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Father Cantalamessa's Good Friday Homily

"We Have a Great High Priest"

VATICAN CITY, APRIL 2, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- Here is the homily delivered today by Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher of the Pontifical Household, at the celebration of the Lord's passion in St. Peter's Basilica. The liturgy was presided over by Benedict XVI.

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"We have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God": Thus begins the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews that we heard in the second reading. In the Year for Priests, the liturgy for Good Friday enables us to go back to the historical source of the Christian priesthood. It is the source of both the realizations of the priesthood: the ministerial, of bishops and presbyters, and the universal of all the faithful. This one also, in fact, is founded on the sacrifice of Christ that, Revelation says, "loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (Revelation 1:5-6). Hence, it is of vital importance to understand the nature of the sacrifice and of the priesthood of Christ because it is from them that priests and laity, in a different way, must bear the stamp and seek to live the exigencies.

The Letter to the Hebrews explains in what the novelty and uniqueness of Christ's priesthood consists, not only in regard to the priesthood of the old Covenant, but as the history of religions teaches us today, in regard to every priestly institution also outside of the Bible. "But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come [...] he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:11-14).

Every other priest offers something outside of himself, Christ offered himself; every other priest offers victims, Christ offered himself victim! Saint Augustine enclosed in a famous formula this new kind of priesthood in which priest and victim are the same thing: "Ideo sacerdos, quia sacrificium": priest because victim."^[1]

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In 1972 a famous French thinker launched the thesis according to which "violence is the heart and secret spirit of the sacred."^[2] In fact, at the origin and center of every religion there is sacrifice, and sacrifice entails destruction and death. The newspaper "Le Monde" greeted the affirmation, saying that it made of that year "a year to mark with an asterisk in the annals of humanity." However, before this date, that scholar had come close again to Christianity and at Easter of 1959 he made public his "conversion," declaring himself a believer and returning to the Church.

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This enabled him not to pause, in his subsequent studies, on the analysis of the mechanism of violence, but to point out also how to come out of it. Many, unfortunately, continue to quote René Girard as the one who denounced the alliance between the sacred and violence, but they do not speak of the Girard who pointed out in the paschal mystery of Christ the total and definitive break of such an alliance. According to him, Jesus unmasks and breaks the mechanism of the scapegoat that makes violence sacred, making himself, the victim of all violence.

The process that leads to the birth of religion is reversed, in regard to the explanation that Freud had given. In Christ, it is God who makes himself victim, not the victim (in Freud, the primordial father) that, once sacrificed, is successively raised to divine dignity (the Father of the Heavens). It is no longer man that offers sacrifices to God, but God who "sacrifices" himself for man, consigning for him to death his Only-begotten Son (cf. John 3:16). Sacrifice no longer serves to "placate" the divinity, but rather to placate man and to make him desist from his hostility toward God and his neighbor.

Christ did not come with another's blood but with his own. He did not put his sins on the shoulders of others -- men or animals -- he put others' sins on his own shoulders: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24).

Can one, then, continue to speak of sacrifice in regard to the death of Christ and hence of the Mass? For a long time the scholar mentioned rejected this concept, holding it too marked by the idea of violence, but then ended by admitting the possibility, on condition of seeing, in that of Christ, a new kind of sacrifice, and of seeing in this change of meaning "the central fact in the religious history of humanity."

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Seen in this light, the sacrifice of Christ contains a formidable message for today's world. It cries out to the world that violence is an archaic residue, a regression to primitive stages and surmounted by human history and -- if it is a question of believers -- a culpable and scandalous delay in becoming aware of the leap in quality operated by Christ.

It reminds also that violence is losing. In almost all ancient myths the victim is the defeated and the executioner the victor.[3] Jesus changed the sign of victory. He inaugurated a new kind of victory that does not consist in making victims, but in making himself victim. "Victor quia victima!" victor because victim, thus Augustine describes the Jesus of the cross.[4]

The modern value of the defense of victims, of the weak and of threatened life is born on the terrain of Christianity, it is a later fruit of the revolution carried out by Christ. We have the counter-proof. As soon as the Christian vision is abandoned (as Nietzsche did) to bring the pagan back to life, this conquest is lost and one turns to exalt "the strong, the powerful, to its most exalted point, the superman," and the Christian is described as "a morality of slaves," fruit of the mean resentment of the weak against the strong.

Unfortunately, however, the same culture of today that condemns violence, on the other hand, favors and exalts it. Garments are torn in face of certain events of blood, but not being aware that the terrain is prepared for them with that which is shown in the next page of the newspaper or in the successive palimpsest of the television network. The pleasure with which one indulges in the description of violence and the competition of the one who is first and the most crude in describing it do no more than favor it. The result is not a catharsis of evil, but an incitement to it. It is disturbing that violence and blood have become one of the ingredients of greatest claim in films and video-games, that one is attracted to it and enjoys watching it.

The same scholar recalled above has unveiled the matrix that sparks the mechanism of violence: mimicry, that innate human inclination to consider desirable the things that others desire and, hence, to repeat the things that

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they see others do. The "heard" psychology is that which leads to the choice of the "scapegoat" to find, in the struggle against a common enemy -- in general, the weakest element, the different one -- a proper artificial and momentous cohesion.

We have an example in the recurrent violence of youth in the stadium, in the bullying in schools and in certain square manifestations that leave behind destruction and debris. A generation of youth that has had the very rare privilege of not knowing a real war and of never having been called to arms, amuses itself (because it is about a game, even if stupid and at times tragic) to invent little wars, driven by the same instinct that moved the primordial horde.

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However there is a yet more grave and widespread violence than that of youth in stadiums and squares. I am not speaking here of violence against children, of which unfortunately also elements of the clergy are stained; of that there is sufficient talk outside of here. I am speaking of violence to women. This is an occasion to make persons and institutions that fight against it understand that Christ is their best ally.

It is a violence all the more grave in as much as it is often carried out in the shelter of domestic walls, unknown to all, when it is not actually justified with pseudo-religious and cultural prejudices. The victims find themselves desperately alone and defenseless. Only today, thanks to the support and encouragement of so many associations and institutions, some find the strength to come out in the open and denounce the guilty.

Much of this violence has a sexual background. It is the male who thinks he can demonstrate his virility by inflicting himself on the woman, without realizing that he is only demonstrating his insecurity and baseness. Also in confrontations with the woman who has made a mistake, what a contrast between the conduct of Christ and that still going on in certain environments! Fanaticism calls for stoning; Christ responds to the men who have presented an adulteress to him saying: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). Adultery is a sin that is always committed by two, but for which only one has always been (and, in some parts of the world, still is) punished.

Violence against woman is never so odious as when it nestles where mutual respect and love should reign, in the relationship between husband and wife. It is true that violence is not always and wholly on the part of one, that one can be violent also with the tongue and not only with the hands, but no one can deny that in the vast majority of cases the victim is the woman.

There are families where the man still believes himself authorized to raise his voice and hands on the women of the house. Wife and children at times live under the constant threat of "Daddy's anger." To such as these it is necessary to say courteously: dear men colleagues, by creating you male, God did not intend to give you the right to be angry and to bang your fist on the table for the least thing. The word addressed to Eve after the fault: "He (the man) shall rule over you" (Genesis 3:16), was a bitter forecast, not an authorization.

John Paul II inaugurated the practice of the request for forgiveness for collective wrongs. One of these, among the most just and necessary, is the forgiveness that half of humanity must ask of the other half, men to women. It must not be generic or abstract. It must lead, especially in one who professes himself a Christian, to concrete gestures of conversion, to words of apology and reconciliation within families and in society.

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The passage from the Letter to the Hebrews that we heard continues saying: "In the days of his flesh, with loud cries and with tears he offered prayers and supplications to Him who could save him from death." Jesus felt in all its crudity the situation of the victims, the suffocated cries and silent tears. Truly, "we do not have a

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high priest who cannot suffer with us in our weaknesses." In every victim of violence Christ relives mysteriously his earthly experience. Also in regard to every one of these he says: "you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).

By a rare coincidence, this year our Easter falls on the same week of the Jewish Passover which is the ancestor and matrix within which it was formed. This pushes us to direct a thought to our Jewish brothers. They know from experience what it means to be victims of collective violence and also because of this they are quick to recognize the recurring symptoms. I received in this week the letter of a Jewish friend and, with his permission, I share here a part of it.

He said: "I am following with indignation the violent and concentric attacks against the Church, the Pope and all the faithful by the whole world. The use of stereotypes, the passing from personal responsibility and guilt to a collective guilt remind me of the more shameful aspects of anti-Semitism. Therefore I desire to express to you personally, to the Pope and to the whole Church my solidarity as Jew of dialogue and of all those that in the Jewish world (and there are many) share these sentiments of brotherhood. Our Passover and yours undoubtedly have different elements, but we both live with Messianic hope that surely will reunite us in the love of our common Father. I wish you and all Catholics a Good Easter."

And also we Catholics wish our Jewish brothers a Good Passover. We do so with the words of their ancient teacher Gamaliel, entered in the Jewish Passover Seder and from there passed into the most ancient Christian liturgy:

"He made us pass
From slavery to liberty,
From sadness to joy,
From mourning to celebration,
From darkness to light,
From servitude to redemption
Because of this before him we say: Alleluia."[5]

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Notes

[1] St. Augustine, Confessions, 10, 43.

[2] Cf. R. Girard, *La Violence et le Sacré*, Grasset, Paris, 1972.

[3] Cf. R. Girard, *Il sacrificio*, Milano 2004, pp. 73 f.

[4] St. Augustine, Confessions, 10, 43.

[5] Pesachim, X, 5 e Meliton of Sardi, Easter Homily, 68 (SCh 123, p. 98).

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