

## Father Cantalamessa's Good Friday Homily

### "Judas Was Standing With Them"

VATICAN CITY, April 18, 2014 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)) - Here is the Good Friday homily delivered today in St. Peter's Basilica by Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa, preacher of the Pontifical Household.

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"Judas was Standing with Them" (Jn 18:5)

In the divine-human history of the passion of Jesus, there are many minor stories about men and women who entered into the ray of its light or its shadow. The most tragic one is that of Judas Iscariot. It is one of the few events attested with equal emphasis by each of the four Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. The early Christian community reflected a great deal on this incident and we would be remiss to do otherwise. It has much to tell us.

Judas was chosen from the very beginning to be one of the Twelve. In inserting his name in the list of apostles, the gospel-writer Luke says, "Judas Iscariot, who became (*egeneto*) a traitor" (Lk 6:16). Judas was thus not born a traitor and was not a traitor at the time Jesus chose him; he became a traitor! We are before one of the darkest dramas of human freedom.

Why did he become a traitor? Not so long ago, when the thesis of a "revolutionary Jesus" was in fashion, people tried to ascribe idealistic motivations to Judas' action. Someone saw in his name "Iscariot" a corruption of *sicariot*, meaning that he belonged to a group of extremist zealots who used a kind of dagger (*sica*) against the Romans; others thought that Judas was disappointed in the way that Jesus was putting forward his concept of "the kingdom of God" and wanted to force his hand to act against the pagans on the political level as well. This is the Judas of the famous musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* and of other recent films and novels—a Judas who resembles another famous traitor to his benefactor, Brutus, who killed Julius Caesar to save the Roman Republic!

These are reconstructions to be respected when they have some literary or artistic value, but they have no historical basis whatsoever. The Gospels—the only reliable sources that we have about Judas' character—speak of a more down-to-earth motive: money. Judas was entrusted with the group's common purse; on the occasion of Jesus' anointing in Bethany, Judas had protested against the waste of the precious perfumed ointment that Mary poured on Jesus' feet, not because he was interested in the poor but, as John notes, "because he was a thief, and as he had the money box he used to take what was put into it" (Jn 12:6). His proposal to the chief priests is explicit: "What will you give me if I deliver him to you?" And they paid him thirty pieces of silver" (Mt 26:15).

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But why are people surprised at this explanation, finding it too banal? Has it not always been this way in history and is still this way today? Mammon, money, is not just one idol among many: it is the idol par excellence, literally “a molten god” (see Ex 34:17). And we know why that is the case. Who is objectively, if not subjectively (in fact, not in intentions), the true enemy, the rival to God, in this world? Satan? But no one decides to serve Satan without a motive. Whoever does it does so because they believe they will obtain some kind of power or temporal benefit from him. Jesus tells us clearly who the other master, the anti-God, is: “No one can serve two masters. . . . You cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt 6:24). Money is the “visible god”<sup>[1]</sup> in contrast to the true God who is invisible.

Mammon is the anti-God because it creates an alternative spiritual universe; it shifts the purpose of the theological virtues. Faith, hope, and charity are no longer placed in God but in money. A sinister inversion of all values occurs. Scripture says, “All things are possible to him who believes” (Mk 9:23), but the world says, “All things are possible to him who has money.” And on a certain level, all the facts seem to bear that out.

“The love of money,” Scripture says, “is the root of all evil” (1 Tim 6:10). Behind every evil in our society is money, or at least money is *also* included there. It is the Molech we recall from the Bible to whom young boys and girls were sacrificed (see Jer 32:35) or the Aztec god for whom the daily sacrifice of a certain number of human hearts was required. What lies behind the drug enterprise that destroys so many human lives, behind the phenomenon of the mafia, behind political corruption, behind the manufacturing and sale of weapons, and even behind—what a horrible thing to mention—the sale of human organs removed from children? And the financial crisis that the world has gone through and that this country is still going through, is it not in large part due to the “cursed hunger for gold,” the *auri sacra fames*,<sup>[2]</sup> on the part of some people? Judas began with taking money out of the common purse. Does this say anything to certain administrators of public funds?

But apart from these criminal ways of acquiring money, is it not also a scandal that some people earn salaries and collect pensions that are sometimes 100 times higher than those of the people who work for them and that they raise their voices to object when a proposal is put forward to reduce their salary for the sake of greater social justice?

In the 1970s and 1980s in Italy, in order to explain unexpected political reversals, hidden exercises of power, terrorism, and all kinds of mysteries that were troubling civilian life, people began to point to the quasi-mythical idea of the existence of “a big Old Man,” a shrewd and powerful figure who was pulling all the strings behind the curtain for goals known only to himself. This powerful “Old Man” really exists and is not a myth; his name is Money!

Like all idols, money is deceitful and lying: it promises security and instead takes it away; it promises freedom and instead destroys it. St. Francis of Assisi, with a severity that is untypical for him, describes the end of life of a person who has lived only to increase his “capital.” Death draws near, and the priest is summoned. He asks the dying

man, "Do you want forgiveness for all your sins?" and he answers, "Yes." The priest then asks, "Are you ready to make right the wrongs you did, restoring things you have defrauded others of?" The dying man responds, "I can't." "Why can't you?" "Because I have already left everything in the hands of my relatives and friends." And so he dies without repentance, and his body is barely cold when his relatives and friends say, "Damn him! He could have earned more money to leave us, but he didn't."[\[3\]](#)

How many times these days have we had to think back again to the cry Jesus addressed to the rich man in the parable who had stored up endless riches and thought he was secure for the rest of his life: "Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" (Lk 12:20)!

Men placed in positions of responsibility who no longer knew in what bank or monetary paradise to hoard the proceeds of their corruption have found themselves on trial in court or in a prison cell just when they were about to say to themselves, "Have a good time now, my soul." For whom did they do it? Was it worth it? Did they work for the good of their children and family, or their party, if that is really what they were seeking? Have they not instead ruined themselves and others?

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The betrayal of Judas continues throughout history, and the one betrayed is always Jesus. Judas sold the head, while his imitators sell the body, because the poor are members of the body of Christ, whether they know it or not. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:40). However, Judas' betrayal does not continue only in the high-profile kinds of cases that I have mentioned. It would be comfortable for us to think so, but that is not the case. The homily that Father Primo Mazzolari gave on Holy Thursday 1958 about "Our Brother Judas" is still famous. "Let me," he said to the few parishioners before him, "think about the Judas who is within me for a moment, about the Judas who perhaps is also within you."

One can betray Jesus for other kinds of compensation than thirty pieces of silver. A man who betrays his wife, or a wife her husband, betrays Christ. The minister of God who is unfaithful to his state in life, or instead of feeding the sheep entrusted to him feeds himself, betrays Jesus. Whoever betrays their conscience betrays Jesus. Even I can betray him at this very moment—and it makes me tremble—if while preaching about Judas I am more concerned about the audience's approval than about participating in the immense sorrow of the Savior. There was a mitigating circumstance in Judas' case that I do not have. He did not know who Jesus was and considered him to be only "a righteous man"; he did not know, as we do, that he was the Son of God.

As Easter approaches every year, I have wanted to listen to Bach's "Passion According to St. Matthew" again. It includes a detail that makes me flinch every time. At the announcement of Judas' betrayal, all the apostles ask Jesus, "Is it I, Lord?" ("*Herr, bin ich's?*") Before having us hear Christ's answer, the composer—erasing the distance between the event and its commemoration—inserts a chorale that begins this way: "It is

I; I am the traitor! I need to make amends for my sins." ("Ich bin's, ich sollte büßen."). Like all the chorales in this musical piece, it expresses the sentiments of the people who are listening. It is also an invitation for us to make a confession of our sin.

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The Gospel describes Judas' horrendous end: "When Judas, his betrayer, saw that he was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, 'I have sinned in betraying innocent blood.' They said, 'What is that to us? See to it yourself.' And throwing down the pieces of silver, he departed; and he went and hanged himself" (Mt 27:3-5). But let us not pass a hasty judgment here. Jesus never abandoned Judas, and no one knows, after he hung himself from a tree with a rope around his neck, where he ended up: in Satan's hands or in God's hands. Who can say what transpired in his soul during those final moments? "Friend" was the last word that Jesus addressed to him, and he could not have forgotten it, just as he could not have forgotten Jesus' gaze.

It is true that in speaking to the Father about his disciples Jesus had said about Judas, "None of them is lost but the son of perdition" (Jn 17:12), but here, as in so many other instances, he is speaking from the perspective of time and not of eternity. The enormity of this betrayal is enough by itself alone, without needing to consider a failure that is eternal, to explain the other terrifying statement said about Judas: "It would have been better for that man if he had not been born" (Mk 14:21). The eternal destiny of a human being is an inviolable secret kept by God. The Church assures us that a man or a woman who is proclaimed a saint is experiencing eternal blessedness, but she does not herself know for certain that any particular person is in hell.

Dante Alighieri, who places Judas in the deepest part of hell in his *Divine Comedy*, tells of the last-minute conversion of Manfred, the son of Frederick II and the king of Sicily whom everyone at the time considered damned because he died as an excommunicated. Having been mortally wounded in battle, he confides to the poet that in the very last moment of his life, "...weeping, I gave my soul / to Him who grants forgiveness willingly" and he sends a message from Purgatory to earth that is still relevant for us:

Horrible was the nature of my sins,  
but boundless mercy stretches out its arms  
to any man who comes in search of it.[\[4\]](#)

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Here is what the story of our brother Judas should move us to do: to surrender ourselves to the one who freely forgives, to throw ourselves likewise into the outstretched arms of the Crucified One. The most important thing in the story of Judas is not his betrayal but Jesus' response to it. He knew well what was growing in his disciple's heart, but he does not expose it; he wants to give Judas the opportunity right up until the last minute to turn back, and is almost shielding him. He knows why Judas came to the garden of

olives, but he does not refuse his cold kiss and even calls him "friend" (see Mt 26:50). He sought out Peter after his denial to give him forgiveness, so who knows how he might have sought out Judas at some point on his way to Calvary! When Jesus prays from the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Lk 23:34), he certainly does not exclude Judas from those he prays for.

So what will we do? Who will we follow, Judas or Peter? Peter had remorse for what he did, but Judas was also remorseful to the point of crying out, "I have betrayed innocent blood!" and he gave back the thirty pieces of silver. Where is the difference then? Only in one thing: Peter had confidence in the mercy of Christ, and Judas did not! Judas' greatest sin was not in having betrayed Christ but in having doubted his mercy.

If we have imitated Judas in his betrayal, some of us more and some less, let us not imitate him in his lack of confidence in forgiveness. There is a sacrament through which it is possible to have a sure experience of Christ's mercy: the sacrament of reconciliation. How wonderful this sacrament is! It is sweet to experience Jesus as Teacher, as Lord, but even sweeter to experience him as Redeemer, as the one who draws you out of the abyss, like he drew Peter out of the sea, as the one who touches you and, like he did with the leper, says to you, " I will; be clean" (Mt 8:3).

Confession allows us to experience about ourselves what the Church says of Adam's sin on Easter night in the "Exultet": "O happy fault that earned so great, so glorious a Redeemer!" Jesus knows how to take all our sins, once we have repented, and make them "happy faults," faults that would no longer be remembered if it were not for the experience of mercy and divine tenderness that they occasioned.

I have a wish for myself and for all of you, Venerable Fathers, brothers, and sisters: on Easter morning, may we awaken and let the words of a great convert in modern times, Paul Claudel, resonate in our hearts:

My God, I have been revived, and I am with You again!

I was sleeping, stretched out like a dead man in the night.

You said, "Let there be light!" and I awoke the way a cry is shouted out!

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My Father, You who have given me life before the Dawn, I place myself in Your Presence. My heart is free and my mouth is cleansed; my body and spirit are fasting. I have been absolved of all my sins, which I confessed one by one. The wedding ring is on my finger and my face is washed. I am like an innocent being in the grace that You have bestowed on me.[\[5\]](#) This is what Christ's Passover can do for us.

[Translated from Italian by Marsha Daigle Williamson]

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[1] William Shakespeare, *The Life of Timon of Athens*, Act IV, sc. 3, l. 386.

[2] Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 3.57.

[3] See Francis of Assisi, "Letter to All the Faithful," 12.

[4] Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio* 3.118-120: English trans. Mark Musa (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1985), 32.

[5] Paul Claudel, *Prière pour le dimanche matin* [Prayer for a Sunday Morning], in *Œuvres poétiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), 377.