

ZE06090101 - 2006-09-01

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-16868?l=english>

## Cantalamessa on "Ecology of the Heart"

### Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on This Sunday's Gospel

ROME, SEPT. 1, 2006 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa on this Sunday's liturgical readings. He is the preacher to the Pontifical Household.

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What defiles man?

In the passage from this Sunday's Gospel (Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23), Jesus cuts at the root the tendency to give more importance to external gestures and rites than to the heart's dispositions, the desire to appear better than one is, in short, hypocrisy and formalism.

But today we can draw from this page of the Gospel a teaching not only of an individual order but also social and collective. The distortion that Jesus criticized, of giving more importance to external cleanliness than to purity of heart, is reproduced today on a worldwide scale.

There is very much preoccupation about exterior and physical contamination from the atmosphere, the water, the hole in the ozone layer; instead, there is almost absolute silence about interior and moral defilement.

We are indignant on seeing marine birds emerging from waters contaminated with petroleum stains, covered with tar and unable to fly, but we do not show the same concern for our children, vitiated and spent at an early age because of the mantle of wickedness that already extends to every aspect of life.

Let's be very clear: It is not a question of opposing the two kinds of contamination. The struggle against physical contamination and care of hygiene is a sign of progress and civilization which must not be given up at any price. However, Jesus told us, on that occasion, that it was not enough for us to wash our hands, our vessels and all the rest; this does not go to the root of the problem.

Jesus then launches the program of an ecology of the heart. Let us take some of the "defiling" things enumerated by Jesus: slander with the related vice of saying evil things about one's neighbor.

Do we really want to undertake the task of healing our hearts? If so, we must engage in an all out battle against the habit of gossiping, of criticizing, of murmuring against absent persons, of making quick judgments. This is a most difficult poison to neutralize once it has spread.

Once a woman went to confession to St. Philip Neri, accusing herself of having spoken badly of some people. The saint absolved her, but gave her a strange penance. He told her to go home, to get a chicken and return to him, plucking its feathers along the way. When she was in his presence again, he said to her: "Now go back home and collect one by one the feathers that you let fall when you were coming here."

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"Impossible!" exclaimed the woman. "In the meantime the wind has dispersed them in all directions." That's the point St. Philip wished to make.

"Now you see -- he said -- how it is impossible to take back murmuring and slander once they have left the mouth."

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