

Eucharist Is “God’s Absolute ‘No’ to Violence”

3RD LENTEN SERMON BY FATHER CANTALAMESSA | VATICAN CITY | MARCH 11, 2005 (ZENIT.ORG)

Thanks to the Eucharist, “God’s absolute ‘no’ to violence, pronounced on the cross, is kept alive through the centuries,” said the Pontifical Household preacher in a Lenten meditation.

With his sacrifice, “Christ defeated violence, not opposing it with greater violence, but suffering it and laying bare all its injustice and uselessness,” said Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa today as he led the third in a series of weekly meditations during Lent.

The meditations, held in the Redemptoris Mater Chapel in the Apostolic Palace, are attended by members of the Roman Curia and other cardinals, bishops and religious close to the Vatican.

John Paul II was unable to attend, as he continues to recover at the Gemelli Polyclinic from his tracheotomy.

Father Cantalamessa summarized his sermon for ZENIT, which is on the topic of the Eucharistic hymn “Adoro Te Devote.” He began a series of commentaries on the hymn in Advent, and has continued the theme in the first meditations in this Lenten series.

At the time the “Adoro Te Devote” was composed, the preacher said, “many factors ended by tacitly making the Eucharist the sacrament of the body of Christ and much less so of his blood.”

The symbol of the pelican introduced the theme of the blood of Christ in the sixth stanza of the Eucharistic hymn: “Lord Jesus, good Pelican, / cleanse me, filthy, with your Blood, / only one drop of which can free / the whole world of all crimes.”

“It was a common belief in antiquity and in the Middle Ages that the pelican would wound its breast with its beak to feed, with its own blood, its hungry offspring or even to bring them back to life if they were dead,” said Father Cantalamessa.

The “theological content of this stanza is a solemn act of faith in the universal value of the blood of Christ, of which only one drop suffices to save the whole world,” but “the greatest difficulty” the hymn “poses at present” refers “to the means chosen to realize this universal salvation.”

“Why blood, precisely? Perhaps it must be thought that Christ’s sacrifice—and, therefore, the Eucharist, which renews it sacramentally—only confirms the affirmation according to which ‘violence is the secret heart and soul of the sacred,’” said the preacher.

But, “today we have the possibility to shed a new and liberating light on the Eucharist, precisely following the path that led René Girard (member of the Académie française) to the affirmation that violence is intrinsic to the sacred, to the conviction that the paschal mystery of Christ has unmasked and



broken for ever the alliance between the sacred and violence,” he continued.

“According to this thinker, with his doctrine and life, Jesus unmasks and tears apart the mechanism of the scapegoat that canonizes violence, making himself innocent, the victim of all violence,” Father Cantalamessa added.

In this connection, it is “emblematic that over his death there were gathered ‘Herod and Pontius Pilate, together with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel’; those who were enemies before became friends, exactly as in every crisis of the scapegoat,” he said, citing ACTS 4:27.

“Christ defeated violence, not by opposing it with greater violence, but suffering it and laying bare its injustice and uselessness,” the preacher said. “He

inaugurated a new kind of victory that St. Augustine condenses in three words: *victor quia victima*: victor because he is victim.”

And “resurrecting him from the dead, the Father declared, once and for all, on what side truth and justice are, and on what side error and lies,” stated the Pontifical Household preacher.

The “novelty of Christ’s sacrifice is made relevant from different points of view in Hebrews: ‘He has no need, as did the high priests, to offer sacrifice day after day’; ‘he would have had to suffer repeatedly from the foundation of the world. But now once for all he has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice.’”

Referring to texts on Christ’s sacrifice and the redemption, Father Cantalamessa said that “the events and experiences of the 20th century, never before lived in such proportions by humanity, posed new to questions to Scripture, and Scripture, as always, revealed itself capable of answers to the measure of the questions.”

“The abolition of the death penalty also received a new light from the analysis on violence and the sacred. Something of the mechanism of the scapegoat is under way in every capital execution, including in those endorsed by the law,” he said.

“‘One died for all.’ The believer has another reason—Eucharistic—to oppose the death penalty. How can Christians, in certain countries, approve and rejoice over the news that a criminal has been condemned to death, when we read in the Bible: ‘Do I indeed derive any pleasure from the death of the wicked? says the Lord God. Do I not rather rejoice

when he turns from his evil way that he may live?’” asked Father Cantalamessa.

In the preacher’s opinion, “the modern debate on violence and the sacred thus helps us to accept a new dimension of the Eucharist,” thanks to which “God’s absolute ‘no’ to violence, pronounced on the cross, is kept alive through the centuries. The Eucharist is the sacrament of non-violence!”

At the same time, the Eucharist “appears, positively, as God’s ‘yes’ to innocent victims, the place where every day blood spilt on earth is united to that of Christ, whose ‘sprinkled blood...speaks more eloquently than that of Abel.’”

Father Cantalamessa added: “From this we understand also what is robbed from the Mass, and the world, if it is robbed of this dramatic character, expressed always with the term sacrifice.”

RANIERO CANTALAMESSA IS A FRANCISCAN CAPUCHIN CATHOLIC PRIEST. DIVINITY DOCTOR AND DOCTOR IN CLASSICAL LITERATURE. FORMER ORDINARY PROFESSOR OF HISTORY OF ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY AND DIRECTOR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS SCIENCES AT THE CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF MILAN. MEMBER OF THE INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION (1975-1981).

IN 1980 HE WAS APPOINTED BY POPE JOHN PAUL II PREACHER TO THE PAPAL HOUSEHOLD IN WHICH CAPACITY HE STILL SERVES, PREACHING A WEEKLY SERMON IN ADVENT AND LENT IN THE PRESENCE OF THE POPE, THE CARDINALS, BISHOPS AND PRELATES OF THE ROMAN CURIA AND THE GENERAL SUPERIORS OF RELIGIOUS ORDERS.