ZE06040701 - 2006-04-07
Permalink: http://www.zenit.org/article-15744?l=english

Father Cantalamessa on Christ's Suffering

3rd Lenten Sermon Given to Pontifical Household

VATICAN CITY, APRIL 7, 2006 (ZENIT.org).- Here is a translation of the second Lenten sermon preached this morning, before Benedict XVI and the Roman Curia, by Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher to the Pontifical Household.

* * *

"The Rocks Were Split"

1. The Passion and the Shroud

Christ's passion is the subject most addressed in Western art. Suffice it to think of the innumerable representations, in painting and sculpture, of Jesus in Gethsemane, the "Ecce Homo," the crucifixion, the famous depositions from the cross, called "pietà" and, in the German world, "Vesperbild." In our secularized world, art remains one of the forms of evangelization which even penetrates realms closed to all other forms of proclamation. I met a Japanese girl who converted and received baptism [after] studying art in Florence.

No artistic representation of the Passion, however, has exercised and still exercises a fascination like that of the shroud. It matters not, from our point of view, to know whether or not the shroud is "authentic," if the image was formed naturally or artificially, if it is only an icon or also a relic. What is certain is that it is the most solemn and sublime representation of death that the human eye has ever contemplated. If a God can die, this is the least inadequate way to represent his death to us.

The closed eyelids, the lips together, the composed features of the face: More than a dead person, it all makes one think of a man immersed in profound and silent meditation. It seems like the translation in images of the ancient antiphon of Holy Saturday: "Caro mea requiescet in spe," "my body too will rest secure." Even the former homily on Holy Saturday that is read in the office of readings acquires a particular force read before the shroud: "What happened? Today on earth, there is great silence, great silence and solitude. Great silence because the King sleeps. "[1]

Theology tells us that at his death Christ's soul separated from his body as it does in every man who dies, but his divinity remained united both to his soul as well as to his body. The shroud is the most perfect representation of this Christological mystery. That body was separated from the soul, but not from the divinity. There is something divine that moves over the martyred face, full of majesty, of the Christ of the shroud.

To perceive it, suffice it to compare the shroud with other representations of the dead Christ made by the hand of human artists, for example Mantegna's dead Christ, and even more so that of Holbein the Younger, in the Museums of Basel, which represents the body of Christ in all the rigidity of death and the incipient decomposition of the members. Before this image, Dostoyevsky, who contemplated it at length on one of his

trips, said that one can easily lose one's faith;[2] before the shroud, on the contrary, faith may be found, or found again if it has been lost.

Christ's face of the shroud is like a boundary, a wall that separates two worlds: the world of men full of agitation, violence and sin and the world of God inaccessible to evil. It is a shore on which all waves break. As if, in Christ, God says to the force of evil what the book of Job says to the ocean: "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stayed" (Job 38:11).

Before the shroud we can pray like this: "Lord, make me your shroud. When, again descending from the cross, you come to me in the sacrament of your body and blood, may I wrap you with my faith and love as in a shroud, so that your features are imprinted on my soul and also leave on it an indelible trace. Lord, make of the coarse and crude cloth of my humanity our shroud!"

2. The Passion of the Savior's Soul

In this meditation, we go ideally to Calvary. The evangelists sum up the most overwhelming event of the history of the world in three words: "and they crucified him" (Mark and Matthew), "there they crucified him" (Luke), "to crucify him" (John). The readers they were addressing knew well what these words meant; we do not. We must deduce it from other sources. These also, however, are strangely reticent; the torture of the cross was considered so horrifying that it had to be kept far away, in Cicero's words, "not only from the eyes, but also from the ears of a Roman citizen."[3] It should not be spoken about by genteel people.

The condemned one could be bound by cords on the writs or fixed with nails to the cross. Mention of the wounds to the hands and feet of the risen one tells us that for Jesus the second way was adopted and one can easily imagine the torture that this entailed.

Several theories have been proposed about the immediate physical cause of Jesus' death: heart attack, suffocation; the most recent indicates dehydration and the loss of blood as the most plausible medical explanation of Christ's death.

But far more profound and painful than the passion of the body was that of Christ's soul. The latter had several causes. The first was solitude. The Gospels insist much on the progressive abandonment of Jesus in his passion: by the crowds, by the disciples and finally by the Father himself. "You will leave me alone" (John 16:32); "Then all the disciples forsook him and fled" (Matthew 26:56; Mark 14:50).

Christ's solitude is impressive above all in the episode of Gethsemane, when he seeks repeatedly and in vain for some one to be close to him. To express the anguish of this moment, Mark and Matthew use the verb "ademonein." In Greek we know that the letter "a" at the beginning of a word indicates absence, privation; "demonein" has the same root as demos, people, and of democracy. The underlying idea then is that of a man cut off from human society, prey to a kind of solitary terror, as some one who finds himself projected in a remote point of the universe where, if he cries out, his voice is lost in an icy void.

Solitude reaches its culmination on the cross when Jesus, in his humanity, feels abandoned even by the Father: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" This was not a cry of dejection or despair, as has sometimes been thought. If the evangelists thought this, they would not have made the Roman centurion's confession of faith depend on it: "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matthew 27:54; Mark 15:39). Nothing however prevents one from thinking that the evangelists had interpreted Jesus' cry in the light of the quoted psalm, as expression of the extreme solitude and abandonment that Jesus experienced at this moment in his humanity.[4]

That which the Apostle Paul assumes as the greatest renunciation and suffering possible to the world, "I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race"

(cf. Romans 9:1), Christ, in fact, experienced this with respect of God. He became the atheist, the one without God, so that men might return to God. There is, in fact, an active atheism, culpable, which consists in rejecting God, and there is a passive atheism, of punishment and expiation, which consists in being rejected or feeling rejected, by God. One must question the mystics who shared a small part of the dark night of Christ -- the last among them Mother Teresa of Calcutta -- to know how painful this form of atheism is.

Another aspect of the interior passion of Christ was humiliation and contempt. "He was despised and rejected by men. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth" (Isaiah 53:3-7). So predicted Isaiah, and so it happened. From the moment of the arrest until under the cross it was a crescendo of contempt, insults and mockery surrounding the person of Christ. "They clothed him in a purple cloak, and plaiting a crown of thorns they put it on him. And they began to salute him, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' And they struck his head with a reed, and spat upon him, and they knelt down in homage to him. And when they had mocked him, they stripped him of the purple cloak, and put his own clothes on him. And they led him out to crucify him" (Mark 15:17-20). Under the cross, "the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying: 'He saved others; he cannot save himself'" (Matthew 27:41ff.). Jesus is defeated. All the innumerable "defeated" of life have someone who can understand and help them.

But the passion of the Savior's soul has an even deeper cause than solitude and humiliation. In Gethsemane he prays that the cup be removed from him (cf. Mark 14:36). In the Bible, the image of the cup evokes almost always the idea of the wrath of God against sin (cf. Isaiah 51:22; Psalm 75:9; Revelation 14:10).

At the beginning of the letter, St. Paul establishes a fact which has the value of a universal principle: "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness" (Romans 1:18). Where there is sin, one cannot fail to note the judgment of God against it, otherwise God would compromise with sin and the distinction itself between good and evil would fail. God's wrath is the same thing as his holiness. Now, Jesus in Gethsemane is ungodliness, all the ungodliness of the world. He, writes the Apostle, is the man "made sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21). It is against him that the wrath of God "is revealed." The infinite attraction that there is from eternity between the Father and the Son is now run through by an equally infinite repulsion between the holiness of God and the malice of sin and this is "to drink the cup."

3. "Is it I, Master?

Now is the moment to pass from contemplation of the passion to our response to it. I pointed out at the beginning the role played by art in addressing the passion of Christ. Next to painting and sculpture, with gratitude we must also remember music. For many people, within and outside of Christianity, Bach's "Passion according to St. Matthew" is the only means of knowledge of the passion of Christ. A means before which it is difficult to remain altogether neutral and detached. Alternated in the account of the facts (recitatives) is meditation (the arias) prayer (choral) the impulse of the heart; all that penetrates in the senses and the soul by the suggestion of a music which reaches here one of its most sublime heights.

In view of these meditations, I wanted to hear again Bach's "Passion" according to St. Matthew; it was a moment that moved me profoundly. At the announcement of the betrayal, all the apostles asked Jesus: "Is it I, Lord?" However, before having us hear Christ's response, annulling all distance between the event and its commemoration, the composer makes today's devout Christian intervene who cries out his confession: "Yes, it is I, I am the traitor!"

This interpretation is profoundly biblical. The kerygma, or announcement, of the Passion is always made up of two elements: a fact -- "suffered," "died"; the motivation of the event -- "for us," "for our trespasses." He was put to death, says the Apostle, "for our trespasses" (Romans 4:25); died "for the ungodly," he died "for us" (Romans 5:6-8). It is always like this.

The Passion inevitably remains extraneous to us, unless we enter into it through that little narrow door of the "for us." Only he truly knows the Passion who acknowledges that it is also his work. Without this, the rest is digression. I am Judas who betrays, Peter who denies, the crowd that shouts, "Barabbas not him!" Every time I have preferred my satisfaction, my convenience, my honor to Christ's this has occurred. In a memorable talk for Good Friday, Don Primo Mazzolari was not wrong to speak of "our brother Judas."

If Christ died "for me" and "for my trespasses," then it means -- simply returning the phrase to the active -- that I killed Jesus of Nazareth, that my trespasses crushed him. It is what Peter proclaims forcefully to the three thousand listeners, the day of Pentecost: "You killed Jesus of Nazareth!" "You denied the Holy and Righteous One!" (cf. Acts 2:23; 3:14).

Those three thousand were not all present on Calvary to hammer the nails or before Pilate to ask that he be crucified. They could have protested, instead, they accepted the accusation and said to the apostles: "Brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). The Holy Spirit had "convinced them of sin," making them engage in simple reasoning: If the Messiah is dead for the sins of his people and I have committed a sin, I have killed the Messiah.

It is written that at the moment of Christ's death "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (Matthew 27:51ff.). An apocalyptic explanation -- symbolic language to describe the eschatological event -- is usually given of these signs, but they also have a parenthetic meaning: indicating what should occur in the heart of the one who reads and meditates on the passion of Christ. St. Leo the Great writes: "Human nature trembles before the Redeemer's torture, the rocks of unfaithful hearts are split and those that were closed in the sepulchers of their mortality emerge, lifting the stone that weighed down on them."[5]

We have arrived at the point in which we must gather the fruit of the whole of our meditation on the Passion. The Bible has explained the profound meaning of the word metanoia, conversion, as a change of heart: "Create in me, O God, a new heart," "rend your hearts and not your garments" (Joel 2:13). Also the conversion of the crowd that heard Peter's talk is expressed through the image of the heart: "They were cut to the heart" (Acts 2:37).

Every conversion implies a movement, a passing from one state to another, from one point of departure to a point of arrival. The point of departure, a state from which one must come out is for Scripture that of the hardness of heart. "I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels" (Psalm 80:13), "For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives" (Matthew 19:8), "grieved at their hardness of heart" (Mark 3:5), "by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself" (Romans 2:5).

In the whole Bible, but especially in the New Testament, the heart indicates the seat of the interior life, as opposed to the outward appearance: "man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7). The heart is man's most profound I, his very person, in particular, his intelligence and will. It is the center of the religious life, the point in which God addresses man and man decides his response to God.

One now understands what hardness of heart represents for Scripture: the refusal to submit to God, to love him with one's whole heart, to obey his law. The term "sclerocardia," invented by the Bible, is significant. A hard heart is a sclerosed heart, felted up, impermeable to any form of love that is not love of self. The images used by Scripture are those of the "heart of stone" (Ezekiel 36:26), of the "uncircumcized heart" (Jeremiah 9:26), and of stubbornness (Deuteronomy 31:27).

The term "ad quem," or the point of arrival of the conversion is described, coherently, with the images of the

contrite, wounded, lacerated, circumcised heart, of the heart of flesh, of the new heart: "The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise (Psalm 51:19); "this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word" (Isaiah 66:2); "we may be heard with a contrite heart and a humbled spirit" (Deuteronomy 3:39).

4. "I stand at the door and knock"

Let us now attempt to understand how this change of heart is brought about.

We must distinguish two situations. When it is a question of the first conversion, from incredulity to faith, or from sin to grace, Christ is outside and knocks on the walls of the heart to enter, when it is a question of successive conversions, from one state of grace to a higher one, from lukewarmness to fervor, the opposite occurs: Christ is within and knocks on the walls of the heart to come out!

I will explain. In baptism we received the Spirit of Christ; that remains in us as in his temple (1 Corinthians 3:16), so long as he is not chased out by mortal sin. But it can happen that this Spirit ends up by being as though imprisoned and walled in by a heart of stone that is formed around it. It has no possibility to expand and permeate with himself the faculties, factions and sentiments of the person. When we read Christ's phrase in Revelation: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20), we should understand that he does not knock from outside, but from within; he does not wish to enter but to come out.

The Apostle says that Christ must be "formed" in us (Galatians 4:19), namely, develop and receive his full form; and this development is impeded by the heart of stone. Sometimes large trees are seen on the sides of the streets (in Rome they are generally pines), whose roots, imprisoned by the asphalt, struggle to expand, raising parts of the cement itself. This is how we should imagine the Kingdom of God within us: a seed destined to become a majestic tree on which the birds of heaven rest, but which makes it difficult to develop because of the resistance of our egoism.

There are obviously different degrees in this situation. In the majority of souls committed to a spiritual path, Christ is not imprisoned in a breastplate but, so to speak, in guarded freedom. He is free to move, but within very precise limits. This occurs when he is tacitly made to understand what he can and cannot ask of us. Prayer yes, but not so as to compromise our sleep, rest, healthy information; obedience yes, but he must not abuse our availability; chastity yes, but not to the point of depriving us of some relaxed show, though impudent. In sum, the use of half measures.

In the history of holiness, the most famous example of the first conversion, that from sin to grace, is St. Augustine; the most instructive example of the second conversion, that from lukewarmness to fervor, is St. Teresa of Avila. It might be that what she says of herself in her life is exaggerated and dictated by the delicacy of her conscience, but it might serve us for a useful examination of conscience.

"Well that is how I began, from pastime to pastime, from vanity to vanity, from occasion to occasion, to go so far on very great occasions and pervert my soul in many vanities. The things of God made me very content but I was bound by those of the world. It seems that I wished to reconcile these two opposites -- so inimical one to the other -- as are spiritual life and sensuous joys, tastes and pastimes."

The result of this state was a profound unhappiness, in which we might also recognize our own: "I spent almost twenty years in this tempestuous sea, with these falls and with raising myself up and badly -- as I would fall again -- and in a life so low in perfection, in which I paid virtually no attention to venial sins, and the mortal ones, though I feared them, but not as I should, as I did not remove myself from the dangers. I can say that it was one of the most painful lives that I believe one could imagine, because I neither enjoyed God nor brought happiness to the world. When I was in worldly joys, to remember what I owed God was painful

for me; when I was with God, worldly pastimes disturbed me."[6]

It was, in fact, contemplation of the Passion that gave Teresa the decisive impulse to change. This is how the saint describes the moment of her "conversion": "It happened to me, entering the oratory one day, I saw an image that I had taken there to put away, which had been found for a celebration at home. It was of a very wounded Christ and so devout that, on looking at it, I was so distressed to see him like that, because it represented well what he went through for us. I felt so much how badly I had thanked him for those wounds, that I thought my heart was breaking and I threw myself next to Him with very great shedding of tears, begging him to strengthen me once and for all so as not to offend him. I told him I would not rise from there until he did what I implored him. I think it did me good, because I have improved much since then."[7] Today we know to what point she improved!

5, "Far be it from me to glory ..."

It is written that, on that day, the multitudes "when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts" (Luke 23:48). We want to do this also, returning to our work after being with Jesus on Calvary. Once we have passed through our little spiritual "earthquake," we see the sign of the cross and death of Christ change completely: from the chapter of accusation and reason for fear and sadness, to its transformation into a reason for joy and security. The "propter nos," because of us, is transformed into "pro nobis," in our favor. The cross now appears as honor and glory, that is, in Pauline language, as joyful security accompanied by overwhelming gratitude, to which man rises in faith and which is expressed in praise and thanksgiving.

We can open ourselves without fear to that joyful and pneumatic dimension in which the cross no longer appears as "folly and scandal," but, on the contrary, as "strength of God and wisdom of God." We can make of it our reason for unbreakable certainty, supreme proof of the love of God for us, inexhaustible topic of proclamation and, without any arrogance at all, but with profound humility, say with the Apostle: "But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ!" (Galatians 6:14).

At a time when in several places pressure is being exerted to remove the crucifix from classrooms and public places, we, Christians, must fix it more than ever to the walls of our hearts. We began this meditation asking Jesus to make his shroud in our souls. We ask Mary to help us to fulfill this program with the words of the Stabat Mater: "Sancta Mater, istud agas, / crucifixi fige plagas / cordi meo valide": "O Holy Mother, make the wounds of the Crucified One be engraved in my heart."

[1] "Antica Omelia sul Sabato Santo" (PG 43, 439 f.).

[2] F. Dostoyevsky, "The Idiot," Part II, iv.

[3] Cf. Cicero, "Pro Rabirio" 5, 16.

[4] Cf. R. Brown, "The Death of the Messiah," II, p. 1051.

[5] St. Leo the Great, "Sermo" 66, 3(PL 54, 366).

[6] St. Teresa of Avila, "Life," chapters 7-8.

[7] Ibid., 9, 1-3.

[Translation by ZENIT]

| More