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Father Cantalamessa on Priorities

Pontifical Household Preacher on Sunday's Liturgical Readings

ROME, NOV. 3, 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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Love the Lord your God
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (b)
Deuteronomy 6:2-6; Hebrews 7:23-28; Mark 12:28b-34

One day one of the scribes came to Jesus asking him which was the first commandment of the law and Jesus answered, citing the words of the law: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God. And you shall love the Lord your God, with your whole heart, and with your whole soul, and with your whole mind, and with your whole strength." But Jesus immediately added that there is a second commandment similar to this, and it is to "love your neighbor as yourself."

If we are to understand the meaning of the scribe's question and Jesus' response, we need to bear in mind the following. In the Judaism of Jesus' time there were two opposite tendencies.

On the one hand there was a tendency to endlessly multiply the commandments and precepts of the law, creating norms and obligations for every minimal detail of life. On the other hand there was the desire to look underneath this suffocating congeries of norms to find those things that really count for God, the spirit of all the commandments.

The scribe's question and Jesus' response are situated in this approach to the essentials of the law, in this desire not to get lost in the thousand other secondary precepts. It is precisely this lesson about method that above all we must learn from today's gospel. There are things in life that are important but not urgent (in the sense that nothing will happen if we let them slide); and vice versa, there are things that are urgent but not important. The danger is that we will systematically sacrifice the important things to pursue those that are urgent but often secondary.

How do we avoid this danger? A story will help us understand how. One day an old professor was asked to speak as an expert to some large North American corporations on personal time management. He decided to try an experiment. Standing before a group ready to take notes, he pulled out from under the table a large, empty glass vase. He placed a dozen tennis-ball-size rocks in the vase until it was full. When he was not able to add more rocks he asked those present: "Does the vase seem full to you?" and they all answered "Yes!" He waited a moment and then asked: "Are you sure?"

He again bent down and pulled a box full of pebbles from under the table and carefully poured the pebbles into the vase, moving the vase a little so that the pebbles could reach the rocks at the very bottom. He asked:

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"Is the vase full this time?"

His audience, having become more prudent, began to understand and said: "Perhaps not yet." "Very good!" the old professor replied. Again he bent down and this time picked up a bag of sand and poured it into the vase with care. The sand filled all the spaces between the rocks and the pebbles.

He then asked again: "Is the vase full now?" And they all answered without hesitation: "No!" "Indeed," the old professor said and, as they expected, took the pitcher of water from the table and poured it into the vase up to the brim.

At this point he looked up at his audience and asked: "What great truth does this experiment show us?" The bravest of the group, reflecting on the theme of the course -- time management -- replied: "This shows us that even when our schedule is full, with a little effort we can always add some other task, some other thing to do."

"No," the professor answered, "It's not that. The experiment shows us something else. If you don't put the big rocks in the vase first, then you will never be able to put them in afterward."

There was a moment of silence and everyone took in the evidence for this affirmation.

The professor continued: "What are the big rocks, the priorities, in your life? Health? Family? Friends? Defending a cause? Accomplishing something that is close to your heart?"

"The important thing is to put these big rocks on your agenda first. If you give priority to a thousand other little things -- the pebbles, the sand -- your life will be filled with meaninglessness and you will never find time to dedicate yourself to the truly important things.

"So, never forget to pose this question to yourself: 'What are the important things in my life?' Put these things at the head of your agenda."

Then, with a friendly gesture the old professor bid farewell to his audience and left the room.

To the "big rocks" mentioned by the professor -- health, family, friends -- we need to add two others, which are the biggest of all, the two greatest commandments: love God and your neighbor.

Truly, loving God, more than a commandment, is a privilege, a concession. If one day we find him, we will not cease to thank God for commanding us to love him and we will not desire to do anything else but cultivate this love.

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