

**We proclaim to you eternal life (1John 1:2)**  
**Second homily of Advent 2020**  
**Raniero Cantalamessa**

“Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God” (Is 40:1). It is with these words of Isaiah that the first reading of the Second Sunday of Advent began. They amount to an invitation, indeed a command, perpetually relevant, addressed to the pastors and preachers of the Church. Today we want to take to heart this invitation and meditate on the most consoling proclamation that faith in Christ offers us.

The second ‘eternal truth’ that the situation of the pandemic has brought back to the surface is the instability and transience of all things. Everything is transitory: wealth, good health, beauty, physical strength... It is something we are faced with all the time. To realize this one just has to compare any pictures of today – our own or those of any celebrities – with those of twenty or thirty years ago. Shocked by the pace of life we do not pay attention to this, we do not dwell on it to draw the necessary conclusions.

And lo and behold, all of a sudden, all that we took for granted has shown its fragile side, just as a pane of ice you are cheerfully skating on that suddenly breaks under your feet and you are plunged into chilly water. As the Holy Father said during that memorable “urbi et orbi” blessing on March 27th: ‘The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities.’

The worldwide crisis we are going through can be an opportunity to discover with relief that there is, despite anything else, a firm point, some solid ground, or rather a rock on which we can build our life on earth. The word for Easter – Pesach in Hebrew – means passage / transit and the Latin word for it is transitus. This word per se evokes something ‘passing’ and ‘transitory’, therefore something rather negative. Saint Augustine felt this difficulty and resolved it in an enlightening manner. He explained that living out the Easter experience does indeed mean passing / shifting, but ‘passing to what does not pass’; it means ‘passing from the world, in order not to pass together with the world.’ Passing with your heart, before passing with your body!

What ‘never passes’ is, by definition, eternity. We have to rediscover faith in the afterlife. This is one of the contributions religions can make together to the effort to create a better and more fraternal world. It makes us understand that we are travelling together on our way to a common homeland, where there are no distinctions of race or nationality. We not only share the route, but also the destination. With very different concepts and contexts, this truth is common to all great religions, at least those that believe in a personal God. ‘Anyone who approaches God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him’ (Hb 11:6). This is how the Letter to the Hebrews sums up the common base – and the minimum common denominator – of every faith and every religion.

For Christians faith in everlasting life is not based on philosophical arguments about the immortality of the soul. It is based on a precise fact, that is the resurrection of Christ, and on his promise: ‘In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be’ (Jn 14:2-3). For us Christians everlasting life is not an abstract category, but rather a person. It means going to live with Jesus, ‘making one body’ with him, sharing the life of the Risen one in the fullness and joy of the life of the Trinity: “Cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo”, as saint Paul said to his dear Philippians: “I long to depart this life and be with Christ’ (Phil 1:23).

**An eclipse of faith**

We may well wonder what has happened to the Christian truth of eternal life. In times such as ours, dominated by physics and cosmology, atheists express above all their denial of the existence of a

creator of the world; in the 19th century they preferred to deny the afterlife. Hegel had claimed that 'Christians waste in Heaven the energy meant for the earth.' Taking up this criticism, Feuerbach and above all Marx fought against the belief in a life after death, claiming that it alienates from earthly commitments. The idea of personal survival in God was replaced by a survival within the species and within future society. Little by little, the word 'eternity' was not only regarded with suspicion, but also forgotten and silenced.

Secularization has then brought this process to completion and done so to such an extent that it is even inconvenient to continue to speak about eternity amongst educated people, those who keep up with the times. Secularization is a complex phenomenon in its ambivalence. It can refer to the autonomy of earthly matters and to the separation between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar, and in this sense not only is it not against the Gospel, but finds in it one of its deepest roots. On the other hand, the word secularization can also refer to a whole set of social attitudes that are hostile to religion and to faith. In this sense, it is preferable to use the word secularism. Secularism is in the same relation to secularization as scientism is to scientific precision and rationalism to rationality.

Even within such limits, the multi-faceted aspects of secularization appear in as many fields as theology, science, ethics, Biblical hermeneutics, expressions of culture and daily life. Its primeval meaning, though, is only one and it is clear. 'Secularization,' just like 'secularism,' stems from the word *saeculum* which in everyday language has ultimately come to refer to the present time – 'the current eon,' according to the Bible –, in opposition to eternity – the future eon, or 'the *saeculum saeculorum*,' 'the time of times, everlasting life,' as Scripture calls it. In this sense, secularism is a synonym of temporalism, that is a reduction of reality exclusively to its earthly dimension. Which means a radical fall of the horizon of eternity.

All of this has had a clear impact on the faith of believers. That very faith, on this point, has become shy and timid. When did we last hear someone preach on eternal life? The philosopher Kierkegaard was right: 'The afterlife has turned into a joke, a need so uncertain that not only is it no longer respected, but not even considered. People are even amused by the thought that there was a time when this idea shaped the whole of life.' We keep saying in the Creed: 'We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come,' but without really appreciating the importance of those words. The fall of the horizon of eternity has the same effect on Christian faith that sand has on a fire: it chokes it off.

What is the practical consequence of this eclipse of the idea of eternity? Saint Paul refers to the intention of those who do not believe in the resurrection of the dead: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die' (1Cor 15:32). When it is distorted, the natural desire to live for ever becomes a desire, or frenzy, to live well, that is pleasantly, even at the expense of others, if necessary. The entire earth becomes what Dante Alighieri said of Italy at his time: "the little threshing floor that so incites our savagery." Once the horizon of eternity has fallen, human suffering appears doubly absurd and without remedy. The world looks like 'a crumbling ant-heap' and 'a wave's drawing on the seashore erased by the next wave.'

### **Faith in eternity and evangelization**

Faith in eternal life is one of the conditions that make evangelization possible. As saint Paul the Apostle writes: 'If Christ has not been raised, then empty [too] is our preaching; empty, too, your faith. [...] If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are the most pitiable people of all.' (1Cor 15: 14 and 19). The proclamation of eternal life is the strength and the grit of Christian preaching. Let us look at what happened in the earliest Christian preaching. The oldest and most widespread idea in Greek and Roman paganism was that real life ended with death; thereafter there is only a life as larvae, in a world of shadows, without shape and colour. As he was approaching death, the Roman emperor Hadrian addressed to himself the well-known words in the epitaph on his tomb:

*Little soul, gentle and drifting, guest and companion of my body, now you will dwell below in pallid places, stark and bare; there you will abandon your play of yore. But one moment still, let us gaze together on these familiar shores, on these objects which doubtless we shall not see again.*

For a man who, in his lifetime, had had luxurious homes built for himself – just visit Villa Adriana in Tivoli to be sure –, such prospect was even more disheartening than for common folk. For his own tomb he erected the Mausoleum of Hadrian, present-day Castel Sant’Angelo, but he was perfectly aware that this would not change his fate of drifting towards ‘pallid places, stark and bare.’

On this backdrop, you understand the impact the Christian proclamation of a life after death infinitely richer than the earthly one, with no more tears, or death or anxiety, must have had (cf. Rev 21:4). You also understand why the subject and the symbols of eternal life – the palm tree, the peacock, the words “*requies aeterna*”, ‘eternal rest’ – are so frequent in the Christian burials in the catacombs.

In proclaiming eternal life not only can we leverage our faith, but also its affinity with the deepest yearning of the human heart. We are indeed ‘finite being capable of infinity’ (ens finitum, capax infiniti), mortal beings with a secret yearning for immortality. In a letter in reply to an Argentinian friend who reproached him for his apparent pride and presumption in wallowing in the problem of eternity, Miguel de Unamuno, who was by no means a champion of Christianity, wrote:

*I am not saying we deserve an afterlife, nor that logic proves it for us; I am saying that we need it – whether we deserve it or not, and that’s all. I am saying that what is only transitory does not satisfy me, in my longing for eternity, and that without it I am indifferent to everything else and everything else makes no difference to me. I need it, I really do! Without it there is no more joy in life and life joys have nothing to tell me anymore. It is just too easy to say: ‘You just have to live and be content with life.’ And what about those who are not content?*

And he himself added that it is not those who yearn for eternity that show that they despise the world and life on earth, but in fact it is those who do not: ‘I love life so much that losing it seems to me the worst of all evils. Those who enjoy life, day by day, and do not care to know whether they are going to lose it all or not do not really love it.’ Saint Augustine said much the same thing: ‘What is the advantage of living well if one is not to live for ever?’ ‘Everything but eternity in the world is vain’, as one of our poets proclaimed. To our contemporaries who nurture this need for eternity in the deep of their hearts, without perhaps daring to confess it even to themselves, we can repeat what Paul said to the Athenians: ‘What therefore you unknowingly worship, I proclaim to you.’ (cf. At 17:23).

### **Faith in eternity as a path to holiness**

We don’t need a renewed faith in eternity only to evangelize, that is to proclaim the Good News to other people; first of all, we need it to give ourselves new momentum on the path to holiness. Its first fruit is to make us free from any attachment to transient things, such as the increase of possessions and prestige.

Let us imagine this situation. A person receives an eviction letter and is asked to leave the house they live in quite soon. Fortunately, a good option for a new house comes up immediately. And what does that person do? They spend all their money to refurbish and redecorate the house they are to leave, instead of furnishing the one they are to move into! Wouldn’t that be silly? Well, we are also asked to “leave” this world and we look like that silly person if we only think about decorating our earthly home, without caring about doing good works which will follow us after our death.

As the concept of eternity fades away, this has an impact on believers, as it reduces their ability to face the suffering and trials of life with courage. We have to rediscover some of the faith of saint Bernard and saint Ignatius of Loyola. In any situation or faced with any obstacles, they would say to themselves: “*Quid hoc ad aeternitatem?*”, what is this compared to eternity?

Let us imagine a man holding scales: one of those called steelyard balances that you hold with only one hand and that have on one side a plate on which you put things to weigh and on the other a graded bar supporting the weight or measurement. If it falls, or the measurement is lost, all that you put on the plate lifts the bar and upsets the balance. Anything prevails, even a fistful of feathers.

We too are just like that, whenever we lose measurement of all that eternity is: our soul can be easily cast down by earthly things and suffering. Everything seems to be too heavy, too much for us to

bear. Jesus said: “If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter into life maimed or crippled than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into eternal fire.” (cf. Mt 18:8-9). Yet, having lost sight of eternity, we find it too much even to be asked to close our eyes before an immoral show, or to bear with a small cross in silence.

Saint Paul finds the courage to write: ‘For this momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to what is seen but to what is unseen; for what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal’ (2Cor 4:17-18). The weight of affliction is ‘light’ precisely because it is momentary, the weight of glory is ‘beyond all comparison’ precisely because it is eternal.

Many ask: ‘What will eternal life consist of and what will we do all the time in heaven?’ The answer is in those apophatic words of the Apostle: ‘What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him’ (1Cor 2: 9). If it is permitted to stammer something, we will say that we will live immersed in the shoreless and bottomless ocean of Trinitarian love. ‘But won’t we be bored?’ Let us ask true lovers if they are bored at the height of their love and if they would rather not want that moment to last forever.

### **Eternity: hope and presence**

Before closing, I want to clear up a doubt weighing on the belief in eternal life. For a believer eternity is not only a promise or a hope, as Carl Marx thought, seen as a way of pouring on heaven all our disappointments on earth. It is also presence and experience. In Christ ‘the eternal life that was with the Father and was made visible to us’ — what we have seen and heard it and touched, says John (cf. 1Jn 1:1~3).

With Christ, the Word made flesh, “eternity has entered time”. We experience that every time we really put our trust in Christ, because those who believe in him already have eternal life (cf. 1Jn 5:13); every time we receive Communion, because in it ‘we have a pledge of future glory’; every time we listen to the words of the Gospel, which are ‘words of eternal life’ (cf. Jn 6:68). Saint Thomas Aquinas says that ‘grace is the beginning of [heavenly] glory.’

That presence of eternity in time is called the Holy Spirit. He is defined as ‘the first installment of our inheritance’ (Eph 1:14; 2Cor 5:5), and it has been given us so that, after receiving the first fruits, we yearn for fullness. “Christ – as saint Augustine writes – gave us the first installment of the Holy Spirit by which he, who could not deceive us anyway, wanted to make us certain of the fulfillment of his promise. What did he promise? He promised eternal life of which the Spirit that is given us is the first installment.’

Between the life of faith in time and eternal life there is a relationship which resembles that between the life of the embryo in the mother’s womb and that of the newborn baby. As the great Medieval Byzantine theologian Nicola Cabasilas wrote:

*This world bears in its womb the new spiritual man, created according to God, until he is born to that perfect unperishable world, once he has been formed, fashioned and made perfect here. Just as an embryo, while he or she is in that dark and fluid existence, is prepared by nature to life in the light, the same happens to the saints [...]. For an embryo, though, future life is absolutely future: the embryo is not reached by any ray, by anything pertaining to this life. It is not like that for us, since the future world has, as it were, been poured on and mixed with the present one [...]. Thus, the saints are already allowed not only to set about and prepare for life, but to live and work in it.*

There is a short story that illustrates this comparison between gestation and birth and I take the liberty of telling in all its simplicity.

There were two boy/girl twins who were so smart and early in their growth, that in their mother’s womb they would already talk to each other. The girl asked her little brother: ‘The way you see it, is there going to be life after birth?’. He replied: ‘Don’t be ridiculous! What makes you think there is anything outside this narrow dark space we are in?’. The girl, trying to be brave, said: ‘Who knows,

perhaps there is a mother, someone in other words who has placed us here and who will take care of us.' And he rebutted: 'Do you happen to see a mother anywhere? All you see is all there is.' She said again: 'But can't you sometimes feel a kind of pressure on your chest that grows day by day and pushes us forward?' He replied: 'Actually, if I pay more attention, it is true; I can feel it all the time.' 'You see – his little sister concluded triumphantly – this pain cannot be in vain. I think it is preparing us for something greater than this tiny space.'

The Church should be that baby who helps human beings to become aware of this yearning they have which remains unconfessed and sometimes is even ridiculed. It is also essential to deny the accusation giving rise to the modern suspicion against the notion of eternal life that the expectation of eternity distracts from the commitment to the planet and from the care of creation. Before modern societies took direct responsibility for promoting health and culture and for improving agricultural methods and people's standards of living, who performed such tasks more and better than the monks who lived on their faith in eternal life?

Not many know that Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Sun* or of the *Creatures* sprang from a sudden gasp of faith in eternal life. Franciscan sources describe the origins of the canticle as follows. One night, as Francis was particularly in pain for his many painful infirmities, he said in his heart: 'Lord, come to my aid in my many infirmities, so that I may bear with them patiently!'. And immediately he heard these words in spirit: 'Francis, tell me: if someone gave you a large precious treasure in return for your infirmities and suffering, would you not hold the earth and stones and waters as nothing compared to that treasure? Wouldn't you be filled with joy?'. Francis answered: 'Lord, that would be a great treasure without comparison, precious and lovely and desirable'. The voice ended: 'Then, be happy and rejoice in your infirmities and troubles; from now on live happily, as if you were already in my Kingdom.'

On getting up the following morning, Francis said to his companions: 'I am to rejoice greatly now amid my infirmities and pain, and always give thanks to God for the amazing grace and blessing that has been bestowed on me. Indeed, He deigned in his mercy to give myself, His little unworthy servant still living down here, the certainty of possessing His eternal Kingdom. Therefore, to His praise and to my consolation and for the upbuilding of our neighbor, I wish to compose a new 'Lauda', a poem in praise of the Lord for his creatures. Every day we enjoy God's creatures and we cannot live without them. And every day we prove ungrateful for such great benefit, and we don't give praise for it to our Creator as we should ". And he sat down, plunged in deep thought, and then he said: 'Altissimo, onnipotente, bon Signore...' [Most high, all powerful, good Lord]. The thought of eternal life had not inspired in him the contempt of this world and of creation, but an even greater enthusiasm and gratitude for them making the present pain easier to endure.

Today's meditation on eternity certainly does not exempt us from experiencing with all other inhabitants of this planet how hard it is to bear with this trial we are going through; yet it should at least help us as believers not to be overwhelmed by it and to be able to pass our courage and hope on to those who do not have the comfort of faith. Let us end with a beautiful prayer from the liturgy:

O God, who cause the minds of the faithful to unite in a single purpose, grant your people to love what you command and to desire what you promise, that, amid the uncertainties of this world, our hearts may be fixed on that place where true gladness is found. Through Christ our Lord. AMEN'

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Translated from Italian by Paolo Zanna

1.[[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200327\\_omelia-epidemia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html)].

2.St Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 55, 1 (CCL 36, pp. 463 s.).

3.Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Frühe Schriften*, 1, in *Gesammelte Werke*, 1, Hamburg 1989, p. 372.

4.S. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 2nd part, chap. 4 .

5.Paradiso, XXII, 151 (Allen Mandelbaum's translation).

6.Marguerite Yourcenar's translation in <https://followinghadrian.com/2013/07/10/animula-vagula-blandula-hadrians-farewell-to-life>.

7. Miguel de Unamuno, “Cartas inéditas de Miguel de Unamuno y Pedro Jiménez Ilundain”, edited by H. Benítez, *Revista de la Universidad de Buenos Aires* 3 (9/1949) 135.150.
8. St Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 45, 2 (PL 35, 1720).
9. A. Fogazzaro, “A Sera” [At night], in *Le poesie* [Poems], Mondadori, Milano 1935, 194-197.
10. St. Jean-Paul II in. in. [http://www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/magazine/documents/ju\\_mag\\_01121997\\_p-20\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_01121997_p-20_en.html)).
11. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 24, a. 3, ad 2.
12. St Augustine, *Sermo* 378, 1 (PL 39, 1673).
13. N. Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, I, 1-2 (PG 150, 496).
14. *Legenda Perugina* 43.
15. Collect for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time.

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