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Father Cantalamessa on the Pearl of Great Price

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, JUNE 15, 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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A Woman Came With an Alabaster Flask of Ointment
11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
2 Samuel 12:7-10,13; Galatians 2:16,19-21; Luke 7:36-8:3

There are some Gospel passages where the teaching is so much connected to the action that the former cannot be fully understood if it is detached from the latter.

The episode of the sinful woman in the house of Simon the Pharisee that will be read at Mass this Sunday is one of these. The opening scene is silent; there are no words, only silent gestures: A woman enters with an alabaster flask of ointment. She nestles at Jesus' feet, washes them with tears, dries them with her hair, and kissing them, douses them with the ointment from her flask.

She is almost certainly a prostitute, because at that time this was what was meant when the term "sinful" was applied to a woman.

At this point the focus turns to the Pharisee who invited Jesus to dinner. The scene is still silent, but only in appearance. The Pharisee is "speaking to himself": "When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this he said to himself, 'If this man were a prophet, he would know who and what sort of woman this is who is touching him, that she is a sinner.'"

The Gospel then takes Jesus' word so as to present his judgment on the actions of the woman and on the thoughts of the Pharisee, and it does this with a parable: "A creditor had two debtors: One owed him five hundred denarii and the other fifty. Not having anything to pay him with, the creditor forgave both of them their debts. Who will love him more?' Simon answered: 'I suppose the one who he forgave the most.' Jesus said to him, 'You have judged well.'"

Jesus first of all allows Simon to be convinced that he is in fact a prophet since he read the thoughts in his heart; at the same time, with the parable, he is preparing everyone to understand what he is about to say in defense of the woman: "For this reason I say to you her many sins are forgiven her because she has loved much. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little.' Then he said to her, 'Your sins are forgiven you.'"

This year is the 800th anniversary of the conversion of Francis of Assisi. What do the conversions of the sinful woman of the Gospel and Francis have to do with each other? Unfortunately, when we speak of conversion our thought goes instinctively to what one leaves behind -- sin, a disordered life, atheism -- but

this is the effect, not the cause of the conversion.

How a conversion happens is perfectly described by Jesus in the parable of the hidden treasure: "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field; a man finds it and hides it again, then he goes, full of joy, and sells all he has and buys the field." It is not said that "a man sold everything he had and then went out in search of a hidden treasure."

We know how the stories that begin this way end. One loses everything he has and does not find any treasure. These are stories of deluded people, visionaries. No, a man finds a treasure and sells all he has to acquire it. In other words, it is necessary to have found a treasure in order to have the strength and the joy to sell all.

This is done with a heart "full of joy," like the man about whom the Gospel speaks. This is how it happened for the sinful woman of the Gospel and for Francis of Assisi. Both had met Jesus and it is this that gave them the strength to change.

The point of departure of the sinful woman of the Gospel and Francis seems to have been different, but this difference was an appearance, external. Deep down it was the same. The woman and Francis, like all of us after all, were searching for happiness and they saw that the life they were leading did not make them happy, but rather it left dissatisfaction and an emptiness in the depths of their heart.

I was reading recently the story of the famous convert of the 19th century, Hermann Cohen, a brilliant musician, idolized as a the young prodigy of his time in the salons of central Europe: a kind of modern version of the young Francis.

After his conversion he wrote to a friend: "I looked for happiness everywhere: in the elegant life of the salons, in the deafening noise of balls and parties, in accumulating money, in the excitement of gambling, in artistic glory, in friendship with famous people, in the pleasures of the senses. Now I have found happiness, I have an overflowing heart and I want to share it with you. ... You say, 'But I don't believe in Jesus Christ.' I say to you, 'Neither did I and that is why I was unhappy.'"

Conversion is the way to happiness and a full life. It is not something painful, but the greatest joy. It is the discovery of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price.

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