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ZE11122301 - 2011-12-23

Permalink: <http://www.zenit.org/article-34044?l=english>

FATHER CANTALAMESSA'S 4TH ADVENT SERMON

"The Current Wave of Evangelization"

VATICAN CITY, DEC. 23, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of the final Advent sermon by Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, the preacher of the pontifical household, which was delivered today.

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1. A new audience for the proclamation

"Prope est iam Dominus: venite, adoremus" (The Lord is close at hand; come, let us worship him). We begin this meditation just as the Liturgy of the Hours begins in the days that precede Christmas in such a way that it may also serve as part of our preparation for the solemnity.

I have tried to recount in the preceding meditations three great waves of evangelization in the history of the Church. Other great missionary enterprises can certainly be recalled as well: the mission of St. Francis Xavier in the 16th century in the East -- India, China, and Japan -- and the evangelization of the African continent in the 19th century by Daniel Comboni, Cardinal Guglielmo Massaia, and so many others. Nevertheless, there is a reason for the selection I made that I hope has emerged in the course of our reflection.

The thing that changes and distinguishes the various waves of evangelization mentioned is not the content of the proclamation -- "the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" as the Letter to Jude verse 3 says -- but those to whom that proclamation is addressed: the Greco-Roman world, the barbarian world, and the new world, that is, the American continent, respectively.

We can ask ourselves, therefore, who comprises the new group that allows us to speak of the proclamation today as a fourth wave of new evangelization? The answer is the western world that has been secularized and in some respects is post-Christian. This analysis, which already appeared in the writings of Blessed John Paul II, has become explicit in the teaching of the Holy Father Benedict XVI. In the *Motu Proprio* with which he established the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, he speaks of many traditionally Christian countries that now "seem particularly resistant to many aspects of the Christian message." [1]

During Advent last year, I tried to demonstrate what characterizes this new group to be evangelized, summarizing into three categories -- scientism, secularism, and rationalism -- the three mindsets that lead to a common result, relativism.

Paralleling the appearance of a new world to evangelize, we have also observed the emergence of a new category of heralds with each wave: bishops

in the first three centuries (especially in the third century), monks in the second wave, and friars in the third. Today as well, we can observe the emergence of a new category of primary agents in evangelization: the laity. This does not mean, of course, that one group displaces another but rather that a new component of the people of God is being joined to the others, while the bishops, with the leadership of the pope, always remain the authorized guides and the ones ultimately responsible for the missionary task of the Church.

2. A parallel to the wake behind a large ship

I said that over the centuries, those to whom the proclamation was addressed has changed but not the message itself. I must, however, clarify this last statement. It is true that the essence of the proclamation cannot change, but its mode of presentation, the priorities, and the departure point of the proclamation can and must change.

Let us summarize the unfolding progression of the gospel proclamation up to our time. There is first of all the proclamation by Jesus whose central theme is the news that "The kingdom of God has come to you." After this unique and unrepeatable period that we call "the time of Jesus" comes "the time of the Church" after Easter. In this second period, Jesus is no longer the one who proclaims but is the one proclaimed. The word "gospel" no longer means "the good news" brought *by* Jesus but the good news *about* Jesus that has Jesus as its focus, and his death and resurrection in particular. That is what St. Paul always means by the word "gospel."

We need to be careful, however, not to separate too strictly the two phases and the two proclamations -- of Jesus and of the Church or what is sometimes called the "historical Jesus" and the "Christ of faith." Jesus is not just the focus of the Church's proclamation, that which is proclaimed. We dare not reduce him merely to that! It would mean forgetting the Resurrection. It is the risen Christ who, by his Spirit, still speaks in the Church's proclamation; he is also the one who is doing the proclaiming. As one Vatican Council text says, "He is present in his word since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church." [2]

Beginning with the initial proclamation of the Church, that is, the *kerygma*, we can summarize the successive unfolding of the preaching of the Church through an image. Let us picture the wake made by a large ship. It begins as one point, and that point is the ship itself, but it grows wider and wider until it spreads out across the horizon and touches the opposite shores of the sea. This is what has happened with the Church's proclamation. It begins with one point, the *kerygma*: "[Christ] was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25; cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1-3) or, in a phrase that is even more concise and pregnant with meaning, "Jesus is Lord!" (Romans 10:9; cf. Acts 2:36).

An initial expansion of this one point occurs with the appearance of the four Gospels, written to explain that original nucleus, and then with the rest of the New Testament. After this comes the Tradition of the Church, with its magisterium, its theology, its institutions, its laws, its spirituality. The final result is an enormous patrimony that can make us think precisely of a ship's wake in its maximum distension.

So now, if we want to evangelize a secularized world, there is a choice to

make. Where do we begin? From some place within that expanded wake or from its initial point? The immense wealth of doctrine and institutions can become a handicap if we are trying to present all of that to a person who has lost all contact with the Church and no longer knows who Jesus is. That would be like clothing a baby with one of those enormous, heavy brocaded copes that priests and bishops used to wear.

Instead, it is necessary to help this person establish a relationship with Jesus. We need to do what Peter did on the day of Pentecost when 3,000 people were present: to speak about Jesus whom we have crucified and whom God has raised and to bring that person to the point that he or she, cut to the heart, asks, "Brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). We will respond as Peter does, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you" (Acts 2:38) if you have not been baptized, or if you have already been baptized, go to confession.

Those who respond to the proclamation will join themselves -- today as in that day -- to the community of believers. They will listen to the teaching of the apostles and will partake in the breaking of the bread. Depending on each person's calling and response, little by little they will be able to make the immense heritage arising from the *kerygma* their own. Jesus is not accepted on the word of the Church, but the Church is accepted on the word of Jesus.

We have an ally in this effort: the failure of all the attempts by the secular world to substitute other "calls" and "manifestos" for the Christian *kerygma*. I often mention the example of the famous painting by the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch called "The Scream." Against a reddish background, a man on a bridge with his hands cupped around his mouth is emitting a scream that we immediately recognize is a cry of anguish, a hollow-sounding cry without words. This seems to me the best description of the situation of human beings in modern times who, having forgotten the cry of the *kerygma* that is full of meaning, find themselves having to scream their existential anguish in a vacuum.

3. Christ, our Contemporary

I would like now to explain why it is possible in Christianity to start over at any time from the point of the ship, without this being either a mental pretense or a mere exercise in archeology. The reason is simple: that ship is still sailing on the sea and its wake still begins with one point!

There is an issue about which I do not agree with the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, although he has said some very wonderful things about faith and about Jesus. One of his favorite themes is the contemporaneity of Christ, but he conceives of that contemporaneity as *our* making ourselves contemporaneous with Christ: "He who believes in Christ," he writes, "must be contemporary with Him in His humiliation." [3] His idea is that in order to truly believe with the same faith required of the apostles, we need to ignore 2,000 years of history and of affirmations about Christ and to put ourselves in the shoes of the very ones to whom Jesus addressed his word: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28). Dare you believe a man uttering such incredible promise while he himself has not even a stone upon which to lay his head?

The true contemporaneity with Christ is something quite other than that: It is Christ who makes himself our contemporary because, having risen, he lives in the Spirit and in the Church. If it were up to us to make ourselves

contemporaries of Christ, it would be a contemporaneity that was merely intentional; if it is Christ who makes himself our contemporary, it is a real contemporaneity. According to a bold idea in Orthodox spirituality, "anamnesis is a joyful remembrance that makes the past even more present than when it was lived." This is not an exaggeration. In the liturgical celebration of the Mass, the event of the death and resurrection of Christ becomes more real for me than it may have been for those who were actually physically present at the event, because they were present "in the flesh," but now we are present "in the Spirit."

The same thing is true when someone proclaims with faith, "Christ died for my sins, he was raised for my justification, and he is Lord." A fourth-century author writes, "For every man the beginning of life is the moment when Christ was immolated for him. But Christ is immolated for him at the moment he acknowledges grace and becomes conscious of the life obtained for him by means of that immolation." [4]

I realize that it is not easy and may perhaps not even be possible to say such things to people, much less to the secularized world of today. But it is what those of us who evangelize need to be very clear about so that we can draw courage from it and believe the word of John the Evangelist that says, "he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

4. The laity, the primary agents of evangelization

I said at the beginning that in terms of the protagonists, the novelty in today's period of evangelization consists in the laity. Their role in evangelization has been described by the Council in *Apostolicam actuositatem* ["Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People"], by Paul VI in *Evangelii nuntiandi* ["Evangelization in the Modern World"], and by John Paul II in *Christifideles laici* ["The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People"].

The basis for this universal call to mission is already found in the Gospel. After Jesus first sent the apostles out on mission, we then read in the Gospel of Luke that Jesus "appointed seventy-two others, and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to come" (10:1). Those seventy-two disciples were probably all the disciples he had gathered at that point, or at least all those who were disposed to commit themselves seriously to him. Jesus thus sent *all* his disciples.

I know a layman in the United States, the father of a family, who alongside his profession also carries on powerful evangelization. He is the kind of man who has a good sense of humor and evangelizes to the sound of loud laughter that can only happen with Americans. When he goes to a new place, he begins by saying very seriously, "Twenty-five hundred bishops gathered in Rome have asked me to come proclaim the gospel to you." People are of course intrigued. He then explains that the 2,500 bishops are those who participated in the Second Vatican Council and wrote the decree on the apostolate of the laity in which they exhort every Christian layperson to participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church. He was perfectly correct when he said, "they asked *me*." Those words are not blowing in the wind, addressed to everyone but no one in particular. They are personally addressed to every Catholic lay person.

We all know about the nuclear energy that is released by the fission of the atom. An atom of uranium absorbs a high energy neutron and splits in two, creating two new elements from the original; energy and more neutrons are

released through this process. This begins a chain reaction. The two new elements in turn can themselves absorb neutrons and break into four new atoms, and so on to the point where the energy released in the end is enormous. It is not necessarily destructive energy because nuclear energy can be used for peaceful purposes on behalf of the human race.

Similarly, we can say that laypeople are a kind of nuclear energy in the Church on a spiritual level. A layperson caught up with the gospel and living next to other people can "contaminate" two others, and these two, four others, etc. Since lay Christians number not only tens of thousands like the clergy but hundreds of millions, they can truly play a decisive role in spreading the beneficial light of the gospel in the world.

The apostolate of the laity did not begin to be discussed only by the Second Vatican Council; it had already been discussed for a long time. However, what the Council brought forth that was new about this topic concerned the qualification for laypeople to work alongside the apostolate of the hierarchy. They are not merely collaborators who are called upon for their professional contributions, their time, and their resources. They are bearers of charisms through which, *Lumen gentium* says, they are made "fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the church." [5]

Jesus willed that his apostles would be pastors of the sheep and fishers of men. For the clergy it is easier to be pastors than to be fishermen, that is, it is easier to nourish those who come to Church through the word and the sacraments than it is to seek out those who are far off in cultural environments that are very different. The parable of the lost sheep is reversed today: ninety-nine sheep have gone off and one remains in the sheepfold. The danger for us is to spend all our time nourishing this one remaining sheep and not to have time -- also because of the scarcity of clergy -- to seek out those who are lost. The contribution of the laity in this situation seems providential.

The most developed expression along these lines is found in ecclesial movements. Their specific contribution to evangelization is to offer adults an opportunity to rediscover their baptism and to become active and committed members of the Church. Many adult conversions and the return of nominal Catholics to religious practice are occurring through these movements.

Recently the Holy Father Benedict XVI has returned to the topic of the importance of the family in evangelization, speaking of the central role of the Christian family: "Just as the eclipse of God and the crisis of the family are linked," he said, "so the new evangelization is inseparable from the Christian family." [6]

Commenting on the text in Luke about the seventy-two disciples, St. Gregory the Great writes that he sent them two by two because "there can be no love where there are fewer than two people," [7] and love is how people can recognize that we are disciples of Christ. This is true of everyone, but in a very special way for the two parents. If they can do nothing more to help their children in their faith, they would already be accomplishing a great deal if their children, seeing them, could say among themselves, "Look how Dad and Mom love each other." The scripture says, "love is of God" (1 John 4:7), and that explains why wherever there is some genuine love, God is being proclaimed there.

The first evangelization begins within the walls of the home. Jesus said to a young man who asked him one day what he needed to do to be saved, "go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, . . . and come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). However, in the case of another young man, who wanted to leave everything and follow him, Jesus did not permit him to do that but told him, "Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you" (Mark 5:19).

There is a famous Negro spiritual called "There is a Balm in Gilead." Some of the words can encourage lay people, and not just them, in the task of person-to-person, door-to-door evangelization:

"If you can't preach like Peter, if you can't pray like Paul, go home and tell your neighbor, he died to save us all."

In two days it will be Christmas. It is a comfort to lay brothers and sisters to remember that in addition to Mary and Joseph around Jesus' cradle, their representatives were also there, the shepherds and the magi.

Christmas brings us back to the point of the ship's wake because everything began there with that Baby in the manger. In the liturgy we will hear proclaimed, "Hodie Christus natus est, hodie Salvator apparuit" (Today Christ is born, today the Savior appeared). Hearing these words, let us ponder again what we said about anamnesis that makes an event more present than when it happened the first time. Yes, Christ is born today, because he is truly born for me in the moment when I recognize and believe the mystery. "What good does it do me if Christ was born in Bethlehem once if he is not born again in my heart through faith?" This idea was expressed by Origen [8] and repeated by St. Augustine and St. Bernard.

Let us make our invocation the one chosen by the Holy Father for his Christmas greeting this year, and let us repeat it with all the yearning of our hearts: "Veni ad salvandum nos" (Come, Lord, and save us!).

[English translation by Marsha Daigle Williamson]

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[1] Benedict XVI, *Motu Proprio*, "Ubicumque et semper," September 21, 2010.

[2] "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy" [*Sacrosanctum concilium*], 7, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, gen. ed. Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello Publishing Co., 1995), p. 12.

[3] Søren Kierkegaard, *Training in Christianity*, trans. Walter Lowrie, pref. Richard John Neuhaus (New York: Random House, 2004), p. 29.

[4] *Easter Homilies of the year 387* (SCh 36, p. 59ff).

[5] *Lumen gentium* ["Dogmatic Constitution on the Church"]. 12, in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, p. 17.

[6] Benedict XVI, "New Evangelization Inseparable from Family," Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Family," *L'Osservatore Romano*, December 2, 2011, p. 8.

[7] Gregory the Great, *Morals on Job*, 34, 41, quoted in Gregory the Great,

John Moorhead (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 148.

[8] See Origen, Homilies on Luke, 22, 3, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard (Washington DC: the Catholic University Press of America, 1996), 94: "For what profit is it to you, if Christ came once in the flesh, unless he also comes into your soul?"

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