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Father Cantalamessa on Jesus' Prayer

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, JULY 27, 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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Jesus at Prayer

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 18:20-21, 23-32; Colossians 2:12-14; Luke 11:1-13

Sunday's Gospel begins with these words: "Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, teach us to pray just as John taught his disciples.' He said to them, 'When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come.'"

We can get an idea of what Jesus' countenance and his whole person looked like when he prayed by considering the fact that his disciples, just watching him pray, fell in love with prayer and asked the Master to teach them to pray. Jesus responds to them, as we have just now heard, by teaching them the Our Father.

Again in our commentary for this Sunday we will draw inspiration for our reflections on the Gospel from Benedict XVI's book on Jesus. "Without the rootedness in God," the Pope writes, "the person of Jesus remains elusive, unreal and inexplicable. This is the point on which my book is based: It considers Jesus from the perspective of his communion with the Father. This is the true center of his personality."

These claims are amply justified by the Gospels. Therefore, no one can deny that historically the Jesus of the Gospels lives and works in continual reference to the heavenly Father, that he prays and teaches how to pray, that he bases everything on faith in God. If this dimension is taken away from the Jesus of the Gospels, nothing is left of him.

From this historical evidence there follows a fundamental consequence and that is that it is not possible to know the true Jesus if we detach from faith, if we try to approach him as nonbelievers or declared atheists. I am not speaking at this point of faith in Christ, in his divinity (which comes later), but of faith in God, in the most common understanding of the term.

Many nonbelievers today write about Jesus, convinced that they are the ones who know the real Jesus, not the Church, not the believers. I do not have the intention of saying -- nor does the Pope, I believe -- that nonbelievers have no right to concern themselves with Jesus. Jesus is the "patrimony of humanity" and no one, not even the Church, has a monopoly on him. The fact that even nonbelievers write about Jesus and are passionate about him can only give us pleasure.

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What I want to draw attention to are the consequences that follow from such a point of departure. If we detach from or deny faith in God, it is not only divinity that is eliminated or the so-called Christ of faith, but the historical Jesus is also completely eliminated, not even the man Jesus is left.

If God does not exist, Jesus is only one of the many deluded people who have prayed, worshipped, and spoken to their own shadow or the projection of their own essence, as Feuerbach would say. But how do we explain the fact that the life of this man "changed the world"? It would be like saying that truth and reason did not change the world but illusion and irrationality. How do we explain that after 2,000 years this man continues to affect us like no one else? Can all of that be the fruit of an equivocation, of an illusion?

There is but one way out of this dilemma and we must acknowledge the consistency of those (especially in the circle of the "Jesus Seminar" of California) who have taken that route. According to them, Jesus was not a Jewish believer; at bottom he was a philosopher of the Cynic type; he did not preach the kingdom of God, or an immanent end of the world; he only pronounced wise maxims in the style of a Zen master. His purpose was to restore in men their self-awareness, to convince them that they did not need him nor another god, because they themselves possessed a divine spark. These are the things, however, that the New Age movement has been preaching for decades.

The Pope understood it correctly: Without the rootedness in God, the figure of Jesus is elusive, unreal, and, I would add, contradictory. I do not think that this must be taken to mean that only those who interiorly adhere to Christianity can understand something about it; but it should put those on guard who think that only by being outside of it, outside the dogmas of the Church, can something objective be said about it.

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