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## Father Cantalamessa on Evangelical History

### Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, JAN. 19, 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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Are the Gospels Historical Records?

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Nehemiah 8:2-4a,5-6,8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 1:1-4;4:14-21

Before beginning the account of the life of Jesus, the Evangelist Luke explains the criteria that guided him. He says that he is referring to facts attested to by eye witnesses, which he verified by "accurate research," so that those who read what he writes may realize the solidity of the teachings contained in the Gospel. This provides us with an occasion to consider the problem of the historicity of the Gospels.

Until some centuries ago, the critical sense did not exist in people. What was referred to in the past was taken as having been an historical event. In the last two or three centuries the historical sense was born which brought people to submit things to a critical test to ascertain their validity before they would believe them to be facts of the past. This procedure has been applied to the Gospels.

Let us sum up the various stages that the life and teaching of Jesus have passed through before they have reached us.

First stage: Jesus' earthly life. Jesus did not write anything, but in his preaching he used some common expedients of ancient culture which facilitated keeping a text in one's memory: brief phrases, parallels and antitheses, rhythmic repetitions, images, parables. Think of lines from the Gospels like: "The last will be first and the first will be last"; "Wide is the door and broad is the way that leads to perdition ; "Narrow is the gate and hard is the way that leads to life" (Matthew 7:13-14).

Phrases like these, once heard, would even be difficult for people today to forget. The fact that Jesus himself did not write the Gospels does not mean that the words that they contain are not his. Unable to write words on paper, the men of ancient times wrote them on the mind.

Second stage: the oral preaching of the apostles. After the resurrection, the apostles immediately began to proclaim to all the life and words of Christ, taking account of the needs and the circumstances of the different listeners. Their purpose was not to do history but to bring people to faith. With the clearer understanding that they now had, they were able to transmit to others that which Jesus said and did, adapting it to the needs of those to whom they turned.

Third stage: the written gospels. About 30 years after Jesus' death, some authors began to write down this

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preaching that had come to them orally. The four Gospels that we know were born in this way. Of the many things that had come down to them, the evangelists selected some, they summarized others, and others they explained to adapt them to the needs that the communities for whom they were writing had at the moment. The need to adapt Jesus' words to new and diverse demands influenced the order in which the facts are recounted in the four Gospels, as well as their coloration and importance, but they did not otherwise alter their fundamental truth.

That the evangelists had, insofar as it was possible at the time, a historical concern and not only a concern with edification, is demonstrated by the precision with which they situate the event of Christ in time and place. A little further on, Luke furnishes us with all the political and geographical coordinates of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry (cf. Luke 3:1-2).

In conclusion, the Gospels are not historical books in the modern sense of detached and neutral accounts of facts. They are historical, rather, in the sense that what they transmit reflects the substance of what happened. But the argument most in favor of the fundamental historical truth of the Gospels is that which we experience inside ourselves every time we are profoundly touched by the word of Christ. What other word, ancient or new, ever had the same power?

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