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## Father Cantalamessa on John the Baptist

### Pontifical Household Preacher on Sunday's Gospel

ROME, DEC. 8, 2006 ([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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Second Sunday of Advent

Baruch 5:1-9; Philippians 1:4-6,8-11; Luke 3:1-6

John the Baptist: Prophet of the Most High

This Sunday's Gospel is concerned entirely with the figure of John the Baptist. From the moment of his birth John the Baptist was greeted by his father as a prophet: "And you, child, will be called prophet of the Most High because you will go before the Lord to prepare the ways for him" (Luke 1:76).

What did the precursor do to be defined as a prophet, indeed, "the greatest of the prophets" (cf. Luke 7:28)? First of all, in the line of the ancient prophets of Israel, he preached against oppression and social injustice. In Sunday's Gospel we can hear him say: "He who has two tunics must give one to him who has none; and he who has something to eat must do likewise."

To the tax collectors who so often drained away the money of the poor with arbitrary requests, he says: "Do not mistreat anyone or commit extortion" (Luke 3:11-14). There are also the sayings about making the mountains low, raising up the valleys, and straightening the crooked pathways. Today we could understand them thus: "Every unjust social difference between the very rich (the mountains) and the very poor (the valleys) must be eliminated or at least reduced; the crooked roads of corruption and deception must be made straight."

Up to this point we can easily recognize our contemporary understanding of a prophet: one who pushes for change; who denounces the injustices of the system, who points his finger against power in all its forms religious, economic, military and dares to cry out in the face of the tyrant: "It is not right!" (Matthew 14:4).

But there is something else that John the Baptist does: He gives to the people "a knowledge of salvation, of the remission of their sins" (Luke 1:77). Where, we might ask ourselves, is the prophecy in this case? The prophets announced a future salvation; but John the Baptist does not announce a future salvation; he indicates a salvation that is now present. He is the one who points his finger toward the person and cries out: "Behold, here it is" (John 1:29). "That which was awaited for centuries and centuries is here, he is the one!" What a tremor must have passed through those present who heard John speak thus!

The traditional prophets helped their contemporaries look beyond the wall of time and see into the future, but John helps the people to look past the wall of contrary appearances to make them see the Messiah hidden

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behind the semblance of a man like others. The Baptist in this way inaugurated the new Christian form of prophecy, which does not consist in proclaiming a future salvation ("in the last times"), but to reveal the hidden presence of Christ in the world.

What does all of this have to say to us? That we too must hold together those two aspects of the office of prophet: On one hand working for social justice and on the other announcing the Gospel. A proclamation of Christ that is not accompanied by an effort toward human betterment would result in something disincarnate and lacking credibility. If we only worked for justice without the proclamation of faith and without the regenerative contact with the word of God, we would soon come to our limits and end up mere protestors.

From John the Baptist we also learn that proclamation of the Gospel and the struggle for justice need not remain simply juxtaposed, without a link between them. It must be precisely the Gospel of Christ that moves us to fight for respect for human beings in such a way as to make it possible for each man to "see the salvation of God." John the Baptist did not preach against abuses as a social agitator but as a herald of the Gospel "to make ready for the Lord a people well prepared" (Luke 1:17).

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