

The Glory and Power of the Gospel

by Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, OFMCap, Preacher to the Papal Household

"When we need a labor union we go to our parish priest; when we need the word of God we go to the (Protestant) pastor."

"In Latin America the Catholic Church has made an option for the poor and the poor have opted for the Protestant Churches."

These shocking statements have been heard by Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa OFMCap and perhaps help to explain the worrying exodus from the Catholic Church in Latin America. Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, the preacher to the Papal household, speaking at a retreat for 1500 priests and 70 bishops in Mexico in 1992, called on the Catholic Church to re-discover once again the beauty and power of the simple kerygma in their preaching, and not dilute it with either a merely works-oriented gospel or one that concentrated too much on self-fulfillment. Below is a translated and precise account of part of what he said.

What have we done with this fundamental proclamation which Jesus and Paul call "the Gospel", the Good News? What place does it occupy in our preaching? In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who has faith." (Rom. 1:16) Obviously even in that time too there was the temptation to be ashamed of the Gospel. For the Jews it was a scandal and for the Greeks, stupidity. (1 Cor. 1:22-25) Paul writes to the Galatians, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel..."

Trusting in Works

I think we must repeat this cry of the Apostle again in our times. I have great esteem and respect for "liberation theology". However, like all good things there is always a danger that it can fall short of the fullness of the gospel. The danger, I believe, is not so much that it ends in Marxist ideology, but the much greater danger of once again trusting in works.

This occurs when social and political liberation is confused with liberation from sin and evil, and material salvation with spiritual, making both of them depend solely on the efforts of man. When this happens, I believe one slips imperceptibly into what Paul calls "another gospel", a gospel which is no longer the "power of God." Jesus is reduced to an example of liberation rather than the "cause of salvation" for all those who believe in him.

Another Gospel

This is not the only way, however that we can preach "another gospel". It may not even be the most dangerous one. Another gospel is also preached when one speaks of spiritual liberation through psychology, by the use of oriental meditation techniques, enneagrams, New Age and other such things. These are all "weak and poor elements of this world" as Paul called them compared to the power of the Gospel. Through them there is a danger that we find ourselves thinking like the Colossians, who sought salvation through their astral speculations and syncretistically mixed Christ with the other spirits and powers. As the Apostle Paul writes, "See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human traditions, according to the elemental spirits of the universe and not according to Christ." (Col. 2:8-9)

These seem like words written for our times. Today there is a new invasion of Christianity from retreats and spiritual exercises and courses, all inspired by this man-made gospel. These concentrate on the "self": self-knowledge, self-expression, self-acceptance, self-justification, self-realization" in other words, self fulfillment instead of the self-denial and self-forgetfulness that lies at the heart of Christianity. In this man-centered gospel, salvation comes from within man himself and Jesus becomes reduced to just one more ingredient in the religious cocktail.

This "other gospel" originates in those countries which are rich and sated, from people who believe it is possible to go "beyond faith" and "beyond Christ". As if anything beyond faith could

exist. "Be he accursed (anathema)!" says Paul. This is a warning full of love. It means "Have nothing to do with these people. Keep yourselves separate from them. It is an apostasy from Christ."

Gospel of Grace

Christians who put Christianity on the same plane as other religions and find them all equally satisfying show that they have not understood the uniqueness of Christianity and its essence, which is grace. Human religions have their way of preaching salvation. Buddha, for example, show how to free oneself from pain. He gives an example and says to his followers: "I have experienced this way; if you wish, you can do likewise..." Jesus also said to his disciples; "I have given you an example" (Jn. 13:14), but he didn't stop there. He died and rose again for us, and he has thereby given us not only the example, but also the grace and the ability to follow his example. The Christian Gospel is the Gospel of grace. We can only love because "He first loved us." (1 Jn. 4:19)

Faith and Works

These are just some of the things that nowadays tend to obscure the Gospel. Another problem comes from the legacy of our history. When Luther proclaimed the thesis of justification by "faith alone", the Catholic Church in reaction to counter balance his polemical excesses had to reaffirm the importance and need for works. At the Council of Trent she stated substantially two things--that we are not saved by good works but we are not saved without them either. Unfortunately in a prevailing polemical atmosphere this led to a hardening of the respective positions. The more the Protestants insisted on justification by faith alone, the more the Catholics insisted--at least in their preaching--on works. This legacy remains with us today. When have you ever heard a Catholic homily based on justification on faith? And yet, this is the very heart and strength of the Christian message.

Thank God today we are living in times in which the Church is breaking these ancient counter-positions. Let us take advantage of this to once again, while not forgetting the importance of works and virtues in the Christian life, rediscover the glory and power of the Kerygma in our preaching.

Translated and edited from Unigidos por el Espiritu, Eicep, Valencia, 1993. This article was taken, with permission, from the September-December 1995 issue of the (ICCRS) Newsletter, Palazzo della Cancelleria, 00120 Vatican City, Europe.