

Full text: Cardinal Cantalamessa's homily at the Vatican's Good Friday 2023 liturgy

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On Good Friday, Pope Francis presided over the Liturgy of the Passion of the Lord in St. Peter's Basilica. Please find below the full text of the homily by Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa, O.F.M. Cap., preacher of the papal household.

The Liturgy of the Passion of the Lord in St. Peter's Basilica on April 7, 2023. | Daniel Ibanez/CNA

“WE PROCLAIM YOUR DEATH, O LORD!”

For two thousand years, the Church has announced and celebrated, on this day, the death of the Son of God on the cross. At every Mass, after the consecration, we say or sing: “We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.”

Yet another “death of God” has been proclaimed for a century and a half in our de-Christianized Western world. When, among cultivated people, one speaks of the “death of God,” it is this other death of God – ideological and rather than historical – that is meant. To keep up with the times, some theologians hastened to build a theology around it: “The theology of the death of God.”

We cannot pretend to ignore the existence of this different narrative, without leaving prey to suspicion many believers. This different death of God has found its fullest expression in the well-known proclamation that Nietzsche puts into the mouth of the “madman” who arrives out of breath into the city:

“Whither is God?” he cried; “I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I! There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed, he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.”

In the logic of these words (and, I believe, in the author's expectations) history after him would no longer be divided into Before Christ and After Christ, but, into Before Nietzsche and After Nietzsche. Apparently, it is not the Nothing that is put in the place of God, but man, and more precisely the “super-man,” or “the beyond-man.” Of this new man one must now exclaim “with a feeling of satisfaction and pride, and no longer of compassion”: “Ecce homo! Here is the real man! It won't take long, however, to realize that, left alone, man is indeed nothing.

“What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?”

The reassuring, implicit, answer of the “madman” to these disturbing questions of his is: “No, because man will carry out the task assigned to God up to now.” Instead, our answer as believers is: “Yes, and that's exactly what happened and is happening” – wandering as if through an infinite nothing! It is significant that, precisely in the wake of Nietzsche's thought, some have come to define human existence as a “being for-death” and to consider all the supposed human possibilities as “nullities from the start.”

“Beyond god and evil,” was another battle-cry of the author. Beyond god and evil, however, there is only “the will to power,” and we are dramatically witnessing again where it leads to . . .

It is not up to us to judge the heart of a man whom only God knows. Even the author of that proclamation had his share of suffering in his life, and suffering unites to Christ perhaps more than invectives separate from him. Jesus' prayer

on the cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing" (Lk 23:34), was not said only for those who were present at Calvary that day!

An image that I have sometimes observed live comes to my mind (which I hope has become reality, in the meantime, for the author of that proclamation!): an angry child tries to punch and scratch his own father's face with his fists, until, exhausted, he falls weeping into the arms of his daddy who calms him down and presses him to his chest.

Let us not judge, I repeat, the person whom only God knows. The consequences, however, that his proclamation has had we can and must judge. It has been declined in the most diverse ways and names, to the point of becoming a fashion and an atmosphere that reigns in the intellectual circles of the "post modern" Western world. The common denominator is a total relativism in every field " ethics, language, philosophy, art, and, of course, religion. Nothing more is solid; everything is liquid, or even vaporous. At the time of Romanticism, people used to bask in melancholy, today in nihilism!

As believers, it is our duty to show what there is behind, or underneath, that proclamation, namely the flicker of an ancient flame, the sudden eruption of a volcano that has never been extinguished since the beginning of the world. The human drama also had its "prologue in heaven," in that "spirit of denial" which did not accept existing in the grace of another. Since then, he has been recruiting supporters of his cause, the naive Adam and Eve being his first victims. "You will be like gods, knowing good from evil" (Gen 3:5).

All this seems to modern man nothing but an etiological myth to explain the evil in the world. And " in the positive sense given to myth today " such it is! But history, literature, and our own personal experience tell us that behind this "myth," there is a transcendent truth that no historical account or philosophical reasoning could convey to us.

God knows how proud we are and has come to our help by emptying himself in front of us. Christ Jesus,

though he was in the form of God,

did not regard equality with God something to be grasped.

Rather, he emptied himself,

taking the form of a slave,

coming in human likeness;

and found human in appearance,

he humbled himself,

becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross (Phil 2:6-8).

"God? We killed him: you and me!" shouts the "madman". This dreadful thing was, in fact, realized once in human history, but in quite a different sense. For it's true, brothers and sisters: It was us " you and me who have killed Jesus of Nazareth! He died for our sins and for those of the whole world (1Jn 2:2)! The Resurrection of Christ from the dead assures us, however, that if we repent this path does not lead to defeat, but to that "apotheosis of life" sought in vain elsewhere.

Why are we talking about all this during a Good Friday liturgy? Not to convince atheists that God is not dead. The most

famous among them discovered it on their own, at the very moment they closed their eyes to the light " better, to the darkness " of this world. As for those still living among us, means other than the words of an old preacher are needed to convince them. Means that the Lord will not fail to grant to those who have a heart open to the truth, for whom we are going to intercede in the universal prayer that will follow.

No, the real purpose is another; it is to keep believers " who knows, perhaps even just one or two university students " from being drawn into this vortex of nihilism which is the true "black hole" of the spiritual universe. The purpose is to let Dante Alighieri's warning resound again among us:

Christians, be ye more serious in your movements;

Be ye not like a feather at each wind,

And think not every water washes you.

Let us, therefore, continue to repeat, with heartfelt gratitude and more convinced than ever, the words we proclaim at every Mass:

"We proclaim your death, o Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again."

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