

The Gate of Faith - First Sermon, Advent 2022

Raniero Cantalamessa

Holy Father, Most Reverend Fathers, brothers et sisters of the Roman Curia, I have asked myself several times what is the meaning and usefulness of these sermons in Advent and Lent which interrupt or delay commitments of a different and more important kind. What encourages me and takes away my scruple of wasting your time is the conviction that one does not come to these sermons to hear opinions or solutions to the ecclesial problems of the moment, but to draw strength from the truths of faith and thus face all problems in the right spirit. In short, to take a bath – or at least a refreshment – of faith, hope and charity.

This is why I thought of choosing the three theological virtues as the theme of these three Advent sermons. Faith, hope and charity are the gold, frankincense and myrrh that we, the Magi of today, want to bring as a gift to God who “comes to visit us from on high”. Taking advantage of the ancient tradition – patristic and medieval – on theological virtues, I will try – as far as possible in three short meditations – an approach that is also modern and existential, that is, one that responds to the challenges, enrichments and, at times, to the surrogates proposed today to the theological virtues of Christianity.

* * *

In Christian prayer the psalm has always had great resonance, which says:

*Lift up your heads, O gates;
be lifted, you ancient portals,
that the king of glory may enter.
Who is this king of glory?
The LORD, strong and mighty,
the LORD, mighty in war.
(Ps 24, 7-8).*

In the spiritual interpretation of the Fathers and the liturgy, the gates spoken of in the psalm are those of the human heart: “Blessed is the one at whose door Christ knocks”, commented Saint Ambrose. “Our door is faith ... If you want to lift up the gates of your faith, the king of glory will come to you”. St. John Paul II made the words of the psalm the manifesto of his pontificate. “Open wide the doors to Christ!”, he shouted to the world, on the day of the inauguration of his ministry.

The great door that man can open or close to Christ is one and is called freedom. However, it opens in three different ways, or according to three different types of decisions that we can consider as three doors: faith, hope and charity. These are all special doors: they open from inside and outside at the same time: with two keys, one of which one is in the hand of man, the other in the hand of God. Man cannot open them without the help of God and God does not want to open them without the cooperation of man.

Christ, origin and fulfillment of faith

Let us therefore begin our reflection from the first of the three doors: faith. God – we read in the Acts of the Apostles – “had opened the door of faith to the gentiles” (Acts 14:27). God opens the door of faith in that he gives the possibility of believing by sending those who preach the good news; man opens the door of faith by accepting this possibility.

With the coming of Christ, there is a leap in quality with regard to faith. Not in the nature of it, but in its content. Now it is no longer a question of a generic faith in God, but of faith in Christ born, died and risen for us. The Letter to the Hebrews makes a long list of believers: “By faith Abel ... By faith Abraham ... By

faith Isaac ... By faith Jacob ... By faith Moses ...” But he concludes by saying: ” Yet all these, though approved because of their faith, did not receive what had been promised. “(Heb 11, 39). What was missing? Jesus was missing who – as the same Letter says – is ” the leader and perfecter of faith. ” (Heb 12: 2).

The Christian faith therefore does not consist only in believing in God; it consists in believing also in the one whom God has sent. When, before performing a miracle, Jesus asks: “Do you believe?” and, after having accomplished it, he affirms: “Your faith has saved you”, he does not refer to a generic faith in God (this was taken for granted in every Israelite); it refers to faith in him, in the divine power granted to him.

This is now faith that justifies the wicked, faith that gives birth to new life. It is placed at the end of a process of which, in the tenth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, St. Paul traces, almost visually, the various phases, drawing them on the map of the human body. Everything begins, he says, from the ears, from hearing the proclamation of the Gospel: “Faith comes from listening”, *fides ex auditu*. From the ears, the movement passes to the heart, where the fundamental decision is made: *corde creditur*, “with the heart one believes”. From the heart, the movement goes back to the mouth: “with the mouth one makes the profession of faith”: *ore fit confessio*.

The process does not end there, but – from the ears, the heart and the mouth – it passes to the hands. Yes, because “faith works through love”, says the Apostle (Gal 5: 6). Saint James can feel comfortable. There is also room for “works”: not before, however, but after (logically if not chronologically) faith. “One does not arrive at faith – says Saint Gregory the Great – starting from the virtues, but to the virtues starting from faith”.

At this point, a very topical question arises. If faith that saves is faith in Christ, what to think of all those who have no chance of believing in him? We live in a pluralistic society, even religiously. Our theologies – Eastern and Western, Catholic and Protestant alike – developed in a world where practically only Christianity existed. It was, however, aware of the existence of other religions, but they were considered false from the start, or were not taken into consideration at all. Apart from the different way of understanding the Church, all Christians shared the traditional axiom: ” There is no salvation outside the Church “: *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*.

Today this is no longer the case. For some time there has been a dialogue between religions, based on mutual respect and recognition of the values present in each of them. In the Catholic Church, the starting point was the declaration “*Nostra aetate*” of the Second Vatican Council, but a similar orientation is shared by all the historical Christian Churches. With this recognition, the conviction has taken ground that even people outside the Church can be saved.

Is it possible, in this new perspective, to maintain the role until now attributed to “explicit” faith in Christ? Wouldn’t the ancient axiom: “outside the Church there is no salvation” end up surviving, in this case, in the axiom: “outside faith there is no salvation”? In some Christian circles, the latter is, in fact, the dominant doctrine and it is what motivates missionary commitment. In this way, however, salvation is limited from the start to a very small minority of people.

This cannot leave us satisfied and it does wrong to Christ, depriving him of a large part of humanity. One cannot believe that Jesus is God, and then limit his actual relevance to a single narrow sector of it. Jesus is “the savior of the world” (Jn 4:42); the Father sent the Son “that the world may be saved through him” (Jn 3:17): the world, not some few people in the world!

Let us try to find an answer in Scripture. It affirms that whoever has not known Christ, but acts on the basis of his own conscience (Rm 2: 14-15) and does good to his neighbor (Mt 25: 3 ff.) is acceptable to God. In the Acts of the Apostles we hear, from the mouth of Peter, this solemn declaration: “In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him” (Acts 10: 34-35).

Even adherents to other religions generally believe that “God exists and rewards those who seek him” (Heb 11: 6); therefore, they realize what Scripture considers the fundamental and common datum of every faith. This applies, of course, in a very special way, to the Jewish brothers who believe in the same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that we Christians believe.

The main reason for our optimism is not based, however, on the good that adherents to other religions are able to do, but on the “God’s varied grace” (1Pt 4: 10). Sometimes I feel the need to offer the sacrifice of the Mass precisely in the name of all those who are saved through Christ, but do not know it and cannot thank him. The liturgy also urges us to do so. In Eucharistic Prayer IV, to the prayer for the pope, the bishop and the faithful, a prayer is added “for all who seek you with a sincere heart”.

God has far more ways to save than we can think of. He has established “channels” of his grace, but he has not bound himself to them. One of these “extraordinary” means of salvation is suffering. After Christ has taken it upon himself and redeemed it, it is also, in some way, a universal sacrament of salvation. He who descended into the waters of the Jordan sanctifying them for every baptism, he also descended into the waters of tribulation and death, making them a potential instrument of salvation. Mysteriously, every suffering – not only that of believers – accomplishes, in some way, “what is lacking* in the afflictions of Christ ” (Col 1:24). The Church celebrates the feast of the Holy Innocents; neither they did know they were suffering for Christ!

We believe that all those who are saved are saved by the merits of Christ: “There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved.” (Acts 4:12). However, it is one thing to affirm the universal need of Christ for salvation and another thing to affirm the universal necessity of faith in Christ for salvation.

Is it superfluous, then, to continue proclaiming the Gospel to every creature? Far from it! It is the reason that must change, not the fact. We must continue to proclaim Christ; not so much for a negative reason – otherwise the world will be condemned – as for a positive reason: for the infinite gift that Jesus represents for every human being. Interreligious dialogue is not opposed to evangelization, but it determines its style. This dialogue – wrote Saint John Paul II, in his encyclical “Redemptoris mission” – “is part of the evangelizing mission of the Church”.

Christ’s mandate: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” (Mk 16:15) and “Make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19) retains its perennial validity, but must be understood in its historical context. These are words to refer to time they were written, when “the whole world” and “all peoples” was a way of saying that Jesus’ message was not intended only for Israel, but also for the rest of the world. They are always valid for everyone, but for those who already belong to a religion, it takes respect, patience and love. Francis of Assisi had understood this and put it into practice. He envisaged two ways of going towards “the Saracens and the other infidels”. He writes in his Rule:

The brothers, however, who go among the Saracens and other infidels may conduct themselves in two ways spiritually among them. One way is not to make disputes or contentions; but let them be “subject to every human creature for God’s sake,” yet confessing themselves to be Christians. The other way is that when they see it is pleasing to God, they announce the Word of God, that they may believe in Almighty God,—Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost, the Creator of all, our Lord the Redeemer and Saviour the Son, and that they should be baptized and be made Christians.

The challenge of science

With this open heart, let us now return to our Christian faith. The great challenge that faith has to face in our age does not come so much from philosophy, as in the past, but from science. It was sensational news a few months ago. A telescope launched into space on December 25, 2021 and positioned one and a half million kilometers from the earth, sent extraordinary images of the universe on July 12 of the current year that sent the scientific world into raptures.

“The new telescope – we read in the news – has opened a new window on the cosmos, able to catapult us back in time, until shortly after the initial Big Bang of the world. It is the most detailed view of the early universe ever obtained. It represents the first taste of a new and revolutionary astronomy that will reveal the universe as we have never seen it before “.

We would be foolish and ungrateful if we did not participate in the just pride of humanity for this as for any other scientific discovery. If faith – as well as from listening – is born, as has been said, from amazement, these scientific discoveries should not diminish the possibility of believing, but increase it. If he lived today, the psalmist would sing with even more enthusiasm: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the firmament proclaims the works of his hands” (Ps 19: 2) and Francis of Assisi: “Praised be you, my Lord, with all your creatures ”.

God wanted to give us a tangible sign of his infinite greatness with the immensity of the universe and a sign of his “elusiveness” with the smallest particle of matter which, even once reached – assures physics – maintains its “uncertainty ”. The cosmos did not make itself. It is the quality of being, not the quantity that decides; and the quality of creation is to be... created! Billions of galaxies, billions of billions of light years away, do not change this quality.

We make these reflections on faith and science not to convince non-believing scientists (none of them are here to hear or read these words), but to confirm us believers in our faith and not be disturbed by the clamor of contrary voices. It is the same purpose for which Saint Luke tells the “illustrious Theophilus” that he wrote his Gospel: “so that you may realize the certainty of the teachings you have received ” (Lk 1: 4).

Faced with the unfolding before our eyes of the boundless dimensions of the universe, the greatest act of faith for us Christians is not to believe that all this was created by God, but to believe that “all things were created through Christ and for him. “(Col 1:16), that “without him nothing came to be” (Jn 1: 3). The Christian has a much more convincing proof of God than that obtained from the cosmos: the person and life of Jesus Christ.

Believers are not ostriches. We do not hide our heads in the sand so as not to see. We share with each person the bewilderment in front of the many mysteries and contradictions of the universe: of natural evolution, of history, of the Bible itself ... We are however able to overcome the bewilderment with a certainty stronger than all uncertainties: the credibility of the person of Christ, of his life and of his word. Full and joyful certainty does not come before, but after having believed.

The righteous shall live by faith

Faith is the only criterion capable of making us relate correctly, not only to science, but also to history. In speaking of the faith that justifies, St. Paul quotes the famous oracle of Habakkuk: “The righteous one will live by faith” (Ab 2: 4). What does God mean by that prophetic word, since it is God himself who utters it?

The message opens with a lament from the prophet, for the defeat of justice and because God seems impassive to witness violence and oppression from above. God replies that all of this is about to end because a new scourge will soon arrive – the Chaldeans – which will wipe out everything and everyone. The prophet rebels against this solution. Is this God’s answer? An oppression that takes the place of another?

But right here God was waiting for the prophet: “See, the rash have no integrity; the righteous one will live by faith (Ab 2, 2-4). The prophet is asked to take the leap of faith. God does not solve the enigma of history, but asks us to trust him and his justice, despite everything. The solution lies not in the cessation of the trial, but in the increase of faith.

History is a continuous struggle between good and evil, of the wicked who triumph and the righteous who suffer. The stable victory of good over evil is not to be found in history itself, but beyond it. Let us leave behind all forms of millennialism. However, God is so sovereign and in control of events that even the agitation of the wicked serves his mysterious plans. Truly, God writes straight with crooked lines! Situations can get out of hand to men, but not to God.

Habakkuk's message is singularly relevant for us today. Humanity experienced in the last years of the last century the liberation from the oppressive power of the communist totalitarian systems. But we didn't have time to breathe a sigh of relief that other injustices and violence have arisen in the world. There were those who, at the end of the "cold war", had naively believed that the triumph of democracy would now definitively close the cycle of great upheavals and that history would continue its course without major shocks. Exactly without more "history". This thesis was soon pitifully disproved by events, with the appearance of other dictatorships and the outbreak of other wars, starting with the "Gulf" one, up to this year's unfortunate one in Ukraine.

In this situation, the heartfelt question of the prophet is stirred in us too: "Lord, until when? You with eyes so pure that you cannot see evil! Why so much violence, so many human bodies skeletonized by hunger, so much cruelty in the world, without you intervening?" God's answer is still the same: those who do not have a right heart with God succumb to pessimism and are scandalized, while the just will live by faith and find the answer in his faith. He will understand what Jesus meant when, before Pilate, he said: "My kingdom does not belong to this world" (Jn 18:36).

But let's put it well in our heads and remember it, if necessary, to the world: God is just and holy; he will not allow evil to have the last word and evildoers get away with it. There will be a judgment at the conclusion of the story, "a written book will be opened, in which everything is contained and by which the world will be judged": *Liber scriptus proferetur – in quo totum continetur – unde mundus judicetur*.

A first judgment, imperfect but within the reach of all, believers and non-believers, is already in place now, moreover, in history. The benefactors of humanity who have worked for the true good of their country and for world peace are remembered with honor and blessing from generation to generation; the name of tyrants and evildoers continues over the centuries to be accompanied by ignominy and reprobation. Jesus has forever reversed the roles. "Winner because victim", thus St. Augustine defines Christ: *Victor quia victima*. In the light of eternity – and also of history – it is not the executioners who are the real winners, but their victims.

What the Church can do, in order not to passively witness the unfolding of history, is to take sides against oppression and arrogance and always put herself, "in time and out of time", on the side of the poor, the weak, the victims, those who bear the brunt of every misfortune and every war.

What the Church can do is also removing one of the factors that has always fomented conflicts and that is the rivalry between religions, the notorious "religious wars". A moral thrust can come from the understanding and loyal collaboration between the great religions that imprints on history that new course we in vain expect from political powers. In this sense must be seen the usefulness of the initiatives for a constructive dialogue between religions initiated by saint John Paul II and accelerated today by the current Supreme Pontiff.

Faith is the weapon of the Church. Even the Church, like the righteous of Habakkuk, "lives by her faith". In Italian, the word "faith" has come to mean a second thing, namely the wedding ring that the spouses exchange on their wedding day. Faith, the theological virtue, is the wedding ring of the Bride of Christ! Rome has long ceased to be *caput mundi*, capital of the world, but it must remain *caput fidei*, capital of faith. Not only of right faith, that is, of orthodoxy, but also of the intensity of believing.

What the faithful immediately grasp in a priest and a pastor is if he “believes in it”, if he believes in what he says and in what he celebrates. Today there is a lot of use of wireless transmission (WiFi, we say in English). Faith too is better transmitted in this way: without strings, without many words and arguments, but through a current of grace that is established between two people.

The greatest act of faith that the Church can do – after having prayed and done everything possible to avoid or stop conflicts – is to surrender to God with an act of total trust and serene abandonment, repeating with the Apostle: ” I know in whom I have placed my trust! ”: Scio cui credidi (2 Tim 1:12). God never draws back to make those who throw themselves into his arms fall into the void.

Let us go therefore to meet Christ who comes, with an act of faith which is also a promise of God and therefore a prophecy: “The world is in the hands of God and when, misusing his freedom, man has hit the bottom, he will intervene to save him”. Yes, he will intervene! This is why he came into the world two thousand twenty-two years ago.

- 1.Ambrose of Milan, Commentary to Psalm 118, XII, 14.
- 2.Gregory the Great, Hom. on Ezechiel, II, 7 (PL 76, 1018).
- 3.Rule without a Bull, XVI.
- 4.Sequence Dies irae.

www.cantalamessa.org