

Ongoing Formation 2023

**“Take courage, I have conquered the world”
- Fifth Lenten Sermon 2023 -
Raniero Cantalamessa**

“In the world, you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world” (Jn 16:33). Holy Father, Venerable Fathers, brothers and sisters, these are among the last words that Jesus addresses to his disciples before taking leave of them. They are not the usual “Take courage!,” addressed to those who stay, by one who is about to leave. In fact, he adds, “I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you” (Jn 14:18).

What does “I will come to you” mean if he is about to leave? How and in what capacity will he come and stay with them? If we don’t understand the answer to this question, we will never understand the true nature of the Church. The answer is present – as a sort of recurring theme – in the farewell discourses of the Gospel of John; and it would be good at least once to listen, one after the other, to the verses in which it becomes the dominant note. Let’s do it with the attention and trepidation with which children listen to their father’s testament regarding the most precious asset that he is about to leave them:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you (Jn 14: 16-17).

The Advocate, the holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name — he will teach you everything and remind you of all that [I] told you (Jn 14:26).

When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me. And you also will testify, because you have been with me from the beginning (Jn 15:26-27).

It is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you (Jn 16:7).

I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears and will declare to you the things that are coming. He will glorify me because he will take from what is mine and declare it to you (Jn 16:12-14).

But what, or rather, who is the Holy Spirit Jesus promises? Is it he, or another? If it is himself, why does he say in the third person, “when the Paraclete will come...”; if it is someone else, why does he say in the first person, “I will come to you?” We touch upon the mystery of the relationship between the Risen One and his Spirit. It is a relationship so close and mysterious that St. Paul sometimes seems to simply identify them. He writes, “The Lord is the Spirit,” but then he quickly adds, “and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17). If it is the Spirit of the Lord, it cannot be, purely and simply, the Lord.

The answer of Scripture is that the Holy Spirit, with the redemption, has become “the Spirit of Christ;” it is the way in which the Risen One – having been “constituted Son of God with power according to the Spirit of sanctification, by virtue of the resurrection from the dead” (Rom 1:4) – now works in the Church and in the world. This is why he can say to the disciples, “It is good that I go away,” and adds, “but I will not leave you orphans.”

We must get rid of a vision of the Church that has become dominant in the consciousness of many believers. I call it a deistic or Cartesian image, because of the affinity it has with the Cartesian deistic vision. How was the relationship between God and the world conceived in this vision? More or less like this: God first created the world and then withdrew, letting it develop according to the laws that he had given it – like a clock that had been given enough wind to run by itself indefinitely. Any new intervention by God would disturb this order, which is why miracles are considered inadmissible. God, in creating the world, would be acting like someone who flips a light balloon and pushes it into the air, while he remains on the ground.

What does this vision mean when applied to the Church? It means that Christ founded the Church, endowed it with all the hierarchical and sacramental structures it needed to function, and then left it, retiring to his heaven at the moment of the Ascension. Like someone pushing a small boat into the sea and then moving away from the shore.

But it is not so! Jesus has boarded the boat and is inside it. His last words in Matthew must be taken seriously, “Behold, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20). With each new storm, including the present ones, he repeats what he said to the apostles in the episode of the calmed storm, “Why are you afraid, people of little faith?” (Mt 8:26). Am I not here with you? Can I sink? Can he who created the sea sink into the sea?

I noted with joy that, under the name of the pope, in the *Annuario Pontificio*, there is only the title “Bishop of Rome;” all other titles – Vicar of Jesus Christ, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of Italy, etc. – are listed as “historic titles” on the next page. It seems right to me, especially with regard to “Vicar of Jesus Christ”. Vicar is one who takes the place of the boss in his absence, but Jesus Christ never absented himself and will never be absent from his Church. With his death and resurrection, he became “the head of the body which is the Church” (Col 1:18) and will continue to be such until the end of the world, the true and only Lord of the Church.

His presence is not, so to speak moral and intentional, it is not a lordship by proxy. When we cannot be present in person at some event, we usually say, “I will be present spiritually,” which is not of much consolation and help to those who have invited us. When we say of Jesus that he is “spiritually” present, this spiritual presence is not a less strong form than the physical one, but infinitely more real and effective. It is the presence of the Risen One who acts in the power of the Spirit, in every time and place, and who acts within us.

If in the current situation of the growing energy crisis, the existence of a new, inexhaustible source of energy were to be discovered; if we finally discovered how to use solar energy at will and without negative effects, what a relief it would be for all of humanity! Well, the Church has, in her field, a similar inexhaustible source of energy – the “power from above” which is the Holy Spirit. Jesus could say of him, “Until now you have asked for nothing in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete” (Jn 16:24).

There is a moment in the history of salvation that closely recalls the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. It is the oracle of the Prophet Haggai. Let us listen to it:

On the twenty-first day of the seventh month, the word of the LORD came through Haggai the prophet: “Speak to the governor of Judah, Zerubbabel, son of Shealtiel, and to the high priest Joshua, son of Jehozadak, and to the remnant of the people: Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? And how do you see it now? Does it not seem like nothing in your eyes? Now be strong, Zerubbabel—oracle of the LORD—be strong, Joshua, son of Jehozadak, high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land—oracle of the LORD—and work! For I am with you—oracle of the LORD of hosts... My spirit remains in your midst; do not fear!” (Hag 2:1-5).

It is one of the very few texts of the Old Testament that can be dated with great accuracy – October 17, 520 B.C. Does it not seem to us that Haggai's words describe the current situation of the Catholic Church and in many respects that of all Christianity? Those of us who are old enough remember with a certain nostalgia the time immediately after the end of the Second World War. Churches filled up on Sundays; weddings and baptisms took place in the parishes; seminaries and religious novitiates abounded in vocations... "But now in what conditions do we see it?," could we say with Haggai. It is not worth spending time repeating the list of present evils, of what, to some, appear only as ruins, no different from the ruins of ancient Rome that we have all around this city.

Not everything that once glittered and we now regret was gold. If it had all been pure gold, if those full seminaries had forged holy pastors, and the traditional formation imparted to them solid and true, we wouldn't have to mourn so many scandals today... But this is not what we need to talk about here, and I'm certainly not the most qualified person to do so. What I am anxious to retain is the exhortation that the prophet addressed to the people of Israel back then. He did not exhort them to feel sorry for themselves, to resign themselves, and be prepared for the worst. No. He said, like Jesus, "Take courage and work because I am with you – oracle of the Lord –; my Spirit will be with you!"

But be careful! Again, this is not a vague and empty, "Take courage." The prophet had previously stated what "the job" was that they would have to do. And since it concerns us closely, let us also listen to the previous oracle of Haggai to the people and their leaders:

Thus says the LORD of hosts: This people has said: "Now is not the time to rebuild the house of the LORD." Then the word of the LORD came through Haggai the prophet: "Is it time for you to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies in ruins? Now thus says the LORD of hosts: Reflect on your experience! You have sown much, but have brought in little; you have eaten, but have not been satisfied. You have drunk, but have not become intoxicated; you have clothed yourselves, but have not been warmed; And the hired worker labors for a bag full of holes... Go up into the hill country; bring timber, and build the house that I may be pleased with it, and that I may be glorified, says the LORD (Hag 1:2-8).

Once pronounced, the word of God becomes active and alive again every time it is proclaimed. It is not a simple biblical quotation. We are now "this people" to whom the word of God is addressed. What are for us today the "well-paneled houses" in which we are tempted to remain tranquil? I see three concentric houses, one inside the other, from which we have to exit to climb the mountain and rebuild the house of God.

The first house, well-paneled, cared for and furnished, is my "I" – my comfort, my glory, my position in society or in the Church. It's the hardest wall to break down. It is so easy to mistake my honor for the honor of God and the Church, attachment to my ideas for attachment to pure and simple truth. The one speaking does not think he is an exception. We stay inside this shell of ours like the silkworm in its case: all around it is silk, but if the silkworm doesn't break the shell, it will remain a caterpillar and will never become a free floating butterfly.

But let's leave this topic aside, having so many opportunities to hear about it. The well-paneled second home from which to go out in order to work on the "house of the Lord" is my parish, my religious order, ecclesial movement or association, my local Church, my diocese... We must not be mistaken. Woe to us if we did not have love and attachment to these particular realities in which the Lord has placed us, and for which we are perhaps responsible. Evil is in making them absolute, considering nothing outside of it, not being interested in anything else, criticizing and despising those who don't share our reality. In short, losing sight of the catholicity of the Church, forgetting what the Holy Father often says, that "the whole is greater than the part." We are one body, the body of Christ, and, as Paul says, in the body "if one member suffers the whole body suffers" (1 Cor 12:26). The synod should also serve this: to make us aware and sharers in the problems and joys of the entire Catholic Church.

But let's get to the well-paneled third house. Getting out of it is made particularly difficult by the fact that for centuries we have been taught that just looking outside of it would be a sin and a betrayal. I was recently reading, on the occasion of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, the testimony of a Catholic woman from a mixed-religion country. Her parish priest used to teach the congregation that even just physically entering a Protestant church was a mortal sin. And I suppose the same was said, on the other side of the fence, about entering a Catholic Church.

I speak, of course, of the well-paneled house which is the particular Christian denomination to which we belong. I do so in the still-fresh memory of the extraordinary and prophetic event of the ecumenical meeting in South Sudan last February. We are all convinced that part of the weakness of our evangelization and action in the world is due to the division and mutual struggle between Christians. What God says in Haggai is still occurring:

You expected much, but it came to little; and what you brought home, I blew away. Why is this? —oracle of the LORD of hosts— Because my house is the one which lies in ruins, while each of you runs to your own house (Hag 1:9-1).

Jesus said to Peter, “On this rock, I will build my Church.” He didn't say, “I will build my Churches.” There must be a sense in which what Jesus calls “my Church” embraces all believers in him and all the baptized. The Apostle Paul has a formula that could accomplish this task of embracing all who believe in Christ. At the beginning of his First Letter to the Corinthians, he extends his greeting to “all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours” (1 Cor 1:2).

Of course, we cannot be satisfied with this very vast but all too vague unity. And this justifies the commitment and discussion, even doctrinal, between the Churches. But neither can we despise and disregard this basic unity that consists in invoking the same Lord Jesus Christ. Whoever believes in the Son of God also believes in the Father and the Holy Spirit. What has been repeated on several occasions is very true: “what unites us is more important than what divides us.”

There are instances where we cannot fail to disapprove of the use made of the name of Jesus and the way in which the Gospel is proclaimed. In such cases, what St. Paul wrote about some who, in his time, proclaimed the Gospel “in a spirit of rivalry and with unrighteous intentions” can help us in overcoming the refusal, “But what does that matter?” He wrote to the Philippians, “Provided that in any way, for convenience or for sincerity, Christ is proclaimed, I rejoice” (Phil 1:16-18). Not to mention that Christians of other denominations also find things in us Catholics that they cannot approve of.

Haggai's oracle about the new, rebuilt temple ends with a radiant promise: “The future glory of this house will be greater than it was before, says the Lord of hosts; in this place, I will put peace. Oracle of the Lord of hosts (Hag 2:9). We dare not say that this prophecy will also come true for us and that the house of God which is the Church of the future will be more glorious than that of the past which we now regret; however, we can hope for it and ask God for it in a spirit of humility and repentance.

We witness some encouraging signs in this regard, one of the most evident being precisely the search for unity among Christians. In an interview with a Catholic journalist on his return journey from South Sudan, Archbishop Justin Welby said, “When the Churches work together, —which in the past had literally been enemies, attacking each other, and burning each other's priests, and had condemned each other in the most forceful of terms —, when that is the case, there is something spiritual that happens. There is a liberation of the Spirit of God, and this gives me great hope.”

The prophecy of Haggai that I have commented on, Venerable Fathers, brothers and sisters, is linked to a personal memory and I apologize if I dare to recall it again here after some of you may have already heard it from me. I do so in the certainty that the prophetic word unleashes its charge of trust and hope every time it is proclaimed and listened to with faith.

The day that my Superior General allowed me to leave my teaching position at the Catholic University of Milan, to devote myself full-time to preaching, there was precisely Haggai's prophecy in the Liturgy of the Hours. After reciting the Office, I came here to St. Peter's. I wanted to ask the Apostle to bless my new ministry. At a certain point, while I was in the square, that word of God came forcefully back to my mind. I turned towards the pope's window in the Apostolic Palace and began to proclaim aloud: "Take courage, John Paul II, take courage, cardinals, bishops, and all the people of the Church, and work because I am with you, says the Lord." It was easy to do because it was raining and there was no one around.

A few months later, however, in 1980, I was appointed Preacher of the Pontifical Household and found myself in the presence of the pope to begin my first Lent. That word echoed inside me again, not as a quote and a memory, but as a living word for that moment. I shared what I had done that day in St. Peter's Square. Then I turned to the pope, who at that time was following the sermon from a side chapel, and forcefully repeated Haggai's words: "Take courage, John Paul II, take courage you cardinals, bishops, and people of God, and get to work because I am with you, says the Lord. My Spirit will be with you." And from the reaction, it seemed to me that the words gave what they promised: that is, courage, (even if John Paul II was the last person in the world who needed to be exhorted to have courage!).

Today I dare to proclaim that word again, knowing that it is not just a quotation, but of an ever-living word that always does what it promises. Courage, therefore, Pope Francis! Courage, fellow cardinals, bishops, priests, and faithful of the Catholic Church, and work, because I am with you, says the Lord. My Spirit will be with you!"

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