

St. Vincent Ferrer, O. P. – Sermon on Spiritual Aging -- Eph. 4:23

"And be renewed in the spirit of your mind," (Eph 4:23)

These words are read in the epistle of this Sunday. Let us salute the Virgin Mary.

In these words the Apostle Paul suggests that mortal sin makes the soul senile and old, when he says, "And be renewed," etc. Tacitly he presupposes this. I will base my sermon on this, and we have insights and advice [speculationes et moralitates]. We know that old age and aging are conditions and properties of corporeal, corruptible, and mortal creatures. It does not happen to spiritual creatures. It is many thousand of years since Michael [the archangel] was created, and he is just as young today as on the first day of his creation. It's the same for Gabriel, Raphael and the others. Old age and antiquity [senectus et antiquitas] do not have a place in them. See St. Thomas [Summa theologiae] [I, q. 50, a. 5 \[ult.\]](#) about the incorruptibility of angels.

The same is true for souls. So the soul of a man a hundred years old, or even a thousand, is as young as the soul of a child one day old, because they are spiritual substances, and they do not grow old or age. Authority. "Your name is as oil poured out: therefore young maidens have loved you." (Song 1:2). Note "oil poured out," namely, Christian faith everywhere preached and spread. Here, the name of Christ is called "oil," elsewhere "ointment," because it is the medicine of the soul, for at the moment in which a child or adult is baptized, their soul is cured, and it is "poured out" in heaven, because by it the wound is cured, the case of bad angels, and [poured out] on earth, because the faith of Christ in every generation was preached by the holy apostles. Therefore the "young maidens," namely, spiritual creatures, on which old age does not settle, "loved you too much," (v. 2) that is very much.

Senescence or aging only happens in corporeal creatures, but not in all, because the sun, moon, stars, planets and the heavens, although they are corporeal creatures, nevertheless they are not corruptible from the composition of contraries. But old age happens and comes upon corruptible, mortal creatures. A house is called old or new, a garden, a ship etc., and our bodies grow old, and also those of animals etc. It is therefore evident that senescence and aging are properties or conditions of corporeal animal creatures. Authority. "And that which decays and grows old, is near its end," (Heb 8:13). If therefore we wish to speak properly about old age, our souls are not old, but the Apostle presupposes and suggests that our souls grow old and age from mortal sin, because every defect which old age gives to the body naturally, the same defects sin gives to the soul spiritually, or morally. Therefore the theme says, "And be renewed in the spirit of your mind," etc., (Eph 4:23). The theme is clear.

I have sought out and found that there are six defects which old age brings naturally to the body.

First is the whitening of the hair [dealbatio capillorum],
Second, the dulling of the senses [obturbatio sensuum],
Third, the wrinkling of the skin [corruptio cutis],
Fourth, the bowing of the head [incurvatio capitis],
Fifth, weakness in the limbs [debilitatio in membris],
Sixth, the approach of death [appropinquatio mortis].

Sin brings on these six defects to the soul spiritually or morally. Therefore the theme says:
"And be renewed in the spirit of your mind," (Eph 4:23).

WHITENING OF THE HAIR

I say first that the first defect which old age gives to the body is the whitening of the hair. Although indeed in youth a man had black hair, commonly in old age, it naturally turns white. Reason. Because the moisture and coolness of the head and scalp rots the roots of the hairs, and so the hair turns white. Just like in autumn the leaves of the trees, once green, grow pale and fall, so it is with the hair. And although this is clear and certain nevertheless there is this scriptural authority: "The Ancient of days sat... and the hair of his head [was] like clean wool," (Dan 7:9). Now we shall see if mortal sin does this to the soul.

The hairs of the soul are the various thoughts, innumerable, volatile, and voluble, like hair. How many indeed are the thoughts of a man waking, sleeping, here and there etc, on the earth and at sea, to the extent that what David said of his thoughts, "They are multiplied," namely, my thoughts, "above the hairs of my head," here and there, "and my heart has forsaken me," (Ps 39:13). For this reason Job said, "Various thoughts succeed one another in me, and my mind is hurried away to different things," (Job 20:2).

I say that someone existing in grace has black hair, i.e. thoughts of humility, thinking of one's own failures, because to the extent that a person is better, holier, and of a more perfect life, to that extent does he think more of his faults, saying within himself, "O you wretch [miser], these graces which God placed in me are so corrupted, like wine in a bad barrel, because I have not kept these graces and virtues pure and holy, etc. This precious liquor of grace has turned bad from the defect of the container." Behold humility. In this way the Blessed Virgin Mary was very humbled by thinking of the graces received from God, and out of humility considered herself to be almost nothing. Therefore the holy fathers ordered for a time, that when something is said in the choir, that they make a "venia" [monastic gesture for pardon for a ritual mistake in choir], as if seeking pardon, because it is impossible that something of ours be done without some defect, either in the deed, or in thought. This is why scripture says of a devout person, "His locks [are] as branches of palm trees, black as a raven," (Song 5:11). "Locks," i. e. thoughts, "like branches," that is the leaves, "of the palm trees," which are straight, which signifies that all good things which they do they attribute to God, saying: "Lord, if I have done anything good, it is by you, because on my part my thoughts and works are as black as a crow from their defects." The old age of mortal sin turns black hair white.

Certain ones, accustomed to sinning are quick to say, "So what if I have sinned? David also sinned. If I have fallen, a saint like him also fell. I fast and give alms, I do such and such, and

that other fellow does not." See the white thoughts, sins, of those who out of presumption do not acknowledge their own defects. About this presumption, read Luke 23, about a certain man who was considered to be holy, who was saying, "O God, I give you thanks that I am not as the rest of men, extortionists, unjust, adulterers, as also is this publican. I fast twice in a week..." (Lk 18:11-12). This man had white hair. He acted stupidly, and praised himself before God, and all was grey [canus] in him, not acknowledging any defect. So it happens to you, when you go to confession. Some say: "Father, ask me, because I don't remember any sin." First of all, they are lying. But if the confessor would query, "What about your neighbor?" not only would they tell of mortal sins, but also venial. You all are grey, not recognizing your defects. It is a sign of an evil life to have such white thoughts, praising or commending oneself. Therefore the Apostle, "And be renewed," etc.

DULLING OF THE SENSES

The second defect is the stopping up [obturatio] of the senses, namely when the sight is clouded [ingrossatur, thickened], and one needs glasses. Also the hearing does not hear, nor does the smelling smell. Same of taste and touch. Natural reason. The heavy [grossi] humors indeed abound in old people and dull the senses. Authority. The soldier [Berzellai] said when he was invited by David, "I am this day eighty years old, are my senses quick to discern sweet and bitter? or can meat or drink delight thy servant? or can I hear any more the voice of singing men and singing women?" (2 Kg 19:35).

Now let us see if any sin induces this defect in the soul. I say that people who live in sin have the senses of the soul so obstructed, that they perceive nothing of the evils of the soul, but of the evils of the body they well are aware of. V.g. If a man walks on the road barefoot, he will immediately feel a thorn. But when you go to soothsayers for your health, as if they are able to give you health, and the devil pierces your soul with a lance, you do not feel it. So the evils of the body you perceive immediately, but not of the soul. If someone storms through the house in a rage you know it I at once, yet you put up with a notorious witch [divinum notorium] etc., and you do not recognize it. This sin suffices, that the anger of God would descend on you. Also if you should find a pebble between the teeth [lapillus inter dentes] in your table forks [scutellis], you would notice it immediately. But when you hold a big rock in your mouth, by swearing and blaspheming, or by defaming your neighbor, you don't notice it. See how sin makes you lose your senses.

WRINKLING OF THE SKIN

Third, I say that the third defect which old age brings is the breakdown or wrinkling of the skin. Youths have soft skin and smooth hands and faces. The old man however is wrinkled all over. Natural reason. Because the youth is fleshy and it fills out the skin, but in old people the flesh shrinks. Therefore the skin wrinkles. So Job, when it is told him that he was young, pointing out the opposite he said, "My wrinkles bear witness against me," (Job 16:19). If when a person stands in a good life in grace, the soul is young and fleshy. The smooth skin of the soul is external conduct, and just as the skin covers the flesh, blood and bones, so conduct. A good, holy and virtuous person is the same internally as he is outside of himself; how he is in the home, so he is in town; how in private, the same in public. So if someone says that he is humble, he is

humble, if he shows himself to be poor on the outside, so he is in his heart. Same of chastity, abstinence, penance, patience and diligence, all is smooth skin.

But sin makes the skin of conduct wrinkle. When indeed a man falls into sin, he is ashamed to make it public, and he shows himself to be other than what he is internally. On the outside he shows himself to be humble, he bows his head, but inwardly pride abounds, like Lucifer, the skin is wrinkled. He shows himself to be a lover of poverty, chastity, sincerity [claritatis], abstinence, patience, diligence, but within he is totally the opposite, all is wrinkled. Some show themselves to be friends on the outside, saying, "If you want anything, I am all yours." But behind his back if they are able they accuse and defame and when they cannot do anything, some go at night and cut his vines, etc. saying, "He can't prove it, and we will deny it." Such people are bound to restore the damages, if they wish to be saved, otherwise neither confession, or anything else will benefit for salvation. The same for a notary changing someone's will, or clauses of the will out of ill will. Same for false witness in accusing a neighbor, all is wrinkled.

Do you want to know what sin is? Christ said through the mouth of John, about someone smoothing or wrinkling, "I know your works, that you are neither cold, nor hot. I would you were cold, or hot. But because you are lukewarm, and neither cold, not hot, I will begin to vomit you out of my mouth," (Rev 3:15-16). Hot or cold is the one who reveals himself externally how he is internally. He is cold who, evil within, shows himself so externally. If inside he has ill will, hate and rancor, against another he shows it outside. He is hot who, good inside, shows himself so outside. If a friend on the inside, he also shows it outside.

But lukewarm is the one who externally shows himself a friend, but inwardly he is an enemy; he greets you externally and defames you behind your back. If it is asked, "Is it not better to be lukewarm than cold?" I say, "No!," because a man can refrain from being cold, not from being lukewarm. If a religious, or clergyman or lay person is warm, no evil follows, because they are good. If cold, it is not credited to them, therefore no evil follows. But when he is lukewarm, then he causes harm, because they confide in him, and he deceives. A good woman should not confess to a bad religious, or clergyman, or lay man, but because she trusts the lukewarm, and she is defrauded. Behold why he says, "I would you were cold, ...But because you are lukewarm, and neither cold, not hot, I will begin to vomit you out of my mouth."(v. 16), and this when Christ says in judgment, "Depart from me, you cursed," (Mt 25:41), because the lukewarm corrupt the whole world. Therefore "be renewed in the spirit of your mind," (Eph 4:23)

BOWING OF THE HEAD

I say fourth, that the fourth defect which old age brings on is the bowing of the head. A young man goes erect, an old man bowed over. Natural reason. Just as a fire emits flames upward, so the heart of a young man is so warm, that it makes him go about upright, but when the warmth of the heart diminishes from old age, the head bows over. Sin works this defect in the soul. Someone who is without sin has the "head" of the soul, namely, thoughts, erect, by thinking of God, paradise, heavenly things, and he ardently desires to be there, to the extent that if God would say to him, "You have to leave here for a year." He would say to him, "O Lord, must I be separated from you and journey for so long?" The heat of devotion raises his head, but mortal sin makes the head bow down to the earth, like beasts, which because they have no business in

heaven, look at the ground. A sinner does not delight in looking to heaven, just as a thief neither [delights in] looking at a judge presiding from his chair above him. An example from the gospel about a certain publican. The "publican," however, "standing afar off, would not so much as lift up his eyes towards heaven;" (Lk 18:13), because sin draws thinking and desiring downward to earthly things, saying, "O if I can have this or that. " So they descend downward to hell.

Of this the miracle of the gospel tells of a certain young woman, beautiful, who used to go about upright, and suddenly was afflicted with a curvature, and could not elevate her head so as to look at others. All were amazed at her, not knowing why, but Christ knowing the cause said, "Woman, you are delivered from thy infirmity. And he laid his hands upon her, and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God," (Lk 13:12-13), and Christ said, "And ought not this daughter of Abraham, whom Satan hath bound, lo, these eighteen years, be loosed from this bond...?" (Lk 13:16).

Thus the woman stands for the human soul, rightly advancing, who lived well, joyfully looking forward to her inheritance spelled out by her father in his will. The clause of the will said: "Fear not, little flock, for it hath pleased your Father to give you a kingdom." (Lk 12:32). But when he sinned, he lost the warmth of devotion and became bent over, but when Christ touched the heart with his hands, giving contrition, it straightened. Therefore Christ, "look up, and lift up your heads, because your redemption is at hand." (Lk 21:28). "And be renewed in the spirit of your mind," (Eph 4:23).

WEAKNESS OF THE LIMBS

I say that the fifth defect which old age brings is the weakness of the members. A young man is strong and robust; an old man feeble, so he is propped up with a cane. "From the sole of the foot unto the top of the head, there is no soundness therein" (Isa 1:6) This sin works in the soul. When a soul is in grace it is strong, inasmuch as it cannot be pressured to sin by all the demons, but after sinning it is so weak that it immediately falls. Just as women, a virgin or otherwise, before she sins, is firm in resisting, but when shame is lost, when corruption happened, they are weak and afterward easily fall and are seduced. Therefore, women, turn yourselves away, lest you drop the reins of modesty. "Jerusalem hath grievously sinned, therefore is she become unstable," (Lam 1:8). So when a person is in grace, he has knees, hands and all his members strong for praying, and is not too tired [attaediatur] to genuflect, to elevating the hands, nor for fasting, the hair shirt, or the discipline. But from the fact that he is in sin, he is immediately weakened [attaediatur]. "For she is become weak unto good that dwells in bitterness," (Mic 1:12). Bitterness stands for sin, which leads the soul to the bitterness of damnation. Therefore, "be renewed in the spirit of your mind," (Eph 4:23).

APPROACHING DEATH

Sixth, I say that for the sixth defect which old age produces is the approach of death. Although the young man dies as well like the old, nevertheless naturally the young man is more distant from death, because he ought to live twenty or even fifty more years. An old man however, is already at the gates of death. "And that which decays and grows old, is near its end," (Heb 8:13). Sin does this to the soul; it makes the soul to be near infernal death, nearer than shirt

[camisa] is to the body, because immediately when it leaves the body, it doesn't delay for a year, or for a month to descend to hell, but in an instant. "They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment they go down to hell," (Job 21:13). Therefore David in the person of a sinner said, "There is but one step (as I may say) between me and," eternal, "death." (1 Kg 20:3).

If, therefore, mortal sin works these six defects in the soul, which old age works in the body, therefore it can well be said, morally speaking, to be the old age of the soul. Therefore, "Be renewed." Man is renewed by contrition, confession, and taking on or accepting penance, and by making satisfaction, and forgiving injuries. And to the extent the injury is greater, to that extent the merit of remission is greater. "Be renewed in the spirit of your mind," (Eph 4:23)