

"The Two Faces of Love: Eros and Agape"

Fr Cantalamessa's Lenten homilies

To Benedict XVI, 2011

Father Cantalamessa's 1st Lenten Sermon

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1. The Two Faces of Love

With the homilies of this Lent I would like to continue in the same vein that I began in Advent, to make a small contribution vis-à-vis the reevangelization of the secularized West, which at this moment is the main concern of the whole Church and in particular of the Holy Father Benedict XVI.

There is a realm in which secularization acts in a particularly pervasive and negative way, and it is the realm of love. The secularization of love consists in detaching human love in all its forms from God, reducing it to something purely "profane," in which God is out of place and even an annoyance.

However, the subject of love is not important just for evangelization, that is, in relation with the world; it is also important first of all for the internal life of the Church, for the sanctification of her members. It is the perspective in which the Holy Father Benedict XVI's encyclical "Deus Caritas Est" is placed and in which we also place ourselves in these reflections.

Love suffers from ill-fated separation not only in the mentality of the secularized world, but also in that of the opposite side, among believers and in particular among consecrated souls. Simplifying the situation to the greatest extent, we can articulate it thus: In the world we find eros without agape; among believers we often find agape without eros.

Eros without agape is a romantic love, very often passionate to the point of violence. A love of conquest which fatally reduces the other to an object of one's pleasure and ignores every dimension of sacrifice, of fidelity and of gift of self. There is no need to insist on the description of this love because it is a reality that we see daily with our own eyes, propagated as it is in a hammering way by novels, films, television fiction, the Internet, the Gossip magazines. It is what common language understands, moreover, by the word "love."

It is more useful for us to understand what is meant by agape without eros. In music there is a distinction that can help us to form an idea -- the difference between hot and cool jazz. I read somewhere about this characterization of two kinds of jazz, although I know it is not the only one possible. Hot jazz is passionate, ardent, expressive jazz, made of outbursts, feelings, and hence of runs and original improvisations. Cool jazz is that which one has when one passes to professionalism: feelings become repetitive, inspiration is replaced by technique, spontaneity by virtuosity.

This distinction having been made, agape without eros seems to us a "cold love," a loving "with the tip of the hairs" without the participation of the whole being, more by imposition of the will than by an intimate outburst of the heart, a descent into a pre-constituted mold, rather than to create for oneself something unrepeatable, as unrepeatable is every human being before God. The acts of love addressed to God are like those of certain poor lovers who write to the beloved letters copied from a handbook.

If worldly love is a body without a soul, religious love practiced that way is a soul without a body. The human being is not an angel, that is, a pure spirit; he is soul and body substantially united: everything he does, including loving, must reflect this structure. If the component linked to affectivity and the heart is systematically denied or repressed, the result will be double: either one goes on in a tired way, out of a sense of duty, to defend one's image, or more or less licit compensations are sought, to the point of the very painful cases that are afflicting the Church. It cannot be ignored that at the root of many moral deviations of consecrated souls there is a distorted and contorted conception of love.

We have therefore a double motive and a double urgency to rediscover love in its original unity. True and integral love is a pearl enclosed within two valves, which are eros and agape. These two dimensions of love cannot be separated without destroying it, as hydrogen and oxygen cannot be separated without depriving oneself of water.

2. The Thesis of Incompatibility Between the Two Loves

The most important reconciliation between the two dimensions of love is the practice that happens in the life of persons, but precisely for it to be rendered possible it is necessary to begin by reconciling eros and agape also theoretically, in the doctrine. This will enable us among other things to know finally what is intended with these two terms that are so often used and misunderstood.

The importance of the question stems from the fact that a work exists which has made popular in the whole Christian world the opposite thesis of the irreconcilability of the two ways of love. It is the book of the Swedish Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren, entitled "Eros and Agape." [1] We can summarize his thought in these terms. Eros and agape designate two opposite movements: the first indicates the ascent of man to God and to the divine as to one's good and one's origin; the other, agape, indicates God's descent to man with the Incarnation and the Cross of Christ, and hence the salvation offered to man without merit and without a response on his part, which is not faith alone. The New Testament has made a precise choice, using the term agape to express love and systematically rejecting the term eros.

St. Paul is the one who with the greatest purity formulated this doctrine of love. After him, always according to Nygren's thesis, such radical antithesis was lost almost immediately to give way to attempts of synthesis. No sooner Christianity entered into cultural contact with the Greek world and the Platonic view, already with Origen, there was a re-evaluation of eros, as ascensional movement of the soul toward the good, as universal attraction exercised by beauty and the divine. In this line, Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite would write that "God is eros," [2] substituting this term for that of agape in the famous phrase of John (1 John 4:10)

In the West a similar synthesis was made by Augustine with his doctrine of *caritas* understood as doctrine of descending and gratuitous love of God for man (no one has spoken of "grace" in a stronger way than he!), but also as man's longing for the good and for God. His is the affirmation: "Thou hast made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee" [3]; his also is the image of love as a weight that draws the soul, as by the force of gravity, toward God, as the place of one's repose and pleasure. [4] All this, for Nygren, inserts an element of love of self, of one's own good, hence of egoism, which destroys the pure gratuitousness of grace; it is a falling again into the pagan illusion of making salvation consist of an ascent to God, instead of the gratuitous and unmotivated descent of God toward us.

For Nygren, prisoners of this impossible synthesis between eros and agape, between love of God and love of self, include St. Bernard, when he defines the supreme degree of the love of God as a "loving God for himself" and a "loving oneself for God" [5]; St. Bonaventure with his ascensional "Journey of the Soul to God"; and St. Thomas Aquinas who defines the love of God poured out in the heart of the baptized (cf. Romans 5:5) as "the love with which God loves us and with which he makes us love him" ("amor quo ipse nos diligit et quo ipse nos dilectores sui facit"). [6]

This in fact would mean that man, loved by God, can in turn love God, give him something of his own, which would destroy the absolute gratuitousness of the love of God. On the existential plane the same deviation, according to Nygren, is had in Catholic mysticism. The love of mystics, with its very strong charge of eros, is, for him, nothing other than a sublimated sensual love, an attempt to establish with God a relationship of presumptuous reciprocity in love.

The one who broke the ambiguity and brought to light the clear Pauline antithesis was, according to the author, Luther. Basing justification on faith alone he did not exclude charity from the founding moment of Christian life, as Catholic theology reproaches him; he has rather liberated charity -- agape -- from the spurious element of eros. To the formula of "faith alone," with the exclusion of works, would correspond, in Luther, the formula of "agape alone," with the exclusion of eros.

It is not for me to establish here if the author has interpreted correctly on this point Luther's thought who -- it must be said -- never posed the problem in terms of opposition between eros and agape, as he did instead between faith and works. Significant, however, is the fact that Karl Barth also, in a chapter of his "Ecclesial Dogmatics," arrives at the same result as Nygren of an unreconcilable opposition between eros and agape: "When Christian love comes on the scene," he writes, "the

conflict immediately begins with the other love and this conflict has no end." [7] I say that if this is not Lutheranism, it is however certainly dialectical theology, theology of the "aut - aut," of antithesis at any cost.

The repercussion of this operation is the radical worldliness and secularization of eros. While in fact a certain theology was busy expelling eros from agape, secular culture was very happy, for its part, to expel agape from eros, namely every reference to God and to the grace of human love. Freud furnished this with a theoretic justification, reducing love to eros and eros to libido, to pure sexual drive which fights against any repression and inhibition. It is the state to which love has been reduced today in many manifestations of life and culture, especially in the world of entertainment.

Two years ago I was in Madrid. The newspapers did no more than speak of a certain art exhibition taking place in the city, entitled "The Tears of Eros." It was an exhibition of artistic works of an erotic nature -- pictures, designs, sculptures -- which intended to bring to light the indissoluble bond that there is, in the experience of modern man, between eros and thanatos, between love and death. One comes to the same observation, reading the collection of poems "The Flowers of Evil of Baudelaire" or "A Season in Hell" of Rimbaud. Love which by its nature should lead to life, leads now instead to death.

3. Return to the Synthesis

If we cannot change with one strike the idea of love that the world has, we can however correct the theological vision that, unwittingly, fosters and legitimizes it. It is what the Holy Father Benedict XVI has done in an exemplary way with the encyclical "Deus Caritas Est." He reaffirms the traditional Catholic synthesis expressing it in modern terms. "Eros and agape," one reads there, "ascending love and descending love -- do not ever allow themselves be separated completely from one another [...] Biblical faith does not construct a parallel world or an opposite world in regard to that original human phenomenon which is love, but it accepts the whole man intervening in his search for love to purify it, revealing to him at the same time new dimensions" (Nos. 7-8). Eros and agape are united to the source itself of love which is God: "He loves," continues the text of the encyclical, "and this love of his can be qualified without a doubt as eros, which however is also and totally agape" (No. 9).

One can understand the favorable reception that this papal document had also in the more open and responsible secular environments. It gives hope to the world. It corrects the image of a faith that touches the world tangentially, without penetrating in it, with the evangelical image of the leaven that makes the dough ferment; it replaces the idea of a kingdom of God come to "judge" the world, with that of a kingdom of God come to "save" the world, beginning from the eros which is the dominant force.

To the traditional vision, whether of Catholic or Orthodox theology, one can contribute, I believe, a confirmation also from the point of view of exegesis. Those who hold the thesis of the incompatibility between eros and agape base themselves on the fact that the New Testament carefully avoids the term eros, using in its place always and only agape (apart from a rare use of the term philia, which indicates the love of friendship).

The fact is true, but the conclusions drawn from it are not. One supposes that the authors of the New Testament knew both, the meaning that the term eros had in common language -- the so-called "vulgar" eros -- and the lofty and philosophical meaning it had, for example, in Plato, the so-called "noble" eros. In the popular meaning, eros indicated more or less what is indicated also today when one speaks of eroticism or of erotic films, namely, satisfaction of the sexual instinct, a degrading of oneself rather than a raising of oneself. In the noble meaning it indicated love of beauty, the force that holds the world together and pushes all beings to unity, namely, that movement of ascent towards the divine that dialectical theologians hold incompatible with the movement of descent of the divine towards man.

It is difficult to maintain that the authors of the New Testament, addressing simple people without any education, intended to put them on guard in regard to Plato's eros. They avoided the term eros for the same reason that today a preacher avoids the term erotic or, if he uses it, does so only in a negative sense. The reason is that, now as then, the word evokes love in its most egotistical and sexual sense. [8] The suspicion of early Christians in comparisons of eros was ultimately aggravated by the role that it had in the orgiastic Dionysian cults.

No sooner Christianity entered into contact and dialogue with the Greek culture of the time, every preclusion fell immediately, we have already seen, in comparisons of the eros. It was used often, in Greek authors, as synonym of agape and was employed to indicate the love of God for man, as well as the love of man for God, love for the virtues and for every beautiful thing. Moreover, to be convinced suffice it to give a simple look at Lampe's "Greek Patristic Lexicon. [9] Nygren's and Barth's system hence is constructed on a false application of the so-called argument "ex silentio."

4. An Eros for the Consecrated

The rescue of eros helps first of all human couples in love and Christian spouses, showing the beauty and dignity of the love that unites them. It helps young people to experience the fascination of the other sex not as something torbid, to be lived taking cover from God, but on the contrary as a gift of the Creator for their joy, if lived in the order willed by Him. To this positive function of eros on human love the Pope also makes reference in his encyclical, when he speaks of the path of purification of eros, which leads from momentary attraction to the "forever" of marriage (Nos. 4-5).

However, the rescue of eros should also help us, consecrated men and women. I made reference at the beginning to the danger that religious souls run, which is that of a cold love, which does not descend from the mind to the heart, much like a winter sun that shines but does not give warmth. If eros means impulse, desire, attraction, we must not be afraid of feelings, much less so scorn and repress them. When it is a question of the love of God," wrote William of St. Thierry, "the feeling of affection (affectio) is also a grace; it is not in fact nature which can infuse in us such a feeling." [10]

The psalms are full of this longing of the heart for God: "To you, Lord, I raise my soul," and "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God." "Pay attention then," says the author of the "Cloud of Unknowing," "to this wonderful work of grace in your soul. It is nothing other than a sudden impulse that arises without any warning and points directly to God, as a spark given off from the fire ... It strikes this cloud of unknowing with the sharp arrow of the desire of love; do not move from there, no matter what happens." [11] Enough to do so is a thought, a motion of the heart, a short prayer.

However, all this is not enough for us and God knows it better than us. We are creatures, we live in time and in a body; we are in need of a screen on which to project our love which is not only "the cloud of unknowing," namely, the veil of darkness behind which God hides himself.

We know well the answer given to this problem: precisely for this reason God has given us our neighbor to love! "No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us ... He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:12-20). However, we must be careful not to omit a decisive fact. Before the brother that we see there is another that we also see and touch: It is the God made flesh; it is Jesus Christ! Between God and our neighbor there is now the Word made flesh who has reunited the two extremes in one person. It is in Him, moreover, that love of neighbor itself finds its foundation: "You did it to me."

What does all this mean for the love of God? That the primary object of our eros, of our search, desire, attraction, passion must be Christ. "Pre-ordained to the Savior is human love since the beginning, as its model and end, almost as a casket so large and wide as to be able to receive God [...]. The desire of the soul goes only to Christ. Here is the place of its rest, because he alone is the good, the truth and all that which inspires love." [12]

This does not mean to reduce the horizon of Christian love from God to Christ; it means to love God in the way He wishes to be loved. "The Father himself loves you, because you have loved me" (John 16:27). It is not a question of a mediated love, almost by proxy, by which whoever loves Jesus "is as if" he loved the Father. No, Jesus is an immediate mediator, loving him one loves, ipso facto, also the Father. "He who sees me, sees the Father," who loves me loves the Father.

It is true that not even Christ is seen, but he exists; he is risen, he is alive, he is close to us, more truly than the most enamored husband is close to his wife. Here is the crucial point: to think of Christ not as a person of the past, but as the risen and living Lord, with whom I can speak, whom I can even kiss if I so wish, certain that my kiss does not end on the paper or on the wood of a crucifix, but on a face and on the lips of living flesh (even though spiritualized), happy to receive my kiss.

The beauty and fullness of consecrated life depends on the quality of our love for Christ. Only this is able to defend our heart from going off the rails. Jesus is the perfect man; in him are found, to an infinitely higher degree, all those qualities and attentions that a man seeks in a woman and a woman in a man, a friend in a friend. His love does not subtract us necessarily from the call of creatures and in particular from the attraction of the other sex (this is part of our nature that he has created and does not wish to destroy); he gives us, however, the strength to overcome these attractions with a much stronger attraction. "The chaste one," writes St. John Climacus, "is he who drives out eros with Eros." [13]

Does all this destroy, perhaps, the gratuitousness of agape, pretending to give God something in return for his love? Does it cancel grace? Not at all, rather it exalts it. What in fact do we give God in this way if not what we have received from him? "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). The love we give to Christ is his same love for us that we return to him, as the echo does the voice.

Where, then, is the novelty and the beauty of this love that we call eros? The echo returns to God his own love but enriched, colored and perfumed by our liberty and gratitude. And it is all that he wishes. Our liberty pays him back for everything. And not only that, writes Cabasilas, "receiving from us the gift of love in exchange for all that he has given us, he holds himself our debtor." [14] The thesis that opposes eros and agape is based on another well-known opposition, that between grace and liberty, and even on the negation itself of the freedom of fallen man (on the "servant will").

I tried to imagine, venerable fathers and brothers, what the Risen Jesus would say now if, as he did in his earthly life when he entered on the Sabbath into a synagogue, he came to sit here in my place and explained to us in person what the love is that he desires from us. I want to share with you, with simplicity, what I think he would say to us; it will serve to make our examination of conscience on love:

Ardent love:

Is to put Me always in the first place;
Is to seek to please Me at every moment;
Is to live before Me as friend, confidant, spouse and to be happy;

Is to be troubled if you think you are far from Me;
Is to be full of happiness when I am with you;
Is to be willing to undergo great sacrifices so as not to lose Me;

Is to prefer to live poor and unknown with Me, rather than rich and famous without Me;
Is to speak to Me as your dearest friend in every possible moment;
Is to entrust yourself to Me in regard to your future;
Is to desire to lose yourself in Me as end of your existence.

If it seems to you, as it does to me, that you are very far from this aim, we must not be discouraged. We have one who can help us reach it if we ask him. Let us repeat with faith to the Holy Spirit: "Veni, Sancte Spiritus, reple tuorum corda fidelium et tui amoris in eis ignem accende" (Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of thy faithful, and enkindle in them the fire of Thy love).

NOTES

[1] Original Swedish version, Stockholm 1930, trans. Ital. "Eros e Agape: The Christian Notion of Love and Its Transformations, Bologna," Il Mulino, 1971.

[2] Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *I Nomi Divini*, IV, 12 (PG, 3, 709 ff.).

[3] St. Augustine, *Confessiones*, I, 1.

[4] *Commento al vangelo di Giovanni*, 26, 4-5.

[5] Cf. St. Bernard, *De diligendo Deo*, IX, 26 -- X, 27.

[6] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commento alla Lettera ai Romani*, chapter V, lesson 2, n. 392-293; cf. St. Augustine, *Commento alla Prima Lettera di Giovanni*, 9, 9.

[7] K. Barth, *Dommatica ecclesiale*, IV, 2, 832-852; trans. Ital. K. Barth, *Dommatica ecclesiale*, Anthology by H. Gollwitzer, Bologna, Il Mulino 1968, pp. 199-225.

[8] The meaning given by the early Christians to the word *eros* is deduced clearly from the known text of St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Lettera ai Romani*, 7, 2: "My love (*eros*) was crucified and there is not in me a fire of passion ... I am not attracted by the nutriment of corruption and the pleasures of this life." "My *eros*" does not indicate here Jesus crucified, but "love of myself," attachment to earthly pleasures, in the line of the Pauline "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live" (Galatians 2:20 f.).

[9] Cf. G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford 1961, pp. 550.

[10] William of St. Thierry, *Meditazioni*, XII, 29 (SCh 324, p. 210).

[11] Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, published by Ancora, Milan, 1981, pp. 1356.140.

[12] N. Cabasilas, *Vita in Cristo*, II, 9 (PG 88, 560-561).

[13] St. John Climacus, *La scala del paradiso*, XV, 98 (PG 88, 880).

[14] N. Cabasilas, *Vita in Cristo*, VI, 4.

Father Cantalamessa's 2nd Lenten Homily "God Is Love"

APRIL 1, 2011

The first and essential proclamation that the Church is charged to take to the world and that the world awaits from the Church is that of the love of God. However, for the evangelizers to be able to transmit this certainty, it is necessary that they themselves be profoundly permeated by it, that it be the light of their life. The present meditation should serve this purpose at least in a small part.??

The expression "love of God" has two very different meanings: one in which God is object and the other in which God is subject; one which indicates our love for God and the other which indicates God's love for us. The human person, who is more inclined to be active than passive, to be a creditor rather than a debtor, has always given precedent to the first meaning, to that which we do for God. Even Christian preaching has followed this line, speaking almost exclusively in certain epochs of the "duty" to love God ("De Deo diligere").

However, biblical revelation gives precedence to the second meaning: to the love "of" God, not to the love "for" God. Aristotle said that God moves the world "in so far as he is loved," that is, in so far as he is object of love and final cause of all creatures.[1] But the Bible says exactly the contrary, namely, that God creates and moves the world in as much as he loves the world.??

The most important thing, in speaking of the love of God, is not, therefore, that man loves God, but that God loves man and that he loved him "first": "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us" (1 John 4:10). From this all the rest depends, including our own possibility of loving God: "We love, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).??

1. The Love of God in Eternity??

John is the man of great leaps. In reconstructing the earthy history of Christ, the others paused on the birth from Mary, but John makes the great leap back, from time to eternity: "In the beginning was the Word." He does the same in regard to love. All the others, including Paul, spoke of the love of God manifesting itself in history and culminating in the death of Christ. He goes back beyond history. He does not present to us only a God that loves, but a God who is love. "In the beginning was love, love

was with God and love was God": thus we are able to solve his affirmation: "God is love" (1 John 4:10).??

Of this statement Augustine has written: "If there was not in all this Letter and in all the pages of Scripture, any praise of love outside of this sole word, namely that God is love, we should not ask for more." [2] The whole Bible does no more than "narrate the love of God." [3] This is the news that supports and explains all the others. Discussed "ad infinitum," and not just today, is the question of whether or not God exists. I believe, however, that the most important thing to know is not of God's existence, but rather of his love. [4] If, by way of hypothesis, he existed but was not love, we would have more to fear than to rejoice over his existence, as in fact happened with several populations and civilizations. Christian faith assures precisely about this: God exists and he is love!??

The point of departure of our journey is the Trinity. Why do Christians believe in the Trinity? The answer is because they believe that God is love. Where God is conceived as supreme Law or supreme Power there is evidently no need of a plurality of persons and that is why the Trinity is not understood. Law and Power can be exercised by only one person, but not love.??

There is no love that is not love for something or someone, as philosopher Husserl says, there is no knowledge that is not knowledge of something. Who does God love to be defined as love? Humanity? But men have only existed for millions of years; before that time what did God love to be defined love? He could not have begun to be love at a certain point in time, because God cannot change his essence. The cosmos? But the universe has existed for some billions of years; before that time what did God love to be defined love? We cannot say: He loved himself, because to love oneself is not love, but egoism or, as psychologists say, narcissism.??

And here is the answer of Christian revelation that the Church received from Christ and has made explicit in her Creed. God is love in himself, before time, because he has always had in himself the Son, the Word, whom he loves with an infinite love which is the Holy Spirit. In every love there are always three realities or subjects: one who loves, one who is loved, and the love that unites them.??

2. The Love of God in Creation??

When this eternal love is spread in time, we have the history of salvation. The first stage of it is creation. Love is, by nature, "diffusivum sui," it tends to communicate itself. Just as "action follows being," being love, God creates out of love. "Why has God created us?" Read the second question of the old catechism, and the answer was: "To know him, to love him and to serve him in this life and to be happy with him in the next in paradise." Irreprehensible answer, but partial. It responds to the question on the final cause: "for what purpose, for what end has God created us"; it does not respond to the question on the causing cause: "why has he created us, what drove him to create us." One must not respond to this question: "so that we would love him," but "because he loved us."

According to rabbinic theology, endorsed by the Holy Father in his recent book on Jesus, "The cosmos was created, not that there might be manifold things in heaven and earth, but that there might be a space for the 'covenant,' for the loving 'yes' between God and his human respondent" [5]. Creation is ordained to the dialogue of the love of God for his creatures.

How far on this point is the Christian vision of the universe from that of atheist scientism recalled in Advent! One of the most profound sufferings for a young man or a girl is to discover that they are in the world by chance, not wanted, not awaited, perhaps by a mistake of their parents. A certain atheist scientism seems determined to inflict this type of suffering on the whole of humanity. No one would be able to convince us of the fact that we were created out of love better than the way Catherine of Siena does in one of her enflamed prayers to the Trinity: "How, then, did you create, O Eternal Father, this your creature? [...] Fire constrained you. O ineffable love, even though in your light you saw all the iniquities, which your creature would commit against your infinite goodness, you looked as if you did not see, but rested your sight on the beauty of your creature, whom you, as mad and drunk with love, fell in love with and out of love you drew her to yourself giving her being in your image and likeness. You, eternal truth, have declared to me your truth, that is, that loved constrained you to create her."??

This is not only agape, love of mercy, of donation and of descent; it is also eros in the pure state; it is attraction to the object of one's love, esteem and fascination with its beauty.??

3. The Love of God in Revelation??

The second stage of the love of God is revelation, the Scriptures. God speaks to us of his love above all in the prophets. In Hosea he says: "[w]hen Israel was a child, I loved him [...]" "it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms [...]" "I led them with cords of compassion, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them [...]" "How can I give you up, O Ephraim? [...]" "My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender." (Hosea 11:1-4).??

We find this same language in Isaiah: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?" (Isaiah 49:15) and in Jeremiah: "Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him" (Jeremiah 31:20).??

In these oracles, the love of God is expressed contemporaneously as paternal and maternal love. Paternal love is made of stimulus and solicitude; the father wants to make his son grow up and to lead him to full maturity. That is why he corrects him and does not praise him in his presence, out of fear that he should believe he has arrived or that he will no longer make progress. Maternal love instead is made of acceptance and tenderness; it is a "visceral" love; it comes from the profound fibers of the mother's being, where the child was formed, and from there grips the whole of her person, making her "tremble with compassion."??

In the human realm, these two types of love -- virile and maternal -- are always, more or less clearly distributed. The philosopher Seneca said: "[d]on't you see how different is the manner of loving of fathers and mothers? The fathers wake their children early so that they will start to study, they are not allowed to be lazy and they make them pour out sweat and at times even tears. The mothers, instead, put them on their lap and hold them close to themselves, avoid opposing them, or making them cry or tiring them." [6] However, whereas the God of the pagan philosopher has toward men only "the spirit of a father who loves without weakness" (these are his words), the biblical God also has the spirit of a mother who loves "with weakness."??

Man knows by experience another type of love, that love of which it is said that it is "strong as death and that its flames are flames of fire" (cf. Ct 8, 6) and to this type of love God has also taken recourse, in the Bible, to give us an idea of his passionate love for us. All the phases and the vicissitudes of spousal love are evoked and used for this purpose: the enchantment of love in the nascent state of engagement (cf. Jeremiah 2:2); the fullness of the joy of the wedding day (cf. Isaiah 62:5); the tragedy of the break (cf. Hosea 2:4 ff) and finally the rebirth, full of hope, of the former bond (cf. Hosea 2:16; Isaiah 54:8).??

Spousal love is, fundamentally, a love of desire and of choice. If it is true, because of this, that man desires God, the contrary, mysteriously, is also true that God desires man, he wants and esteems his love, he rejoices over it "as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride!" (Isaiah 62: 5).??

As the Holy Father notes in "Deus Caritas Est," the nuptial metaphor that traverses almost the whole Bible and inspires the language of "covenant," is the best proof that God's love for us is also eros and agape, it is to give and to seek together. It cannot be reduced only to mercy, to a "doing charity" to man, in the most reductive sense of the term.??

4. The Love of God in the Incarnation??

Thus we come to the culminating stage of God's love, the Incarnation: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). In face of the Incarnation we ask the same question that was posed for the creation. Why did God become man? Cur Deus homo? For a long time the answer was: to redeem humankind from sin. Duns Scotus deepened this answer, making of love the fundamental reason for the Incarnation, as all the other works ad extra of the Trinity.??

God, says Scotus, first of all, loves himself; in the second place, he wants other beings that love him ("secundo vult alios habere condiligentes"). If he decided on the Incarnation it was so that there would be another being that would love him with the greatest love possible outside of himself. [7] The Incarnation would then have taken place even if Adam had not sinned. Christ is the first one thought

of and the first one willed, the "first born of all creation" (Colossians 1:15), not the solution of a problem intervened immediately with Adam's sin.??

But even Scotus' answer is partial and must be completed on the basis of what Scripture says of the love of God. God willed the Incarnation of the Son, not only to have someone outside of himself who would love him in a way worthy of him, but also and above all to have outside of himself someone to love in a manner worthy of himself. And this is the Son made man, in whom the Father "finds all his delight" and with him all of us are rendered "sons in the Son."??

Christ is the supreme proof of the love of God for man not only in the objective sense, in the manner of a pledge that is given to someone of one's love; he is so also in the subjective sense. In other words, it is not only the proof of the love of God, but it is the love itself of God that has assumed a human form to be able to love and to be loved from within our situation. In the beginning was love and "the love was made flesh," according to an ancient Christian writer, paraphrasing the Prologue of John.[8] ??

St. Paul; coined an apposite expression for this new way of God's love, he calls it "the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:39). If, as we said the last time, all our love for God must now express itself concretely in love for Christ, it is because all love of God for us was first expressed and gathered in Christ.??

5. The Love of God Poured into Hearts??

The history of the love of God does not end with Christ's Easter, but is prolonged in Pentecost which renders present and operative "the love of God in Christ Jesus" until the end of the world. We are not constrained, therefore, to live only from the memory of the love of God, as something of the past. "[G]od's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Romans 5:5).??

But what is this love which has been poured into our hearts in Baptism? Is it a feeling of God for us? A benevolent disposition of His towards us? An inclination? Something, that is, intentional? It is much more than that; it is something real. It is, literally, the love of God, namely the love that circulates in the Trinity between the Father and the Son and that in the Incarnation assumed a human form and in which we now participate in the form of "indwelling." "My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (John 14:23).??

We become "participants in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), that is, participants of divine love. We find ourselves by grace, explains Saint John of the Cross, in the vortex of love that has always taken place in the Trinity between the Father and the Son, [9] better still: in the vortex of love taking place now, between the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ, risen from death, of whom we are the members.??

6. We Have Believed in the Love of God!??

Holy Father, venerable fathers, brothers and sisters, what I have traced poorly is the objective revelation of the love of God in history. Now we come to ourselves: what will we do, what will we say after having heard how much God loves us? A first answer is: to love God in return! Is not this the first and greatest commandment of the law? Yes, but it comes after. Another possible answer: to love one another as God has loved us! Does not the evangelist John say that, if God has loved us "we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11)? This also comes after; first there is something else to do. To believe in the love of God! After having said that "God is love," the evangelist John exclaims: "We believe the love God has for us" (1 John 4:16).??

Hence, faith, but here it is a question of a special faith: faith-astonishment, incredulous faith (a paradox, I know, but true!), a faith that does not know how to equip itself with what it believes, even if it does believe it. How is it possible that God, supremely happy in his quiet eternity, had the desire not only to create us, but also to come in person to suffer among us? How is this possible? Look, this is faith-astonishment, the faith that makes us happy.??

The great convert and apologist of the faith Clive Staples Lewis (the author, said incidentally, of the narrative cycle of Narnia, taken recently to the screen) wrote a singular novel entitled "The Screwtape Letters." They are letters that an old devil writes to a young and inexperienced little devil who is determined to seduce on earth a young Londoner who has just returned to Christian practice. The

purpose is to instruct him on the ways to follow to succeed in his attempt. It is a modern, very fine treatise of morality and asceticism, to be read the opposite way, that is doing exactly the contrary of what is suggested.??

At a certain point the author makes us witness a discussion carried out among the demons. They cannot be persuaded that the Enemy (thus they call God) can really love "the human vermin and desire their liberty." They are sure it cannot be. There must be a fraud, a trick. We are investigating, they say, from the day that "Our Father" (thus they call Lucifer), precisely for this reason, distanced himself from him; we have not discovered it yet, but one day we will. [10] The love of God for his creatures is, for them, the mystery of mysteries. And I believe that, at least on this, the demons are right.??

It would seem to be an easy and pleasant faith; instead it is perhaps the most difficult thing that there is also for us human creatures. Do we really believe that God loves us? Not that we do not believe really or at least that we do not believe enough! If we believed, life, we ourselves, things, events, pain itself, everything would immediately be transfigured before our eyes. This very day we would be with him in paradise, because paradise is but this: to enjoy in fullness the love of God.??

The world has always made it more difficult to believe in love. Whoever has been betrayed and wounded once, is afraid of loving and of being loved, because he knows how terrible it is to find oneself deceived. So much so that the array of those who are unable to believe in the love of God, more than that, in any love is always increasing. Disenchantment and cynicism is the mark of our secularized culture. On the personal plane there is then the experience of our poverty and misery that make us say: "Yes, this love of God is beautiful, but it isn't for me. I am not worthy."??

Men need to know that God loves them and no one better than the disciples of Christ are able to take this good news to them. Others, in the world, share with Christians the fear of God, concern for social justice and respect for man, for peace and tolerance; but no one -- I say no one -- among the philosophers, or among the religions, says to man that God loves him, he loved man first and he loves him with a love of mercy and of desire: with eros and agape.??

St. Paul suggests a method to us to apply to our concrete existence the light of the love of God. He wrote: "[w]ho shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (Romans 8:35-37). The dangers and the enemies of the love of God that he enumerates are those that he had, in fact, experienced in his life: anguish, persecution, the sword (cf. 2 Corinthians 11:23 ff). He reviews them in his mind and says that none of these is so strong as to rule in comparison with the thought of the love of God.??

We are invited to do as he did: to see our life, exactly as it presents itself, to bring to the surface the fears that nest in us, the sadness, the threats, the complexes, the physical or moral defects, the painful memory that humiliates us, and to expose everything to the light of the thought that God loves me. He invites me to ask myself; what in my life attempts to depress me???

From his personal life, the Apostle broadens his gaze to the world around him. "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:37-39). Hence, he observes "his" world, with the powers that rendered it menacing: death with its mystery, the present life with its allurements, the astral powers or the infernal ones which struck so much terror in ancient man.??

We can do the same thing: we can look at the world that surrounds us, which makes us afraid. What Paul calls the "height" and the "depth" are for us now infinitely great on high and infinitely small below, the universe and the atom. Everything is ready to crush us; man is weak and alone, in a universe so much greater than him and become, in addition, even more threatening, following the scientific discoveries that he has made and that he does not succeed in controlling, as is being dramatically demonstrated by the atomic reactors in Fukushima.??

Everything can be questioned, all of our safety measures can fail, but never this: that God loves us and is stronger than everything. "Our help is in the name of the Lord who made heaven and earth."??

NOTES

- [1] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7, 1072b.?
- [2] St. Augustine, *Treatise on the First Letter of John*, 7, 4.?
- [3] St. Augustine, "On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed," I, 8, 4: PL 40, 319.?
- [4] Cf. S. Kierkegaard, "Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits, 3: The Gospel of Suffering," IV.?
- [5] Benedict XVI, "Jesus of Nazareth Part II," Libreria Editrice Vaticana (in Italian), 2011, p. 93.?
- [6] Seneca, "On Providence," 2, 5 f.?
- [7] Duns Scotus, "Opus Oxoniense," I, d. 17, q. 3, n. 31; Rep., II, d. 27, q. un., n. 3.?
- [8] "Evangelium Veritatis" (of the Codes of Nag-Hammadi).?
- [9] Cf. St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle A*, Strophe 38.?
- [10] C.S. Lewis, "The Screwtape Letters," 1942, Chapter XIX.

Father Cantalamessa's 3rd Lenten Homily
"Let Love Be Genuine"

APRIL 8, 2011

1. You shall love your neighbor as yourself

A strange phenomenon has been observed. The river Jordan, as it flows, eventually forms two seas: the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea; but while the Sea of Galilee is teeming with life, and contains some of the most abundant fishing waters on earth, the Dead Sea is exactly that: a "dead" sea, there is no trace of life in it or around it, only saltiness. And yet it is the same water as that of the Jordan. The explanation, at least partially, is this: the Sea of Galilee receives its waters from the Jordan, but it does not keep them to itself, it lets them flow out so that they irrigate the entire Jordan valley.

The Dead Sea receives the waters and retains them for itself, it has no outlets, not a drop of water comes out of it. This is a symbol. To receive love from God, we must give it to our brothers and sisters, and the more we give, the more we receive. This is the subject of our reflections in this meditation. The water that Jesus gives us has to become "a spring inside us, welling up to eternal life" (cf. John 4:14)

Having reflected in the first two meditations on the love of God as gift, the time has now come for us to meditate on the duty to love, in particular, the duty to love our neighbor. God's Word expresses the link between the two loves: "Since God has loved us so much, we too should love one another" (1 John 4:11).

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself" was an ancient commandment, written in the law of Moses (Leviticus 19:18) and Jesus himself quotes it as such (Luke 10:27) How then does Jesus call it "his" commandment and the "new" commandment? The answer is that, with him, the object, the subject and the reason for loving one's neighbor have all changed.

First of all the object has changed. In other words: who is the neighbor who must be loved? It is no longer only one's fellow countrymen, or at most the guest who dwells among the people, but every person, including the foreigner (the Samaritan!), even one's enemy. It is true that the second part of the phrase "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy" (Mt 5:43) is not found literally in the

Old Testament, but it does sum up the general approach expressed in the law of retaliation: "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" (Leviticus 24:20), especially if we compare it with what Jesus expects from his disciples: "But I say this to you: love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain on the upright and the wicked alike. For if you love those who love you, what reward can you expect? Do not even the tax collectors do as much? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Do not even the gentiles do as much?" (Matthew 5:44-47).

The subject of the love of neighbor has also changed: the word neighbor now means something else. It is not another person; it is I, it is not the person who is next to me, but the one who comes close. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus shows that there is no need to wait passively for my neighbor to turn up on my path, with lights flashing and sirens blaring. There is no such thing as a ready-made neighbor; there is a neighbor when you decide to come close to that person.

And most of all, the model or measure of the love of neighbor has changed. Until Jesus came, the model was love of self: "as yourself." It has been said that God could not have chosen a more secure peg than this on which to fasten the love of neighbor. He would not have achieved the same result even if he had said: "You shall love your neighbor as you love your God!" because, when it comes to loving God, and understanding what it means to love God, a man can still cheat -- but not where love of self is concerned. We know full well what it means to love ourselves, whatever the circumstances. It is a mirror that is always before us, there is no escape.[1]

And yet there is still an escape, which is why Jesus replaces it with another model and another measure. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12). A person can love himself or herself in the wrong way, can desire evil, not good, can love vice, not virtue. If such a person loves others "as himself" and wants others to have the things he wants for himself, pity the person who is loved in that way! We know, instead, where the love of Jesus leads us: to virtue, to the good, to the Father. Whoever follows him "does not walk in darkness." He has loved us by giving his life for us, while we were still sinners, in other words, enemies (Romans 5:6 ff).

We can now understand what the evangelist John means by his apparently contradictory statement: "My dear friends, this is not a new commandment I am writing to you, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the message which you have heard. Yet in another way I am writing a new commandment for you" (1 John 2:7-8). The commandment of the love of neighbor is "old" in the letter, but "new" with the novelty of the Gospel itself -- because it is no longer just a "law" but also and first of all a "grace." It is founded on communion with Christ, made possible by the gift of the Spirit.[2]

With Jesus there is a move from a two-person relationship: "What the other person does to you, do the same to him," to a three-person relationship: "What God has done to you, do the same to the other person," or, starting from the opposite direction: "What you have done to others is what God will do to you." There are countless sayings of Jesus and the Apostles which repeat this concept: "As God has forgiven you, so you are to forgive one another": "If you do not forgive your enemies from the heart, neither will your Father forgive you." Our excuse is cut off at the root: "But he does not love me, he offends me." That's his business, not yours. The only thing that concerns you is what you do to others and how you behave in face of what others do to you.

But the main question still remains to be answered: why this singular diversion of love from God to one's neighbor? Wouldn't it be more logical to expect: "As I have loved you, so you must love me," rather than: "As I have loved you, so must you love one another"? Here is the difference between love that is purely eros and love which is eros and agape together. Purely erotic love is a closed circle: "Love me, Alfredo, love me as much as I love you": thus sings Violetta in Verdi's *Traviata*: I love you, you love me. The love of agape is an open circle: it comes from God and returns to Him, but passes through one's neighbor. Jesus himself inaugurated this new kind of love: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you" (John 15:9).

St. Catherine of Siena gave the simplest and most convincing explanation of the reason for this. She puts these words into God's mouth: "I ask you to love me with the same love with which I love you. But this you cannot do for me, because I have loved you without being loved. All the love you have for me is a love of debt, not of grace, in as much as you are obliged to do it, while I love you with the

love of grace, not of debt. Hence, you cannot give me the love that I require. Because of this I have placed your neighbor alongside you: so that you may do to him what you cannot do for me, that is, love him without considering whether he deserves it, and without expecting anything in return. And I consider as done to me what you did to him." [3]

2. Love one another with a sincere heart

After these general reflections on the commandment to love our neighbor, the time has come to speak of the quality this love must have. It is essentially two-fold: it must be a sincere and active love, a love of the heart and a love, so to speak, of the hands. This time we pause on the first quality, under the guidance of that great singer of love, Paul. The second part of the Letter to the Romans is a whole succession of recommendations about mutual love within the Christian community: "Let love be genuine [...]; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing respect" (Romans 12:9 ff). "Owe no-one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8).

In order to grasp the spirit that unites all these recommendations, the underlying idea, or rather the "feel" that Paul has for charity, one must start with the initial word: "Let love be genuine!" It is not just one of many exhortations, but the matrix from which all the others derive. It contains the secret of charity. With the help of the Holy Spirit, let us try to grasp that secret.

The original term used by St. Paul, translated as "genuine," is *anhypokritos*, namely, without hypocrisy. This word is a sort of pilot light; it is, in fact, a rare term that we find used in the New Testament almost exclusively to describe Christian love. The expression "genuine love" (*anhypokritos*) returns again in 2 Corinthians 6:6 and in 1 Peter 1:22. This last text enables us to grasp the meaning of the term in question with complete certainty, because he explains it in different words; genuine love -- he says -- consists in loving one another intensely "from the heart."

Hence, with that simple affirmation -- "Let love be genuine!" -- St. Paul takes the discussion to the very root of charity, to the heart. What is required of love is that it be true, authentic, not a pretence. Just as wine, to be "genuine," must be squeezed from the grape, so must love come from the heart. In this, too, the Apostle is the faithful echo of Jesus' thought; in fact, repeatedly and forcefully, the Lord pointed to the heart as the "place" where the value of what a person does is decided, and what is pure or impure in the life of a person (Matthew 15:19).

We can speak of a Pauline intuition with regard to charity: behind the visible and exterior universe of charity, made up of works and words, he has revealed another, wholly interior, universe, which is, in comparison with the first, what the soul is to the body. We find this intuition again in the other great text on charity, which is 1 Corinthians 13. When you look closely you see that what St. Paul says there refers entirely to this interior charity, to the dispositions and the sentiments of charity: charity is patient, it is kind, not jealous, not angry, it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things. There is nothing here, specifically and directly, about doing good, or works of charity, but everything is taken back to the root of wanting that which is good. Benevolence, wanting what is good, comes before doing good.

The Apostle himself is explicit about the difference between the two spheres of charity when he says that the greatest act of exterior charity -- distributing all one's goods to the poor -- would be of no use at all without interior charity (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:3). It would be the opposite of "genuine" charity. Hypocritical charity, in fact, is precisely that which does good, but without willing the good, which shows something externally that does not have a corresponding "attitude" in the heart. In this case, there is an appearance of charity which may even be a mask for egoism, self-seeking, using another person, or simply the remorse of conscience.

It would be a fatal error to see charity of the heart and charity in deed as being opposed to one another, or to use interior charity as a kind of alibi for a lack of active charity. In any case, to say that without charity "it does me no good at all" even if I give everything away to the poor, does not mean to say that it does no good to anyone and is useless. Rather, it means that it does no good "to me", but it might help the poor person who receives it. So, it is not a question of lessening the importance of charitable works (we will look at this next time), but of ensuring that they have a firm foundation against selfishness and its infinitely wily ways. St. Paul wants Christians to be "rooted and grounded in love" (Ephesians 3:17); in other words, love has to be the root and foundation of everything.

To love genuinely means to love at a depth where you can no longer lie, because you are alone before yourself, alone before the mirror of your conscience, under the gaze of God. "He loves his brother," writes Augustine, "who, before God, where God alone sees, reassures his heart and asks himself deep down whether he really acts thus out of love for his brother; and his witness is that eye which penetrates the heart, where man cannot look." [4] That is why Paul's love for the Jews was genuine if he could say: "I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race" (Romans 9:1-3).

To be genuine, Christian charity must therefore begin from within, from the heart; the works of mercy must spring from "heartfelt compassion" (Colossians 3:12). However, we must make it clear at once that this is something much more radical than mere "internalization," that is, more than a shift of emphasis from the external practice of charity to the interior practice. That is only the first step. Internalization leads to divinization! The Christian, as St. Peter said, is one who loves "with a genuine heart": but with which heart? With "the new heart and the new Spirit" received in Baptism!

When a Christian loves like that, it is God who loves through him; he becomes a channel of God's love. Something similar happens with consolation, which is nothing other than a way of manifesting love: "God comforts us in all our sorrows, so that we can offer others, in their sorrows, the consolation we ourselves have received from God" (2 Corinthians 1:4). We console with the consolation by which we are consoled by God, we love with the love with which God loves us. Not with a different love. This explains the apparently disproportionate effect even a very simple act of love can sometimes have, even oftentimes a hidden one, in terms of the hope and light it can create.

3. Charity edifies

When charity is mentioned in the apostolic writings, it is never spoken of in the abstract, in a generic way. The background is always the building up of the Christian community. In other words, the first sphere of the exercise of charity must be the Church and more specifically the community in which one lives, the people one relates to each day. This is how it should be also today, especially at the heart of the Church, among those who work in close contact with the Supreme Pontiff.

In ancient times it was customary for a while to apply the term 'charity', agape, not only to the fraternal meal that Christians shared together, but also to the whole Church. [5] The martyr St. Ignatius of Antioch greets the Church of Rome as the one "that presides over the charity (agape)," that is, over the "Christian fraternity," over all the Churches. [6] This phrase affirms not just the fact of the primacy, but also its nature, or the way of exercising it, namely, in charity.

The Church is in urgent need of an outburst of charity which will heal her fractures. In one of his addresses Paul VI said: "The Church needs to feel the wave of love flowing once more through all her human faculties, that love which is called charity and has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." [7] Love alone heals. It is the oil of the Samaritan. Oil also because it must float above everything else, as oil does in relation to liquids. "And over all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Colossians 3:14). Over everything, super omnia!! Hence also over discipline, over authority, even though, obviously, discipline and authority can be expressions of charity.

One important area on which we need to work is that of mutual judgments. Paul wrote to the Romans: "Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? ... Let us stop passing judgment on one another" (Romans 14:10.13). Before him Jesus had said: "Do not judge, and you will not be not judged. [...] Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own?" (Matthew 7:1-3). He compares the neighbor's sin (the sin judged), no matter what it is, to a speck, compared to the sin of the one who judges (the sin of judging), which is a beam. The beam is the very fact of judging, so grave is it in the eyes of God.

The discussion on judgments is certainly delicate and complex and it cannot be left half-finished if it is not to appear immediately unrealistic. How can anyone live without judging at all? Judgment is implicit in us, even by a look. It is impossible to observe, to hear, to live, without making assessments, in other words, without judging. A parent, a superior, a confessor, a judge, whoever has a responsibility

over others, must judge. Sometimes, in fact, as is the case of many here in the Curia, judgment is, precisely, the type of service that one is called to give to society or to the Church.

In fact, it is not so much the judgment we must remove from our heart, but the poison from our judgment! That is, the resentment, the condemnation. In Luke's account, Jesus' command "Do not judge, and you will not be judged" is immediately followed, as if to make the meaning explicit, by the command: "do not condemn, and you will not be condemned yourselves" (Luke 6:37). In itself, judgment is a neutral action, the judgment can end either in condemnation or absolution or justification. It is negative judgment that is taken up again and banished by the word of God, the judgment that condemns the sinner as well as the sin, that is aimed more at the punishment than the correction of a brother.

Another qualifying point of sincere charity is esteem: "Outdo one another in showing respect for one another" (Romans 12:10). To esteem one's brother, one must not esteem oneself too much, not be always sure of oneself; as the Apostle says "no-one should exaggerate his real importance" (Romans 12:3). Whoever has too high an idea of himself is like a man who, at night, has before his eyes a source of intense light: he can see nothing beyond it; he cannot see the lights of his brothers and sisters, their merits and values.

"To minimize" should become our favorite verb in relations with others: to minimize our own merits and the defects of others. Not to minimize our defects and the merits of others as we often tend to do, which would be the exact opposite! There is a fable of Aesop in this connection, as reworked by La Fontaine, which goes like this:

"When coming into this valley
each carries on his back
a double knapsack.
Inside the front one
willingly he stuffs the faults of others,
and in the other puts his own." [8]

We must simply reverse things: put our own faults in the knapsack in front of us, and the faults of others in the one behind.

St. James warns: "Do not slander one other"(James 4:11). Today, slander has a different name: it's called gossip and seems to have become an innocent thing, but in fact it is one of the things that most pollutes our lives together. It is not enough to avoid speaking ill of others, we must also prevent people from doing so in our presence, making it clear, perhaps by our silence, that we do not approve. How different the atmosphere is in a workplace or community where St. James's warning is taken seriously! In many public places there used to be a notice saying: "No smoking here" or even: "No blaspheming here." It would be a good idea in some cases to replace them with "No gossiping here!"

We finish by listening to the Apostle's exhortation to the community of the Philippians, as though his words were addressed to us: "Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, one in love, one in heart and one in mind. Do nothing out of jealousy or vanity. Instead, out of humility of mind, everyone should give preference to others, everyone pursuing not his own interests but those of others. Make your own the mind of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:2-5).

NOTES

[1] Cf. S. Kierkegaard, "Gli atti dell'amore," (Works of Love) Milan, 1983, p. 163.

[2] J. Ratzinger -- Benedict XVI, Jesus of Nazareth Part II, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2011.

[3] St. Catherine of Siena, Dialogue 64.

[4] St. Augustine, Homilies on the First Epistle of John, 6, 2 (PL 35, 2020).

[5] Lampe, A Patristic Greek Lexicon, Oxford 1961, p. 8.

[6] St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Romans, initial greeting.

[7] Address at the General Audience of Nov. 29, 1972 (Insegnamenti di Paolo VI, Tipografia Poliglotta Vaticana, X, pp. 1210 f.).

[8] J. de La Fontaine, Fables I, 7.

Father Cantalamessa's 4th Lenten Homily
"Love Must Be Active: The Social Relevance of the Gospel"

APRIL 8, 2011

1. The exercise of charity

In the last meditation we learned from Paul that Christian love must be sincere; in this final meditation, John teaches us that it must also be active: "If anyone is well off in worldly possessions and sees his brother in need but closes his heart to him, how can the love of God be remaining in him? Children, our love must not be just words, or mere talk, but something active and genuine" (1 John 3:17-18). We find the same teaching, in a more graphic form, in the Letter of James: "If one of the brothers or sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on, and one of you says to them, 'I wish you well, keep yourself warm and eat plenty,' without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that?" (James 2:16).

In the primitive community at Jerusalem this requirement was translated into sharing. It was said of the first Christians that "they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed" (Acts 2:45), but what urged them to do this was not an ideal of poverty, but of charity; the aim was not to make everyone poor, but that "none of their members should ever be in want" (cf. Ac 4, 34). The need to translate love into concrete gestures was quite familiar also to the Apostle Paul, who as we have seen, insists so much on love that comes from the heart. This is shown by the importance he gives to the collections taken up on behalf of the poor (cf. 2 Corinthians 8-9).

The apostolic Church, on this point, simply gathered the teaching and example of the Lord, whose compassion for the poor, the sick and the hungry was never simply an empty sentiment but was always translated into concrete help. Indeed, Christ made these concrete gestures of charity the basis for the Last Judgment (cf. Matthew 25).

Church historians see in this spirit of fraternal solidarity one of the main factors behind "the mission and expansion of Christianity in the first three centuries"[1]. That spirit was converted into specially created initiatives -- and later, institutions -- for the care of the sick, the support of widows and orphans, providing aid to prisoners, soup-kitchens for the poor, assistance to foreigners, etc. This aspect of Christian charity, historically and in the present day, is dealt with in the second half of Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical "Deus Caritas Est," and in a permanent manner by the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum."

2. The emergence of the social problem

The modern era, especially the 19th century, marked a turning point, bringing the social problem to the forefront of attention. It is not enough to provide for the needs of the poor and oppressed on a case-by-case basis; action needs to be taken on the structures that create the poor and the oppressed. That this was new territory can be deduced from the title and the opening words of Leo XIII's encyclical "Rerum Novarum" of May 15, 1891, which saw the Church entering the debate as a leading exponent.

It is worth rereading the opening paragraph: "That the spirit of revolutionary change, which has long been disturbing the nations of the world, should have passed beyond the sphere of politics and made its influence felt in the cognate sphere of practical economics is not surprising. The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits and the marvelous

discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, and the utter poverty of the masses; the increased self reliance and closer mutual combination of the working classes; as also, finally, in the prevailing moral degeneracy."

The same category of problems provides the setting for the second encyclical of the Holy Father Benedict XVI on charity: "Caritas in Veritate." I have no competence in this subject, and so it is only right that I refrain from going into the merits of the content of this and other social encyclicals. What I would like to do is illustrate the historical and theological background, the "Sitz im Leben" as it is called, of this new form of ecclesiastical magisterium: In other words, to see how and why social encyclicals began to be written and why new ones are written periodically. In fact, this can help us to discover something new about the Gospel and about Christian love. St. Gregory the Great says that "Scripture grows with those who read it" (cum legentibus crescit) [2], meaning that it is constantly yielding new meanings in response to the questions that are put to it. This turns out to be particularly true in our present context.

My reconstruction here will be no more than a "bird's eye view" in the form of a few headings, which is all one can do in a few minutes, but a synthesis or a summary can be of some use, especially when, because we have different tasks, we cannot personally study a particular question in any depth.

At the time when Leo XIII wrote his social encyclical, there were three dominant trends of thought regarding the social significance of the Gospel. First of all there was the socialist and Marxist interpretation. Marx had paid no attention to Christianity from this point of view, but some of his immediate followers (Engels from a still ideological standpoint, and Karl Kautsky from a historical viewpoint) did deal with the question in the context of research on the "precursors of modern socialism."

The conclusions they reached were as follows: that the Gospel was in the main a great social message to the poor, and that everything else in it was of secondary importance -- a mere "superstructure." Jesus was a great social reformer who wanted to rescue the lower classes from their wretched condition. His program provides equality for all and freedom from economic need. The system of the primitive Christian community was a type of communism "ante litteram," as yet unsophisticated and non-scientific: a kind of consumer communism, rather than the communism of the production line.

Subsequently, Soviet-era historiographers rejected this interpretation because, in their view, it conceded too much to Christianity. In the 1960's the revolutionary interpretation reappeared, this time in political guise, with its thesis of Jesus as the head of a "zealot" liberation movement, but it was short-lived and is outside our present field. (The Holy Father recalls this interpretation in his latest book on Jesus, when speaking about the purification of the temple.)

Nietzsche had arrived at a conclusion similar to the Marxist one, but his intention was entirely different. For him, too, Christianity was born as a liberation movement of the lower classes, but this fact had to be judged as totally negative. The Gospel embodies the "resentment" of the weak against the strong forms in nature; it is the "inversion of all values," clipping the wings of mankind's aspiration to greatness. The whole aim of Jesus was to counter earthly misery by spreading a "Kingdom of heaven."

To these two schools -- which agreed on the reality they saw, but differed on how it should be judged -- a third can be added which we may call conservative. According to this view, Jesus took no interest at all in social and economic problems; to attribute such concerns to him would be to diminish him and turn him into a worldly figure. He used images drawn from the world of work and took to heart the miseries of the poor, but he never envisioned the improvement of people's living conditions in their earthly life.

3. Theological reflection: liberal and dialectical theology

These were the dominant ideas in the culture of the time, when the Christian churches began to engage in theological reflection on the problem. It too developed in three stages and reflected three approaches: that of liberal theology, of dialectical theology, and that of the Catholic magisterium.

The first response was that of the liberal theology current at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, represented in this field especially by Ernst Troeltsch and Adolph von Harnack. It is worth pausing a while to look at the ideas of this school, because many of its conclusions, at least in

this particular field, were also arrived at from a different direction by the social magisterium of the Church and are still current and sustainable.

Troeltsch challenges the starting point of the Marxist interpretation, which holds that the religious factor is always secondary in relation to the economic. By studying the Protestant ethic and the rise of capitalism he shows that, while the economic factor influences the religious, it is also true that religion influences economics. They are distinct fields, not subordinate.

Harnack, for his part, notes that the Gospel provides no direct social program to combat and abolish poverty; that it makes no judgments about the organization of labor and other aspects of life which are so important for us today, such as art and science. But, he adds, it is fortunate that this is the case! We would have been sorry if it had tried to make rules about the relations between classes, working conditions and so on. To be concrete, those rules would have been fatally linked to the conditions of the day, (just as many Old Testament institutions and social precepts are), and so would eventually have become anachronisms, in fact a "useless encumbrance" to the Gospel. History, even the history of Christianity, shows how dangerous it is to bind oneself to social structures and political institutions of a particular era, and how difficult it is to get rid of them later.

"And yet," continues Harnack, "no religion ever went to work with such an energetic social message, and so strongly identified itself with that message, as we see to be the case in the Gospel. How so? Because the words 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' were spoken in deep earnest, because with these words Jesus shone a light upon all the concrete relations of life, upon the world of hunger, poverty and misery. [...] Its object is to transform the socialism which rests on the basis of conflicting interests into the socialism which rests on the consciousness of a spiritual unity. [...] The fallacious principle of the free play of forces, of the 'live and let live' principle -- a better name for it would be 'live and let die' -- is entirely opposed to the Gospel." [3]

The position enshrined in the Gospel message is, as we can see, opposed both to the reduction of the Gospel to a social proclamation or to the class struggle, and to the position of economic liberalism and the free play of forces. The evangelical theologian at times gives way to a certain enthusiasm: "A new spectacle," he writes, "was being introduced to the world; until then, religion had either accepted the things of the world, easily adapting to the status quo, or it had taken refuge in the clouds, and standing in direct opposition to everything. Now, however, it found itself with a new duty to fulfill, to despise earthly want and destitution, and likewise earthly prosperity, while relieving every kind of hardship and need; to look up to heaven with the courage that comes from the faith, while working with heart, hand and voice for the brethren in this world." [4]

What was it that the dialectical theology of Barth, Bultmann, Dibelius and others, which succeeded liberal theology after World War I, had against this liberal view? Principally, it was the point of departure, its idea of the kingdom of heaven. For liberals, the kingdom was essentially ethical in nature, a sublime moral ideal based on the fatherhood of God and the infinite value of each soul; for dialectical theologians it was eschatological in nature -- a sovereign, gratuitous intervention by God, intended not to change the world but to denounce its present structures ("a radical critique"), to announce its imminent end ("consequent eschatology"), with a call to conversion ("the radical imperative").

The topicality of the Gospel consists in the fact that "its demands are not made in a general way, to everyone and for all time, but to this person, and perhaps only to this person, at this moment and perhaps only at this moment; and the demand is not based on an ethical principle, but on the situation in which God has placed him, and perhaps only him, requiring from him a decision here and now." [5] The influence of the Gospel on society comes about through the individual, not through the community or ecclesial institution.

The challenge for the Christian believer today comes from the situation created by the industrial revolution, from the changes it has brought to the pace of life and work and the consequent devaluing of the human person. There are no "Christian" solutions to this problem: Every believer is called to respond to it under his or her own responsibility, in obedience to the call God addresses to him or her in the actual situation in which he or she lives, although the basic principle is found in the commandment to love one's neighbor. The believer should not be pessimistically resigned to the situation, but neither should he have any illusions about changing the world.

From this perspective, can one still speak of the Gospel having social relevance? Yes, but only as method, not as content. Let me explain. This view reduces the social significance of the Gospel to a "formal" one, excluding any "real" significance, i.e., in terms of content. In other words, the Gospel provides the method, or the impulse, for a correct Christian attitude and action in the social sphere, and nothing else.

And here lies the weakness of this position, because it attributes only formal significance to the Gospel accounts and parables ("How am I to welcome the call to decision which comes to me here and now?") and not also a real and exemplary significance. Is it legitimate, for example, in the case of the parable of the rich man who feasted sumptuously, to ignore the clear, concrete indications it contains about the use and abuse of wealth, luxury, and disdain for the poor, and look only at the "imperative of the moment" that resounds through the parable? Would it not be strange, at least, if Jesus had simply meant that, standing there before him, a person is called to make a decision for God, and that in order to say this, he had constructed such a complex and detailed story, which, far from concentrating attention on the center of interest, would distract from it?

Such a solution strips the flesh from Christ's message and acts on the mistaken premise that the word of God contains no general demands that apply to the rich of today, as they did to the rich -- and to the poor -- in Jesus' day. As though the decision God required were something empty and abstract -- simply making a decision -- and not a decision about something. All the parables with a social background are called "parables of the Kingdom" and in this way their content is flattened out to a single meaning, the eschatological one.

5. The social teaching of the Church

The social teaching of the Catholic Church, as ever, looks for synthesis rather than opposition; its method is "et-et" (both-and) rather than "aut-aut" (either-or). It maintains the Gospel's "two-fold illumination": eschatological and moral. In other words, it agrees with dialectical theology on the fact that the Kingdom of God preached by Christ is not essentially ethical in nature, i.e., not an ideal that draws its force from the universal validity and perfection of its principles, but is a new and gratuitous initiative of God which, in Christ, breaks in from above.

Where it parts company with the dialectical vision is in its way of conceiving the relationship between this kingdom of God and the world. The two are not simply opposed and irreconcilable, just as there is no opposition between the work of creation and that of redemption, and also -- as we saw in the first meditation -- no opposition between agape and eros. Jesus compared the kingdom of God to the yeast added to the dough to make it rise, to a seed cast into the earth, or to salt that gives food its flavor; he said he had come not to judge the world, but to save it. This enables us to see the influence of the Gospel on social matters in a different, much more positive light.

However, despite all the differences of approach, some general conclusions do emerge from the whole theological reflection on the relationship between the Gospel and the social sphere. We can summarize them as follows. The Gospel does not provide direct solutions to social problems. (As we have seen, it is just as well that it did not try to do so!) It does, however, contain useful principles by which concrete responses to different historical situations can be framed. Since social situations and problems change from one age to another, the Christian on each occasion is called to embody Gospel principles in the situation of the moment.

This is precisely the contribution made by the social encyclicals of the popes. This is why there is a succession of such encyclicals, with each one taking up the subject at the point where the previous ones left off (in the case of Pope Benedict's encyclical, from "Populorum Progressio" of Paul VI), and they update the subject on the basis of new needs emerging in society (in this case, the phenomenon of globalization) and also of the new questions constantly being asked in the light of the word of God.

The title of Benedict XVI's social encyclical, "Caritas in Veritate," indicates the biblical foundations on which, in this case, he intends to base his discourse on the social significance of the Gospel: charity and truth. "Truth preserves and expresses charity's power to liberate in the ever-changing events of history [...]. Without truth, without trust and love for what is true, there is no social conscience and responsibility, and social action ends up serving private interests and the logic of power, resulting in social fragmentation, especially in a globalized society at difficult times like the present." [6]

The difference lies not only in what is said and in the solutions that are proposed, but also in the genre adopted and in the authority of the proposal. It consists, in other words, in moving from free theological discussion to magisterial teaching, and from an exclusively "personal" intervention in social affairs (as proposed by dialectical theology) to a communal intervention as Church, and not simply as individuals.

4. To serve, not to be served

We finish with a practical point that challenges everyone, even those of us who are not called to work directly in the social field. We saw Nietzsche's ideas about the social relevance of the Gospel. For him, it was certainly the fruit of a revolution, but a negative one, a regression compared to Greek culture; it was the revenge of the weak against the strong. One of the points he had in his sights was the preference given to service over dominion, to making oneself small over putting oneself forward and aspiring to great things.

He blames Christianity for one of the finest gifts it has given to the world. In fact, one of the principles by which the Gospel has influenced the social sphere most decisively and beneficially is precisely that of service. Not for nothing does it occupy an important place in the Church's social teaching. Jesus made service one of the pivotal points of his teaching (Luke 22:25); he himself said he had come to serve, not to be served (Mark 10:45).

Service is a universal principle; it applies to every aspect of life: the state ought to be at the service of its citizens, politics at the service of the state, the doctor at the service of his patients, the teacher at the service of his pupils...But it applies in an altogether special way to the servants of the Church. Service is not, in itself, a virtue (in no catalogue of the virtues, or of the fruits of the Spirit, is diakonia mentioned in the New Testament), but it flows from various virtues, especially humility and charity. It is one way in which that love which "does not pursue selfish interests, but those of others" (Philippians 2:4), manifests itself, and gives of itself without seeking any return.

Service in the Gospel, unlike service in the world, is not the proper characteristic of the inferior, of the one in need, but rather of the superior, of the one who is raised high. Jesus says that, in His Church, it is first of all "the leader" who must be "like the one who serves" (Luke 22:26), the first must be "slave to all" (Mark 10:44). We are preparing for the beatification of John Paul II. In his book "Gift and Mystery," he expresses this meaning of authority in the Church with a strong image, in the form of a few verses he composed while in Rome at the time of the Council: "It is you, Peter. Here you wish to be the Ground / On which the others walk ... so they can reach the place / Whither you guide their steps / As the rock bears the hoof-marks of the flock."

We finish by listening to the words spoken by Jesus to his disciples immediately after he had washed their feet, as though he were speaking to us, here and now: "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Master and Lord, and rightly, so I am. If I, then, the Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you must wash each other's feet. I have given you an example, so that you may copy what I have done to you" (John 13 12-15).

NOTES

[1] A. von Harnack, "Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den ersten drei Jahrhunderten," Leipzig, 1902.

[2] St. Gregory the Great, Commentary on Job, XX,1 (CCL 143, p. 1003).

[3] A. von Harnack, "Das Wesen des Christentums," Leipzig, 1900. Italian translation. "L'essenza del cristianesimo," Torino, 1903, pp. 93 ss.

[4] A. von Harnack, "Il cristianesimo e la società," Mendrisio, 1911, pp. 12-15.

[5] M. Dibelius, "Das soziale Motiv im Neuen Testament," in "Botschaft und Geschichte," Tübingen, 1953, pp. 178-203.

[6] Benedict XVI, "Caritas in Veritate," No. 5.

[Translation by Father Charles Serignat, OFM Cap]

**Father Cantalamessa's Good Friday Homily
"Truly, This Man Was the Son of God"**

APRIL 22, 2011

In his passion, writes St. Paul to Timothy, Jesus Christ "has given his noble witness" (1 Timothy 6:13). We ask ourselves: witness to what? Not to the truth of his life or the rightness of his cause. Many have died, and still die today, for a wrong cause, while believing it to be right. Now, the resurrection certainly does testify to the truth of Christ. "God has given public proof about Jesus, by raising him from the dead", as the Apostle was to say in the Areopagus at Athens (Acts 17:31).

Death testifies not to the truth of Christ, but to his love. Of that love, in fact, it is the supreme proof. "No-one can have greater love than to lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). One could object that there is a greater love than giving your life for your friends, and that is to give your life for your enemies. But that is precisely what Jesus has done: "Christ died for the godless," writes the Apostle in the Letter to the Romans. "You could hardly find anyone ready to die, even for the upright; though it is just possible that, for a really good person, someone might undertake to die. So, it is proof of God's own love for us that Christ died for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:6-8). "He loved us while we were enemies, so that he could turn us into friends"[1], exclaims St. Augustine.

A certain one-sided "theology of the cross" can make us forget the essential point. The cross is not only God's judgment on the world and its wisdom; it is more than the revelation and condemnation of sin. It is not God's "no" to the world, it is the "yes" God speaks to the world from the depths of his love: "That which is wrong," writes the Holy Father in his latest book about Jesus, "the reality of evil, cannot simply be ignored; it cannot just be left to stand. It must be dealt with; it must be overcome. Only this counts as true mercy. And the fact that God now confronts evil himself, because men are incapable of doing so -- therein lies the 'unconditional' goodness of God."[2]

* * *

But how can we have the courage to speak about God's love, with so many human tragedies before our eyes, like the disaster that has struck Japan, or the shipwrecks and drowning incidents of these last few weeks? Should we not mention them at all? But to stay completely silent would be to betray the faith and to be ignorant of the meaning of the mystery we are celebrating today.

There is a truth that must be proclaimed loud and clear on Good Friday. The One whom we contemplate on the cross is God "in person." Yes, he is also the man Jesus of Nazareth, but that man is one person with the Son of the Eternal Father. As long as the fundamental dogma of the Christian faith is not recognized and taken seriously -- the first dogma defined at Nicea, that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and is himself God, of one substance with the Father -- human suffering will remain unanswered.

One cannot say that "Job's question has remained unanswered," or that not even the Christian faith has an answer to give to human pain, if one starts by rejecting the answer it claims to have. What do you do to reassure someone that a particular drink contains no poison? You drink it yourself first, in front of him. This is what God has done for humanity: he has drunk the bitter cup of the passion. So, human suffering cannot be a poisoned chalice, it must be more than negativity, loss, absurdity, if God himself has chosen to savor it. At the bottom of the chalice, there must be a pearl.

We know the name of that pearl: resurrection! "In my estimation, all that we suffer in the present time is nothing in comparison with the glory which is destined to be disclosed for us" (Romans 8:18), and again: "He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain. The world of the past has gone" (Revelations 21:4).

If life's race ended here below, we would have every reason to despair at the thought of the millions, if not billions, of human beings who start off at a great disadvantage, nailed to the starting line by poverty and underdevelopment, without even a chance to run in the race. But that is not how it is.

Death not only cancels out differences, but overturns them. "The poor man died and was carried away by the angels into Abraham's embrace. The rich man also died and was buried ... in Hades" (cf. Luke 16:22-23). We cannot apply this scheme of things to the social sphere in a simplistic way, but it is there to warn us that faith in the resurrection lets no-one go on living their own quiet life. It reminds us that the saying "live and let live" must never turn into "live and let die."

The response of the cross is not for us Christians alone, but for everyone, because the Son of God died for all. There is in the mystery of redemption an objective and a subjective aspect. There is the fact in itself, and then awareness of the fact and our faith-response to it. The first extends beyond the second. "The Holy Spirit," says a text of Vatican II, "offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the paschal mystery." [3]

One of the ways of being associated with the paschal mystery is precisely through suffering: "To suffer," wrote John Paul II in the days following the attempt on his life and the long convalescence that ensued, "means to become particularly susceptible, particularly open to the working of the salvific powers of God, offered to humanity in Christ." [4] Suffering -- all suffering, but especially that of the innocent and of the martyrs -- brings us into contact with the cross of Christ, in a mysterious way "known only to God."

* * *

After Jesus, those who have "given their noble witness" and "have drunk from the chalice" are the martyrs! The account of a martyr's death was called "Passio," a passion, like that of the sufferings of Jesus to which we have just listened. Once more the Christian world has been visited by the ordeal of martyrdom, which was thought to have ended with the fall of totalitarian atheistic regimes. We cannot pass over their testimony in silence. The first Christians honored their martyrs. The records of their martyrdom were circulated among the churches with immense respect. In this very day, in a great Asian country, Christians have been praying and marching in the streets to avert the threat hanging over them.

One thing distinguishes genuine accounts of martyrdom from legendary ones composed later, after the end of the persecutions. In the former, there is almost no trace of polemics against the persecutors; all attention is concentrated on the heroism of the martyrs, not on the perversity of the judges and executioners. St. Cyprian even ordered his followers to give twenty-five gold coins to the executioner who beheaded him. These are the disciples of the one who died saying: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing." Truly, "Jesus' blood speaks a different language from the blood of Abel (Hebrews 12:24): it does not cry out for vengeance and punishment; it brings reconciliation." [5]

Even the world bows before modern witnesses of faith. This explains the unexpected success in France of the film "Of Gods and Men," which tells the story of the seven Cistercian monks slain in Tibhirine on the night of the March 26-27, 1996. And who can fail to admire and be edified by the words of Shahbaz Bhatti, a Catholic politician in Pakistan who was recently killed for his faith? His testament is a legacy to us, his brothers and sisters in the faith, and it would be an act of ingratitude to allow it to be quickly forgotten.

He wrote: "I was offered high government positions and asked to quit my struggle but I always refused to give up, even at the cost of my life. I do not want popularity; I do not want any position. I just want a place at Jesus' feet. I want my life, my character, my actions to speak for me and indicate that I am following Jesus Christ. Because of this desire, I will consider myself most fortunate if -- in this effort and struggle to help the needy and the poor, to help the persecuted and victimized Christians of Pakistan -- Jesus Christ will accept the sacrifice of my life. I want to live for Christ and I want to die for Him."

We seem to hear again the martyr Ignatius Antioch, when he came to Rome to suffer martyrdom. The powerlessness of the victims doesn't however justify the indifference of the world toward their fate. "The upright person perishes," lamented the prophet Isaiah, "and no one cares. The faithful is taken off and no one takes it to heart" (Isaiah 57:1).

* * *

Christian martyrs are not the only ones, as we have seen, to suffer and die around us. What can we believers offer to those who have no faith, apart from the certainty our own faith gives us that there is a ransom for suffering? We can suffer with those who suffer, weep with those who weep (Romans 12:15).

Before proclaiming the resurrection and the life, with the weeping sisters of Lazarus before Him, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). At this time we can suffer and weep, most of all with the Japanese people, now recovering from one of the most devastating natural disasters in history. We can also tell those brothers and sisters in humanity that we admire the example of dignity and composure that they have given to the world.

Globalization has at least this positive effect: the suffering of one people becomes the suffering of all, arouses the solidarity of all. It gives us the chance to discover that we are one single human family, joined together for good or ill. It helps us overcome all barriers of race, color or creed. As one of our poets put it: "Peace, you peoples! Too deep the mystery of the prostrate earth." [6]

But we must take in the teaching contained in such events. Earthquakes, hurricanes and other disasters that strike the innocent and the guilty alike are never punishments from God. To say otherwise would be to offend both God and humanity. But they do contain a warning: in this case, against the danger of deluding ourselves that science and technology will be enough to save us. Unless we practice some restraint in this field, we see that they can become more devastating than nature itself.

There was an earthquake also at the moment when Christ died: "The centurion, together with the others guarding Jesus, had seen the earthquake and all that was taking place, and they were terrified and said: 'In truth, this man was son of God'" (Matthew 27:54). But there was an even bigger one at the moment of his resurrection: "And suddenly there was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled away the stone, and sat on it" (Matthew 28:2). This is how it will always be. Every earthquake that brings death will always be followed by an earthquake of resurrection and life. Someone once said: "Only a god can save us now" (Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten). [7] We have the sure and certain guarantee that he will do exactly that, because "God loved the world so much that he gave His only-begotten Son" (John 3:16).

Let us, then, prepare to sing the ancient words of the liturgy with new conviction and heartfelt gratitude: "Ecce lignum crucis, in quo salus mundi pependit (See the wood of the cross, on which hung the savior of the world). Venite, adoremus (Come, let us worship)."

NOTES

[1] St. Augustine, Commentary on the First Letter of John 9,9 (PL 35, 2051).

[2] Cf. J. Ratzinger - Benedict XVI, Jesus of Nazareth, Part II, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2011, p.133.

[3] Gaudium et spes, 22.

[4] Salvifici doloris, 23.

[5] J.Ratzinger - Benedict XVI, op. cit. p.187.

[6] G. Pascoli, I due fanciulli (The two children).

[7] Antwort. Martin Heidegger im Gespräch, Pfullingen 1988.

[Translation by Father Charles Serignat, OFMcap]
