

**St. Vincent Ferrer, O.P. -- Sermon on St. Blaise - Feb. 3 (Jn 12:24)**

John 12:24 (Douay transl.) Amen, amen I say to you, unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, 25 Itself remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world, keepeth it unto life eternal.

"Unless the grain of wheat falling to the ground die," (Jn 12:24). This text is found in John 12. The whole solemnity today is about the most glorious St. Blaise, bishop and martyr, and so is my sermon. From the many virtues and examples of his good life, we can derive instruction for the virtuous regulation of our own life. But first the Virgin Mary must be "Hailed."

This theme is the answer to the question from some ignorant person asking, "Who was this St. Blaise, and what is his story? The theme replies: "Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die," etc. The words are figurative, secretly pointing out his virtues and excellences according to the five words of the theme:

The first virtue is virtuous humility, because the text says "a grain," not chaff.

The second is gracious sublimity, because it says "of wheat," and not barley.

The third is rigorous adversity, because it says "falling," from dignity.

The fourth is sorrowful bitterness, because it says "on the ground," through torture.

The fifth is precious or glorious happiness, because it says "dead."

**VIRTUOUS HUMILITY**

As for the first, I say that one great and excellent virtue of St. Blaise was his virtuous humility. Although he was filled with virtues, nevertheless he kept them in the pouch of humility, otherwise they might be lost. Whoever collects virtue without humility, is like someone who carries dust in the wind. Note here two humilities. The first is virtuous. The second is vicious. The virtuous kind is when a man on one hand thinks of the immensity of God and his infinite power; on the other hand he thinks of his own smallness and defects, and so his heart is humbled. Such humility, which regards God is virtuous, and pleases God very much, because in this way a creature regards himself as nothing, nor does he presume about himself. St. James praises this kind saying, "Be humbled in the sight of the Lord," – he does not say 'of men,'— "and he will exalt you," (James 4:10).

The second humility is vicious, when one is humbled in the sight of men, and yet within has an inflated heart, like the belly of a pregnant woman, and they behave before men like hypocrites. Of these scripture says, "There is one that humbles himself wickedly, and his interior is full of deceit," (Sir 19:23).

The humility of St. Blaise was virtuous, because he was humbled in the sight of the Lord. He would hide his works so that he would avoid vainglory. By praying and contemplating through the night, and secretly, he kept to his penitential bed, and he wore a hair shirt. Outside he went about decently dressed. He fasted, and as much as he could, he hid his sanctity out of humility. But God exalted him. Authority. "Be you humbled ... under the mighty hand of God, that he

may exalt you in the time of visitation," (1Peter 5:6). Also, "Be humbled in the sight of the Lord, and he will exalt you," (James 4:10), because God wishes to show him off for the glory of God and as a good example for men. Note, this text, "A city seated on a mountain cannot be hid," (Mt 5:14). The Gloss quotes Augustine, that is, a person over a long life. It is otherwise for hypocrites, who want to be seen and praised, and falsely do many deeds. Like smoke, such pass away totally and do not have a foundation in God, because scripture says, "The joy of the hypocrite [is] but for a moment," (Job 20:5).

The virtuous humility of St. Blaise is noted when he says, "a grain." For chaff stands for the proud. Reason, because there are more of them than the humble. Second, because chaff is puffed up and light, and always stands out; grain however is small and always hidden, like the humble person, etc. The scripture says about this, "You sow not the body that shall be;" namely a holy person sowing, in this world, "but bare grain," bare of vanities, (1Cor 15:37). Behold humility. "But God gives it [a body as he will]," etc., (v. 38).

The more St. Blaise hid his holiness, the more it was published in the miracles which he worked. It is told how he was from a city of Cappadocia etc. The miracle is told of the cure of the widow's son who choked or was choking on a fish bone stuck in his throat. Christ granted health for him and for all who call upon [St. Blaise] for illnesses of the throat. So today bread, wine and such are blessed in honor of St. Blaise, and so the scripture is verified in St. Blaise, Luke 18: "He who humbles himself, shall be exalted," (Lk 18:14). Note, "He who humbles himself," with true humility, "shall be exalted."

#### GRACIOUS SUBLIMITY

The second virtue is gracious sublimity, namely in dignity, because he was the bishop of the city of Sebaste, and so it is said, of corn that it is better than the other grains. And so prelates, who are the greater and more noble of the populace are symbolized by corn. Zach 9: "For what is the good thing of him," namely of the Christian people, "and what is his beautiful thing, but the corn of the elect," (Zach 9:17), that is, of the prelates. And because St. Blaise was a bishop, therefore it is said, "of the corn."

It is told how he was elected, not only by the canons, but also by all the laity of Sebaste, praying etc. And suddenly in their hearts God inspired them all to cry out in a loud voice for Blaise to be the bishop. However, he refused. Nevertheless he was elected, and in tears he assumed his position. Why was he weeping? Because in the [last] judgment bishops have to render an account not only for their own souls, but also for all committed to him. And so scripture says, "...a most severe judgment shall be for them who rule. For to him that is little, mercy is granted: but the mighty shall be mightily tormented," (Wis 6:6-7). Note the "most severe judgment."

Three judgments happen to a prelate. The first is how he attained his dignity. Whether through the door, when, without his foreknowledge he is elected, or the pope provides without his or his friends request. If, however, he obtains it another way, he is a thief and a robber, nor can he be saved unless he resigns. So scripture says about this: "Amen, amen I say to you: He that enters not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbs up another way," namely by letters, or

armed demands [preces armatas], or through gifts etc., "the same is a thief and a robber," (Jn 10:1). O what a hard judgment will befall him.

The second is a harder judgment, which happens to him, based on how he has lived after he became a bishop, and how he spent his income. He ought to divide it into three parts: one for himself, a second for his household, and a third for the poor.

The third will be the hardest judgment, which happens to him when he renders a count of the souls damned because of his negligence. For to such a one Ezekiel 33 says: "I have made you a watchman to the house of Israel: therefore you shall hear the word from my mouth, and shall tell it them from me. When I say to the wicked: O wicked man, you shall surely die: if you do not speak to warn the wicked man from his way: that wicked man shall die in his iniquity, but I will require his blood at your hand. But if you tell the wicked man, that he may be converted from his ways, and he be not converted from his way: he shall die in his iniquity: but you have saved your soul," (Ez 33:7-9). Now you see how and what kind is the care of souls. See why he says, "a most severe judgment," etc., (Wis 6:6).

Considering these things, the saints of old accepted the episcopal burden with the greatest trepidation, and would refuse, until they knew the will of God, and then trusting in divine help they accepted. It is told how St. Blaise having been made a bishop didn't change his status, as do many wicked men. They immediately do vain things in their excessively vast household, in horses and pomps, saying "Honors change morals, in wicked men. In the good it is not true." And because St. Blaise did not abandon his life style, neither did God remove from him the grace of miracles, rather he augmented it, because not only was he curing men, but even wild beasts, which obeyed him.

The story is told of the miracle of the poor woman, having one pig, which was seized by a wolf. She rushed to St. Blaise, to have him command the wolf to return the pig to her, which she had purchased, etc. This he did. Immediately the wolf brought it back alive.

Note here carefully two points. First the virtue of St. Blaise. Second our hardness. St. Blaise's virtue moved the heart of the most ferocious wolf to return the pork which he loved so much. He obeyed St. Blaise, because he was a friend of God and obedient to God. So also it was in the first state [of mankind] when as long as Adam was obedient to God, the animals obeyed him.

Second, consider our hardness. The rapacious wolf at the command of St. Blaise restored what he had stolen. Yet you, thief, robber, not because of the command of Blaise but of God, do not wish to restore your loot or usury. We are worse than beasts. O how many usurers are there who lend ten florins and write in a contract that they were twelve; or buy at less than a fair price [pretio parato], or sell for more, for a hoped for price; or lend monies over possessions, and in the mean time profit from the fruits or from the community etc., or they keep for themselves the wages of their servants, or the goods of the church, or tithes or first fruits, or goods of the deceased. Such persons cannot be saved until they make restitution. Their sins are not even forgiven unless they return what they have taken. It is a rule of jurists, 14, q. 6. *Si res*, and also of theologians, and it is originally of Augustine. Here you can speak against those usurers.

## RIGOROUS ADVERSITY

I say third that the third virtue is rigorous adversity, when the text says "falling" etc., namely from episcopal dignity. When St. Blaise had been a bishop for some time, a persecution arose against Christians. They were to deny the faith of Christ, or they would be killed. For this reason St. Blaise was deposed and exiled from his bishopric by the prefect. He took refuge in the desert where he lived in a cave on a mountain, in great penance. See how he can be said to have fallen. He could say with David, "Being pushed I was overturned that I might fall: but the Lord supported me," in the desert, (Ps 117:13). And because in such hardship St. Blaise did not wish to abandon God, neither did God abandon him. When he was in the desert he had nothing to eat. Trusting in God he said, "The eyes of all hope in thee, O Lord," (Ps 144:15), devoutly reciting his hours as if he were in the city, and at the dinner hour he came out of the cave. So the story goes, that birds were would come to him bringing him food from what they were eating. They delivered it to him at the dinner hour, at the hour of none [3 pm] they would come, fifty or a hundred doves with grains of wheat. Also a woodpecker [tornellus] with an olive in its beak. Crows brought fresh figs. Falcons too came with partridges. And St. Blaise was reciting a verse and all the birds were around him in a circle. Note that no bishop or king had so many servants, and he ate that which pleased him, but not the meat. Afterwards, he divided the leftovers for them ordering them not to argue. It is said how it is confessed of God: "Whoever serves God well, need not fear that they will be lacking." A monk or friar [religiosus] therefore should not say, "O wretched me, how will I get another cappa [a friar's cape], when this one gets torn," etc. You should serve God diligently, because nothing will be lacking to you. Did not God, Jesus Christ, say, "Seek you therefore first the kingdom of God, and his justice, and all these things shall be added unto you," (Mt 6:33). Same for the clergy and laypeople. But the life of many is such that it is a wonder that they find water in the well, because they are not worthy. But about them who serve God Christ says, "Be not solicitous therefore, saying, What shall we eat: or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed... For your Father knows that you have need of all these things." (Mt 6:31-32).

And not only birds, but also animals like lions, bears, wolves, sometimes if they were ill, or that they had something stuck in their throat or a thorn, they came to him showing him the wounds, which he cured in the name of Jesus, with the sign of the cross made over the wound saying: "Be careful now, and hurt no one. It is because of your malice and because of sin this evil came to you," or something of the sort. Note here that the irrational animals turned to him to recover their health. To whom do you turn? To the devil! Because you go to soothsayers and fortune tellers. If you say "We do this, because we do not have doctors, pharmacists nor medicines." It is said of the power of this name of Jesus, according to the Psalm, "Men and beasts you will preserve, O Lord: O how have you multiplied your mercy, O God!" (Ps 35:7-8). And so David, "Blessed is the man whose trust is in the name of the Lord; and who has not had regard to vanities, and lying follies," (Ps 39:5).

## SORROWFUL BITTERNESS

The fourth virtue is sorrowful bitterness, of many tortures, which is indicated when it is said "into the ground." Led out of the desert he would return to his country where there he would attain the crown of glory through martyrdom. "He will crown you with a crown of tribulation, he

will toss you like a ball into a large and spacious country," (Isa 22:18), that is, from torture to torture. While he was in the desert, as I said, in a cave, Christ appeared to him saying that he should offer him a sacrifice, which he understood that he should say a mass, and so he got up. Meanwhile some men sent by the commissioner of the emperor came to him to arrest him. And then St. Blaise understood that Christ was speaking about the sacrifice of his body, in martyrdom, and on bended knees he gave thanks to Christ that he had been mindful of his servant.

When he was led away captive, many, seeing the miracles which he worked, were converted. When he came before the prefect, the prefect said to him, "Rejoice Blaise, friend of the gods," saluting him cordially. Blaise said: "Do not say 'gods,' but 'demons.'" Angered, the prefect then sentenced him to five tortures. The first, five blows with a club, and at each blow St. Blaise said "Jesus Christ." From the power of this name he survived, because otherwise it was a wonder how he could have lived.

The second was imprisonment in a stinking cell without food or water. But although his body was detained in the prison, his soul nevertheless was strolling through the palace of paradise, devoutly contemplating the orders of angels. He was comforted by a woman to whom a wolf had delivered a pig. She hearing of the arrest of St. Blaise brought the cooked head of the pig, and bread and wine with a lighted lamp to St. Blaise. Getting permission from the jailer, she entered his cell. To whom St. Blaise said. "Daughter I want to repay the charity which you have extended to me. You know that very shortly I am to be martyred, and I shall beg pardon for you. And because, daughter, you are a poor person, I shall give you a way of becoming wealthy. Every year you are to come to my church with a lighted candle. And so she did. And in a short time she grew wealthy. We read of no other saint who has promised to someone temporal riches.

The third torture was the rack, on which, naked and with iron hooks he was torn at, to the extent that streams of blood flowed down his body. He was saying, "The sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come," (Rom 8:18). He did not pay attention to this torture, so he was again returned to the cell. Even greater tortures were prepared. Seven women who were collecting the blood of the martyr out of devotion were beheaded.

The fourth torture was this. The prefect ordered that he be thrown into a lake, which, at a sign from him, suddenly solidified, as if it were solid and dry, and he was standing in the middle. The idol worshippers wishing to come to him, sank into the water. The water supported the light, but not heavy works, especially of sins.

## GLORIOUS HAPPINESS

I say, fifth, that the fifth virtue is glorious happiness, when it [the text] says, "die." No torture makes a martyr glorious but death. And so David says: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints," (Ps 115:6). So it has been ordained by Christ. No one has glorious happiness unless through death, because neither Christ himself, nor his Virgin mother Mary had it otherwise. "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and so to enter into his glory?" (Lk 24:26). And so "die" is said in the theme. Note this martyrdom. When he was in the water, the angel of the Lord said to him, "O glorious one go forth, and receive the crown." He went forward, and a great light appeared before his face. And he said to the prefect, you should know

that I consider it as glory for me to die for Christ. Behold I present myself now. And many were converted by his miracles.

The prefect sentenced him to be beheaded. When however St. Blaise was praying, the Lord said to him; "I will grant every petition of yours," promising to help all who call upon him. And this having been said, he was beheaded. Note here, with how much penitence the saints and friends of God gain paradise. Yet we still believe that it is gained without penitence. "Iniquity has lied to itself." (Ps 26:12). And so it is necessary that we do penance: in our heart through contrition; in our voice through confession; and in our body through voluntary penance. And so Christ says, "Do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," (Mt 4:16).