng was critical of what he said was the pope's failure to tackle issues of justice, such as the status of divorced and remarried people in the church. But in comments reported by the

Agence France-Presse, Küng said Benedict's "solid theological presentation" on the relationship of eros and agape is "a positive sign that I welcome."

John Allen, a veteran Vatican watcher who writes for the *National Catholic Reporter*, said the pope wants to show that ultimately the church is on the side of love. "The encyclical," writes Allen, "is Pope Benedict's version of 'compassionate conservatism.'" -*Religion News Service, Ecumenical News International*