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# Papal Preacher 'comes home' to Catholic charismatics in New Jersey

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tWhen Capuchin Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa, the Preacher of the Papal Household, finished speaking to an overflow crowd at Seton Hall University last night, the applause was loud and sustained. It continued to build until hundreds of people were on their feet delivering a standing ovation. Cantalamessa sat for a moment, clearly uncomfortable, and then stood. He turned to face a large crucifix suspended behind the lectern and began to clap in its direction, gradually leading his audience to direct its thanks to God rather than to him.

tThough Cantalamessa had preached for almost an hour, this simple gesture may have been his most eloquent statement of the night ? not only about his theological convictions, but also his deep Franciscan humility.

tPope Paul IV (1555-1559) created the office of ?Apostolic Preacher,? meaning someone designated to preach for the pope and senior Vatican officials. Since 1743, the office has been reserved to the Capuchins, and since 1980, it?s been held by the 72-year-old Cantalamessa, a scripture scholar by training whose last name in Italian means ?sing the Mass.?

tThough serving as Preacher of the Papal Household is certainly a privilege, it?s not really a full-time job. Cantalamessa is responsible for leading retreats for the pope and senior Vatican officials during Advent and Lent, as well as delivering the Good Friday homily in St. Peter?s Basilica. The rest of the time, Cantalamessa is, in effect, an itinerant preacher, moving around the globe in his simple brown Capuchin habit, clutching a tattered small blue copy of the *New Jerusalem Bible*.

His Feb. 21 appearance at Seton Hall University was in some ways a homecoming for the Cantalamessa. It was in New Jersey in 1967 that Cantalamessa was first ?baptized in the Spirit,? a key term in Charismatic Christianity for a decisive moment in which someone accepts Jesus Christ in a deeply personal way. Since then, Cantalamessa has gone on to become arguably the most prominent adherent of the Charismatic movement in the Catholic Church.

Cantalamessa is not the stereotypical enthusiast associated with the Charismatic scene. He?s low-key, and just as likely to cite Thomas Aquinas as he is to quote hymns or to invoke wonders. Yet he?s deeply committed to seeing Christianity not in terms of formal adherence to a Creed, but as a deeply personal decision to ?accept Jesus Christ? and to receive ?baptism in the Spirit.?

?Maybe the Holy Spirit will touch somebody here,? he said at one point. ?Maybe later tonight, maybe during Lent, but this could be a life-changing moment for someone here right now.?

Cantalamessa is such a drawing card that at a certain point last night, people turning out to hear him preach in the Seton Hall basketball gym had to be directed to park in a nearby synagogue and then bused to the location.

Cantalamessa candidly told the audience that early in his priesthood, he was ?a strong adversary? of the Charismatic movement, so that his reversal of field in New Jersey came as a surprise to most of his Italian family and friends.

t?When I got back to Italy, they told me, ?We sent America Saul, and they have sent us back Paul,?? Cantalamessa joked.

tHe said that as part of his experience in New Jersey, God spoke to him through an ?interior image.? He saw himself standing in a chariot, with the horses? reins in his hands. He understood this, he said, to be a metaphor for his efforts to control his own life.

tNext, he said, Christ asked him, ?Do you want me to take the reins??

tWhat followed, Cantalamessa said, was a ?moment of panic,? as he faced the prospect of surrendering himself completely to Christ, but in the end he accepted.

tLater, it was another such ?interior vision? which prompted Cantalamessa to give up a promising academic career for the ministry of an itinerant preacher, moving in largely Charismatic circles. That lasted, he said, until he got a phone call from his Capuchin superior in 1980, asking if he had any ?serious reason? why he could not accept an appointment from Pope John Paul II as Preacher of the Papal Household.

The Seton Hall event had a decidedly charismatic flavor, with outstretched hands during prayer, upbeat spiritual music, and personal witness about ?what the Lord has done in my life.? It was sponsored by the university and the ?People of Hope,? one of the largest charismatic ?covenant communities? in the United States.

Cantalamessa, who holds advanced degrees in both classical literature and theology, is comfortable with the language of ?revivalist? Christianity, a term analysts use to designate both independent Pentecostal Christians as well as the Charismatics within existing confessions. Today, ?revivalists? represent one-quarter of the world?s total Christian population, up from just six percent at the beginning of the 20th century. Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement have seen explosive growth across the global south, including Latin America and Africa.

The ease with which Cantalamessa uses revivalist language makes him a natural interlocutor with many Protestants. In fact, Cantalamessa arrived in New Jersey from Kentucky, where he had just delivered ten talks over two days at a Methodist seminary.

tIn his Seton Hall presentation, Cantalamessa emphasized that at its core, Christianity is not a set of duties or ethical obligations, but a message about something God has done. Christianity is ?the religion of grace,? he said ? ?amazing grace.?

tCantalamessa compared the moment of decision for Christ to the arrival of an unexpected guest.

t?We want to shut the doors to the messy rooms, so the guest doesn?t see the disorder,? he said. ?But this is not what we should do with Christ. We must open up the messy rooms of our hearts to him, because those are the ones that need some work.?
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