

PEACE, PENANCE, AND SAINT VINCENT FERRER

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O A FOURTEENTH CENTURY WORLD filled with all kinds of moral evils came Saint Vincent Ferrer, the Angel of the Apocalypse, preaching the way to peace. Then, as now in the Twentieth Century, the Christian world was torn from within by dissension, anxiety, dissatisfaction, and was threatened from without by a savage horde, intent on destroying it as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Then, as now, peace was a matter of universal concern, a goal which everyone wished to attain. But then, as now, men had forgotten the principles of Christian life, had neglected the Divine precepts, had abandoned the right way of living in exchange for promises of fleeting pleasures.

To this world of the Fourteenth Century came Saint Vincent Ferrer, showing men the way, the hard way, the only way to true peace. He came preaching the doctrine which is the sound basis for peace, preaching a doctrine which would have the same effect now in the Twentieth Century if it were heeded. Saint Vincent Ferrer preached *penance*—he exhorted people to repent, to be sorry for their sins, to amend their personal lives. He preached violence to self, peace to neighbor. He taught an unpleasant doctrine, it is true, unpleasant because it goes against the grain of our fallen nature, but a doctrine which is theologically sound, and which proved most successful for the hundreds of thousands of people who elected to follow it at the urgings of the Saint. Indeed it would have been difficult for anyone to resist when confronted with the terrifying picture of the Last Judgment drawn so sharply by one of the most masterful preachers of all time, especially when his words were confirmed by miracle after miracle!

TRUE PEACE

In this year 1955, marking the five hundredth anniversary of his canonization, it might be profitable to re-examine the true nature of peace, in order to appreciate more fully the doctrine of Saint Vincent Ferrer.

Saint Augustine defined peace simply as "the tranquillity of

order."¹ In man there is a three-fold order—to God, to himself, and to his neighbor, which, when properly regulated, results in peace for the individual.² A man is peacefully ordered *to God*, when he is completely subjected to the Divine Will, that is, when he tries as far as possible to conform his actions to the divinely established norms, obeying the commands and counsels given by God; *to himself* when all his own faculties are under the control of his reason and will, when he is not dominated by his passions but rather is their master, when he does not live for his body, but for his soul; *to his neighbor* when both are in agreement about mutual interests, when they live harmoniously, ironing out difficulties and problems with respect for their rights and duties to each other. Of these three, the order to God is the most fundamental; it is the basis of the other two.

Peace is the effect of love of God and neighbor, in other words, of Charity. When a person loves God, he obeys His laws, and when he loves his neighbor, he is able to live in concord with him. Conversely, sin makes peace impossible, because sin destroys man's proper relationship to God, without which it is impossible for him to preserve the due order to himself and to his neighbor. Here a difficulty arises with regard to peaceful relations between men as individuals. Suppose that one of two persons is rightly ordered to God, also to himself, and that he has the proper dispositions toward his neighbor; yet the other has no such good intentions, but, on the contrary, is determined to persecute and even destroy the first person. Apparently there would be no peace. Actually, however, there is. For the interior peace of a well ordered soul is a strong peace, capable of withstanding the most violent and outrageous external opposition. But such peace exists only for the one who has the right intent, who is perfectly subject to God, submitting to His Will in all things.

Such a person is at peace with his neighbor fundamentally, radically, even if the actual complexion of external events does not reflect the tranquillity he desires. If he has the proper interior dispositions, and if he does all he can to bring about a state of concord with those about him, he himself is at peace. We have the majestic example of Christ, Who, hanging from the cross, could say with all the power of His soul, "Father, forgive them, for they

¹ Saint Augustine, *The City of God*, Book XIX, Chap. 13.

² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Super Evangelium S. Joannis*, cap. XIV, lect. VII, No. 1962.

know not what they do."³ Similarly, Christian martyrs in suffering under persecutors, while not actually enjoying an harmonious existence, were at peace.

"Tranquillity of order," then, indicates the essential nature of peace. To establish and to preserve this tranquillity in the three-fold relationship proper to man is the task of all who desire world peace. A fact not generally realized, but nevertheless incontestible, is that true world peace is based on the peace of each individual, and indeed is unobtainable without it. The first step in gaining world peace is the establishment of true, interior peace by each individual person. World peace, or the peace of the community, rests ultimately on the interior peace possessed by each member of the community.

The means to obtain a state of concord among nations are not directly within the grasp of the average member of society. But each can attain the three-fold order to God, to self, and to neighbor in his own personal life, and ask for supernatural help from God—by means of prayer—to effect the proper dispositions of other individuals and nations. A group or community of such people, properly ordered and with the desire for peace with all other communities, has *internal* peace, even though actual conflict may exist with the others. Thus the Catholic Church as a whole when attacked and fought against, is at peace. Though it is true that in this state of conflict the *totality* of peace is not present, nevertheless it exists *fundamentally*, the only condition absent being the actual concord with neighbor; and this is absent through no fault of the one party having the proper dispositions, who is therefore, at peace.

So the point at issue here, because it is within reach of everyone, is the establishment and strengthening of the proper order *in the individual* to God first of all, then to himself and finally to others. The practice and spirit of penance, as preached by Saint Vincent Ferrer, is a sure means to this end.

THE NATURE OF PENANCE

We are dealing here not only with the sacrament of penance, but with the virtue fundamental to the sacrament. This virtue is an habitual sorrow for past sins with the intention of removing them since they are an offense against God. Because any sin is a disorder; a revolt against the proper plan of God, a person should

³ Luke 23, 34.

be sorry for his sins. Such sorrow should inspire exterior acts done for the purpose of making amendment, of somehow righting the wrong. This doctrine, taught by Saint Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa*, was preached by Saint Vincent Ferrer "from the housetops"—in the streets, the market places, the cathedrals of Europe.

Internal penance, by which one grieves for his sins, should last throughout life, for if a person should cease to be sorry for sin, he would rejoice over it, and by this very act he would be sinning again. But the external penance, the deeds and actions which are signs of sorrow: confession, absolution, and acts of satisfaction, while essential to the virtue, need not last beyond the time necessary to perform such acts. These latter external acts of penance Saint Vincent Ferrer especially inspired, causing his hearers to scourge themselves, to confess their sins and receive absolution; and, over and above this, to preserve the internal *spirit* of sorrow for the rest of their lives. He impressed upon them the utmost necessity of both the virtue and the sacrament; but he particularly urged them to acts of self-punishment, actual, tangible signs of satisfaction. Since penance is the wonderful restorer of the proper relationship of the individual's soul to God, to self, and to neighbor, those souls found true peace who heeded the words of Saint Vincent Ferrer.

THE PREACHING OF THE SAINT

Saint Vincent Ferrer, preaching the Last Judgment, inciting fear of eternal punishment, was called the "Angel of the Apocalypse." "If you do not do penance and amend your lives, your city will be destroyed; you will all be lost," he cried. "The end of the world is approaching." So compelling was his manner, so forceful his words, and so well acquainted were his listeners with the ideas he proposed that he usually achieved results. It was by threatening the imminence of the Last Judgment that he gained his end—penance and sorrow for sin. Individual reform, the restoration of personal peace—this was the point of his endless journeys, his incessant preaching, his strong urgings upon all with whom he came into contact. He would not leave a city or country without having put strong pressure on it to reform its ways. And, of course, the confirmation by God of the Saint's actions by innumerable miracles gave added emphasis to his preaching. In the wake of his activity there was a noticeable improve-

ment in the morals of the people, due largely to the spirit of penance he induced.

It is interesting to note how the principal means used by Saint Vincent Ferrer in stirring the people to penance correspond with the theologically determined causes of this virtue. The *Summa* notes six stages in the genesis of penance in a soul: 1. The operation of God moving the heart; 2. an act of faith; 3. the movement of servile fear whereby a man is turned away from sin through fear of punishment; 4. hope of obtaining pardon; 5. charity because sin offends God; 6. filial fear whereby a man, of his own accord, offers to make amends to God through fear of Him.⁴

In the work of Saint Vincent Ferrer all of these factors are evident: 1. God's activity is seen in the very fact that the people listened to the Saint (crowds of fifty thousand were not uncommon); it is further manifested by the multitude of miracles which accompanied his work. (Eight hundred and seventy-three were listed in his process of canonization, and their compilation was only stopped because of the fatigue of those working on it.) 2. The faith of the people, already present but dormant, was aroused by pointed references to Scripture and to the teaching of the Church; the familiar quotations revived the mysteries which his listeners had been taught since childhood.

3. The third step—servile fear—is an important one, for it is the movement of the passions; all men are apt to be affected in this way, but it is especially useful for those who are not accustomed to abstract speculation on the truths of the Faith, because it is the only way they can be jolted out of their sensual complacency. Since this was the condition of the vast majority in Saint Vincent's audiences, it was here that he used all his oratorical and persuasive powers: it was here that he aroused their emotion of fear in a masterful way by a vivid portrayal of the Last Judgment. Saint Vincent Ferrer himself firmly believed that the end of the world was near unless people did penance to quiet the wrath of God, and he imparted this feeling to all who heard him speak. Interpreting the signs of the times as escatological, he added strange calculations drawn from mystical numbers and "secret books," confirming his argument with texts from the Apocalypse. He made the end of the world and its consequent judgment—Heaven and beatitude for some, Hell and damnation

⁴ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Part III, q. 85, art. 5, corpus.

for most—seem so real and so personally meaningful that people were moved to a state approaching terror.

4. After portraying this horrifying scene, the Saint held out the only hope of salvation—"Repent, do penance, now, right now!" 5. People saw the true nature of sin, a hideous offence against God's Majesty, and, 6. they were sorry, did penance. Thus did Saint Vincent Ferrer effectively arouse people to penance, and consequently to the attainment of true peace. But why does peace come as a consequence of the spirit of penance?

PENANCE AND PEACE

Penance re-establishes the order of charity to God, and from this follows the due relation to oneself and to one's neighbor. For the spirit of penance aids in obtaining control over one's faculties: the acts of interior and exterior mortification which it inspires help bring the body and its appetites under the direction of reason enlightened by Faith. It destroys inordinate attachments to material goods, which are a great obstacle to peace. A man who is master of himself, under God, is in a position to take the final step in establishing the three-fold order necessary for peace—the right relations with other people. For such a man is willing to sacrifice some of his own material well-being in order to establish agreement with others; he has the spirit of charity which enables him truly to love others as his brothers, and this overcomes all obstacles. The result is the tranquillity of order, true Christian peace.

This doctrine is as applicable today as it was five hundred years ago, as it will be five hundred years in the future. Since the Redemption of the Cross made possible the repairing of the damage done by Adam, peace is attainable for any given individual. For world peace to be an actuality, the *individuals* in the world must first achieve interior peace, and this is the work of penance. This teaching is fundamental. Any program for peace which ignores it is foredoomed to failure.

THE SPIRIT OF SAINT VINCENT FERRER

The result of following the teaching of Saint Vincent Ferrer, of putting into practice his exhortation to penance, of working to obtain the virtue of penance, will be true peace for each individual. When all the individuals in a community have that true peace, the community has it. And when all the communities in

the world have it, the world itself will have peace. Each person can effect this for himself from within, and work and pray for its establishment in others from without. This is the secret of world peace—the answer that men are looking for today. It is not an easy way, but it is a sure way, and as such should be faced squarely and acted upon.

A return to the spirit of Saint Vincent Ferrer is imperative in our modern age. This Dominican friar who was a scholar, diplomat, preacher, ascetic, miracle-worker and saint is admittedly hard to imitate. Saint Vincent Ferrer conversed intimately with kings and popes, traveled throughout Europe with thousands of followers, preached outdoors to multitudes of such great number that the churches could not contain them, converted tens of thousands of people at a time. Few of us could ever hope to do these extraordinary things. Nor do we expect to receive the gift of prophecy, to work miracles, to have our death marked by definite manifestations of sanctity. But all of us can practice what Saint Vincent preached—the spirit of penance, of sorrow for sin, of amendment for past sins. This is the spirit of Christ, not the spirit of the age; this is the means to true peace, to “that peace which the world *cannot* give.”

PRIDE—

its perfect story

(Satan speaks) “Hail, horrors! hail,
Infernal World! and thou, profoundest Hell,
Receive thy new possessor—one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heaven of Hell, a Hell of Heaven.
What matter where, if I be still the same
And what I should be, all but less than he
Whom thunder hath made greater? Here at least
We shall be free; the Almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
Here we may reign secure; and, in my choice,
To reign is worth ambition, though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.”

JOHN MILTON, *Paradise Lost*, Book I

its perfect description

“ . . . windy pride . . . ”

ST. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, bk. IV, para. 15

its perfect definition

“ . . . the inordinate desire of one's own excellence . . . ”

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 84, a. 2.