

A370 Feria V post diem cinerum (Thursday after Ash Wednesday)

St. Vincent Ferrer – Cure of the Centurion's Servant (Mt 8:7)

Mt 8:5-8 Douay trans.

5 And when he had entered into Capharnaum, there came to him a centurion, beseeching him,
6 And saying, Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, and is grievously tormented. 7 And
Jesus saith to him: I will come and heal him. 8 And the centurion making answer, said: Lord, I am
not worthy that thou shouldst enter under my roof: but only say the word, and my servant shall be
healed.

"I will come and heal him," (Mt 8:7). It is a general teaching in holy theology that in every conversion of a sinner from an evil life to a good one, and from sin to grace, from vice to virtue, in that conversion, if it be true, God is always first present, through grace. The power of any creature is insufficient for that conversion, of man or of angel, because "Without me you can do nothing," (Jn 15:5). It is a conclusion of all the theologians. And this conclusion can be declared through a rule for the general conversion and redemption of the world, for which God himself principally comes. No one else was able or sufficient for this work. It is like in a large hospital in which many sick people are lying, suffering from an incurable illness, where it is necessary that a great doctor must come to cure them. We all are lying in the hospital of this world, with the great illnesses of sins. For this reason the great doctor comes from his office in paradise to practice, and cure the sick. And so Augustine on the text of Matthew 9:13: "For I am not come to call the just, but sinners," says "The great doctor comes to us from heaven, because the whole world lies sick." It is clear therefore that for universal redemption his coming was necessary.

So I say that in the conversion of the sinner, it is principally necessary for him to come, because no one else would be sufficient. And so David understanding this conclusions in the spirit of prophecy, and the teaching about his coming, thanking God, says to his soul in Ps 102: "Bless the Lord, O my soul: and let all that is within me bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and never forget all he has done for you. Who forgives all your iniquities: who heals all your diseases," (Ps 102:1-3). And so when that Centurion about whom today's gospel speaks, pleads with Christ, that he would go to cure his servant, Christ responds, "I will come and heal him," (Mt 8:7).

But why does he say "I will come," because he did not go, nor intended to go. Did he not tell a lie? I reply, according to the teachers, that when God cured something in the body, he also cured in the soul, because the work of God is perfect. And so he said, he would make the whole man healthy, "I have healed the whole man," (Jn 7:23), the whole, i.e. in body and soul. And unless he comes through grace, no soul can be cured, and so because of this he says, "I will come," – not by bodily presence but through spiritual grace – "and heal him," (Mt 8:7).

Since, therefore Christ is the proper and immediate doctor of the soul of the sinner, let us see how he might cure the sick soul. This matter is very subtle, and so I shall explain it to you through a comparison to a physical doctor, who in curing the body does seven things. For a good doctor first wishes to examine the patient, who generally is lying in his closed room, hidden. Second, the doctor lights a lamp and looks at his face, in the light of which he recognizes his interior condition.

First his face is examined. [facies eius inspicitur]
 Second his pulse is taken, [pulsus tangitur]
 Third his urine is inspected, [urina attenditur]
 Fourth a diet is prescribed, [dieta praecipitur]
 Fifth, a medicine is given, [syrupus immittitur]
 Sixth a purgation is performed, [purgatio tribuitur]
 Seventh, dining is allowed. [refectio conceditur]

Christ the heavenly doctor, observes all these things, in order, in curing a sinner's soul.

FACE EXAMINED

First he wants to see his face, i.e. the disposition of the sinner, because he lies in the dark room of guilt, on the bed of sin, nor does he see the danger of the demons who are watching him. Because if the sinner could see clearly the good which he lost through sin, and the evil which he incurred, and the danger which he is in, he would immediately flee from sin. And so David says, speaking of sinners in Ps 81: "They have not known nor understood: they walk on in darkness," (v. 5). Note, when he says "They have not known," good things, namely those which they have lost, "nor understood," the evil things which they have incurred, "they walk on in darkness," not seeing the danger in which they are, of falling into hell if they were then to die. But when Christ comes he lights the lamp of his mercy, which he sets before his face, i.e. the conscience of the sinner, lighting it up, so that he might recognize his sins. When the religious says, "O wretched me, for so many years I was..." etc. Same for a clergyman and layman. He is then enlightened by the ray of divine mercy, when he recognizes his evil life, and the sins which he committed. So scripture says, "The spirit of a man is the lamp of the Lord, which searches all the hidden things of the bowels," (Prov 20:27), that is, of the mind.

Christ observes this practice, and it served in the cure of St. Peter, who on the night of his passion, when he denied him, in the first denial did not recognize sin, because he was lying in a dark room, nor in the second, nor in the third, but the text says that the cock crowed. "And the Lord turning looked on Peter. And Peter remembered the word, which Jesus said to him: "Before the cock crows, you shall deny me three times. And Peter going out, wept bitterly," (Lk 22:61-62). Note that Christ did not look at Peter in his first denial, nor in the second, but after the third, after the cock crowed. But why did he look at him more then than before?

St. Gregory says in his "Moralibus" that the cock crowing signifies the preacher for two reasons. First because the cock, before he crows, excites himself, when he strikes himself with his wings. So the preacher should first excite himself, exciting himself with two wings, and striking himself: first he ought to free himself from sin, second he should maintain a good life. Because if one wished to preach humility, he should see that he is not proud, and so for the rest. And so the Apostle says, "For I dare not to speak of any of those things which Christ works not by me," (Rom 15:18). And, "I chastise my body, and bring it into subjection: lest perhaps, when I have preached to others, I myself should become a castaway," (1Cor 9:27).

The second reason is, because the rooster crows stronger and more often at the end of the night as day approaches. So the preacher should preach stronger and more often now, at the end of the night of this life, with the day of judgment approaching. And note here how God poses many

questions to Job, among which were these, saying, "Who has put wisdom in the heart of man? or who gave the cock understanding?" (Job 38:36). He isn't speaking of the rooster, the animal, but the "rooster" spiritual preacher who ought to have the wisdom of avoiding sins and clinging to a good life, and the understanding of preaching, especially now, at the end of night, so that the people might awaken from their sins. When, therefore the rooster crows – the preacher by preaching – then Christ gazes at us by enlightening us. Then you come to a recognition and remembrance of your sins. Behold the first procedure of the medicinal cure by Our Lord Jesus Christ.

TAKING THE PULSE

The second work of a physical doctor is to take a pulse. So too Christ, in the contrition of the heart. For contrition is a certain medicinal touch of the hand of Christ on the artery of the heart. Like a doctor he takes the pulse with his whole hand, but one finger especially senses. So also Christ, takes the pulse with the hand of his mercy, which hand has five fingers, i.e. five motives for contrition. And the first is fear of eternal damnation, which is like the thumb, because commonly sinners begin contrition from this motive, from fear. Second is the pain of damnation, because from sins he lost all his merit, so much so that if he died then nothing of his good deeds would count for him. And so he weeps, like a merchant who lost everything. Third is the pain of loss, because he lost his inheritance of paradise. How he would be devastated. It would be like the pain of the prince, the king's firstborn, who because of his guilt would lose the inheritance of the kingdom. Fourth is most important, when you think that by sinning you have offended your creator, who has given you so many good things. Fifth by thinking how you by your sins have made yourself an enemy of the angels and all the citizens of heaven, as if all of this city would be your archenemies; that friendship has deteriorated. It is clear then that true contrition is nothing other than a certain medicinal touch of the divine hand. About this scripture has, "...and I went away in bitterness in the indignation of my spirit," and so, "the hand of the Lord was with me, strengthening me," (Ez 3:14), giving contrition and a purpose of not returning to sins. And so confessors, at the end of a confession ought to ask, "Do those sins displease you, and do you have a purpose of not returning to them?" If he says, "No," he ought not to be absolved.

EXAMINING THE URINE

Third, the urine is examined. For in the water a doctor recognizes illness and the disposition of the body. Behold, here, oral confession, for through confession is revealed and shown the interior disposition of the sinner. Confession is like a urinal, in which the stinking urine of the sinner, existing within him, is revealed to the confessor, and there the illnesses of the soul are recognized. But it is required that the urine be clear, i. e. that his sins be confessed clearly. Note, against those who minimize and excuse themselves, confessing by accusing others. It is necessary indeed to show clearly the urine of a bad life to the confessor, by accusing oneself, bravely telling the truth. And so I give this counsel, lest you make your confession with those "confessionals" [possibly handbooks of sins for the penitent], well ordered and not heartfelt, because there is a double error. First, accusing yourself of sins which you have not committed is a mortal sin, of lying in confession. Second because through those generalities many sins are glossed over. Those confessions [or "confessionals"] are only for remembering sins, but not for confessing them.

Also it is required that the door of the urinal be closed, lest in confession you might reveal the sin of another. For example if someone has sinned with a sister or daughter, he should turn away, so he might seek out a confessor who does not know his sister or daughter, lest the sin be revealed. If however he does not find such a confessor he ought so to say, "Father I have sinned with one very close to me." This is the mind of St. Thomas in IV Sent. Dist. 16, namely to preserve the good name of another in confession.

A figurative example of confession is found in scripture: "Joshua said to Achan: My son, give glory to the Lord God of Israel, and confess, and tell me what you have done, hide it not. And Achan answered Joshua, and said to him: Indeed I have sinned against the Lord the God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done," (Jos 7:19-20). Note when it is said, "My son," here confessors have an example of how they should speak gently to the sinner. And so the Apostle speaks to confessors: "If a man be overtaken in any fault, you, who are spiritual, instruct such a one in the spirit of meekness," (Gal 6:1). Second [Joshua] says, "give glory to the Lord God of Israel," because honor which is given to the confessor, is given to God, because the confessor takes the place of God. Note, this is against those who come to confession very casually, as if they were dancing, etc.

DIET IS PRESCRIBED

Fourth, a diet is prescribed, having recognized the illness, and this happens in the restriction of life and abstinence from the occasion of sins. For example, For a diet which Christ gives by means of the confessor, to the proud, the vain, the pompous, is that they be humbled. Same for a vain woman, and so for the other sins of lust and greed etc. Note, this is against some confessors who know only to give a diet of masses, to each sick person. They prescribe the same medicine. Note also against those who prefer not to keep to the diet given by the confessor for the health of their soul, but would well keep a diet given by a medical doctor for the health of their body. And so the Apostle Peter: "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, to refrain yourselves from carnal desires which war against the soul," (1Pet 2:11).

MEDICINAL SYRUP IS SWALLOWED

Fifth, the medicine [syrupus] is swallowed. This happens in grace and devout prayer. Syrup is sweet; so prayer is sweet. Would it not seem to you sweet, if at any hour you could speak with the king or the Pope? In devout prayer a man is speaking with Christ the King, and Pope. And he replies in his own way by giving consolation, illuminations, good resolves, and things like that. But many are deaf, and do not hear. But David the prophet heard, and so he said in prayer in Ps. 118: "How sweet are your words to my palate! more than honey to my mouth," (v. 103).

Second the syrup-medicine is taken in the morning and in the evening, in a certain measure; so many Our Fathers and so many Hail Marys, etc.

Third the syrup-medicine is taken mixed with warm water. So also when in prayer God grants you some tears, etc. about which it is said, "...and give us for our drink tears in measure?" (Ps 79:6). About this Christ said, "we ought always to pray," morning and evening, "and not to faint," (Lk 18:1).

PURGATION IS PERFORMED

Sixth, purgation is performed. This happens in the restitution of things taken, and the forgiveness of injuries. Purgation expels bitter corrupt humors, superfluous, and it expels them. Purgation is used against cholera, and it signifies that we should forgive injuries for God's sake, close our eyes to them. Say whatever you wish. It is necessary to rehabilitate the unjust. You, robber, if you have something at home which you stole, or you loan-sharks, or you slave drivers, you judge, you lawyer, you merchant, you cleric, if you obtained your position by bribery, the purgation of restitution is necessary if you wish to be saved. So it is said, "The sin is not remitted, unless the stolen is returned." It is a rule of the theologians, and the jurists, *14, q. 6 Si res*. Certainly one says that this purgation is hard. Other medicines please me more. A remedy against this bitterness is to taste the sting in one bite of a bitter red apple. This happens by thinking of the bitterness of eternal damnation and death, through which, either by force or voluntarily it is necessary for you to give up everything which you have. Better to give it up now, by meritoriously restoring. Whence Jerome, to Paulinus, last chapter, "It is easy to despise everything, who always thinks that he is about to die. With the remedy of this thought purgation of restitution is easily accepted. So the Apostle Paul, "Render therefore to all men their due... Owe no man any thing," (Rom 13:17-16).

DINNER IS PERMITTED

Seventh, dining is permitted, when for building up strength, meat is offered – not beef or veal, but chicken. And this happens in Holy Communion, because, restitution having been made, man can receive communion, and eat the Lamb, the Son of that blessed ewe, the Virgin Mary. The meat is most delicate, and wine is drunk, his blood, which is contained in the host. So he himself said, "For my flesh is meat indeed: and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, abides in me, and I in him," (Jn 6:56-57). Just as the body of a sick person is strengthened by eating, so the soul in worthy communion. But just as for the sick person it would be deadly to eat meat before purgation, so would it be for the sinner, to receive communion before making restitution. See therefore why he says, "I will come and heal him," (Mt 8:7), which is the theme. Thanks be to God.