Father Cantalamessa on Infinite Chances

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, APRIL 20, 2007 (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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Do You Love Me?
Third Sunday of Easter
Acts 5:27b-32, 40b-41; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19

Reading the Gospel of John, we understand that originally it ended with Chapter 20. If Chapter 21 was added on later, why did the Evangelist or some disciple of his feel the need to insist yet again on the reality of Christ's resurrection.

The teaching that is drawn from this Gospel passage is that Jesus is risen not just in "a manner of speaking," but really, in his new body. "We ate and drank with him after his resurrection from the dead," Peter will say in the Acts of the Apostles, probably referring to this episode (Acts 10:4).

In John's Gospel, Jesus' dialogue with Peter follows the scene in which he eats the roasted fish with the apostles. Three questions: "Do you love me?" Three answers: "You know that I love you." Three conclusions: "Feed my sheep!"

With these words Jesus confers on Peter, de facto -- and according to the Catholic interpretation, to his successors -- the office of supreme and universal shepherd of the flock of Christ. He confers on him that primacy that he promised him when he said: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. To you I will give the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:18-19).

The most moving thing about this page of the Gospel is that Jesus remains faithful to the promise made to Peter despite Peter's not having been faithful to his promise to never betray him even at the cost of his life (cf. Matthew 26:35).

Jesus' triple question is explained by his desire to give Peter the possibility of canceling out his triple denial of Jesus during the passion.

God always gives men a second chance, and often a third, a fourth and infinite chances. He does not remove people from his book at their first mistake.

What does this do for us? His master's confidence and his master's forgiveness made Peter a new person; strong, faithful unto death. He fed Christ's faithful in the difficult moments in the Church's beginning, when it was necessary to leave Galilee and take to the roads of the world.

Peter will be able in the end to keep his promise to give his life for Christ. If we would learn the lesson contained in Christ's interaction with Peter, putting our confidence in someone even after they have made a mistake, there would be a lot fewer failures and marginalized people in the world!

The dialogue of Jesus and Peter should be transferred to the life of each one of us. St. Augustine, commenting on this passage of the Gospel, says: "Questioning Peter, Jesus also questions each of us." The question: "Do you love me?" is addressed to each disciple.

Christianity is not an ensemble of teachings and practices; it is something much more intimate and profound. It is a relationship of friendship with the person of Jesus Christ. Many times during his earthly life he asked people: "Do you believe?" and never "Do you love me?" He does this only now, after giving us proof of how much he loves us in his passion and death.

Jesus makes love for him consist in serving others: "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." He does not want to benefit from the fruits of this love but he wants his sheep to. He is the recipient of Peter's love but not its beneficiary. It as if he said to Peter: "Consider what you do for my flock as done to me."

This implicates us as well. Our love for Christ should not be something private and sentimental but should express itself in the service of others, in doing good to others. Mother Teresa of Calcutta often said: "The fruit of love is service and the fruit of service is peace."

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