

On the Revolution of Love

It “Changes the World Without Making Noise”

POPE BENEDICT XVI
VATICAN CITY, 18 FEBRUARY 2007

A TRANSLATION OF THE ADDRESS BENEDICT XVI DELIVERED BEFORE RECITING THE MIDDAY ANGELUS WITH SEVERAL THOUSAND PEOPLE GATHERED IN ST. PETER’S SQUARE. (ZENIT.ORG)

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

This Sunday’s Gospel has one of the most typical, yet most difficult, teachings of Jesus: Love your enemies (LUKE 6:27).

It is taken from the Gospel of Luke, but it is also found in Matthew’s Gospel (5:44), in the context of the programmatic discourse that begins with the famous Beatitudes. Jesus delivered this address in Galilee, at the beginning of his public ministry: It was something of a “manifesto” presented to everyone, which Christ asked his disciples to accept, thus proposing to them in radical terms a model for their lives.

But what is the meaning of his teaching? Why does Jesus ask us to love our very enemies, that is, ask a love that exceeds human capacities? What is certain is that Christ’s proposal is realistic, because it takes into account that in the world there is too much violence, too much injustice, and that this situation cannot be overcome without positing more love, more kindness. This “more” comes from God: It is his mercy that has become flesh in Jesus and that alone can redress the balance of the world from evil to good, beginning from that small and decisive “world” which is man’s heart.

This page of the Gospel is rightly considered the “magna carta” of Christian nonviolence; it does not consist in surrendering to evil—as claims a false interpretation of “turn the other cheek” (LUKE 6:29)—but

in responding to evil with good. (ROMANS 12:17-21), and thus breaking the chain of injustice. It is thus understood that nonviolence, for Christians, is not mere tactical behavior but a person’s way of being, the attitude of one who is convinced of God’s love and power, who is not afraid to confront evil with the weapons of love and truth alone. Loving the enemy is the nucleus of the “Christian revolution,” a revolution not based on strategies of economic, political or media power. The revolution of love, a love that does not base itself definitively in human resources, but in the gift of God, that is obtained only and unreservedly in his merciful goodness. Herein lies the novelty of the Gospel, which changes the world without making noise. Herein lies the heroism of the “little ones,” who believe in the love of God and spread it even at the cost of life.

Dear brothers and sisters: Lent, which begins this Wednesday, with the rite of the distribution of ashes, is the favorable time in which all Christians are invited to convert ever more deeply to the love of Christ.

Let us ask the Virgin Mary, the docile disciple of the Redeemer, to help us to allow ourselves to be conquered without reservations by that love, to learn to love as he loved us, to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful (LUKE 6:36).

REVOLUTION: WITHOUT MAKING NOISE

(REV.) EMMANUEL CHARLES MCCARTHY

COMMENTARY ON THE ADDRESS, GIVEN BY POPE BENEDICT XVI ON 18 FEBRUARY 2007

Many of you may have already read the address given on the Sunday before the beginning of Lent—the time set aside for repentance and changes of mind and heart—by Pope Benedict XVI. If not, let me exhort you to read it and ponder it—and then distribute it. This is one superbly crafted statement on the importance, indeed the centrality, of Jesus’ teaching of nonviolent love of friends and enemies, and on this being “the nucleus of the Christian revolution” and hence axial to a correct understanding of the Gospel. For those who spend the time with it that it deserves, it will be an illumination of a truth hidden or obscured, perhaps since their Baptism.

Remember this Pope is considered by the consensus of his academic colleagues, regardless of their individual Christian denomination, an eminent theological scholar. There are no shallow or throwaway lines in this address. Consider his words on how nonviolent Christlike love of friends and enemies operates: “The revolution of love...which changes the world without making noise.” At one level this could be read, and properly so, that the Gospel revolution of Christlike nonviolence and love of enemies changes the world without the noise of war or violent revolution—both of which are always suffused with the noise of weapons, the noise of the herd, the noise of hate, the noise of revenge, the noise of self-righteousness, the noise of propaganda, the noise that drowns out dialogue, the noise that overrides conscience, the noise that represses empathy, the noise that is not human language as the carrier of truth but is rather loutish blarings as the carrier of the spirit of destruction and desolation. Such a reading of what the Pope said would be reasonable.

But, “The revolution of love...which changes the world without making noise,” reaches infinitely beyond this interpretation. It proceeds to the very core of the revolution Jesus Christ started and offers us the opportunity to participate in and continue, that is, the revolution that Pope Benedict says “is not afraid to confront evil with the weapons of love and truth alone.” In the context of Benedict’s address the words, “The revolution of love...which changes the world without making noise,” is a direct and immediate reference to the counter-violence, revolutionary Hymn of the Suffering Servant, the ebed Yahweh—the summit of salvific nonviolent love in Hebrew Scripture. Its opening stanza is

*Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen one with whom I am pleased,
Upon whom I have put my spirit;
he shall bring forth righteousness to the nations,
Not crying out, nor shouting,
not making his voice heard in the streets.
A bruised reed he shall not break,
and a smoldering wick he shall not quench,
Until he established righteousness on earth;
the coastlands will wait for his teaching.*

ISAIAH 42:1-4

To underline and elaborate on what I am saying, let me here present excerpts on the Hymn of the Suffering Servant (ISAIAH 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) and on its relation to the New Testament from the writings of another world renowned Catholic intellectual, the Biblical scholar, the late Rev. John L. McKenzie:

“The number of allusions to this passage (Suffering Servant) in the New Testament is difficult to count. But they are enough to establish the thesis that this passage had a central position in the proclamation of Jesus. The early Church attributed the proclamation of this theme to Jesus himself and no convincing reason has been urged to show that it should be attributed to another. It is as deeply embedded in the Gospels as anything else; to repeat what I have said in other connections, if this theme is not the work of Jesus himself then we know nothing of his words or his person.”

“It is remarkable that the words at the baptism of Jesus (MT 3:17; MK 1:11; LK 3:22) are almost an exact quotation of ISAIAH 42:1.”

“It remains true that Jesus demands that his disciples identify themselves with him as the Suffering Servant.”

“Jesus suffered; but there is nothing in the Gospels which indicates that he liked it.”

“Mere cultivation of pain does not assure identity with Jesus the Suffering Servant. Mere animal pain does not save. Identity with Jesus suffering is first of all identity with Jesus loving, to put it in a word.”

“As Suffering Servant Jesus experienced nothing, we have noticed, which is not part of the human condition. And he thus placed his achievement within the reach of all people.”

“The Suffering Servant theme is the peak of faith in the Old Testament, the supreme affirmation of God’s power. When we meet the theme of the Suffering Servant as proclaimed in the New Testament, we are at the very center of the Christian revolution.”

Lest some of my non-Catholic readers feel a certain discomfort with all this scholarly focus on the Pope and the writings of a Catholic Biblical scholar, let me offer some thoughts on the same subject from a Protestant Biblical scholar every bit the academic equal to Benedict XVI and John L. McKenzie, namely, Oscar Cullmann:

“We come straight to the heart of New Testament Christology with the title Suffering Servant, ebed Yahweh, although scholars have not usually given it its proper place.”

“At what point in his earthly life did Jesus reach the consciousness that he had to realize the task of the Suffering Servant? The key to the solution of this problem is the voice from heaven, which Jesus hears when he is baptized by John in the Jordan (MK 1:11 and parallel passages). The saying, ‘Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased,’ is a quotation from ISAIAH 42:1. In the Old Testament these words are addressed to the Suffering Servant; indeed they are the introduction to the ‘ebed Yahweh’ hymn. We may consider it certain that the words of the voice from heaven (to Jesus at his baptism) are a citation of this passage in Isaiah. He realized at the time of his baptism that he was the ‘ebed Yahweh,’ the Suffering Servant, and from that time on the way he should go was clear to him. We conclude that the concept of Jesus as the ‘ebed Yahweh,’ the Suffering Servant, has its origin with Jesus himself.”

The purpose of these quoted scholarly reflections on the Old Testament theme of the Suffering Servant and how it intersects with the New Testament proclamation of Jesus is to try to make visible the depth of truth being presented here by Benedict. It is also to try to insure that the spiritual and moral momentousness of what he is stating regarding Gospel nonviolence and love of enemies is not recklessly brushed-off by Christians with the habitual, unthinking and unserious evasive flippancy: “Oh that’s nice, but that stuff is just so much spiritual cotton-candy, a bit of uplifting idealistic, unrealistic, Utopian piety.” Let me assure my readers, first, that a full year’s university theology course at the doctoral level could be built around this address. Secondly, if this is an easily dismissible piece of sugary theological fluff, it is the first such piece that the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 25 year Prefect of the Congregation of Doctrine and Faith, has presented for public consumption in the last four decades!

Do give this address thought and prayer. In a world—

where violence and enmity are the tools of choice for bringing in a “better tomorrow and brighter future,” in a world where these tools of choice have been so technologically honed that a few people can generate, almost instantaneously, levels of fear, hate, destruction and desolation that in the past would have required tens or hundreds of thousands of people years to effect, in a world where the production and sale of these tools is the most lucrative business on the planet, and finally in a world where practically all of this is being done with “God” as its source and/or supporter—is it not time for Christians and their Churches to teach what Jesus taught and to struggle to live what Jesus lived in relation to violence and enmity? Has not the fullness of time arrived for one of the world’s major religions to say an absolute, universal and never-ending, “No,” to divinely justified violence and enmity, because violence and enmity are *de facto* in radical opposition to the Way and the Will and the Reality of God—because they are hostile to the Holy? Is it not time for Christians and their Churches to choose as their “way of being,

the attitude of one who is convinced of God’s love and power, who is not afraid to confront evil with the weapons of love and truth alone?” Why should Christians and their Churches be the first major world religion to universally witness to this truth about God and His Way by choosing this “way of being”? Why—because their Founder, Lord and Savior so witnessed to this truth about God and God’s Way by this “way of being.” And—because he explicitly chose them to do likewise.

Please, do give this presentation by Benedict XVI to your pastor, to the people of your parish (not only the peace and justice folks), to your students, to your family, to your friends, etc. Dialogue and pray about its content with them. If you are not a Catholic and see the Pope as simply a Christian man, then read, study and ponder what he is saying here, asking yourself but one question before God: “Is he stating in this address the truth that Jesus Christ taught by word and by deed, and that He commanded His disciples to observe?” (MT 28:20)