

St. Vincent Ferrer – On Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving (Mt 6:1 ff)

Mt 6:1-6 Douay transl. Take heed that you do not your justice before men, to be seen by them: otherwise you shall not have a reward of your Father who is in heaven. 2 Therefore when thou dost an almsdeed, sound not a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honoured by men. Amen I say to you, they have received their reward. 3 But when thou dost alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doth. 4 That thy alms may be in secret, and thy Father who seeth in secret will repay thee. And when ye pray, you shall not be as the hypocrites, that love to stand and pray in the synagogues and corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men: Amen I say to you, they have received their reward. 6 But thou when thou shalt pray, enter into thy chamber, and having shut the door, pray to thy Father in secret: and thy Father who seeth in secret will repay thee..

"Take heed that you do not your justice before men," (Mt 6:1) The theme is the word of Christ, advising us, saying "Take heed..." The Lord Jesus Christ in this theme calls penitence "justice." It is the custom in sacred scriptures, both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, that true penitence is called "justice." The reason: because through good penitence man does true justice for himself, and for all the good things, by which we commonly sin which are three, namely

The material body, [corpus materiale]

The rational soul, [anima rationalis]

And temporal goods [substantia temporalia]

For penitence, if it is true, ought to do justice, and punishment [punitiōnem] to these three. And first it does justice to the body by afflicting it through fasting, vigils, disciplines, and pilgrimages etc., because from its inclination we commit many sins. And so lest God do justice to the body in hell through those evil ministers, man ought to do justice here through penance. This privilege God gives uniquely to human nature, that each renders judgment in his own case. Even though man renders justice to himself, he [God] is content. Behold the privilege: "But if we would judge ourselves, we should not," by the Lord, "be judged," (1Cor 11:31), in our body. And so when the repentant soul, which has done justice, comes before Christ at judgment, and is accused by the demons, then the soul responds with the saying of David in Ps. 118: "I have done judgment and justice: give me not up to them who slander me," (v. 121).

The same penitence for the soul. Many sins are within the soul through wicked thoughts, through hatred, rancor, malice, through ill will, or through errors and false opinions. But penitence does justice through devout prayers, as if by binding up the soul in the chain of devout prayers, which pass verbally through the neck, whose head is bound at the foot of the throne of Christ, as if saying, "Lord, because I am judge in my own case, I suspend my soul etc. lest you suspend it in the fork of hell."

Third, penitence does justice regarding temporal goods, which have been for you an occasion of sin, in committing secret thefts, robbery, usury, overcharging, for extortion, withholding salaries of your workers, or the goods of the church, or of the dead, not paying tithes, first fruits etc. Penitence does justice by repaying.

It is clear therefore true penitence is nothing other than justice, and so it is said, "But if the wicked do penance for all his sins which he has committed, and keep all my commandments, and do judgment, and justice, living he shall live, and shall not die. I will not remember all his iniquities that he has done: in his justice which he has wrought, he shall live," (Ez 18:21-22). Of this justice, true penitence, the theme speaks when it says, "Take heed that you do not your justice," that is, penitence, "before men," (Mt 6:1). The theme therefore is clear. Christ himself shows and declares in the holy gospel today how it is to be avoided, lest penitential justice happens before men.

There are three parts in which he shows how penitential justice should not be practiced before men.

- First about the physical body,
- Second about material affluence,
- Third about the rational soul.

BODILY PENITENCE

I say first etc., and this, when he says in the first part of the gospel, "Take heed that you do not your justice before men," (Mt 6:1), which is about the body through fasting, vigils and abstinences, you do before men, for their recognition, not for God. Note here the difference between the recognition of men and of God. For the recognition of men extends itself only to the exterior works, and not to the interior. But the recognition of God extends itself to both works, because he sees all things clearly, "Nor do I judge according to the look of man: for man sees those things that appear, but the Lord beholds the heart," (1Sam 16:7). Note, according to St. Thomas [I, q. 57, a. 4](#), where he asks whether the angels know the thoughts of the heart.

Response:

A secret thought can be known in two ways: first, in its effect. In this way it can be known not only by an angel, but also by man; and with so much the greater subtlety according as the effect is the more hidden. For thought is sometimes discovered not merely by an outward act, but also by change of countenance; and doctors can tell some passions of the soul by the mere pulse. Much more then can angels, or even demons, the more deeply they penetrate those occult bodily modifications...

In another way thoughts can be known as they are in the mind, and affections as they are in the will: and thus God alone can know the thoughts of hearts and affections of wills. The reason of this is, because the rational creature is subject to God only, and He alone can work in it Who is its principal object and last end... Consequently all that is in the will, and all things that depend only on the will, are known to God alone. Now it is evident that it depends entirely on the will for anyone actually to consider anything; because a man who has a habit of knowledge, or any intelligible species, uses them at will. Hence the Apostle says (1 Corinthians 2:11): "For what man knows the things of a man, but the spirit of a man that is in him?" ([I, q. 57, a. 4](#)). Cf. Also II Sent., d. 8, ad 5m. Also in IV Sent d. 45, q. 3, ad 5m.

Now therefore returning to the point, let us see what it is to fast "before men," and what it is to fast before God. To fast before men is to abstain from meat and especially to eat only once a

day. Also to abstain from those delights of the body. This is fasting, which falls into the recognition of men. But to fast before God is when not only the body but also the heart abstains from stews [cibus potionatis], whether of the poisons of wicked thoughts, or depraved desires, of rancors, of ill will and from the desire for revenge. And because there are many who fast before men and not before God, he says, "Take heed that you do not your justice before men," (Mt 6:1), supply "only" before men, but also before God, which is to say just as you fast by abstaining from bodily foods, fast also from the deadly and indigestible foods of the heart. etc. This fast Christ commands in the gospel of Matthew 5, in the first part of the gospel, saying, "You have heard that it has been said, You shalt love your neighbor, and hate your enemy. But I say to you, Love your enemies: do good to them that hate you: and pray for them that persecute and calumniate you: That you may be the children of your Father who is in heaven, who makes his sun to rise upon the good, and bad, and rains upon the just and the unjust. For if you love them who love you, what reward shall you have? do not even the publicans do this? And if you salute your brethren only, what do you more? do not also the heathens do this? Therefore be perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect," (Mt 5:43-48).

Note when he says "be perfect," by fasting, not only before men but also before God, "as also your heavenly Father is perfect," who in this world has many enemies, all sinners and infidels, yet he loves them and gives them the blessings of the sun, the moon, the rain and provisions. And so like good children we are assimilated to our heavenly Father. Also because we are bound to do more for God than the infidels, because they alone love those loving them, this also dogs do. But when a creature loves with the love of God, they not only love those who love him, but also their enemies, this is meritorious. Also if you greet those who greet you, no thanks for that. But there are many who say they do not hate someone, but they do not speak to them, unless the other speaks to him first. I tell to you that he who speaks first and greets the other, he then gains merit, a crown. And so we not only fast before men but also before God, then we shall be perfect in our fasting.

Today's epistle agrees with the gospel. It tells how the Jews, in the time of Isaiah the prophet, as is found in Isaiah 58, had great tribulations in Jerusalem of drought, famine, locusts and such. The rulers of the city ordered that all would fast for some days, and the more they fasted, the worse the troubles grew, on which account they came to the temple and praying said, "Why have we fasted, and you have not regarded. We have humbled our souls, and you have not taken notice?" – by accepting it. And God responded to them through Isaiah the prophet, "Behold in the day of your fast your own will is found," (Isa 58:3) – note, he did not speak of God who commanded to forgive and love enemies – "and you exact of all your debtors. Behold you fast for debates and strife, and strike wickedly with the fist. Do not fast as you have done until this day, to make your cry to be heard on high. Is this such a fast as I have chosen: for a man to afflict his soul for a day? ... will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the Lord?" (Isa 58:3-5). Note, enemies are called "debtors." This is clear when it is said, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," our enemies (Mt 6:12). The debts are recalled through the desire of revenge.

But the fast, which he wants and chooses is that which follows, "Loose the bands of wickedness," (Is 58:6), which happens in two ways, through parents, or through a valet or aide. And when it is said to them that they make peace, they say "I will not make it, unless with my friends, or my valet or aide makes it. It is good to require them that they make peace, otherwise

you go with God." And if you swear an oath to them via your valet or aide, it need not be kept, because it is contrary to charity. Therefore it is said in the plural, "Loose the bands..." Second, "undo the bundles that oppress," (Is 58:6), namely hatred which someone holds in his heart, and this is the fast, which he chooses. Thus, the first part is clear. See why he says, "Take heed..."

PENITENCE OF MATERIAL AFFLUENCE

Second, I say that Christ warns lest penitential justice happen before men, from our material affluence [*de abundantia temporalis*], which happens through restitution and almsgiving. And this Christ shows in the second part of the gospel, Matthew 6, when he says, "Therefore when you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Amen I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing. That your alms may be in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you," (Mt 6:2-4). To explain this text note how, the Jewish rabbis and Pharisees of old did not care about heavenly glory but about temporal and terrestrial glory, and so everything whatsoever they did they did only before men. And when they were to give alms, first it was cried out through the city, and they followed the crier that they might hear the praises from the people saying, "O how pious is this man!" and they delighted in these praises. Behold vainglory! And so Christ said about them, "Amen I say to you, they have received their reward." So that great reward is lost which God promised to persons of mercy saying, "Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy," (Mt 5:7). When the soul which gives alms or other goods out of vainglory, comes to judgment before Christ, immediately it will be remitted to hell, saying that it has already received its reward here. If it is asked, therefore, what manner should we hold to in giving alms, this Christ shows saying, "But when you give alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing," (Mt 6:3).

Note here three moral points. First, temporal riches are called "hands." Reason: because just as by hands we do all our deeds, – hence the Philosopher says that the hand is the organ of organs – so with riches man does all his business. The right hand is good and just money earned, from his own labors or acquired possessions. The left hand is bad money, unjustly acquired or collected, from theft, usury, robbery, simony and the like. So about this Solomon wrote: "His left hand is under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me," (Song 2:6). Restitution should be made from the left, and alms given from the right. And so he says, "But when you give alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing." (Mt 6:3). And so I give you useful advice, that in your financial books, or accounts you should put yourself in the middle, and money from good work is put in one side and from the unjust deed on the other side, because when they are placed together restitution is forgotten; and through that middle stance it is remembered. And then you know from which hand you give alms, and from which you make restitution. And according to this understanding Tobias said to his son, "My son... Give alms out of your substance, and turn not away your face from any poor person: for so it shall come to pass that the face of the Lord shall not be turned from you," (Tob 4:7).

The second point is on the part of the intention of giving alms. The hand is called "right," when the intention is righteous [*recta*]. When alms are given solely out of love and honor of God who has given us so much alms, by creating, providing and redeeming us with the treasure of his blood. This intention is called the right hand. Or by thinking, "I shall now give alms, so that

when I ask for alms at the gate of paradise, God might give me a crumb of his glory. This therefore is a right intention. Beware therefore lest you give alms from a "left" [sinistra] intention, of praise or vainglory. "Let not your left hand know," the intention of vain glory. Many great works are lost because of a "left" intention.

The third point, the manner of giving alms, which can be good or evil, it is said to be a "right hand" or "left." The good way of giving alms is, when alms, a work of piety, are given with piety, benignity, and out of pure charity; then they are given with the right hand. When however given in a bad way, it is given like bread to a dog, or because they pretend not to hear the poor, or with indignation at the insistence of a beggar, then it is given by the left hand. And so the text says, "Therefore when you give alms..." And so the counsel of the Apostle must be kept saying, "Every one as he has determined in his heart, not with sadness, or of necessity: for God loves a cheerful giver," (2Cor 9:7). A practical note. When someone goes to church, he should carry in his hand what he proposes to give out of love of God. See why he says, "But when you give alms, let not your left hand know what your right hand is doing." So the advice of the theme is kept, "Take heed that you do not your justice before men," (Mt 6:1).

PENITENCE OF THE SOUL

I say, third, that in the third part of the gospel, Christ our Lord shows how to do penitential justice from a rational soul, not before men, but secretly. "And when you pray, you shall not be as the hypocrites, who love to stand and pray in the synagogues and corners of the streets, that they may be seen by men: Amen I say to you, they have received their reward. But you when you shall pray, enter into your chamber, and having shut the door, pray to your Father in secret: and your Father who sees in secret will repay you," (Mt 6:5-6). This is said about the manner of praying of the ancient hypocrites in the synagogues, villages and street corners, where people would gather so they might be seen. O about these blessed ones, about whom Christ in the gospel said, "Amen I say to you, they have received their reward," (Mt 6:5). O stupid ones, that such a precious jewel, as is prayer, they give away for such a paltry and contemptible price. And so Christ shows us how to pray saying, "But you when you shall pray, enter into your chamber, and having shut the door, pray to your Father in secret: and your Father who sees in secret will repay you," (Mt 6:6).

Note, "into your chamber." But someone can say about this, "Should one NOT pray in the temple of God, or in the church?" Response: this is understood in two ways. In the first way, the conscience is said to be the secret chamber, and this prayer happens in the churches, namely not crying out nor making grand gestures in order to be seen, lest others be disturbed, but "by shutting the door," i.e. praying secretly. And this ought to be understood about prayers which happen in public or in common. About other special prayers, and the rest a man should shut himself up in his room. So the text is understood.

But here someone can argue saying, It seems that our Lord in his teaching is contradicting himself, because he says in today's gospel, "Take heed that you do not your justice before men," And in another place he says, "So let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven," (Mt 5:16). This seems to be a contradiction. Response: It is not a contradiction. But hear the explanation. Christ since he is the Lord and universal master gives his teaching to men, both to perfect persons, and also to the imperfect.

Because they had to instruct others and to inform them in the spiritual life and teaching, he was saying, "You are the light of the world," (Mt 5:14). And he was speaking to the apostles and other perfect persons, whom the winds of adulation did not harm. And so he said, "So let your light shine," namely your good works and catholic teaching, "before men, that they may see ..," etc. as if he had said, "Bear the royal banner," that is, the evangelical teaching, "under the standard of a good life," that all might say, "Certainly this one practices what he preaches, because otherwise he is not believed."

But to the imperfect, and those just beginning a good life, whom the winds of praise might harm, he says, "Take heed that you do not your justice before men," This question was once asked by St. Antoninus, who explained it in this way, "Just as a great fire is not extinguished by the wind, rather it is even increased, but a tiny light is blown out by the wind, so also a great fire of ardent devotion and charity is in the body of the perfect, but a modest fire in the imperfect. And so it is immediately extinguished by the slightest breath of praise, but in the perfect it is fanned and grows the more. And note this in the great honor given to St. Peter, when he came to Antioch, and to St. John returning from exile, and to St. Paul in Galatians, as is clear in Galatians 4.