



ST. VINCENT FERRER
(1350-1419)

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FIRE UPON THE EARTH

VINCENT REILLY, O.P.



EATED UPON A BLANKET, improvised as a saddle, the old man swayed with the motion of the ragged donkey. One foot was thrust into a stirrup hanging from a rope, while the other leg dangled loosely. His head hung forward in sleep. Without warning the donkey stumbled. Still half-asleep, the old man pitched forward wildly. Then, unable to save himself, he slid along the donkey's flank to land with a jar against the hard ground.

With a groan and a patient smile, he raised himself from the ground, slapped the donkey affectionately and laughed at his companions gathered anxiously about him. Well might they be anxious, for this gaunt old friar, their leader, was now almost seventy. They knew, as did he, that he had not long to live. Yet, indomitable, once more he called them to kneel in prayer before a new town he was to attack with prayer and preaching and example. He had twenty years of this extraordinary missionary preaching behind him, in Spain, France and Italy.

He preached on death and judgment. He preached as Pope Pius would have the priests of our own day do: "Not only has the preaching of the first truths of our faith and of the last end lost nothing of timeliness, but has become more urgent than ever before. Likewise the preaching on hell. No doubt one must deal with such a matter with dignity and wisdom. But as to the substance itself of this truth, the Church has before God and man the sacred duty to proclaim and preach it without softening it, just as Christ has revealed it, and no consideration of the condition of the times can diminish the gravity of this duty."¹

¹ Words of Pope Pius XII, in *L'Osservatore Romano*. March 24, 1949.

For the old friar, the conditions of his time had made imperative the violence of his preaching. He knew the world well. Its princes were engaged in vicious quarrels and the faithful were lukewarm. Heresy had snared many. The Church itself, divided, was only now becoming stable again. The Jews were a problem and the Mohammedans an ever-present danger.

The decrepit old friar was none other than Master Vincent Ferrer, known as the Angel of the Apocalypse, a man called saint even before his death. Now, feeble as he was, when he began to preach he was transformed. His sallow cheeks became ruddy and his eyes sparkled. His gestures were vehement, graceful, powerful. His resonant voice made the ear tingle. Then he was finished and abruptly he became old again.

Father Gardeil, O.P., says of him: "He was a terrifying Saint whose whole words were ordered with the object of creating dismay. His favorite meditation was the vengeful Face of Christ coming upon the clouds of heaven. His gospel was the gospel of the end of the world. . . . So lofty was he in the pulpit where he preached, so terrible, so penetrating the accent of his voice, that one hesitated to believe him a man. His voice was the trumpet which sounded to summon both the living and the dead. He was the Angel of the Last Judgment."²

So much has been said of St. Vincent the wonder worker and the Angel of the Apocalypse, that we tend to forget that he was very human as well. Were he not so, he would have been a monstrous creature and the Lord does not love the monstrous. Yet our error is excusable, for, as with St. Dominic, his very birth was touched with the supernatural. Before St. Vincent's birth, his father, William Ferrer, had a dream in which he saw a Dominican friar preaching. The preacher interrupted his discourse to tell the father that a son would be born to him who would become a Dominican and whose fame would spread throughout the world. Vincent's mother, Constance Miguel, during her pregnancy, felt none of the usual pain and lassitude, but rather a marvelous gladness. One day a blind old woman, to whom she was giving alms, exclaimed: "O happy mother, it is an angel that you bear, and one day he will give me my sight." These things caused such a stir in Valencia that it was decided that the City Magistrates should hold the infant at the Baptismal font. Six centuries ago then, in another jubilee year, St. Vincent was born, on

² Gardeil, Antoine, O.P., *The Gifts of the Holy Ghost in the Dominican Saints*, Bruce Publ. Co., Milwaukee, 1937, p. 39.

January 23rd, 1350. There was a dispute about his name, but the baptizing priest settled the matter by naming him Vincent in honor of St. Vincent Martyr, whose feast day had been celebrated the day before.

“What’s in a name?” Perhaps there is more than we imagine. Vincent Martyr had also been a mighty preacher. A deacon, he had preached for his bishop who had an impediment in his speech, just as centuries later, Dominicans would preach in place of bishops, impeded for one reason or another. The martyr had died at Valencia and the Valencians had a special devotion to him, as now they have for his namesake, St. Vincent Ferrer.

William Ferrer’s son was handsome, holy and keenly intelligent. His parents saw a bright ecclesiastical future in store for their boy, and had already obtained certain benefices for him. Yet Our Lord had other plans. With his mother’s reluctant consent, Vincent, at eighteen, asked to be received as a member of the Order of Preachers in the priory at Valencia. Here he began a life of rigid mortification that did not end till he was borne to heaven at Vannes, April 5th, 1419.

Vincent’s year of novitiate was not always pleasant. His mother wished him to be a secular priest. In tears she begged him to leave the Order. Though it twisted his generous heart to do so, like St. Thomas Aquinas, he resisted his parent successfully. We may forget that St. Vincent was very human, but the devil did not. As with St. Ignatius Loyola, he tempted Vincent to despair at the prospect of long years of toil, trial and mortification. Then he showed Vincent how to make life bearable, by accepting the joys life could offer a handsome young Valencian. Failing to shake the young friar’s resolution, Satan exposed himself. He approached one day disguised as a venerable hermit, a past master of the religious life. He cautioned St. Vincent against pride and imprudence in his mortifications. The advice was rather plausible, but the excessive prudence and persistence of the hermit made the young friar wary. Again defeated, the devil forsook the rational approach. He made himself as fearfully hideous as possible. He appeared as a terrifying Ethiopian, hurled himself upon Vincent and threatened him with war to the death. St. Vincent instinctively took refuge at the foot of the Blessed Virgin’s statue and the devil had to flee. Finally the novitiate year was finished, even if the devil wasn’t. St. Vincent was solemnly professed on the feast of St. Dorothea, February 6th, 1368.

Hell also made two notable attempts against the saint by way of the flesh. One night the friar remained late at his prayers in the church. When he returned to his cell he found a woman seated at

the foot of his bed. Thinking her an evil spirit, he made the sign of the cross over her. When she did not budge, Vincent realized this was flesh, not spirit. Like St. Thomas Aquinas, he overcame fire with fire. He ran to a grate nearby and scattered embers from it upon the floor. Then throwing himself upon the embers, he invited the woman to join him. Appalled by the bitter irony and savage self-violence of the saint, the woman broke down and wept bitterly. Later she was converted.

A more severe and a more clever carnal assault came from a girl of noble family, a great beauty, whose name was Ines Hernandez. She feigned sickness and asked that the holy friar Vincent be sent to help her. When they were alone she confessed her deception, but pleaded: "I love you, Vincent, with a sinful passion . . . but if you do not yield, I shall die." Vincent tried to overcome the evil in her, but did not linger. When he had left (and this is interesting, showing, as it does, how close Satan is to his intermediaries), the devil took possession of the girl. Exorcists were called to help her. Tortured by the prayers and questions of the exorcists, the spirit exclaimed through the girl's twisted lips: "I will not go out of her save on the order of him who has not burned in the depth of the fire." The spirit referred to the fire of concupiscence which had not consumed the friar. Vincent had to be recalled. He did not lightly meet the enemy thus face to face. Nevertheless, in the name of Jesus, he cast out the spirit, though the girl was left half-dead from her ordeal.

Tried by way of the flesh and the devil, Vincent was now subjected to the attacks of the world, even the world of his own religion. There was much wealth, much luxury, much laxity within the Church, and St. Vincent made the lovers of the *status quo* uneasy. They belittled his learning, though he was a Master of Sacred Theology at thirty-nine. They envied his holy success. They daily contested his decisions in the civil matters he had been chosen to decide.

Vincent did not proceed unconcernedly amidst these attacks. That he must fight the flesh and the devil he understood; to fight men, even men who should have been with him, was more difficult. Twice, at crucial points in his life, the man from Valencia fell gravely ill because of the tension he suffered between the absolute order God willed and the disorderly compromises of men. Each time it was the schism affecting the Church that crushed him. Each time, as with St. Paul, in his weakness he found Christ's strength.

His first grievous illness occurred in 1398. He was worn with his efforts to unite the Church under one true pope and discouraged because Benedict XIII, whom he supported, refused to lay aside his

tiara and thus make possible a solution of the schism. Crushed with sorrow and weariness, he lay in a raging fever for twelve days. Death seemed imminent, but on the eve of the Feast of St. Francis Our Lord intervened. The saint's cell was flooded with light. Christ, accompanied by St. Dominic and St. Francis, spoke to the sufferer: "Arise and be consoled; the schism shall soon be at an end, when men have ceased from their iniquities. Arise then and go to preach against vice; for this have I specially chosen thee. Exhort sinners to repentance, for My judgment is at hand." Vincent arose, consoled spiritually and cured physically, to the amazement of those who so surely expected his death. Delayed two years by the importunate Benedict, at the age of forty-nine St. Vincent began a stirring twenty year apostolate such as had never been witnessed since the amazing first apostolate of the Church.

Sixteen years after the first grave illness at Avignon, the sensitive saint became desperately ill again. The cause was the same, the refusal of his long-time friend, Peter de Luna, to resign his title as Benedict XIII. Vincent told his doctor: "It is not from earth that my remedy must come; I shall be back in the pulpit on Thursday." And so he was, but he no longer pleaded. He now thundered forth Benedict's duty. He was too loyal to his Master in heaven to allow one man to stand in the way of a united Christendom any longer, even if that man seemed to him true pope. Sometime later Gerson wrote to St. Vincent: "But for you this union could never have been accomplished." The schism was ended.

It was not always war for this soldier. Sometimes he could be gentle, as he yearned always to be. Like his Master, he loved children. When, towards the end of his life, he was too weak for pulpit preaching, he taught children their catechism. He is venerated in Spain as the patron of orphans because of the many institutions he erected for them. Two of his followers had the strict duty of collecting the nearby children each morning to teach them Christian doctrine and hymns to Our Lord and Our Lady. Indeed, few know that this pulpit fire-brand, this Master of Sacred Theology, composed the children's verse—

*"Angel of God, my guardian dear
To whom the Lord commits me here
Ever this day be at my side
To light, to guard, to rule and guide."*

In the pulpit St. Vincent might have been terrifying, but personally he never lost the common-touch. Witness the story of how he

cured a nagging wife. He told her to take a mouthful of water whenever she felt inclined to berate her husband. The woman followed his advice and returned in her simplicity to tell him of the wonderful efficacy of the water. With a noncommittal smile, he agreed. In his town there lived a woman so ugly that her husband beat her continually. She besought St. Vincent and, at his intercession, was suddenly made beautiful. We are not told whether or not this remedied the domestic situation, but to this day the Valencians are accustomed to say of an ugly woman: "She needs St. Vincent."

Vincent could be keen as well as kindly. Whatever he did was directed towards God. He tried to inculcate into his penitents this habit of seeing God in everything. He taught his followers to realize the divine presence in those they served. At Christmas time he accustomed his wealthy penitents to invite an old man, a maiden and a child to dinner, as a picture of the Holy Family.

Vincent was as practical as truth. He spoke to the people in the concrete and used their own imagery. Hear him on birds, birds which the people saw and knew, and seeing again, would remember. "They sing. Their song is the breviary which God has given them. . . . What other things do the birds do? They soar. You must do likewise. Think of the glory of paradise, think of Hell and of the Passion; hear Mass in silence. All that is a kind of soaring."

To the vain people of the town, the Valencian's tongue was caustic. Hear him address a fashionable assemblage of women: "I hear them say in confession: 'I paint my face Father (or I dye my hair or whatever their vanity is) because my husband is young.' It is a lie. Is your hair white or black? Are you bald that you must hang fair curls over your temples? Be honest. It is another man you want to snare. Have your eye-brows fallen out that you replace them by a line? Is your skin dark or fair? Doesn't your husband know that you are dark if dark you are? Fools! It is for another man."

Truly this Valencian was down to earth, not at all quixotic. Yet there was another side to him. Grace made him soar, made him seem more than a man. It has been said of him that it was a miracle when he did not work miracles. In 1412 St. Vincent himself said that, to that date, the Lord had worked three thousand miracles through him. In his process of canonization eight hundred and seventy-three of his miracles were confirmed and then it was decided further investigation would be superfluous. As to his miracles, Vincent knew well who did the work. Often when asked for help of a miraculous sort he would turn to one of his companions and say: "I have wrought sufficient miracles today, and am tired. Do yourself what is

asked of me; the Lord Who works through me will also work through you."

What of his claim to be the Angel of the Apocalypse? In the presence of an immense throng, including members of the Inquisition, he raised a woman from the dead to testify to this assertion. What God affirmed by miracle, who could dare deny? He also preached the end of the world. As with Jonas at Nineveh, the sparing of men depended on their repentance. Vincent's tongue lashed them on to violent penance and the world was spared.

Besides the woman Vincent raised to confirm his claim as the Angel of the Apocalypse, he raised more than thirty others during his lifetime. That lifetime was now nearing its close. The friar was old and feeble, so feeble he must now ride a donkey, rather than march at the head of his thousands of penitents. Another year and he would be dead; this at Vannes, April fifth, 1419. Yet in his very death, God attested the saint's power was not ended. Two corpses were raised to life at his tomb. Four hundred people were cured at the bed in which he had died. He had said to the Bretons: "I shall be your advocate before the throne of God. I shall never fail to implore mercy for you, and I promise that you shall obtain that mercy if you are faithful to the truth which I have taught."

Thirty-nine years after his death he was canonized on the first of October, 1458. At Vannes his body was found to be quite incorrupt and was exposed for the veneration of the faithful. During the Mass that followed, the cloak in which the saint had been buried was placed over two corpses and they were thus raised to life—this in the presence of the congregation. At the same time a relative of the Duke of Brittany was cured of leprosy and a man born blind received his sight.

The power of the saints does not die with them. St. Vincent is as powerful with God today as he was six hundred years ago. Today we need the help of his power. We need his holy violence. We are surrounded with ease and comfort, with the delicacies which he said "make the most valiant soldiers weak and effeminate." We need his courageous spirit. He said in his forthright way: "A timid man will never do any good." We need his spirit of prayer. "Never begin your work before your prayers." We need to pray always as did this tireless apostle. "The man who would please God must pray all day and all night." We need his message: "Fear God and do Him honor." This is but a paraphrase of the message that came to us through the Immaculate Heart of Mary at Fátima. We must wake up to the drastic nature of our times.

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