

World

Preaching to the pope: Capuchin says it's an exercise in humility

Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa preaches during the Good Friday liturgy led by Pope Francis in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican April 18, 2014. Father Cantalamessa, the official "preacher of the papal household," has been preaching at the Good Friday service since 1980. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)



VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- The first time Capuchin Father Raniero Cantalamessa climbed the steps up to the papal altar in St. Peter's Basilica, he said, "it felt like I was climbing Mount Everest."

The intimidating climb 35 years ago was to fulfill a mandate from St. John Paul II, who tapped the Capuchin to preach to the pope and the public on Good Friday 1980.

Now 80, Father Cantalamessa still preaches at the Liturgy of the Lord's Passion in the basilica each year. And, as the official "preacher of the papal household," the Capuchin also preaches to the pope and leaders of the Roman Curia on most Fridays of Advent and Lent each year.

The superiors of a variety of religious orders took turns preaching to the pontiff and his aides during Advent and Lent until the mid-1500s when Pope Paul IV appointed the first preacher of the papal household; his successors followed suit, always choosing a religious-order priest for the job. Pope Benedict XIV decided in 1743 to be more specific, decreeing that the preacher of the papal household always be a Capuchin friar.

Last summer, Father Cantalamessa told an Italian Catholic magazine that he figured he had given 280 Advent and Lenten talks to the Curia and St. John Paul, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis. With each meditation lasting about 30 minutes, he said, "I've been responsible for having taken up a good 140 hours of the last three popes' precious time."

In an interview with Catholic News Service, Father Cantalamessa said that in the life of the pope and the Curia, "my service is very humble" and limited to nine meditations or homilies a year. "Not having any role other than proclaiming the word of God, I'm free to preach and disappear, which is to the advantage of everyone."

While he travels frequently, preaching and giving talks especially to charismatic groups, the place he usually disappears to is the Capuchin Poor Clares hermitage in the town of Cittaducale. He helped the nuns there discern their vocation not only to be cloistered, but to dedicate a significant amount of time each month in prayer in a hermit's isolation.

In the quiet of the monastery, he prays and writes his sermons for the pope and for the nuns, but also for the townspeople to whom he ministers on Sundays.

The three popes he has preached to have given him the freedom to choose the topics for his meditations, he said. "I try to understand, including with the help of prayer, what are the problems, needs or even graces the church is living at the moment and to make my little contribution with a spiritual reflection."

For Lent 2015, after watching Pope Francis embrace Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople in Jerusalem last spring and in Istanbul in November, Father Cantalamessa decided to focus on a current trend in ecumenism: learning from one another.

In the past, he told the pope and Curia March 6, "relations between Eastern theology and Latin theology were marked with an obvious apologetic and polemic coloring." In a world thirsting for the Gospel, insisting on "subtle distinctions" makes little sense, he said, but bringing together "what we have in common and what unites us in one faith" can be a great service.

While Father Cantalamessa's message is spiritual, he said the needs of the world are always in his heart and on his mind.

"Putting the word of God into practice must characterize all preaching," he said. "Pope Francis gives us a stupendous example of that with his morning homilies."

The brown-robed Capuchin honed his relevancy skills on television, he said. Every Saturday evening for 14 years, he had a half-hour program on RAI 1, Italy's main station, in which he reflected on the Scripture readings that would be used at Mass the next day.

"Television is ruthless. Either you show what the Word has to do with the lives and problems of people or they tune you out," he said. "Thanks to the remote, people don't even need to get up out of their chairs to do it."

Preaching is not an academic exercise or an occasion for philosophical musing, he said. But that does not mean it's not intimidating to preach to the pope and his top aides.

"This is the real challenge for the preacher of the papal household: To talk in front of people who, in terms of holiness and spiritual knowledge, are far ahead of you," he said. "It's a healthy exercise in humility."

Father Cantalamessa tells the story of one of his confreres who, "a bit jokingly and a bit seriously," told him he must not be a very good preacher. "You've been preaching to the Roman Curia for years and there's still no sign of conversion," the other Capuchin said.

In response, Father Cantalamessa said he told him, "The most difficult thing isn't to convert those who are listening, but to convert the preacher."

Just the fact that the popes and the heads of the departments of the Roman Curia set aside an hour every Friday morning in Lent and Advent "to listen to a simple priest" is a lesson, he said. "In reality, the popes preach to me with their humility."