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Father Cantalamessa on Evil

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, FEB. 23, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by the Pontifical Household preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, on the readings from this Sunday's liturgy.

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He was tempted by the devil
First Sunday of Lent
Deuteronomy 26:4-10; Romans 10:8-13; Luke 4:1-13

The Gospel of Luke, which we read this year, was written, as he says in the introduction, so that the believing reader would be able to "know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed." This purpose is quite relevant today.

Faced as we are with attacks on the historical veracity of the Gospels from every quarter and with the continual manipulation of the figure of Christ, it is more important than ever that the Christian and the honest reader of the Gospel know the truth of the teachings and reports that the Gospel contains.

I have decided to use my commentaries on the Gospels from the beginning of Lent to the Sunday after Easter for this purpose. Taking each Sunday Gospel as our point of departure, we will consider different aspects of the person and the teaching of Christ to determine who Jesus truly is, whether he is a simple prophet and great man, or something more and different than these.

In other words, we will be doing some religious education. Such phenomena as Dan Brown's "Da Vinci Code," with the imitators and discussions it has given rise to, have shown to us the alarming religious ignorance that reigns in our society. This ignorance provides ideal terrain for every sort of unscrupulous commercial venture.

Tomorrow's Gospel, for the first Sunday of Lent, treats of Jesus' temptation in the desert. Following the plan I have announced, I would like to begin from this Gospel and expand the discussion to focus on the general question of Jesus' attitude toward demonic forces and those people possessed by demons.

It is one of the most historically certain and undeniable facts that Jesus freed many people from the destructive power of Satan. We do not have the time here to refer to each of these episodes. We will limit ourselves to throwing light on two things: The first is the explanation that Jesus gave about his power over demons; the second is what this power tells us about Jesus and his person.

Faced with the clamorous liberation of one possessed person which Jesus had performed, his enemies, unable to deny the fact, say: "He casts out demons in the name of Beelzebul, the prince of demons" (Luke 11:15). Jesus shows that this explanation is absurd. If Satan were divided against himself, his reign would have ended

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long ago, but instead it continues to prosper. The true explanation is rather that Jesus casts out demons by the finger of God, that is, by the Holy Spirit, and this shows that the kingdom of God has arrived on earth.

Satan was "the strong man" who had mankind in his power, but now one "stronger than him" has come and is taking his power away from him. This tells us something quite important about the person of Christ. With his coming there has begun a new era for humanity, a regime change. Such a thing could not be the work of a mere man, nor can it be the work of a great prophet.

It is essential to note the name or the power by which Jesus casts out demons. The usual formula with which the exorcist turns to the demon is: "I charge you by...", or "in the name of ... I order you to leave this person." He calls on a higher authority, generally God, and for Christians, Jesus. But this is not the case for Jesus himself: His words are a dry "I order you."

I order you! Jesus does not need to call upon a higher authority; he is himself the higher authority.

The defeat of the power of evil and of the demons was an integral part of the definitive salvation (eschatological) proclaimed by the prophets. Jesus invites his adversaries to draw the conclusions of what they see with their eyes. There is nothing more to wait on, to look forward to; the kingdom and salvation is in their midst.

The much discussed blasphemy against the Holy Spirit has its explanation here. To attribute to the spirit of evil, to Beelzebul, or to magic that which is so manifestly the work of the Spirit of God meant to stubbornly close one's eyes to the truth, to oppose oneself to God himself, and therefore to deprive oneself of the possibility of forgiveness.

The historical approach that I wish to take in these commentaries during Lent should not keep us from seeing also the practical importance of the Gospel we are treating. Evil is still terribly present to us today. We witness manifestations of evil that often exceed our ability to understand; we are deeply disturbed and speechless when faced with certain events reported by the news. The consoling message that flows from the reflections we have made thus far is that there is in our midst one who is "stronger" than evil.

Some people experience in their lives or in their homes the presence of evil that seems to be diabolical in origin. Sometimes it certainly is -- we know of the spread of satanic sects and rites in our society, especially among young people -- but it is difficult in particular cases to determine whether we are truly dealing with Satan or with pathological disturbances. Fortunately, we do not have to be certain of the causes. The thing to do is to cling to Christ in faith, to call on his name, and to participate in the sacraments.

Tomorrow's Gospel suggests a means to us that is important to cultivate especially during the season of Lent. Jesus did not go into the desert to be tempted; his intention was to go into the desert to pray and listen to the voice of the Father.

Throughout history there have been many men and women who have chosen to imitate Jesus as he withdraws into the desert. But the invitation to follow Jesus into the desert is not made only to monks and hermits. In a different form it is made to everyone.

The monks and hermits have chosen a place of desert. We have chosen a desert time. To pass time in the desert means to create a little emptiness and silence around us, to rediscover the road to our heart, to remove ourselves from the noise and external distractions, to enter into contact with the deepest source of our being and our faith.

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