

Ongoing Formation 2023

**God is love
- Third Lenten Sermon 2023 -
Raniero Cantalamessa**

We need Theology!

For your consolation and mine, Holy Father, Venerable Fathers, brothers and sisters, this meditation will be entirely and exclusively centered on God. The discourse on God, that is, theology, cannot not remain extraneous to the reality of the Synod, just as it can't remain extraneous to any other moment of the life of the Church. Without theology, faith would easily become dead repetition and would lack the main tool for its "inculturation."

To fulfill this task, theology itself, however, needs a profound renewal. What God's people need is a theology imbued with life, which does not always speak of God "in the third person," with categories often borrowed from the philosophical system of the moment, incomprehensible outside the small circle of "insiders." It is written that "the Word was made flesh," but in theology, often the Word was only made idea! Karl Barth hoped for the advent of a theology "capable of being preached," but this hope seems far from being fulfilled as yet. St. Paul wrote:

For the Spirit scrutinizes everything, even the depths of God...No one knows what pertains to God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the things freely given us by God (1 Cor 2: 10-12).

But where can we now find a theology that relies on the Holy Spirit to know "the depths of God" rather than on categories of human wisdom? For this, it is necessary to resort to so-called "optional" disciplines: to "Spiritual theology," or to "Pastoral theology" if one wants a theology capable of being preached. Henri de Lubac wrote: "The ministry of preaching is not the vulgarization of a doctrinal teaching of a more abstract form, which would be prior and superior to it. It is, on the contrary, doctrinal teaching itself, in its highest form. This was true of the first Christian preaching, that of the apostles, and it is equally true of the preaching of those who succeeded them in the Church: the Fathers, the Doctors, and our pastors at the present time."

I am convinced that there is no content of the faith, however high, that cannot be made comprehensible to every intelligence open to the truth. One thing we can learn from the Church Fathers is that you can be profound without being obscure. St. Gregory the Great says that Holy Scripture is "simple and profound, like a river in which, so to speak, lambs can walk and elephants can swim." Our theology should be inspired by this model. Everyone should be able to find in it bread for their teeth: the simple, their nourishment, and the learned, their pasture. Not to mention that often it is revealed to the "little ones" what remains hidden "from the wise and the learned."

But I apologize for breaking my initial promise. It is not a discourse on the renewal of theology that I intend to develop here. I wouldn't have the qualifications to do it. Rather, I would like to show how theology, understood in the sense just outlined, can contribute to present the Gospel message in a significant way to today's humanity and to give new life to our faith and our prayer.

The most beautiful news that the Church has the task of proclaiming to the world, the one that every human heart expects to hear, is: "God loves you!" This certainty must eradicate and take the place of the one we have always carried within us: "God is judging you!" The truth that "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8) must accompany, like a bass note, every Christian proclamation, even when the practical demands of this love must be recalled, as the Gospel does.

When we invoke the Holy Spirit, including the present occasion of the Synod, we think first of all of the Holy Spirit as a light that enlightens us in each situation and suggests the right solutions. We think less of the Holy Spirit as love. Instead, this is the first and most essential operation of the Spirit that the Church needs. Only charity builds up; knowledge – even theological and ecclesiastical knowledge – often only inflates and divides. If we ask ourselves why we are so eager to know (and today, so excited at the prospect of artificial intelligence!) and so little concerned about loving, the answer is simple: knowledge translates into power, love into service!

The same Henri de Lubac wrote: “The world must know: the revelation of God as Love upsets everything it had conceived of the divinity.” To this day, we have not yet finished (and never will) drawing all its consequences from this evangelical revolution about God. In this meditation, I would like to show how, starting from the revelation of God as love, the main mysteries of our faith are illuminated with new light: the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the Passion of Christ, and it becomes less difficult to make people understand them. When Saint Paul defines Christ’s ministers as “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1), he means these mysteries of faith, he is not referring to some rites or even primarily to the sacraments.

Why the Trinity

Let’s start with the mystery of the Trinity. Why do we Christians believe that God is one and trine? On several occasions, I have preached the word of God to Christians who live in countries with a Muslim majority, in which however there is a relative tolerance and a possibility of dialogue, as in the United Arab Emirates. Those Christians, mostly immigrants and employed as laborers, have sometimes asked me to help them answer a question they are often asked in the workplace: “Why do you Christians say you are monotheists if you do not believe in one and only God?”

I repeat here the answer I suggested to them because it’s the same answer we should give to ourselves and to those who are struggling with the same problem. We Christians believe in a triune God because we believe that God is love. All love is love of someone or something; there is no “empty” love, without an object, just as there is no knowledge that is not knowledge of someone or something. Now, whom does God love, to be called love? Humankind? The universe? If so, then he has only been love for some billions of years, that is, since the physical universe and humanity came into being. Before that, whom did God love to be called love, since God cannot change and begin to be what he was not before? The Greek thinkers, conceiving God above all as Intelligence (Nous), could answer: God thought of himself; he was “pure thinking.” But this is no longer possible when it is said that God is love, because “pure love of oneself” would only be selfishness and narcissism.

And here is the answer of revelation, defined at Nicaea in 325. God has always been love – *ab aeterno* – because even before there was an object outside himself to love, he had in himself the Word, the “only-begotten Son” whom he loved with infinite love, that is “in the Holy Spirit.”

All this does not explain how unity can be trinity at the same time, a mystery unknowable to us because it occurs only in God. However, it helps us to understand why, in God, unity must also be communion and plurality. God is love, therefore he is Trinity! A God who was pure knowledge or pure law, or absolute power, would not need to be triune. This would actually complicate things. No “triumvirate” and no “diarchy” has ever lasted long in history!

Christians too, therefore believe in the unity of God and are monotheists; a unity, however, not mathematical and numerical, but of love and communion. If there is something that the experience of the proclamation shows is still capable of helping people today, if not to explain, at least to get an idea of the Trinity, this, I repeat, is precisely what hinges on love. God is a “pure act” and this act is an act of love involving, simultaneously and *ab aeterno*, a lover, a loved one and love itself.

The mystery of mysteries is not, I am convinced, the Trinity; it is to understand what love really is! Since love is the very essence of God, we will not be given to fully know what it is, not even in eternal life. Something better than knowing it, however, shall be given to us, that is, possessing it and being satiated with it eternally. You cannot embrace the ocean, but you can enter into it!

Why the Incarnation

Let's move on to the other great mystery to be believed and proclaimed to the world: the Incarnation of the Word. I beg your pardon if in this part I perhaps ask for an effort of attention greater than what is lawfully asked of listeners to a sermon, but I believe that the effort is worth making at least once in life.

Let's start with the famous question of St. Anselm (1033-1109): "Why did God become man?" – *Cur Deus homo?* His answer is because only one who was both man and God could redeem us from sin. As a man, in fact, he could represent all of humanity, and as God, what he did had infinite value, proportionate to the debt that man had contracted with God by sinning.

St. Anselm's answer is valid, but it is not the only one possible, nor is it entirely satisfactory. In the Creed we profess that the Son of God became flesh "for us men and for our salvation," but our salvation is not limited to the remission of sins alone, much less of a particular sin, the original one. There is therefore room for a deepening of faith.

This is what Blessed Duns Scotus (1265-1308) tried to do. God, he says, became man because this was the original divine plan, prior to the fall itself, namely that the world – created "through Christ and for him" (Col 1:16) – should find in him, "in the fullness of time," his crowning and his recapitulation (Eph 1:10). "First of all," Scotus writes, "God loves himself;" then he "wants to be loved by someone who loves him in the highest possible degree outside of himself;" therefore he "foresees the union with the nature that had to love him in the highest degree." This perfect lover could not be any creature, being finite, but only the eternal Word, who, therefore, would become incarnate "even if no one had sinned." Adam's sin determined the modality of the Incarnation (that is, atonement through passion and death), not the fact itself.

Unfortunately, at the beginning of everything there is still, for Scotus, a God to be loved, not a God who loves. It is a remnant of the philosophical vision of God as an "immovable mover" who can be loved, but cannot love. "God," wrote Aristotle, "moves the world by being loved," that is, as an object of love, not as someone who loves. In line with the Western vision of the Trinity, the divine nature, not the person of the Father, is here the starting point of the discourse on God. And nature, unlike the person, is not a subject capable of loving! In this, our Orthodox brothers, heirs of the Greek Fathers, have a better vision than we Latins.

On this precise point, Scripture calls us to take a step forward, even with respect to Scotus, always aware, however, that our affirmations about God are nothing but fleeting finger marks on the surface of the ocean. God the Father determines the Incarnation of the Word not because he wants to have someone outside himself who loves him in a way worthy of him, but because he wants to have someone outside himself to love in a way worthy of himself! Not to receive love, but to pour it out. Presenting Jesus to the world, in Baptism and in the Transfiguration, the heavenly Father says: "This is my beloved Son" (Mk 1:11; 9:7); he does not say "my loving Son."

Only the Father in the Trinity (and in the whole universe!), does not need to be loved to exist; he only needs to love. The Son exists thanks to the Father; the Father exists thanks to no one. This is what guarantees the role of the Father as the unique source and origin of the Trinity while assuring the equality in nature of the three divine persons. At the root of everything, there is the dazzling intuition of Augustine and the school born from him which define the Father as the lover, the Son as the beloved, and the Holy Spirit as the love uniting them. On this point, we Latins, too, have something

precious and essential to offer for an ecumenical synthesis. A reconciliation between the two theologies no longer seems so difficult and remote and it would be a decisive step forward in the unity among the two Churches.

Why the Passion

We come to the third great mystery: the passion and death of Christ which we are preparing to celebrate at Easter. Let us see how, starting from the revelation of God as love, this mystery too is illuminated by a new light. “By his wounds you have been healed” – with these words, spoken of the Servant of Yahweh (Is 53:5-6), the faith of the Church has expressed the saving meaning of Christ’s death (1 Pt 2:24). But can wounds, cross, and pain – negative facts and, as such, only deprivation of good – produce such a positive reality which is the salvation of all mankind? The truth is that we have not been saved by Christ’s suffering, but by his love! More precisely, by the love that is expressed in the sacrifice of oneself. From a crucified love!

To Abelard who, already in his time, found the idea of a God “pleased” in the death of his Son to be repugnant, St. Bernard replied: “It was not his death that pleased him, but his will to die spontaneously for us.”

Christ’s pain retains all its value and the Church will never cease meditating on it: not, however, as a cause, in itself, of salvation, but as a sign and testimony of love: “God demonstrates his love towards us in the fact that, while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8).

This takes away from the passion of Christ a connotation that has always left me perplexed and unsatisfied: the idea, that is, of a price and a ransom paid to God (or, worse still, to the devil!), or of a sacrifice with which to appease divine anger. In reality, it is rather God who made the great sacrifice of giving us his Son – of not “sparing him,” just as Abraham made the sacrifice of not sparing his son Isaac (Gen 22:16; Rom 8:32). God is more the subject than the beneficiary of the sacrifice of the cross!

A love worthy of God

Now we have to see what the truth that we have contemplated in the mysteries – the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the passion of Christ – changes in our lives. And here awaits us the “good news” that is never missing when we try to deepen the treasures of the Christian faith. The good news, thanks to our incorporation into Christ, is that we too can love God with a love worthy of him! Paul’s affirmation: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts” (Rom 5:5), cannot be fully understood except in the light of the words Jesus says to the Father: “I in them and you in me...that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them” (Jn 17:23.26).

The love that has been poured into us is the same with which the Father has always loved the Son, not a different love! It is an overflow of divine love from the Trinity to us. God communicates to the soul, writes St. John of the Cross, “the same love that he communicates to the Son, even if this does not happen by nature, as in the case of the Son, but by union.” The consequence is that we can love the Father with the love with which the Son loves him and we can love Jesus with the love with which the Father loves him. And all this thanks to the Holy Spirit who is that very love.

What, then, do we give to God of our own when we say to him, “I love you!” Nothing but the love we receive from him! So absolutely nothing on our part? Is our love for God nothing more than a “bouncing” of his own love towards him, like the echo that sends sound back to his source? Not in this case! The echo returns to God from the cavern of our hearts, but with a novelty that is everything for God: the scent of our freedom and our filial gratitude! All this is accomplished, in an exemplary way, in the Eucharist. In it we offer to the Father, as “our sacrifice,” what the Father has first given us, that is, his Son Jesus.

We can say to God the Father in our prayer: “Father, I love you with the love with which your Son Jesus loves you!” And we can say to Jesus: “Jesus, I love you with the love with which your heavenly Father loves you!” And know with certainty that all this is not a pious figment of our imagination!

Every time, in prayer, I try to do this myself, I am reminded of the episode of Jacob who presents himself to his father Isaac to receive the blessing, pretending to be his elder brother (Gen 27:1-23). And I try to imagine what God the Father might be saying to himself at that moment: “The voice is not really that of my firstborn Son; but the hands, the feet, and the whole body are the same that my Son took on earth and brought up here to heaven.” And I’m sure that he blesses me, just as Isaac blessed Jacob! And he blesses all of you, Venerable Fathers, brothers and sisters. It is the splendor of our Christian faith. We hope to be able to pass on some fragments of it to the men and women of our time who thirst for love but ignore its source.

1.H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, I, 2, Parigi 1959, p. 670.

2.Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, Epist. Missoria, 4 (PL 75, 515).

3.Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit*, Aubier, Paris 1950, cap. V.

4.Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII,7 1072b.

5.Duns Scotus, *Opus Parisiense*, III, d. 7, q. 4 (*Opera omnia*, XXIII, Parigi 1894, p. 303).

6.Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VIII, 9,14; IX, 2,2; XV,17,31; Richard of St. Victor, *De Trin.* III,2.18; Bonaventure, *I Sent.* d. 13, q.1.

7.Bernard of Clairvaux, *Against the errors of Abelardi*, VIII, 21-22: “Non mors, sed voluntas placuit sponte morientis”.

8.John of the Cross, *Spiritual canticle A*, str. 38, 4.

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