

A158 In Nativitate Christi. Sermo unicus

St. Vincent Ferrer: Christmas Sermon (Lk 2:11)

"This day, is born to you a Savior," (Lk 2:11). Our sermon will be about the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Virgin Birth. But that you might sense the spiritual sweetness of this feast, we shall salute the glorious Mother of God. [*Vincent now leads his listeners in the "Hail Mary."*]

"There is born to us etc." From the beginning of the world up to the birth of Christ there has never been heard such good news, nor so useful for mankind like the news of the proposed theme, "This day, is born to you a Savior," (Lk 2:11) etc. To all who were lost and damned and sentenced to hell. The declaration of this blessed Nativity I deal with in five conclusions.

1. First, that this blessed Nativity was from of old ardently desired by the saints.
2. Second, that this blessed Nativity was cruelly unappreciated by the Jews.
3. Third, that this blessed Nativity was celebrated powerfully by God.
4. Fourth, that this blessed Nativity was humbly hidden by the Virgin Mary.
5. Fifth, that this blessed Nativity was broadcast publicly by the angels saying, "This day, is born to you a Savior," (Lk 2:11).

And anyone who, curiously, might wish to preach all five conclusions, would be excessively prolix. And all are touched in the theme, in which there are five conditions. The first, therefore, is touched by the first saying. The second in the second. The third in the third, and so on for the others.

1. LONG DESIRED

I say first that this blessed Nativity was ardently desired of old by holy persons. And that you might understand better this condition listen to this story:

You should know that there was a certain great and noble city, well populated, which was cruelly under siege by enemies, attacking it with every kind of weapons, to the extent that it was already running low on provisions, the longer the siege went on, nor were the enemies willing to take them alive, or to grant any mercy, moreover they killed them at once. Aware of this, the king and lord of the city secretly sent messengers and letters to the city, telling them that he will come personally to free them when he was able. The citizens were very happy about this and were eagerly expecting his arrival any day.

Rightly so it was of this world. This great and noble city was and is human nature. Who can number how many citizens there were and how many dwelling in her, from Adam up to the birth of Christ -- since according to some teachers more than 5,000 years have passed -- who were besieged daily by cruel enemies, namely by countless demons attacking it with diverse temptations, with catapults, pains and sufferings, since they were lacking the spiritual food, about which Christ said, "Not in bread alone does man live, but in every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.," (Mt 4:4). Although they had the Mosaic law, it did not give eternal life. Nor did they have drink, i.e., the promise of spiritual [gifts] which refresh souls. And when someone went out of the city, through death, immediately without mercy he was captured and imprisoned

in the prison of hell. However, God, the Lord of this world, wishing to comfort the citizens, secretly sent messengers to them, the holy patriarchs and prophets, with his letters announcing to them that he himself personally would come to liberate them. Many citizens rejoiced over this and city-dwellers sent him supplications, devout prayers, that he would come and liberate the city.

First came Moses saying to God the Father, "I beseech you, Lord send whom you will send," (Ex 4:13) as you have promised. Second, David on behalf of the whole city says, "[Lord] stir up your might, and come to save us," (Ps 79:3). Third, Solomon saying in the Holy Spirit, "Send her out of your holy heaven, and from the throne of your majesty, that she may be with me, and may labor with me," (Wis 9:10) against your enemies. Note: "Send her," namely, the person of Christ in human flesh, which is sent by the Father and the Holy Spirit, in respect to humanity. Fourth, Isaiah, saying, "Would that you would rend the heavens, and would come down," (Isa 64:1). Others were saying, "Come, O Lord, and tarry not: forgive the sins of your people Israel," etc. (Alleluia Verse from the Advent Liturgy)

The King, however, having heard these supplications, sent a messenger secretly to the city who would say on his behalf, " [the vision]... it/he shall appear at the end, and shall not lie: if it/he make any delay, wait for it/him: for it/he shall surely come, and it/he shall not be slack," (Hab 2:3). Behold how ardently he was desired, and according to Augustine they would say, "When shall he come? When shall he be born? When would he appear? Do you think I shall see it? Do you think I shall endure? Do you think his birth will find me here? O, if only my eyes shall behold the one whom the eyes of the heart have revealed. O, if only my eyes shall see what I believe in the writings of God. And the closer he approached, so much the more was he desired.

He begins his path of coming on the day of his conception. So he was most fervently desired by the Blessed Virgin, his mother and St. Joseph who daily checked off the calendar yearning to see the day of his entry into this world. The Virgin carried him nine months and six days, which are 277 days. Thus in the person of Christ Holy Scripture says, "I myself also am a mortal man, like all others, ...and in the womb of my mother I was fashioned," in the figure of man, "to be flesh. In the time of ten months," (Wis 7:1-2) Because of this the Virgin Mary and Joseph knowing his coming was near prepared themselves for receiving him devoutly. The Virgin prepared woolen and linen wrappings, as women do when they are close to childbirth. Joseph purchased an ox so that he could have a great feast on the birth of the child. But in the mean time says Luke, "There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that the whole world should be enrolled," (Lk 2:1). So Augustus wished to enroll the world because he wanted to know how many provinces there were, how many cities, and how many people. Note the great sadness of Joseph, when he heard the edict of the Emperor, that under penalty of death everyone must proceed to the city of their birth. Joseph, who was of the city of Bethlehem, of the tribe of David, began to weep saying, "O woe, if I go to Bethlehem, I shall not see that blessed birth so long desired by the saints. If I do not go, I will be disobedient and will be killed, and too I shall not see the aforesaid birth." Sadly, he went home.

The Virgin Mary was comforting him, as a wife should do, saying, "O father, what are you worried about? You should rejoice, because the savior is about to be born soon." Then Joseph told the Virgin Mary about the edict of the Emperor and the reason for his sadness. The Virgin

replied, "Father, do not weep, because for your comfort, I shall go with you, for I am also of the offspring of David. Joseph, on the one hand rejoiced, that the Virgin would wish to go, but on the other hand he wondered what people would say, that he was taking with him a young pregnant woman so near to childbirth.

Also, what if she gives birth on the way? The Virgin replied to him, "Father, do not worry about what people will say, because your intention is good. It is the will of God that we go to Bethlehem, because the savior is to be born there. According to the prophecy of Micah, "And you, Bethlehem Ephrata, are a little [place] in the kingdom of Judah: out of you shall come forth one who to be the ruler in Israel," (Mic 5:2). The Virgin Mary knew the bible better than the prophet, as Origen said.

They prepared themselves and left the town of Nazareth, the Virgin riding on a donkey, and Joseph leading the ass and ox. Behold the Queen of Paradise, and those she was traveling with. Then was fulfilled the prophecy of Haggai on this event saying, "Yet one moment [modicum], and I will move the heaven and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land. And I will move all nations: and the desired of all nations shall come and I will fill this house with glory: says the Lord of hosts," (Hag 2: 6-7). Note, "one moment," because it was only a moment of time from the prophet Haggai until Christ, "and I will move the heaven," where he speaks of the immovable empyreal heaven. St. Thomas says in the Prima Pars [of the Summa theologica, [I, q. 106, a.1](#)] that when some angel receives a revelation from God, immediately he reveals it to the others so that nothing there is kept a secret. So the archangel Gabriel in the holy court of the Trinity when he had the revelation of the incarnation and the nativity of the Son of God, about which he was the messenger, immediately revealed it to all the others, and so the heaven was moved out of joy and rejoicing and dancing because of the reparation of the fall. So, "I will move the earth," the Virgin Mary is called the virginal earth, who was to produce the fruit of life who was moved by the angel's salutation, when, "troubled at his saying, thought within herself what manner of salutation this should be," (Lk 1: 29). Then, "I shall move the sea and dry land," when from the edict of the Emperor the peoples would proceed to their sites, some by sea and some by land. Then "shall come the desired of all the ages," (Hag 2:7). So much for the first conclusion.

2. CRUELLY UNAPPRECIATED

The second conclusion says that this blessed Nativity was cruelly unappreciated by the Jews. History says that when Joseph and the Virgin were in the city of Bethlehem they found no hospitality nor any house nor hospice that was willing to receive them. Three reasons are alleged for this. First because they were the last to arrive and they had to go slowly on the way. So whoever comes late, often seems to be angry. Secondly although the city of Bethlehem was small, it nevertheless teemed with many in military service and citizens and nobles, all who were of the tribe of David who had been born in this city. They had made reservations in advance for their lodgings. A third reason was avarice of the hoteliers. When they got a look at Joseph, the poor man with his pregnant wife, thought that they would fill up a whole room and that there would be little profit from them. Therefore, etc.

Most likely, when Joseph entered through the gate of the city, with the Virgin riding on the donkey, he would head immediately to the first inn lest he would have to pass through the whole

city seeking whether they might find a place there. When they asked who and how many were in the party they saw that there were only two, with an ox and ass, thinking, we will earn little, they told them to move on because there is no place here for you. At the next inn, the answer was that there were no vacancies. Imagine Joseph's anxiety here and the shame of the Virgin Mary, thus going from door to door. But the Virgin patiently put up with it and comforted Joseph. Finally they came to another inn where they said that all was full for such a gentleman and for expectant one etc.

Seeing that they couldn't buy lodging, Joseph searched that out of love of God some private home would take in that pregnant woman near to childbirth, but he did not find one in the whole city, and so they said to him, "Old man, you are indeed concerned about your wife, but why did you put her in this situation, so pregnant?" And the poor man wept. At which the Virgin [said], "Father let us be patient, and we shall find some hospital." So they looked for a hospital seeing if they might be received out of love of God. The nurse replied, "You are healthy, and this house is for the sick. You are not able to be received here, and so spare us."

Since the hour was late and they had not yet found a place Joseph said, "O Lord these are my sins." Then they found a cave [porticulum] along a public road in which there was a manger, where visitors sometimes stabled their animals. The Virgin said, "Father, we shall stay here, because it is not right to go through the village at this hour." Joseph said, "O woe! We shall never find a house." The Virgin Mary said, "Father the whole world is the house of God, so let us stay here."

Then Joseph, with the greatest reverence assisted the Virgin from the donkey and entered the refuge [porticum] and Joseph rolled out a blanket [flatiatam] which he had brought on the donkey as a tent for privacy, and he went to buy some straw and charcoal because of the cold. And from a little straw he made a bed for the Queen of Heaven, saying, "O Lord what will you say to me, that I have placed your mother on such a bed," and in this place they stayed for at least thirteen days. The Gloss on Matthew 2 said that the kings from the east found Christ the King still there in that cave.

Behold the palace of the queen of paradise. Behold how that glorious birth was little appreciated by the Jews. God had revealed this to Jeremiah the prophet who, weeping, said in the person of the Jews, "We have sinned against thee. O expectation of Israel, the Savior thereof in time of trouble: why will you be a stranger in the land, and as a wayfaring man turning in to lodge? Why will you be as a wandering man, as a mighty man that cannot save?" (Jer 14:7-9) Thus this prophecy was fulfilled. So much for the second conclusion.

MORALITER (a moral aside)

Who of you does not say now in his heart, " Oh, if I had been there then, and had known him, I would have received him into my home," etc. Would that you would not be in the same condemnation or cruelty with the Jews. Have you ever today seen a pregnant young woman in this village with Joseph and never took them in? The consecrated host which the priest brings forth, like Joseph, is the virgin pregnant with the Son of God. Who of you receives him by communicating devoutly? None, I believe. With sincere reflection you should prepare for yourselves the home of your conscience

through contrition, confession, and satisfaction. Many excuse themselves like the Bethlehemites saying: I have to welcome a great soldier, namely Sir Chicken, Lord Kid, and Mister Pig. Another says I have to receive a great and noble lady, namely Lady Hen, another Madam Partridge, etc. but they do not receive the Lord Jesus Christ. About which John in the Gospel said, "He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, he gave them power to be made the sons of God," (Jn 1).

3. MIGHTY BIRTH

The third conclusion says that this blessed Nativity came about through the celebrated power of God. The Virgin Mary, stayed in that cave, as is said, between the cattle. In the middle of the night the hour for her delivery arrived. The Virgin Mary sensed this, not like other women, who before they feel the onset of childbirth, have pains, miseries and suffering in the body, and their face are distorted. But the Virgin Mary had other signs, special inspirations, consolations and heartfelt sweetness, with exquisite pleasures more than others, and her face was radiant. Joseph seeing this said, "Blessed, what is happening." She replied, "Father, now the hour of my childbirth is at hand."

Joseph got up immediately so that he might send for midwives. But the Virgin stopped him saying, "Father, just as for his conception no creature did anything, so neither for his birth." Joseph then said, "Blessed, neither you or I are expert in this." The Virgin said, "Father, don't worry, because God, the heavenly Father, will provide." And so the *Book of the Infancy of the Savior* [[Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew](#), ch.13] which states that there were women, has been condemned by the decree of Pope Pelagius. (Cf. Jerome: *On the perpetual virginity of Mary*, 8): "No midwife assisted at His birth; no women's officiousness intervened." But suddenly, like the ray of the sun passes through a glass window without breaking it, so Christ, the sun of justice passed through the gate of her virginal womb without any breaking or corruption, "like a bridegroom...from his chamber," (Ps 18:6).

The Virgin received him into her own hands, on her knees, with great reverence and veneration, adoring him and saying, "O Lord, you indeed have come from heaven to earth for the salvation of men. O Lord, desired by the holy patriarchs and prophets, I adore you, because as God you are my creator, as human you are my son." And she kissed him first on his feet as God, next on his mouth as a son, then on the hands as the creator of all things, and finally on his face as her son, saying, "O Lord you have given me such a grace." And she adored him a hundred times over. And as someone has reported, she said, "You are the Lord my God, you are my redeemer, you are my beloved Son." Ambrose: "O blessed Virgin, who can open the treasures of your heart to us, as here you adore your child as God, and here you kiss him as son?"

Joseph, weeping for joy, said, "Blessed, permit me to adore your son, the long desired Son of God," etc. How he adored him saying, "O Lord you have granted me such a grace. Kings and prophets wished to see you and they did not see, and to me, a sinner, you have given such a grace that I should see you." Then the infant began to cry because of the cold. Joseph immediately warmed the blankets and the Virgin wrapped him.

Then Joseph wanted to call for a wet nurse, but the Virgin again stopped him. Joseph said, "Blessed, what are you doing, for you do not have milk?" Doctors say that from the same root

comes milk and children. So a woman who does not know man, does not have milk. The Virgin replied, "Father, God shall provide. Then the Virgin, on her knees prayed God the Father saying, "God the Father you and I have one son in common, so you who provide for all creatures ought to provide some milk for him." Then suddenly her breasts were filled with milk, sent to her from heaven. So the church says, the Virgin, not knowing man, without pain, gives birth to the savior of the ages. The Virgin herself with full breasts nursed the very King of the Angels. So much for the third conclusion.

4. HUMBLE AND HIDDEN

The fourth conclusion states that this blessed Nativity happened to a Virgin, humble and hidden. History says that as soon as Christ was born, his body shone like the rising sun, and the night became as midday, and so it was light. Think how many, who were not sleeping, and wondering about such a brightness, sought to see the source of the light and ran toward such a great spectacle of light. The Virgin sensing the excitement of the people placed the child in the manger. Jews came to see the source of the light. Some of them said prophecy says that when the Messiah will be born, "night shall be light as day," (Ps 138:12). Others asked if this might be he. Some said, be quiet; don't make much of it. If Herod finds out, he will kill us. So that out of fear of Herod they did not dare receive the Messiah King. Of this light the prophet said, "The people that walked in darkness, have seen a great light: to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death," of the sin of ingratitude, "a light has risen for them, You have multiplied the nation," to see the light, "and have not increased the joy," (Is 9:2-3), because no one brought him or the Virgin a gift. Of that light it is said, it is pointed out when it is said, and it follows, "For a child is born to us, and a son is given to us," not the Father, nor the Holy Spirit (v. 6).

Here the question is raised, why did the blessed Virgin place her son in the manger between the beasts? What if the ox with horns, and the donkey with teeth had attacked? St. Luke wishes to excuse the Virgin saying: "She laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn," i.e. in this cave, (Lk 2:7). But one might respond to St. Luke: "Could not the Virgin who gave birth without pain and suffering, place or position him in her arms or on her breast? Why put him between animals?" The response is, for three reasons:

First, to fulfill the scriptural truth.

Second, to alleviate bodily needs,

Third, to teach us a moral lesson.

SCRIPTURAL TRUTH

As for the first, it was prophesied that he would be placed between the animals and humbly be adored. Think what kind of joy the blessed Virgin had when she saw her son adored by an ox and ass. And how sad when she saw him ignored by the Jews. And so was fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah saying, "Hear, O ye heavens, and give ear, O earth, for the Lord hath spoken. I have brought up children, and exalted them: but they have despised me. The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel has not known me," (Isa 1:2-3).

BODILY NEEDS

As for the second reason you have already seen how cold it could be at that time. Think if the Virgin Mary was cold, because we do not read that they brought lined coats. For this reason she placed her child in the manger so that the animals might warm him with their breath, as it was revealed by Habakkuk the prophet, who said this: "Lord I have heard your voice and I have feared. Lord I have considered your work, in the middle of two animals you shall be known," (Hab 3:2, LXX transl.).

MORAL LESSON

As for the third reason the Virgin does this so that we might be instructed in good morals.

- An ox is a great animal having two big horns, which signify the temporal lords and rulers of the community. The donkey which carries burdens, signifies peasants and subjects. And the Virgin places her son in the middle, pointing out that all can indeed be saved by the saving justice of the Lord, and that not by hatred nor by love nor by fear nor by bribes they give unjustly. Vassals too by keeping faith, obedience and reverence for their lords.
- Second, the ox is a clean animal which in olden times was sacrificed to God. So it symbolizes the priests who offer sacrifice to God. The simple ass signifies the laity. The Virgin places her son between them, implying that all can be saved.
- Third, the ox, which doesn't bear burdens, signifies the rich who do not labor with their hands. The ass signifies the workers, if they be patient.
- Fourth, the ox which has horns signifies devout and holy people. Two horns are true prudence or adherence to the faith, and prompt obedience to commandments. The surly ass, signifies sinners, who if they are repentant can be saved.
- Fifth the ox, which chews the cud and has divided hooves, signifies the learned masters and doctors who ruminate by studying; and the divided hooves means they have knowledge of the old and new testament. The ass signifies the ignorant. Christ is placed in the middle etc. And the text of David confirms it: "Men and beasts you will preserve, O Lord: O how you have multiplied your mercy, O God!!" (Ps 35:7-8). Note men, both powerful and powerless, both learned, and rich, and draft animals, i.e. crude sinners and the ignorant, shall be saved by the Lord.

5. OPENLY PROCLAIMED

The fifth conclusion says that this blessed Nativity was openly proclaimed by the angels when they appeared to the shepherds telling the good news: "For, this day is born to you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David," St. Luke writes (2:11). A little story is told about the angels at the birth of Christ, that God the Father, from heaven, where he was throwing a big party over the birth of Christ, sent them to earth so that there might be a feast here also. This blessed Nativity was revealed to the watching shepherds, not to the sleeping emperor Octavian, nor, in Jerusalem, to the masters and teachers, nor to the priests, but to shepherds singing their songs.

Why this? Bernard says that shepherds have five qualities in which it is shown to which persons God reveals his secrets and gives his glory.

- First, the shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks etc. In which it is shown that shepherds both temporal and ecclesiastical ought to watch over the flock committed to them, lest they be devoured by the wolves of especially notorious sin, because the community is not punished for secret sins. To such shepherds God reveals his glory and grace.
- Second, they play their flutes harmoniously, in which is shown that to devout and peaceful persons who play music through their prayers and supplications, God reveals his grace and glory.
- Third, because they were in the desert, in the harshness of penance, etc. where eating and drinking and sleeping was hard, etc. In which it is shown, that to those who live in the rigors of penance etc., [God reveals his grace and glory].
- Fourth, because they were poor men, etc. So Christ says, "But woe to you that are rich: for you have your consolation," etc. (Lk 6:24).
- Fifth, because they were simple men, they despised no one. To such God gives his grace. Authority of Christ: "I confess to you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hid these things from the wise and prudent, and have revealed them to the little ones," (Mt 11:25).