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## Father Cantalamessa on Being No. 1, for Christ

### "Whoever Is Great in Service, Is Great"

ROME, SEPT. 22, 2006 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by the Pontifical Household preacher, Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, on next Sunday's liturgy.

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If Any One Would Be First ...

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Wisdom 2:12,17-20; James 3:16--4:3; Mark 9:30-37

"And he sat down and called the Twelve; and he said to them, 'If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.'" Does Jesus condemn with these words the desire to excel, to do great things in life, to give the best of oneself, and favors instead laziness, a defeatist spirit and the negligent?

So thought the philosopher Nietzsche, who felt the need to combat Christianity fiercely, guilty in his opinion of having introduced into the world the "cancer" of humility and self-denial. In his work "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" he opposes this evangelical value with the "will to power," embodied by the superman, the man of "great health," who wishes to raise, not abase, himself.

It might be that Christians sometimes have misinterpreted Jesus' thought and have given occasion to this misunderstanding. But this is surely not what the Gospel wishes to tell us. "If any would be first": therefore, it is possible to want to be first, it is not prohibited, it is not a sin. With these words, not only does Jesus not prohibit the desire to be first, but he encourages it. He just reveals a new and different way to do so: not at the cost of others, but in favor of others. He adds, in fact: "he must be last of all and servant of all."

But what are the fruits of one or the other way of excelling? The will to power leads to a situation in which one imposes oneself and the rest serve; one is "happy" -- if there can be happiness in it -- and the rest unhappy; only one is victor, all the rest are vanquished; one dominates, the rest are dominated.

We know with what results the idea of the superman was implemented by Hitler. But it is not just Nazism; almost all the evils of humanity stem from that root. In the Second Reading of this Sunday, James asks himself the anguishing and perennial question: "What causes wars?" In the Gospel, Jesus gives us the answer: the desire for predominance. Predominance of one nation over another, of one race over another, of a party over the others, of one sex over the other, of one religion over another.

In service, instead, all benefit from the greatness of one. Whoever is great in service, is great and makes others great; rather than raising himself above others, he raises others with him. Alessandro Manzoni concludes his poetic evocation of Napoleon's ventures with the question: "Was it true glory? In posterity the arduous sentence." This doubt, about whether or not it was truly glory, is not posed for Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Raoul Follereau and all those who daily serve the cause of the poor and those wounded by wars, often risking

their own lives.

Only one doubt remains. What to think of antagonism in sports and competition in business? Are these things also condemned by Christ's words? No, when they are contained within the limits of good sportsmanship and good business, these things are good, they serve to increase the level of physical capability and ... to lower prices in trade. Indirectly, they serve the common good. Jesus' invitation to be the last certainly doesn't apply to cycling or Formula 1 races!

But precisely, sport serves to clarify the limit of this greatness in relation to service. "In a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize," says St. Paul (1 Corinthians 9:24). Suffice it to remember what happens at the end of a 100-meter flat race: The winner exults, is surrounded by photographers and carried triumphantly in the air. All the rest go away sad and humiliated. "All run, but only one receives the prize."

St. Paul extracts, however, from athletic competitions also a positive teaching: "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable [crown, eternal life, from God]." A green light, therefore, to the new race invented by Christ in which the first is the one who makes himself last of all and serves all.

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