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Father Cantalamessa on Christmas

Pontifical Household Preacher on Sunday's Gospel

ROME, DEC. 24, 2006 ([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 the liturgy of Christmas.

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Why did God become man?

Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-16; John 1:1-18

Let us go right to the apex of the prologue of John's Gospel, which is read at the third Mass on Christmas day.

In the Credo there is a line that on this day we recite on our knees: "For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven." This is the fundamental and perennially valid answer to the question -- "Why did the word become flesh?" -- but it needs to be understood and integrated.

The question put another way is in fact: "Why did he become man 'for our salvation?'" Only because we had sinned and needed to be saved?

There is a vein of the theology inaugurated by Blessed Duns Scotus, a Franciscan theologian, which loosens a too exclusive connection to man's sin and regards God's glory as the primary reason for the Incarnation. "God decreed the incarnation of his Son in order to have someone outside of him who loved him in the highest way, in a way worthy of God."

This answer, though beautiful, is still not the definitive one. For the Bible the most important thing is not, as it was for Greek philosophers, that God be loved, but that God "loves" and loved first (cf. 1 John 4:10, 19). God willed the incarnation of the Son not so much as to have someone outside the Trinity that would love him worthily as to have someone to love in a way worthy of him, that is, to love without measure!

At Christmas, when the child Jesus is born, God the Father has someone to love in an infinite way because Jesus is together man and God. But not only Jesus, but us together with him. We are included in this love, having become members of the body of Christ, "sons in the Son." John's prologue reminds of this: "To those who welcomed him he gave the power to become sons of God."

Therefore, Christ did descend from heaven "for our salvation," but what moved him to come down for our salvation was love, nothing else but love.

Christmas is the supreme proof of God's "philanthropy," as Scripture calls it (Titus 3:4), that is, of God's love (philea) for man (anthropos). John too responds to the why of the Incarnation in this way: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever should believe in him would not die but have life everlasting" (John 3:16).

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So, what should be our response to the message of Christmas? The Christmas carol "Adeste Fideles" says: "How can we not love one who has so loved us?"

There is much that we can do to solemnize Christmas, but the truest and most profound thing is suggested to us by these words. A sincere thought of gratitude, a feeling of love for him who came to live among us is the best gift we can give to the child Jesus, the most beautiful ornament in the manger.

To be sincere, however, love needs to be translated into concrete gestures. The simplest and most universal -- when it is pure and innocent -- is the kiss.

Let us kiss Jesus, then, as we desire to kiss all children just born. But let us not just kiss the statue of plaster or porcelain but the child Jesus in flesh and blood. When we have kissed those who are wretched, suffering, we have kissed him!

To kiss someone, in this sense, is to help in a real way, but it is also to speak a good word, to give encouragement, to pay a visit, to smile, and sometimes -- why not -- to give an actual kiss. These are the most beautiful candles that we can light in our manger.

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