

**St. Vincent Ferrer, O.P. – Sermon on the Trinity (2)**

John 3 Douay trans.

1 And there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. 2 This man came to Jesus by night, and said to him: Rabbi, we know that thou art come a teacher from God; for no man can do these signs which thou dost, unless God be with him. 3 Jesus answered, and said to him: Amen, amen I say to thee, unless a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

" No man can do these signs which you do," (Jn 3:2)

These words come originally from John 3 and are recited in today's gospel for this Sunday and the present feast. For just as the church celebrates the solemnity of saints, and lest any be omitted, all the saints are venerated together in one solemnity on the feast of All Saints to make up for any neglect, so the church celebrates today a special solemnity for each divine person. It is very fitting to celebrate the distinction of persons and the unity of essence. I now have to preach about a more sublime and complicated matter in all of theology, or in any school, about the eternal Trinity, the Father and Son and Holy Spirit. So that our sermon be to the glory of God and the reverence and reformation of our souls, and the correction of sins, let us first salute the most holy Virgin Mary.

The secret and mystery of the holy and eternal Trinity, how there is one God the creator of all things and that one God is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is so sublime and transcending, that from the beginning of the world up to the end, nothing would have been known by the human intellect unless God had revealed it to us, because the human intellect cannot naturally comprehend such a sublime mystery. You already see how great is the height of heaven over our bodies, more incomparably higher is the Trinity over our souls. And just as a man created with his feet on the ground in no way can touch heaven with his finger, he can, however, do so spiritually. And this can happen in two ways, if heaven, for example, bowed down, or if man would be elevated on high by God and would touch heaven, otherwise it is impossible to touch heaven with your finger.

So for the Holy Trinity about souls. The finger of the soul by which it touches [heaven] is the subtle intellect. Just as the body of a man with a finger cannot touch heaven naturally, so neither the finger of the soul can touch, understand or comprehend the mystery of the Trinity naturally, but indeed [bene] supernaturally, in two ways, either that heaven, that is the secret bends down, as happened in the blessed incarnation of the Son of God, and then it elevates men when that infinite height humbles itself descending from heaven to earth, assuming human nature, and reveals himself by his own mouth, preaching and declaring how one God is triune in persons. Consequently, we can touch with the finger of the intellect. Also because he raises men on high, like the apostles, martyrs, doctors, confessors through contemplation and perfection of life, who then touch with the finger of intellect the mystery of the Trinity. See how either through the humbling of heaven, or elevation of man we supernaturally touch that mystery. Authority: David in Ps. 143 says, "Lord, bow down your heavens and descend," the first way. "Touch the mountains and they shall smoke," (Ps 143:5), the second way.

The secret mystery of the Trinity he calls "heavens" saying, "Lord, bow down your heavens," that is the secrets. One heaven is that one God is three persons. Another that only the Father begets the Son. Another that from the Father alone the Son proceeds through eternal generation. Another that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both equally. Also another secret is that in divinity there are four real relations, and five notions. About these he says, "Bow down the heavens." Behold the first way.

The second, "Touch the mountains and they shall smoke." He calls highest "mountains" the apostles, martyrs and doctors and confessors, who had an intellect raised through high contemplation and spiritual life. Earthly valleys are the worldly people, therefore he says, "Touch the mountains and they shall smoke," not from the smoke of a lime kiln, but of the smoke of teaching and preaching and like the good smelling smoke of incense. By these two ways we know the secrets of the Trinity, otherwise no human intellect could have known or understood this mystery, because the Apostle says that God dwells in inaccessible light "Whom no man has seen," not with the eye of the body or of the intellect, "nor can see: to whom be honor and empire everlasting. Amen." (1 Tim 6:16).

Question: Where does this defect come from, that we cannot see God? I say that it is not a defect of the object, but of the potency, because God of himself is visible, but the defect is on the part of our intellect, which is not proportionate to him. For the eye of the owl cannot see the sun, which of it self is well visible, but the eye of the owl is not proportioned. So the mystery of the Trinity of itself is most bright and visible, but the defect is on the part of our intellect. So the Philosopher [Aristotle] says, "Just as the eye of the owl is to the light of the sun, so is our intellect to the things most manifest in nature."

Therefore I shall tell you a wonderful story from St. Augustine, the greatest and most subtle doctor, who wanted to write a book in which he would explain the secrets of the Trinity by using reasons, arguments and authorities from nature. When once he was walking along the seashore meditating on an explanation he was writing, as he was going along, he came upon a charming young boy, who was dipping water from the ocean with a silver spoon and was pouring it into a little hole which he had made with his hand. Thinking about the boy for a moment, St. Augustine asked him, "Son, what are you doing?" He replied that he wanted to put the whole vastness of the sea into this little hole. Augustine understood that the little hole represented his book, the silver spoon his bright and subtle intellect, the vast sea the infinite mystery of the Trinity. Then the boy disappeared. "O" said Augustine, "In vain I labor," and dismissing natural reasons and physics, by which the mystery of the Trinity cannot be understood, he proceeds another way, by returning to the revelations of Christ, who bowed down from the heavens and raised men, and to the authorities of the bible, and so he planned his book, saying with the Apostle, "O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments, and how unsearchable his ways!" (Rom 11:33).

Note knowledge is called "depth [altitudo] of the riches," which man has of the Trinity. The riches of this world are not properly riches, because they perish, but knowledge of the secrets of the Trinity is the "depth of the riches," which makes souls rich in this world through faith, and in heaven through glory. They give to them whatever they wish and whatever they desire. "Of the wisdom," that is, that savor of knowledge, because the devout soul finds great savor in the

contemplation of the Trinity and of knowledge, and this with respect to the blessed who already see clearly and can say: "As we have heard, so have we seen," etc., (Ps 47:9).

A proper judgment is the conclusion of counsel, by which the one presiding, having heard his counselors, decides, and he says this ought to be done, this is counsel. The judgment therefore of the Trinity are true conclusions namely that one God is three persons, that the Father generates the Son, just as the sun generates rays, nor is a wife necessary in such a generation. And just as from the sun and rays heat proceeds, so from the Father and Son proceeds the Holy Spirit. Such judgments are "incomprehensible" by a created intellect on its own. And "unsearchable his ways," or of those. Ways are arguments, reasons and proofs, because just as by a way [viam] a man goes to his destination, so through arguments and reasons man comes to the conclusion. He wishes therefore to say that not only judgments are incomprehensible, but also arguments reasons or physical or natural proofs cannot be discovered or investigated for proving the mystery of the Trinity.

But God for the consolation of the faithful gives us signs representing the most blessed mystery of the Trinity itself, and about these the theme speaks. "For no man can do these signs which you do," (Jn 3:2). And there are three signs. The first sign he gives in the rational soul, and this through creation. Second in material body and this through redemption. Third in the spiritual life through salvation. And because no one can make these signs, but God alone, therefore he says the theme, "No man can do these signs which you do," (Jn 3:2).

#### THROUGH CREATION

I say first that God gives a sign of the Holy Trinity in the rational soul through creation. And see what kind. In one body there is only one rational soul, which governs the whole body and members, namely, the head, feet, hands and all. So in the whole world there is only One God who governs and rules the whole world and the head which is heaven, and arms, namely the sun and moon and stars by which he works deeds, and the stomach, namely the elements. Already you see how much is the height [altitudo] of heaven, which is the head, over the feet, the earth. And just as the rational soul has three in itself, [the intellect,] and the memory in which we understand the present, and the will by which we desire the future, like health [sanitatem]. When you are sick you desire health, and when poor, riches. Nevertheless the memory, and intellect and will is only one soul. So in the world there is only one God, and that God is three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

See how God gives the sign of the Trinity in the rational soul through creation, like a king using diverse metals to mint money, but only on the gold coins does he put his image. On the other coins he puts only his seal. So God from the beginning of the world makes many creatures, like coins of diverse metals, but only on the gold coin, namely on man does he impress his image, by speaking of corporeal creatures. The sun, moon and stars, are silver coins. They have only a sign of the Trinity, and not the image. The elements are coins of lead. They do not have a trace.

Speaking of corporeal creatures, only man is made after the image of God, because just as gold among all the metals is the most noble, so man among all corporeal creatures is the more excellent. And just as he who makes coins imprints the image of the king on the florin, so God

when he creates the soul imprints his image on it. God pointed this out from the beginning when he created all things saying, "Let there be light," and he says no more. Let there be luminaries, etc. But when he wished to form man, he did not say let there be man, but, as if he held a meeting [teneret consistorium], Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God said, "And he said: Let us make man to our image and likeness: and let him have dominion over the fishes of the sea, and the fowls of the air, and the beasts, and the whole earth, and every creeping creature," (Gen 1:26). It is clear how this sign is given in the soul by God through creation. About this sign David says, "The light of your countenance O Lord, is signed upon us: you have given gladness in my heart," (Ps 4:7). Note "the light of your countenance O Lord," that is, the image of the Trinity, "upon us," that is in the soul, which is above the body.

Morally. [Moral sense] Here we are instructed if anyone of you has the image of God in the soul, how worthy and reverently must you preserve the image of Christ. A traitor and infidel is the one who slices with a knife or burns with fire, or throws into the garbage, the image of Christ or of the Virgin Mary. You all would say, "O traitor, wretch," etc. The rational soul is more properly the image of God than any painting. And some tear at it, like angry and vengeful murders. If it is said "O he killed my father." Response. If he is a traitor, therefore you are a traitor, and ought to be punished by God, in this world or the next. Therefore God says, "Whosoever shall shed man's blood, his blood shall be shed," and he gives the reason, "for man was made to the image of God," (Gen 9:6). Note "his blood shall be shed," this is understood either by a judge through a just sentence [per iustitiam], or by himself through penance. Who therefore kills or consents in the death of his neighbor, is a murderer, if outside of or contrary to the judgment of a court, etc. By self-penance one sheds his own blood with a whip. Others do not cut the image of God, but cast it into the fire, like the greedy, because avarice is like a fire which burns in the heart of the greedy person to get more either by charging excessive interest or through robbery, etc. About this Christ says, "Take heed and beware of all covetousness; for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of things which he possesses," (Lk 12:15). Note "of all," universally. Others throw the image into the toilet, like the lustful. What is lust but stinking excrement? [stercus putridum] Howsoever lust happens, it is damnation, but the marriage act can happen without any sin, moreover also sometimes with merit, but sometimes with mortal, sometimes venial sin. This is said against those who say simple fornication is not a sin, and against notorious prostitutes. Therefore scripture says, "My son, keep thy soul in meekness, and give it honor according to its desert," because the image of God is worthy of honor, "Who will justify him that sins against his own soul? and who will honor him that dishonors his own soul?" (Sir 10:31).

## THROUGH REDEMPTION

Second, God gives a sign of the Holy Trinity in the material body, and this through redemption. The sign which Christ receives on the day of redemption, which was on the day of Good Friday, is the cross. Just as the king of Aragon takes for his crest [red and orange] stripes, the king of France, the fleur de lis, the king of Castile, the lion and castle. So Christ the king of heaven and earth takes the sign of the cross, on which he was hung for our redemption, so no one believing him or obeying him would be suspended on the pitchfork of hell. About this the prophecy, "Behold I will lift up my hand to the Gentiles, and will set up my standard to the people." (Isa 49:22), namely of the holy cross. Therefore in this physical sign, both visible and audible, God gives the sign of the Trinity, because when you sign yourself you say, "In the name

of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen," "In the name" Behold the unity of essence. He does not say "in the names." The holy doctors say that if when the priest baptizes he would say, "I baptize you in the names, etc.," he would not [validly] baptize. About this see St. Thomas [III, q. 66, a. 5, ad 6m.](#) And in 4 Dist. 3, a.2, q.1 ad 9m. Therefore Christ said to the apostles and disciples, "Going therefore, teach ye all nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." (Mt 28:19). He does not say "in the names." When he says "of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," clearly he says the Trinity of persons.

Also with respect to sight and hearing in the manner of signifying, he points out this manner of signifying, when it is said, "In the name of the Father," the hands are held high. Reason because the Father never was sent from another, but he himself existing on the throne of his eternity sent his only-begotten Son into the virginal womb, just as the sun gives out its ray, and nevertheless does not return from it. Therefore when it is said, "and of the Son," you ought to hold your hands over the womb, when it is said "and of the Holy Spirit," the hand should be guided across from shoulder to shoulder, because the Holy Spirit was dispersed over the apostles and the disciples of Christ on the day of Pentecost. When you say "Amen," the hands are joined signifying the unity of essence. Some err much in their way of signing, when they say, "In the name of the Father," [longe faciunt dicentes] they make long saying that the Father is greater, this is heresy, because in this Trinity nothing is prior or posterior, nothing more or less. But all the three persons are co-eternal to each other and co-equal, as Athanasius says. Other put the Son on the right because the article of the creed says "He is sitting at the right hand of the Father." But this is wrong, because the Son and Holy Spirit are on the right hand of God, because to be on the right hand of God is nothing other than to be equal to God the Father. Others place the Holy Spirit on the right hand [a dextris], saying that on the left is the devil who then is struck down. And this never is found in the book of any authority. Therefore the good way of signing is that about which you, etc.

And of this sign the Church says,  
Signus salutis                      Sign of salvation  
Salus in periculis                Safety in dangers  
Vitale lignum                      Living wood  
Vitam ferens omnium              Bearing the life of all.

(Hymn for the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, Salve crux sancta, Hymn of King Henry II)

Morally. Here it is clear that they err who do not sign themselves with the sign of Christ, but of the devil, as many clergy and laity do. What kind of injury would there be to a king if someone would remove from his palace his coat of arms, and place there the sign of his enemy? The standard [signum] of Christ is the cross, the sign of the devil is the circle or wheel. Authority: "The wicked walk round about," (Ps 11:3) David says. The palace of Christ is the body of a Christian, on which is placed the sign of the Cross of Christ the king, in baptism. But when you sign by making a circle, then you remove the sign of Christ from his palace, and you place there the sign of the devil. You ask, when you arise from your bed, how do you sign yourself? "In the name of the Father" etc., and then make a circle. Also when you go to eat breakfast. Sadly we include even some priests, who in the blessings of salt and water and bread make the sign of the devil, etc. What is worse even at Mass, and even when after Mass they give the blessing to the people which has great power from the presence of Christ. Some give the blessing with the sign

of the devil by making a circle, saying, "In the unity of the Holy Spirit may the Father and Son and Holy Spirit bless you. Amen." Think how much the removal of his standard would have displeased the king, even more it displeases Christ. On this account David said in the Psalm, "O God, why have you cast us off unto the end: why is your wrath enkindled against the sheep of your pasture?" (Ps 73:1) Note "Why have you cast us off," etc. The Holy Trinity replies. "We do not see our signs." No longer is he a prophet, i.e. the priest prophesying, truly making the sign of Christ, therefore let this wicked vice be corrected.

## THROUGH SALVATION

Third, I said that God gave the sign of the Trinity in the spiritual life, which was given through salvation, For the spiritual life, holy and good, is only one from its beginning up to the end, nevertheless it has three parts, so that a man is well ordered. First with respect to God. Second, with respect to his neighbor. And third, with respect to himself. And just as there is one God in the Trinity of persons, so there is one spiritual life with three aspects [ordinationibus]. Behold the sign of the Trinity.

Of this sign Bernard says, "Signs have been given and certain indications, and manifest indicators of salvation that it is indubitable that one be of the number of the elect, in whom those signs remain. You know when you shall be well ordered regards God, when you bear honor and reverence to God. Then indeed the vassal is well ordered regarding his lord when he speaks reverently of him, so we regarding God by not swearing, not denying him, or blaspheming. Therefore you should not wonder if you have a bad time etc. [malum tempus] But I wonder that you do not fall into the abyss because of blasphemies, which you have done. From this God the Father is sought out, saying, "The son honors the father, and the servant his master: if then I be a father, where is my honor? and if I be a master, where is my fear, says the Lord," (Mal 1:6). Let there be an law against oaths. Everyone should cry out against those who swear, just as against a wolf. etc.

Second, good order regarding the neighbor is not to harm the neighbor neither in damaging him in his goods, nor in reputation, nor in his person, but to foster benevolent love regarding him. Therefore it will be necessary to avoid the game of dice, which game of dice very much harms the neighbor, in his goods and in body and also in the soul. Therefore the Son shall judge them, because injury is done to him, who comes to save souls. The Father "has given all judgment to the Son. That all men may honor the Son, as they honor the Father." (Jn 5:22).

The third good ordering, regarding oneself, consists in this, that after you have labored on Monday and Tuesday etc., you rest on Sunday, avoiding doing secular things. You should not walk through the market, unless absolutely necessity. You should not be doing business nor making deals etc. Note: Some miracle etc. Let there be a law that feasts be observed, and you shall prosper. Such a law befits the Holy Spirit, who requires rest in the soul in which it dwells. Therefore scripture says, "From henceforth now, says the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors," (Rev 14:13). Thanks be to God.