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Father Cantalamessa on Witness

Pontifical Household Preacher Comments on Sunday's Readings

ROME, MAY 18, 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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You Will Be My Witnesses

Ascension of the Lord

Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Luke 24:46-53

If we do not want the Ascension to be a sad "farewell," but rather a true feast, then we must understand the radical difference between a disappearance and a departure. With the ascension, Jesus has not departed, he has not become absent; he has only disappeared from our sight. Those who leave are no longer here; those who only go out of our sight, however, can still be near us -- it is only that something prevents our seeing them. Jesus does disappear from the apostles' sight at the ascension but he does so to be present in another more intimate way.

He is no longer outside them but within them. This is similar to the Eucharist. So long as the host is outside of us we see it, we adore it; when we receive the host we no longer see it, it has disappeared, but it has disappeared to be within us. It is present in a new, more powerful way.

But it will be asked: If Jesus is no longer visible, how will men come to know of his presence? The answer is that he wants to make himself present through his disciples! In his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, the Evangelist Luke closely links the Ascension with the theme of testimony: "You are witnesses of these things" (Luke 24:48).

The "you" indicates in the first place the apostles who were with Jesus. After the apostles, this "official" testimony -- official because it is connected to their office -- passes to their successors, the bishops and priests. But the "you" also regards all the baptized and believers in Christ. "Each individual layman," says a document of the Second Vatican Council, "must stand before the world as a witness to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus and a symbol of the living God" ("Lumen Gentium," 38).

Pope Paul VI has famously said that "the world needs witnesses more than it needs teachers." It is relatively easy to be a teacher. It is much less easy to be a witness. In fact, the world is full of both true and false teachers, but has few witnesses. Between the two roles there is the same difference as that between saying and doing. "Actions," an English proverb says, "speak louder than words."

The witness is one who speaks with his life. A believing father and mother must be "the first witnesses of faith" for their children. (The Church asks this for them from God in the blessing that follows the rite of matrimony).

Let us give a specific example. At this time of year many children are preparing for first Communion and confirmation. A believing mother or father can help the child review the catechism, explain the meaning of the words to him, and help him memorize the responses. Such parents are doing a beautiful thing and if only there were more who did this!

But what would a child think if after all that his parents said and did for his first Communion, they never go to Mass on Sunday, they never make the sign of the cross and never pray? They have been teachers, but they haven't been witnesses.

Naturally, the testimony of the parents must not limit itself to the time of the first Communion or confirmation of their children. With the way they correct and forgive the child and forgive each other, with the way they speak with respect of those who are not present, with the way they conduct themselves before a poor person begging for alms, with the comments they make in the presence of the children when they are listening to the news, parents have the possibility of bearing witness to their faith every day.

The souls of children are like sheets of photographic film: Everything they see and hear in the years of childhood leaves a trace and one day the "film" will be "developed" and will bear its fruits -- for good or for bad.

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