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Father Cantalamessa on Modesty

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, AUG. 31, 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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Be Modest in What You Do!

22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Sirach 3:19-21, 30-31; Hebrews 12:18-19, 22-24a; Luke 14:1, 7-14

The beginning of this Sunday's Gospel helps us to correct a widely diffused prejudice: "One Sabbath when he went to dine at the house of a ruler who belonged to the Pharisees, they were watching him." Reading the Gospel from a certain angle we have ended up making the Pharisees the prototype for all vices: hypocrisy, duplicity, falsity; Jesus' enemies par excellence. The terms "Pharisee" and "Pharisaical" have entered into the vocabulary of many languages with negative connotations.

Such an idea of the Pharisees is not correct. There were certainly many among them who corresponded to this negative image and it is with these that Jesus has serious problems. But not all of them were like this. Nicodemus, who comes to see Jesus one night and who later defended him before the Sanhedrin, was a Pharisee (cf. John 3:1; 7:50ff.). Saul was a Pharisee before his conversion and was certainly a sincere and zealous person then, if misguided. Gamaliel, who defended the apostles before the Sanhedrin, was a Pharisee (cf. Acts 5:34ff.).

Jesus' relationships with the Pharisees were not only conflictual. They often shared the same convictions, such as faith in the resurrection of the dead and the love of God and neighbor as the first and most important commandment of the law. Some, as we see in Sunday's Gospel, even invited Jesus to dinner at their house. Today there is agreement that the Pharisees did not want Jesus to be condemned as much as their rival sect, the Sadducees, who belonged to Jerusalem's priestly caste.

For all these reasons, it would be a very good thing to stop using the terms "Pharisee" and "Pharisaical" in a disparaging way. This would also help dialogue with the Jews who recall with great respect the role played by the Pharisees in their history, especially after the destruction of Jerusalem.

During the dinner that Sabbath, Jesus taught two important things: one directed to those who were invited and the other to their host. To the host Jesus says (perhaps privately or only in the presence of his disciples): "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors ..." This is what Jesus himself did when he invited the poor, the afflicted, the meek, the hungry, the persecuted -- the persons named in the beatitudes -- to the great banquet of the kingdom.

But this time I would like to focus on what Jesus says to the invitees. "When you are invited to a wedding

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feast, do not take a place of honor ..." Jesus does not intend to give a lesson in good manners here. Neither does he wish to encourage the subtle calculation of those who take a lower place with the secret hope of gaining a more honorable place from the host. The parable could deceive us if we do not think about the banquet and the host that Jesus has in mind. The banquet is the most universal one of the kingdom and God is the host.

In life, Jesus wants to say, Choose the last place, try to work more for the benefit of others than for your own benefit. Be modest in evaluating your merits, allow others to do this instead ("No one is a good judge of his own case"), and already in this life God will lift you up. He will lift you up in his grace; he will make you rise in the ranks of Jesus' friends and true disciples, which is the only thing that really matters.

He will also exalt you in the esteem of others. It is a surprising fact but a true one: It is not only God who "comes to the humble but holds the proud at a distance" (cf. Psalm 107:6); men do the same, whether or not they are believers. Modesty, when it is sincere and not affected, conquers, makes those who practice it loved, makes their company desirable, their opinion appreciated. True glory flees from those who seek it and seeks those who flee from it.

We live in a society that has an extreme need to hear this Gospel message of humility again. Running to take the first seats, perhaps without scruple using others as steppingstones, being opportunistic and viciously competitive -- these are things that are universally condemned but, unfortunately, they are also universally practiced. The Gospel has an impact on society, even when it speaks of humility and modesty.

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