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Father Cantalamessa on Fish and Sheep

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, FEB. 2, 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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Fishers of men
Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Isaiah 6:1-2a,3-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Luke 5:1-11

The miraculous catch was the proof that convinced a fisherman like Simon Peter.

After they returned to shore he fell down at Jesus' feet saying, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." But Jesus answered him with these words that represent the culmination of the story, and the reason for which it was recorded: "Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be a fisher of men."

Jesus uses two images to illustrate the task of his co-workers: fishermen and shepherds.

For fear that modern man find these images little respectful of his dignity and reject them, let us explain their meaning. Today no one likes to be "fished for" by another, or be a sheep in a flock.

The first observation that should be made is this: Ordinarily in fishing the fisherman is after his own good and not that of the fish. The same goes for the shepherd. He shepherds and cares for his flock not for the good of the flock, but for his own good because the flock furnishes him with milk, wool and food.

In the Gospel we find just the opposite: the fisherman who serves the fish; the shepherd who sacrifices for the sheep to the point of giving his life for them. When we talk about men being "fished" for it is not a disgrace, but salvation.

Imagine people who find themselves cast upon the waves in the high seas after a shipwreck, at night, in the cold; seeing a rope or a lifeboat lowered for them is not humiliation, but their supreme hope. This is how we must understand the work of fishers of men: They are like those who lower a lifeboat into the sea, often in the midst of a storm, for those who are in danger of their lives.

But the difficulty which I noted reappears in another form. Let's say that we do need shepherds and fishermen. Why is it that some should have the role of fishermen and others of fish, and some that of shepherds and others that of sheep and flock. The relationship between fisherman and fish, as that between shepherd and sheep, suggests the idea of inequality, of superiority. No one likes being just a number in the flock and recognizing a shepherd over him.

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Here we need to rid ourselves of a certain prejudice. In the Church no one is only a fisherman or only a shepherd, and no one is only a fish or a sheep. We are all, in different ways, all at the same time. Christ is the only one who is simply a fisherman and simply a shepherd.

Before becoming a fisher of men Peter himself was fished for and fished for again, many times. He was, literally, fished for when, walking on the waves, he was overcome with fear and was on the point of sinking; he was fished for again, above all, after his betrayal of Jesus. He had to experience what it meant to be a "lost sheep" so that he could learn what it meant to be a good shepherd; he had to be fished out of the depths of the abyss into which he had fallen in order to learn what it meant to be a fisher of men.

If, in a different way, all the baptized are both fished for and fishermen themselves, then here there opens up a large field of action for the laity. We priests are better prepared to be shepherds than we are to be fishermen. We find it easier to nourish with the word and the sacraments the people who spontaneously come to church than we do going out to look for those who have strayed and are far away. The role of the fisherman remains in large part to be discovered. The laity, because of their direct insertion in society, are irreplaceable co-workers in this task.

Once the nets were lowered at Jesus' word, Peter and the others who were with him in the boat caught such a quantity of fish that the nets broke. Then the evangelist writes that "they beckoned to their partners in the other boat to come and help them." Even today the successor of Peter and those who are with him in the boat -- the bishops and priests -- beckon to those in the other boat -- the laity -- to come and help them.

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