

Advent Homilies 2014

"MY PEACE I GIVE YOU"

Peace as Gift of God in Christ Jesus

Father Cantalamessa's 1st Advent Homily

1. We are at peace with God!

If one could hear the loudest cry that is in the heart of billions of people, one would hear, in all the languages of the world, only one word: peace! The painful actuality of this subject, united to the need to give back to the word peace the richness and profundity of meaning that it has in the Bible, has driven me to dedicate this year's Advent meditations to this subject. It will help us to hear with new ears the Christmas announcement: "on earth peace among men with whom God is pleased," and also to begin to live inside the Church the message that she addresses every year to the world on the World Day of Peace.

We begin by listening to the fundamental announcement about peace. They are Paul's words in the Letter to the Romans: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God (Romans 5:1-2).

I still remember what happened the day that the Second World War ended for Italy. The cry "Armistice! Peace!" spread from the city to the country, from house to house. It was the end of a nightmare -- no more terror, no more bombardments, no more hunger. It seemed that one finally returned to live again. That announcement of the Apostle should arouse something of this sort in the heart of readers: "We have peace with God! Peace has been made! A new age has begun for humanity in its relation with God!" Theirs has been described as "an age of anxiety." People of that time had the impression (anything but unfounded) of a condemnation that weighed on their head. Paul calls it "the wrath of God [that] is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness" (Romans 1:18), hence the emergence of the esoteric rites and cults of propitiation, which were rife in the pagan society of that time.

When we speak of peace, we are almost always led to think of a horizontal peace: between peoples, between races, social classes, religions. The word of God teaches us that the first and most essential peace is the vertical, between heaven and earth, between God and humanity. From it depend all other forms of peace. We see this in the account of creation itself. While Adam and Eve were at peace with God, there was peace within each of them, between flesh and spirit (they were naked and did not feel shame); there was peace between man and woman ("flesh of my flesh"), between the human being and the rest of creation. No sooner they rebelled against God, everything became a struggle: the flesh against the spirit (they realized they were naked), man against woman ("the woman seduced me"), nature against man (thorns and tribulations), brother against brother, Cain against Abel.

This is the reason I decided to dedicate this first meditation to peace as gift of God in Christ Jesus. In the second meditation we will speak of peace as a task to work for and, in the third, of peace as fruit of the Spirit, namely, of the soul's inner peace.

2. The Peace of God Promised and Given

Paul's announcement, which we just heard, presupposes that something happened that had changed humanity's destiny. If we are now at peace with God, it means that before we were not; if now "there is no condemnation" (Romans 8:1), it means that before there was condemnation. Let us see what it was that produced such a decisive change in the relations between man and God.

In face of man's rebellion – original sin – God did not abandon humanity to its fate, but He decided on a new plan to reconcile man with Himself. A trivial but useful example to understand this, is what happens today with the so-called Sat Nav's in cars. If at a certain point the driver does not follow the indication given to him from above by the navigator, if he turns, for instance, to the left rather than to the right, in a few seconds the navigator traces a new itinerary for him, from the position in which he is, to reach his desired destination. Thus God did with man, deciding, after the sin, his plan of redemption.

The long preparation began with the biblical covenants. They are, so to speak, “separate peaces.” First with individual persons: Noah, Abraham and Jacob. Then through Moses with the whole of Israel, who became the People of the Covenant. These covenants, as opposed to human ones, are always covenants of peace, never of war against enemies.

However, God is God of the whole of humanity: “Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also?” exclaims Saint Paul (Romans 3:29). Therefore, these ancient covenants were by themselves temporal, destined to be extended one day to the whole human race. In fact, the prophets begin to speak ever more clearly of a “new and eternal covenant,” of a “covenant of peace” (Ezekiel 37:26), which out of Zion and from Jerusalem will extend to all peoples (cf. Isaiah 2:2-5).

This universal peace is presented as a return to the initial peace of Eden, with images and symbols that the Jewish tradition interprets in a literal sense and the Christian in a spiritual sense.

“They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4) ”The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them” (Isaiah 11:6-7).

The New Testament sees all these prophecies realized with the coming of Jesus. His birth is revealed to shepherds with the announcement: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased!” (Luke 2:14). Jesus himself states that he came on earth to bring God’s peace: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you,” he says (John 14:27). On the Easter evening in the Cenacle, who knows with what divine vibrations the word Shalom issued from the mouth of the Risen One! Peace to you! As the Angels’ announcement at Christmas, it is not only a greeting or a wish but something real that is communicated. All the content of the redemption was enclosed in that word.

The Apostolic Church does not tire of proclaiming the fulfilment of all God’s promises of peace, which took place in Christ. Speaking of the Messiah who would be born in Bethlehem of Judea, the prophet Micah pre-announced: “He shall be our peace!” (Micah 5:4), exactly what the Letter to the Ephesians affirms of Christ: “He is our peace” (Ephesians 2:14). “The Lord’s birth, says Saint Leo the Great, is the birth of peace.”

3. Peace, Fruit of Christ’s Cross

But now we ask ourselves a more precise question. Was it with his simple coming on earth that Jesus re-established peace between heaven and earth? Is the birth of Christ truly “the birth of peace,” or is it also, and above all, his death? The answer is contained in Paul’s word, with which we began: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1). Peace comes from justification through faith and justification comes through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross! (cf. Romans 3:21-26).

What is more, peace is the content itself of justification. This does not consist only in the remission (or, according to Luther, in the non-imputation) of sins, namely, in something purely negative, in the “taking away” of something that was; it comprises also and above all a positive element, a putting something that was not: the Holy Spirit and, with it, grace and peace.

One thing is clear: one cannot understand the radical change that took place in relations with God, if one does not understand what happened in Christ’s death. East and West are unanimous in describing humanity’s situation before Christ and outside of him. On one hand, there were men who,

sinning, had incurred a debt with God and had to fight against the devil who kept them slaves -- all things that they could not do, the debt being infinite and they prisoners of Satan from whom they needed to be freed. On the other hand, there was God who could expiate the sin and defeat Satan, but he did not have to do it, that is, he was not held to do it, as he was not the debtor. There had to be someone who united in himself he who had to fight and he who could win, and this is what happened with Christ, God and man. This is how Nicholas Cabasilas, among the Greeks, and Saint Anselm of Aosta, among the Latins, expressed themselves in rather close terms.

Jesus' death on the cross is the moment in which the Redeemer carries out the work of redemption, destroying sin and gaining victory over Satan. As man, what he carries out belongs to us: "Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30). On the other hand, in as much as God, what he does has infinite value and can save "all those who draw near to him" (Hebrews 7:25).

Recently, there has been a profound rethinking on the meaning of Christ's sacrifice. In 1972 the French thinker René Girard launched the thesis according to which "violence is the secret heart and soul of the sacred." In fact, at the origin and center of every religion, including the Jewish, there is sacrifice, the rite of the scapegoat, which always entails destruction and death. Already before this date, however, this scholar had returned to Christianity and, at Easter of 1959, he made his "conversion" public, declaring himself a believer and returning to the Church.

This enabled him not to stop, in subsequent studies, at the analysis of the mechanism of violence, but to indicate also how to come out of it. According to him, Jesus unmasks and breaks the mechanism that makes violence holy, making himself the voluntary "scapegoat" of humanity, the innocent victim of all violence. Christ, the Letter to the Hebrews already said (Hebrews 9:11-14), did not come with the blood of another, but with his own. He did not make victims, but made himself victim. He did not put his sins on the shoulders of others – men or animals – he put the sins of others on his own shoulders: "He bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24).

Can one, then, continue to speak of the "sacrifice" of the cross and therefore of the Mass as sacrifice? For a long time the quoted scholar rejected this concept, regarding it too marked by the idea of violence, but then, with the whole of Christian tradition, he ended by admitting its legitimacy, on condition of seeing, in that of Christ, a new kind of sacrifice, and seeing in this change of meaning "the central event in the religious history of humanity."

All this enables one to understand better, in what sense reconciliation happened on the cross between God and men. Usually the sacrifice of expiation served to placate an irate God because of sin. Man, offering a sacrifice to God, asks the divinity for reconciliation and forgiveness. In Christ's sacrifice the perspective is reversed. It is not man who exercises influence on God to placate him. Rather, it is God who acts so that man will desist from his enmity against him. "Salvation does not begin with the request for reconciliation by man, but rather with God's request to be reconciled with himself." In this connection, one understands the Apostle's affirmation: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:19), and again: "For while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son" (Romans 5:10).

4. "Receive the Holy Spirit!"

The peace that Christ merited for us with his death on the cross becomes active and operative in us through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in the Cenacle, after having said to the Apostles: "Peace be with you," he breathed on them and added, as in a single breath: "Receive the Holy Spirit!" (John 20:22).

In reality, peace does come from the cross of Christ, but it is not born from it. It comes from farther away. On the cross Jesus destroyed the wall of sin and of the enmity that impeded God's peace to pour out on men. The ultimate source of peace is the Trinity. "O Blessed Trinity, ocean of peace!" exclaims the liturgy in one of its hymns. According to Dionysius the Areopagite, "Peace" is one of God's names. He is peace in himself, as he is love and as he is light.

Almost all polytheistic religions speak of divinity in a permanent state of rivalry and war among themselves. Greek mythology is the most noted example. In strict terms, one cannot speak of God as source and model of peace, not even in the context of an absolute and numeric monotheism. Peace, in fact, like love, cannot exist less than between two persons. It consists in beautiful relations, in relations of love, and the Trinity is, precisely, this beauty and perfection of relations. What strikes us most when we contemplates Rublev's icon of the Trinity is the sense of superhuman peace that emanates from it.

Therefore, when Jesus says: "Shalom!" and "Receive the Holy Spirit," he communicates to the disciples something of "the peace of God, which passes all understanding" (Philippians 4:7). In this sense, peace is almost a synonym of grace and, in fact, the two terms are used together, as a sort of binomial, at the beginning of the Apostolic Letters: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:7) (1 Thessalonians 1:1). When "Peace be with you," "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, give us peace" is proclaimed in the Mass and, at the end, "Go in peace," it is of this peace as gift of God that one speaks.

5. "Be Reconciled with God"

I would now like to bring to light how this gift of peace, received ontologically and by right in Baptism, must change little by little, in fact as well and psychologically, our relation with God. Paul's heartbroken appeal: "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20) is addressed to baptized Christians who have lived as a community for a long time. Therefore, he is not referring to the first reconciliation or, evidently, to that which we call "the Sacrament of Reconciliation." In this existential sense, it is addressed also to each one of us and we try to understand in what it consists.

One of the causes, perhaps the principal one, of modern man's alienation from religion and from the faith is the distorted image that he has of God. This is also the cause of a spent Christianity, without thrust and without joy, lived more as a duty than as a gift. I think of how the grandiose image of God the Father was in the Sistine Chapel when I saw it for the first time many years ago, all covered by a dark patina, and how it is now, after the restoration, with the lively colors and clear contours with which it issued from Michelangelo's brush. A more urgent restoration of the image of God the Father must happen in men's hearts, including in us, believers.

What is, in fact, the "pre-defined" image of God (in computer language, which operates, namely, as default) in the human collective unconscious? To discover it, it suffices to ask oneself this question and to ask it also to others: "What ideas, what words, what realities arise spontaneously in you, before every reflection, when you say: Our Father, who art in heaven ... thy will be done"? While saying this one interiorly bows generally his head in resignation, as if preparing for the worst. Unconsciously, the will of God is connected with all that is displeasing, painful to what, in one way or another, can be seen as mutilating of freedom and of individual development. It is as if God was the enemy of all celebration, joy and pleasure.

Another revealing question -- what does the invocation Kyrie eleison, "Lord have mercy," suggest in us, which punctuates Christian prayer and in some liturgies accompanies the Mass from the beginning to the end? It has ended up by becoming only the request for forgiveness of the creature, who always sees God about to punish him. The word mercy has become very debased from being used often in a negative sense, as something mean and despicable: "have pity," a "pitiful" spectacle. According to the Bible, Kyrie eleison should be translated: "Lord, have your tenderness descend upon us." Suffice it to read in Jeremiah how God speaks to his people: "my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy (eleos) on him" (Jeremiah 31:20). When the sick, the lepers and the blind cry out to Jesus, as in Matthew 9:27: "Lord, have mercy (eleison) on me!" they do not intend to say: "forgive me," but "show your compassion on me."

In general, God is seen as Supreme Being, the Almighty, the Lord of time and of history, that is, as an entity that imposes on the individual from outside -- no particular of human life escapes him.

The transgression of his Law introduces inexorably a disorder that exacts reparation. The latter, not ever being able to be considered as adequate, the anguish of death and of the divine judgment arises.

I confess that I virtually get shivers when reading the words that the great Bossuet addresses to Jesus on the cross, in one of his Good Friday sermons: "You throw yourself, O Jesus, in the arms of the Father and you feel rejected, you feel that it is in fact he who persecutes you, who strikes you, he who abandons you, he in fact who crushes you under the enormous and unbearable weight of his revenge ... The anger of an irritated God: Jesus prays and the angry Father does not listen to him; it is the justice of a vengeful God for the outrages received; Jesus suffers and the Father is not placated!" If an orator spoke thus of the loftiness of Bossuet, we can imagine to what popular preachers of the time abandoned themselves. We can understand, therefore, how that certain "pre-defined" image of God was formed in man's heart.

God's mercy has certainly never been ignored! However, entrusted to it only was the duty to moderate the inalienable rigors of justice. In fact, in practice, the love and forgiveness that God generously gives were made dependent on the love and forgiveness that is given to others: if you forgive him who bears the offense, God in turn will be able to forgive you. There has emerged with God a relation of bargaining. Is it not said that one must accumulate merits to gain Paradise? And does one not attribute great importance to efforts to do things, to the Masses to have celebrated, to the candles to light, the novenas to make?

All this, having enabled so many people in the past to demonstrate their love for God, cannot be thrown away; it must be respected. God makes his flowers -- and his saints-- bloom in every climate. One cannot deny, however, that the risk exists of falling into a utilitarian religion, of the "do ut des." At the base of everything is the presupposition that the relation with God depends on man. "None shall appear before me empty-handed" (Exodus 23:15; 34:20), but this is the God of the Law, not yet the God of grace. In the kingdom of grace, in fact, man must appear before God "empty-handed"; the only thing he must have "in his hands" on appearing before him, is his Son Jesus.

Let us now see how the Holy Spirit changes this situation, when we open ourselves to it. He teaches us to look at God with new eyes: as the God of the Law, certainly, but yet first as the God of love and of grace, the "merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love" (Exodus 34:6). It makes us discover him as an ally and a friend, as "he who did not spare for himself his own Son but gave him up for us all" (this is how Romans 8:32 should be understood!); in sum, as a most tender Father. In a word, the Holy Spirit communicates to us the feeling that Jesus had of his Father.

The filial sentiment now blossoms which is translated spontaneously in the cry: Abba, Father! As one who says: "I did not know you, or I knew you only from hearsay. Now I know you, I know who you are; I know that you truly love me, that you are favourable to me." The son has taken the place of the slave, love that of fear. It is thus that one is truly reconciled with God, also on the subjective and existential plane.

We leave for our daily work with a question in our mind: What idea of God the Father is in my heart: that of the world or that of Jesus?

[Translation by ZENIT]