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Father Cantalamessa on the Duty to Love

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on This Sunday's Gospel

ROME, MAY 19, 2006 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of a commentary by Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa on this Sunday's Gospel reading. He is the preacher to the Pontifical Household.

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To "Have" to Love

"This is my commandment: That you love one another as I have loved you. ... What I command you is that you love one another."

Love is a commandment? Can love be made a commandment without destroying it? What relationship can there be between love and duty, given that one represents spontaneity and the other obligation?

We must know that two types of commandments exist. There is a commandment or obligation that comes from outside, from a will other than my own, and a commandment or obligation that comes from within, which is born from the thing itself. The stone thrown into the air or the apple that falls from the tree is "obliged" to fall, it cannot do anything else, not because it is imposed on it, but because there is an inner force of gravity that attracts it to the center of the earth.

In the same way, there are two great ways according to which man can be induced to do or not do something: by constriction or by attraction. The law and ordinary commandments induce him the first way: by constriction, with the threat of punishment. Love induces him the second way: by attraction, by an interior impulse.

Each one, in fact, is attracted by what he loves, without suffering any constriction from outside. Show a child a toy and you will see him try to take it. Who pushes him? No one, he is attracted by the object of his desire. Show a good to a soul thirsting for truth and it will go out to it. Who pushes it? No one; it is attracted by its desire.

But if it is so -- that is, that we are spontaneously attracted by goodness and truth which is God, what need is there, one might ask, to make this love a commandment and a duty? The fact is that we are surrounded by other goods and run the risk of missing the target, of tending to false goods and thus losing the supreme good.

As a spaceship going to the sun must follow certain rules so as not to fall into the sphere of gravity of an intermediary planet or satellite, the same is true for us in our tending to God. The Commandments, beginning with "the first and greatest of all," which is to love God, serves this purpose.

All this has a direct impact on human life and also on human love. There are increasingly numerous young people who reject the institution of marriage and choose so-called free love, or simply living together.

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Marriage is an institution; once contracted, it obliges one to be faithful and to love one's partner for life. But, what need is there to transform love, which is instinct, spontaneity, vital impulse, into a duty?

The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard gives a convincing answer: "Only when there is a duty to love, is love guaranteed forever against any alteration; eternally liberated in happy independence; assured in eternal bliss against all despair."

He means: The man who truly loves, wants to love forever. Love needs to have eternity as its horizon; otherwise it is no more than a game, a "kind misunderstanding" or a "dangerous pastime."

That is why, the more intensely we love, the more we perceive with anguish the danger in loving, a danger that does not come from others, but from ourselves. We know that love is variable, and that tomorrow, alas, we might get tired and not love any more. And, now that we are in love, we see with clarity the irreparable loss that that would imply, and here we take the precaution of "binding" ourselves to love forever.

Duty removes love from variability and anchors it in eternity. One who loves is happy to "have" to love; it seems to him to be the most beautiful and liberating commandment in the world.

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