

**“Da mihi animas
cetera tolle”
Symposium**

July 18-25, 2007

**Don Bosco Hall,
Berkeley**

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Australia**

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**Province of Mary Help,
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Response to Paper of Fr. Joe Boenzi SDB

Francis Preston, SDB

Earlier this year, in mid January, together with the other members of the staff and the students of the Ratisbonne Community in Jerusalem, I had the privilege of making my annual retreat at a retreat center on the Mount of Beatitudes in Galilee—surely one of the most beautiful and evocative locations in the world in which to make a retreat.

The retreat center is situated on the crest of a range of low hills that fringe the northern shoreline of the Sea or, more accurately, the Lake of Galilee or Genezaret. From the grounds of the center it is possible to look due south and view the whole of the Lake, even the southern shoreline where the Jordan River exits on its journey southwards to the Dead Sea. Except in the south, the Lake is fringed by high ground: in the east there are the Golan Heights, the northern part of which, at the time of Jesus, lay in the Tetrarchy of Philip, the southern part in the Decapolis, and to the west of the Lake there is a range of hills with a steep east-facing escarpment which was part of the Tetrarchy of Herod Antipas.

During the retreat we were blessed with six days of unbroken sunny weather – almost unknown of in mid January – and so I was able to spend much of my time looking south out over the Lake, letting the incredible beauty of the location speak to me. “God created seven seas but the Sea of Genezaret gave him the greatest joy.” Immediately below and to the west of the Mount of Beatitudes is the narrow coastal plain of Genezaret, which fringes the north western shores of the Lake. Fresh water springs and rich volcanic soil ensure even today the fertility and productiveness of this area. The lakeside villages of Magdala

and Capernaum, long since disappeared, lay, the first towards the southern end of the plain, the other towards the north.

It was in this natural amphitheatre and in the rolling hill country immediately behind and to the north of it, the so called "Evangelical Triangle" that included the towns of Capernaum, Bethsaida and Chorazin, that Jesus called his first disciple, worked most of his miracles and delivered the most important parts of his teaching. It was in Capernaum that Jesus made his home and the base for his pastoral ministry in Galilee.

In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, Benedict XVI, writes:

The real novelty of the New Testament lies not so much in new ideas as in the figure of Christ himself, who gives flesh and blood to those concepts - an unprecedented realism. In the Old Testament, the novelty of the Bible did not consist merely in abstract notions but in God's unpredictable and in some sense unprecedented activity. This divine activity now takes on dramatic form when, in Christ Jesus, it is God himself who goes in search of the "stray sheep", a suffering and lost humanity. When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are no mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity. His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he saves himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form.²⁵

Where was the nature of this radical love revealed for the first time in all its depth and richness? If we are to believe the gospels, it was at Capernaum on the northern shores of the Lake of Galilee.

They went as far as Capernaum, and at once on the Sabbath he went into the synagogue and began to teach. And his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority. That evening, after sunset, they brought to him all who were sick and those who

²⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, paragraph 12.

were possessed by devils. The whole town came crowding round the door and he cured many who were sick with diseases of one kind or another; he also drove out many devil.²⁶

Towards the end of his paper, Fr. Boenzi makes reference to the “pastoral heart” of Francis de Sales and how “as he looked at the separated city of Geneva, his longing converted into a program of action and a journey of continual conversion.” And with reference to Don Bosco Fr. Boenzi comments: “At the end of the day, the *Da mihi animas* is a prayer and a gesture that becomes a life long investment. Don Bosco had to learn this for himself.” On whom did both Francis de Sales and Don Bosco model themselves, if not the person and the ministry of Jesus? The pastoral concern of Jesus became their inspiration and example.

And when he saw the crowds he felt sorry for them because they were harassed and dejected like sheep without a shepherd.²⁷

The question I found myself asking as I gazed from the Mount of the Beatitudes over what remains today of Capernaum is, Why did Jesus choose this obscure part of rural Palestine to reveal the true nature of pastoral charity and not somewhere more appropriate? Say, Jerusalem, the religious capital of the Jewish people and the home of Herod the Great’s magnificent Temple, or the desert, where Jesus’ kinsman, John, had centered his ministry. Why here in Galilee?

Sean Freyne in his book, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean*, comments:

The reasons for the choice are unclear and it would be entering the realm of the speculative to be definitive on the matter, though several possible suggestions can be put forward: acquaintance with some of the Baptist disciples from Bethsaida; rejection by his own people, searching for suitable labor; option for a more open, cosmopolitan

²⁶ Mark 1:21-22; 32-34.

²⁷ Matt 9:36.

environment; avoidance of Herodian at Sepphoris, close to Nazareth; a healer in search of suitable air and water...²⁸

Certainly, the breathtaking beauty of the region must have spoken to Jesus, as it still does today, of God's love as revealed in creation. No wonder then that Jesus spoke so often of what he observed in countryside around him: the birds of the air, the lilies of the field, the seed growing secretly. Were the people of this region more needy than those elsewhere, more deserving? Probably not.

In Jesus' time Galilee was at least half Gentile in population, many of its inhabitants bilingual using Greek and Aramaic. As well as the influence of Judaism, as evidenced by the importance of worship in the synagogue on the Sabbath, the cult of Venus and other pagan deities flourished in places like Dan and Caesarea Philippi. And for all its apparent obscurity Capernaum, which Jesus chose as his home, must have been a fascinating place to live, situated as it was not only on the lakeside, but also on an important trading route running east-west between the Mediterranean and Damascus.

It was here that Jesus focused his ministry. It was to the inhabitants of this region he proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom: to the fishermen who worked the waters of the Lake, to the farmers and rural poor who labored in fields and the vineyards, to the merchants who traversed the road to Syria that ran along the northern shore of the Lake, to the petty government officials and the military who controlled the border crossings along the Jordan, separating Herod's Galilee from Philip's Gentile Tetrarchy. It was to this assorted group of individuals, as interesting and as varied a cross section of humanity as could be found anywhere, that Jesus directed his ministry. They became the object of his unique love and pastoral concern.

²⁸ Sean Freyne, *Jesus, Jewish Galilean*, T&T Clark International, London and New York, 2004, 48.

In his letter *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*, Fr. Pascual Chávez, observes that:

Much is said nowadays about the “refounding of Consecrated Life.” The expression is well grounded if it expresses the desire to take it to its foundation which is no other than the Lord Jesus: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.” [1Cor 3, 11].²⁹

In this context I can only say how grateful I am for the opportunity that the Congregation has given me over the last two years to reflect “*in situ*,” in his homeland, on the ministry of Jesus whose heart is the source of that pastoral charity which is the center and the synthesis of the Salesian spirit and which is so well summed up in the motto: *Da mihi animas, cetera tolle!*

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²⁹ Pascual Chávez, Acts of the General Council, N. 394, 37.