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Father Cantalamessa's 2nd Advent Sermon

John the Baptist: More Than a Prophet

VATICAN CITY, DEC. 14, 2007 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Here is a translation of the second Advent sermon delivered today by Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, Pontifical Household preacher, in the presence of Benedict XVI and members of the Roman Curia in preparation for Christmas.

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Last time, basing myself on Hebrews 1:1-3, I attempted to sketch the image of Jesus that we get when we compare him to the prophets. But between the time of the prophets and that of Jesus there is a special, pivotal figure: John the Baptist. Nothing in the New Testament illuminates the newness of Christ better than comparison with the Baptist.

The theme of fulfillment, of an epochal turning point, clearly emerges in the texts in which Jesus himself speaks of his relationship to the precursor. Today scholars recognize that these sayings are not inventions of the post-Easter community, but derive their substance from the historical Jesus. Indeed, some of them are inexplicable if they are attributed to the subsequent Christian community.[1]

A reflection on Jesus and John the Baptist is also the best way to put us in tune with the Advent liturgy. In fact, the Gospels of the second and third Sunday of Advent have the figure and message of the precursor at their center. There is a progression in Advent: In the first week the voice that stands out is the prophet Isaiah's, who announces the Messiah from a distance; in the second and third weeks it is that of the Baptist who announces the Christ as present; in the last week the prophet and the precursor give way to the Mother, who carries him in her womb.

1. The great turning point

The most complete text in which Jesus reflects on his relationship to John the Baptist is the Gospel passage that the liturgy has us read next Sunday at Mass. John, in prison, sends his disciples to ask Jesus: "Are you the one who must come or should we wait for another?" (Matthew 11:2-6; Luke 7:19-23).

The preaching of the Rabbi of Nazareth whom he himself had baptized and presented to Israel seems to John to go in a very different direction from the fiery one that he had expected. More than the imminent judgment of God, he preaches the mercy that is present, offered to all, righteous and sinners.

The most significant part of the whole text is the praise that Jesus offers of John after he had answered the question posed by John's disciples: "Why then did you go out? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet [...]. Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent are taking it by force. All the prophets and the law prophesied up to the time of John. And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah, the one who is to come.

Whoever has ears ought to hear" (Matthew 11:11-15).

One thing is made plain by these words: Between the mission of John the Baptist and that of Jesus something so decisive has happened that it constitutes a parting of the waters, so to speak, between two epochs. The focus of history has shifted: That which is important is not in a more or less imminent future but "here and now," that kingdom that is already operative in Christ. Between John's preaching and the preaching of Jesus there is a qualitative leap: The littlest one of the new order is superior to the greatest one of the old order.

The occurrence of this epochal turning point is confirmed in many other contexts in the Gospel. We only need recall such words of Jesus as: "Behold, there is one here greater than Jonah. [...] Behold, there is one here greater than Solomon!" (Matthew 12:41-42). "Blessed are your eyes because they see and your ears because they hear. Truly I say to you, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see and did not see it, and longed to hear what you hear and did not hear it!" (Matthew 13:16-17). All of the so-called parables of the kingdom -- one thinks of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price -- at bottom express the same idea, always in a new and different way: With Jesus, history's decisive hour has struck, in his presence the decision that determines salvation imposes itself.

It was this claim that brought Bultmann's disciples to break with the master. Bultmann included Jesus in Judaism, making him a premise of Christianity but not yet a Christian; he attributed the great turning point to the faith of the post-Easter community. Bornkamm and Conzelmann realized the impossibility of this thesis: The "epochal turning point" already happened in Jesus' preaching. John belonged to the premises and the preparation, but with Jesus we are already in the time of fulfillment.

In his book "Jesus of Nazareth," the Holy Father confirms this conclusion of the most serious and up-to-date exegesis. He writes: "For such a radical collision to occur, provoking the radical step of handing Jesus over to the Romans, something dramatic must have been said or done. The great and stirring events come right at the beginning; the nascent Church could only slowly come to appreciate their full significance, which she came to grasp as, in 'remembering' them, she gradually thought through and reflected on these events [...]. No, the greatness, the dramatic newness, comes directly from Jesus; within the faith and life of the community it is further developed, but not created. In fact, the 'community' would not have even emerged or survived at all unless some extraordinary reality had preceded it." [2]

In Luke's theology it is evident that Jesus occupies the "center of time." With his coming he divided history in two parts, creating an absolute "before" and "after." Today it is becoming common practice, especially in the secular media, to abandon the traditional way of dating events "before Christ" or "after Christ" ("ante Christum natum e post Christum natum") in favor of the more neutral formula of "before the common era" and "common era." It was a decision motivated by a desire not to offend the sensibilities of people and other religions who do not use Christian chronology; in that regard it should be respected, but for Christians there is no question of the decisive role that Christ's coming plays in the religious history of humanity.

2. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit

Now, as is our usual practice, we will pass from the exegetical and theological certainty that has been established to our life today.

The comparison of John the Baptist and Jesus crystallizes in the New Testament in the comparison of the baptism with water and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. "I baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:8; Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16). "I did not know him," the precursor says in John's Gospel, "but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit'" (John 1:33). And Peter, in the house of Cornelius, says: "And I remembered the word of the Lord how, he said, 'John baptized with water but you shall be baptized

with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 11:16).

What does it mean to say that Jesus is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit? The expression serves not only to distinguish Jesus' baptism from John's baptism; it serves to distinguish the entire person and work of Christ from that of the precursor. In other words, in all of his work Jesus is the one who baptizes in the Holy Spirit. Baptism has a metaphorical meaning here; it means to inundate, to completely cover, as water does to bodies that are immersed in it.

Jesus "baptizes in the Holy Spirit" in the sense that he receives and gives the Spirit "without measure" (cf. John 3:34), he "pours out" his Spirit (Acts 2:33) on all of redeemed humanity. The expression refers more to the event of Pentecost than to the sacrament of baptism. "John baptized with water but before many days you will be baptized in the Holy Spirit" (Act 1:5), Jesus tells the disciples, obviously referring to Spirit's descent at Pentecost that would happen in a few days.

The expression "baptize with the Spirit" therefore defines the essential work of the Messiah, which already in the prophets of the Old Testament appears as oriented toward the regeneration of humanity through a great and universal outpouring of the Spirit of God (cf. Joel 3:1ff.). Applying all of this to the life and time of the Church, we must conclude that the risen Jesus baptizes in the Spirit not only in the sacrament of baptism, but, in a different way, also in other moments: in the Eucharist, in listening to the Word and, in general, through all the channels of grace.

If we want, and have enough faith, this very chapel in which we stand can be the cenacle into which the Risen Lord enters, [despite] closed doors, breathes on our faces and says almost begging us: "Receive the Holy Spirit."

St. Thomas Aquinas writes: "There is an invisible mission of the Spirit every time there is a progress in virtue or an augmentation of grace...; when someone moves to a new activity or a new state of grace." [3] The Church's liturgy itself inculcates this. All of its prayers and its hymns to the Holy Spirit begin with the cry, "Come!": "Come, O Creator Spirit!" "Come, Holy Spirit!" And those who pray this way have already at sometime received the Spirit. This means that the Spirit is something that we have received and that we must receive again and again.

3. Baptism in the Spirit

In this context, we must say something about the so-called baptism in the Spirit that for a century has become an experience lived by millions of believers in almost all of the Christian denominations. This is a rite made up of gestures of great simplicity, accompanied by dispositions of repentance and faith in the promise of Christ: "The Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

It is a renewal and an activation, not only of baptism and confirmation, but of all the events of grace of one's state in life: priestly ordination, religious profession, marriage. Besides making a good confession, those who are involved prepare by participating in catechism meetings in which they are put again in living and joyful contact with the principal truths and realities of the faith: the love of God, sin, salvation, new life, transformation in Christ, charisms, the fruits of the Spirit. Everything is characterized by a profound fraternal communion.

Sometimes, however, everything happens spontaneously, outside of all formal contexts and it is like being "surprised" by the Holy Spirit. A man gave this testimony: "I was on a plane and I was reading the last chapter of a book on the Holy Spirit. At a certain point it was as if the Holy Spirit came out of the pages of the book and entered into my body. Tears streamed from my eyes. I began to pray. I was overcome by a power quite beyond me." [4]

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The most common effect of this grace is that the Holy Spirit passes from being a more or less abstract object of faith, to being a fact of experience. Karl Rahner wrote: "We cannot deny that here below man can have experiences of grace that give him a feeling of liberation, open totally new horizons to him, make a deep impression on him, transform him, shaping, even over a long period of time, his deepest Christian attitude. Nothing prohibits us from calling such experiences baptism in the Spirit." [5]

Precisely through that which is called "baptism in the Spirit," there is an experience of the anointing of the Holy Spirit in prayer, of his power in pastoral ministry, of his consolation in trials, of his guidance in decisions. Before his manifestation in charisms it is thus that he is experienced: as Spirit who interiorly transforms us, gives us a taste of the praise of God, opens our mind to the understanding of the Scriptures, teaches us to proclaim Jesus "Lord" and gives us the courage to assume new and difficult tasks in the service of God and neighbor. This year is the 40th anniversary of the retreat that gave birth, in 1967, to the Charismatic Renewal in the Catholic Church, which is estimated to have touched no fewer than 80 million Catholics in a few decades. This is how one of the people who was present at that first retreat describes the effects of baptism in the Spirit on himself and on the group:

"Our faith has come alive, our believing has become a kind of knowing. Suddenly, the world of the supernatural has become more real than the natural. In brief, Jesus Christ is a real person to us, a real person who is Our Lord and who is active in our lives. [...] Prayer and the sacraments have become truly our daily bread instead of practices which we recognize as 'good for us.' A love of Scripture, a love of the Church I never thought possible, a transformation of our relationships with others, a need and a power of witness beyond all expectation, have all become part of our lives. The initial experience of the baptism in the Spirit was not at all emotional, but life has become suffused with calm, confidence, joy and peace. ... We sang the 'Veni Creator Spiritus' before each conference and meant it. We were not disappointed. We have also been showered with charismata. This also puts us in an ecumenical atmosphere at its best." [6]

We all see with clarity that these are precisely the things that the Church needs today to proclaim the Gospel to a world that has become wayward to the faith and the supernatural. We do not say that everyone is called to experience the grace of a new Pentecost in this way. However, we are all called not to remain outside this "current of grace" that flowed through the post-Conciliar Church. John XXIII spoke, in his time, of "a new Pentecost"; Paul VI went beyond this and spoke of "a perennial Pentecost," a continual Pentecost. It is worthwhile to listen again to the words he pronounced during a general audience:

"On several occasions we have asked about the greatest needs of the Church. [...] What do we feel is the first and last need of this blessed and beloved Church of ours? We must say it, almost trembling and praying, because as you know well, this is the Church's mystery and life: the Spirit, the Holy Spirit. He it is who animates and sanctifies the Church. He is her divine breath, the wind in her sails, the principle of her unity, the inner source of her light and strength. He is her support and consoler, her source of charisms and songs, her peace and her joy, her pledge and prelude to blessed and eternal life. The Church needs her perennial Pentecost; she needs fire in her heart, words on her lips, prophecy in her outlook. [...] The Church needs to rediscover the eagerness, the taste and the certainty of the truth that is hers." [7]

The philosopher Heidegger concluded his analysis of society with the alarmed cry: "Only a god can save us." We Christians know this God who can save us, and who will save us: It is the Holy Spirit! Today something called "aroma therapy" is widely popular. It uses essential oils that emit a perfume to maintain health and as therapy for certain disturbances. The Internet is full of advertising about aroma therapy. There are perfumes for physical maladies, like stress; there are also "perfumes for the soul"; one of these is supposed to help us achieve "interior peace."

Physicians discourage this practice, which is not scientifically confirmed and which in fact, in some cases, provokes counter indications. But what I would like to say is that there is a sure, infallible aroma therapy that

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does not provoke counter indications: that one made up of a special aroma, the "sacred chrism of the soul" that is the Holy Spirit! St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote: "A perfumed ointment ('myron') was poured upon the Lord's head to breath incorruptibility on the Church!"[8] Only if we also receive this "aroma" can we be "the sweet odor of Christ" in the world (2 Corinthians 2:15).

The Holy Spirit is a specialist above all in healing the sicknesses of marriage and family. Marriage consists in giving oneself to another; it is the sacrament of making oneself a gift. Now, the Holy Spirit is the gift made person; he is the giving of the Father to the Son and the Son to the Father. Where he comes the ability to make oneself a gift is reborn and with it the joy and the beauty of living together for husband and wife. The love of God that he "pours out into our hearts" revives every other expression of love and that of conjugal love in the first place. The Holy Spirit can truly make the family "the principal agent of peace" as the Holy Father defines it in the message for the next World Day of Peace.

There are numerous examples of dead marriages resurrected to new life by the action of the Spirit. I recently received the moving testimony of a couple which I want to show on my television program on the Gospel for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord ...

Naturally, the Spirit also revives the life of consecrated persons, which consists in making one's life a gift and an oblation "of sweet odor" to God for our brothers (cf. Ephesians 5:2).

4. The new prophecy of John the Baptist

Returning to John the Baptist, he can show us how to carry out our prophetic task in today's world. Jesus defines the Baptist as "more than a prophet," but where is the prophecy in his case? The prophets announced a future salvation; John indicates one that is present. In what sense, then, can he be called a prophet? Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel helped the people to go beyond the barrier of time; John the Baptist helps the people to go beyond the more difficult barrier of contrary appearances, of scandal, of banality and poverty with which the fateful hour manifests itself.

It is easy to believe in something grandiose, divine, when you project into the indefinite future: "in those days," "in the last days," in a cosmic framework, with the heavens that distill sweetness and the earth that opens to allow the Savior to grow. It is more difficult when you have to say: "Look! It is he!" and that of a person about whom people know everything: where he is from, what used to be his job, who is his mother and father.

With the words: "There is one among you whom you do not know!" (John 1:26), John the Baptist has inaugurated the new prophecy, that of the time of the Church, which does not consist in proclaiming a future and distant salvation, but in revealing the hidden presence of Christ in the world. In taking away the veil from the eyes of the people, he upsets the indifference, repeating with Isaiah: "See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth. Do you not see it?" (cf. Isaiah 43:19).

It is true that 20 centuries have passed and we know many more things about Jesus than about John. But the scandal has not been removed. In John's time the scandal derived from the physical body of Jesus, from his flesh so similar to ours, except in sin. Even today it is his body that causes difficulties and scandalizes: his mystical body, so similar to the rest of humanity, included sin.

"Jesus' testimony," we read in the Book of Revelation, "is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelations 19:10), the spirit of prophecy is required to bear witness to Christ. Is this spirit of prophecy in the Church? Is it cultivated? Or do we believe, implicitly, that we can do without it, depending more on human expedients?

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In 1992 there was a retreat for priests in Monterrey, Mexico, on the occasion of the 500th anniversary of the first evangelization of Latin America. There were 1,700 priests and about 70 bishops present. During the homily of the concluding Mass I spoke about the urgent need that the Church has for prophecy. After Communion there was prayer for a new Pentecost in small groups scattered throughout the great basilica. I remained in the presbytery. At a certain moment a young priest came up to me in silence, knelt down in front of me and with a look I will never forget said to me: "Bendígame, Padre, quiero ser profeta de Dios!" -- "Bless me, Father, I want to be a prophet for God!" A chill went down my spine because I saw that he was plainly moved by grace.

We can with humility make that priest's desire our own: "I want to be a prophet for God." Little, unknown to anyone, it does not matter, but one who, as Paul VI said, has fire in his heart, words on his lips, and prophecy in his outlook.

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[1] Cf. J. D.G. Dunn, "Christianity in the Making, I: Jesus Remembered," Eerdmans, 2003, Part 3, Ch. 12.

[2] Benedict XVI, "Jesus of Nazareth," Doubleday, 2007, 324.

[3] St. Thomas Aquinas, "Summa theologiae," I, q. 43, a. 6, ad 2.

[4] In "New Covenant," June, 1984, 12.

[5] K. Rahner, "Erfahrung des Geistes: Meditation auf Pfingsten," Herder, 1977.

[6] Testimony as reported by P. Gallagher Mansfield, "As by a New Pentecost," Steubenville 1992, 25f.

[7] General audience of 29 November 1972 ("Insegnamenti di Paolo VI," Vatican, X, 1210f.).

[8] St. Ignatius of Antioch, "Letter to the Ephesians," 17.

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