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Father Cantalamessa on Families

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, MARCH 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 for this Sunday's liturgy.

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Jesus, the woman, and the family
Fifth Sunday of Lent
Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:8-14; John 8:1-11

The Gospel of the Fifth Sunday of Lent is about the woman surprised in adultery whom Jesus saves from stoning. Jesus does not intend to say with his gesture that adultery is not a sin or that it is a small thing. There is an explicit, even if delicate, condemnation of adultery in the words addressed to the woman at the end of the scene: "Do not sin anymore."

Jesus does not intend to approve the deed of the woman; his intention is rather to condemn the attitude of those who are always ready to look for and denounce the sin of others. We saw this last time in our look at Jesus' general attitude toward sinners.

As we have been doing in these commentaries on the readings for the Sundays of Lent, we will now move from this passage to expand our horizon and consider Christ's general attitude toward marriage and the family, as this can be discerned in all the Gospels.

Among the strange theses about Jesus advanced in recent years, there is also one about a Jesus who supposedly repudiated the natural family and all familial relationships in the name of belonging to a different community in which God is the father and all the disciples are brothers and sisters. This Jesus is supposed to have proposed an itinerant life like that of the philosophical school known as the Cynics in the world outside Israel.

There are words of Christ about familial bonds that actually perplex at first glance. Jesus says: "If someone comes to me and does not hate his father, his mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

These are certainly hard words but already the Evangelist Matthew is careful to explain the meaning that the word "hate" has in this context: "Whoever loves his father and mother ... son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37).

Jesus does not ask us therefore to hate our parents and children, but to not love them to the point of refusing to follow Jesus on their account.

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There is another perplexing episode. One day Jesus says to someone: "Follow me." And the man responds: "Lord, let me go first and bury my father." Jesus replies: "Let the dead bury the dead; you go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:59ff).

Some critics let loose on this. In their eyes, this is a scandalous request, disobedience to God who orders us to care for our parents, a clear violation of filial duties!

The scandal of these critics is for us a precious proof. Certain words of Christ cannot be explained as long as he is considered a mere man, even if an exceptional one. Only God can ask that we love him more than our father and that, to follow him, we even renounce attending our father's burial.

For the rest, from a perspective of faith like Christ's, what was more important for the deceased father: that his son be at home in that moment to bury his body or that he follow the one sent by God, the God before whom his soul must now present itself?

But maybe the explanation in this case is even more simple. We know that the expression, "Let me go and bury my father," was sometimes used (as it is today) to say: "Let me go and be with my father while he is still alive; after he dies I will bury him and come follow you."

Jesus would thus only be asking not to indefinitely delay responding to his call. Many of us religious, priests and sisters, find ourselves faced with the same choice and often our parents have been happier for our obedience to Jesus.

The perplexity over these requests of Jesus arises in large part from a failure to take into account the difference between what he asked of all indistinctly and what he asked only of those who were called to entirely share his life dedicated to the kingdom, as happens in the Church even today.

There are other sayings of Jesus which could be examined. Someone might even accuse Jesus of being the cause of the proverbial difficulty in agreement between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law since he said: "I have come to separate son from father, daughter from mother, daughter-in-law from mother-in-law" (Matthew 10:35).

But it will not be Jesus who divides; it will be the different attitude that each member of the family takes toward him that will determine the division. This is something that painfully occurs even in many families today.

All of the doubts about Jesus' attitude toward the family and marriage will fall away if we take into account the whole Gospel and not only those passages that we like. Jesus is more rigorous than anyone in regard to the indissolubility of marriage, he forcefully confirms the commandment to honor father and mother to the point of condemning the practice of denying them help for religious reasons (cf. Mark 7:11-13).

Just consider all the miracles that Jesus performed precisely to take away the sorrows of fathers (Jairus and the father of the epileptic), of mothers (the Canaanite woman, the widow of Nain!), and of siblings (the sisters of Lazarus).

In these ways he honors familial bonds. He shares the sorrow of relatives to the point of weeping with them.

In a time like our own, when everything seems to conspire to weaken the bonds and values of the family, the only thing that we have not set against them yet is Jesus and the Gospel!

But this is one of the many odd things about Jesus that we must know so that we are not taken in when we

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hear talk of new discoveries about the Gospels. Jesus came to bring marriage back to its original beauty (cf. Matthew 19:4-9), to strengthen it, not to weaken it.

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