

St. Vincent Ferrer, O.P. -- On the Nativity of St. John the Baptist Sermon Three

"The hand of the Lord was with him," (Lk 1:66) We have this text officially in the gospel of Luke chapter 1. The whole solemnity today is of this glorious and holy patriarch, prophet, martyr and friend of God, John the Baptist. Similarly our sermon shall be about the same. God willing we shall have many good instructions for the consolation of our souls and the correction of life. But first let the Virgin Mary be hailed.

This text, proposed as the theme and foundation for our whole sermon, says of St. John, that "The hand of the Lord was with him," (Lk 1:66) For a greater clarification of this passage, and as an introduction to the matter to be preached it must be known that in sacred scripture both in the old testament and also in the new is found that through the hand of God is understood the infinite power of God, through which all things are made. Just as we make things with our hands, and just as the hand of a man or woman has five fingers by which it functions, so the power of Christ has five attributes, like five fingers, by which God has made everything. The first is power, the second wisdom, the third mercy, the fourth grace and the fifth justice.

The first attribute of the power of God is called power, which is like the thumb. By this God makes the works of creation, heaven with the stars, the elements with their properties and contents, the compounds [*elementata*], namely men, grain, trees, mountains and valleys etc. The second is wisdom, like the index finger. By his the universe is governed, the heavens, the sun and moon. The third attribute is mercy, like the middle finger which is longer than the others, just as the mercy of God over all his works. David says: "The Lord is sweet to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works," (Ps 144:9). By this is fabricated the works of our redemption, because it was the greatest mercy to wish to be humiliated, that those believing in him and obedient might be exalted. He even willed to be hung on the wood of a cross, lest his own be hung over the furnace of hell. The fourth is grace, like the doctor feeling the pulse, enlightening him to knowing sins, and being converted and confessing etc. By this is worked out the works of justification of sins, as are the seven ecclesiastical sacraments. The fifth is justice, like the little finger [*auricularis*, ear finger], because it now appears less than the others, for in this world the good are not rewarded, nor the wicked punished. By this is worked out the matter of retribution. Behold the five fingers of the power of God, by which God creates all things. Authority: "Who is ignorant that the hand of the Lord has made all these things? In whose hand is the soul of every living thing, and the spirit of all flesh of man," (Job 12:9-10). It is therefore clear that the hand of God is called his infinite power, by which all beings corporeal and spiritual, corruptible and incorruptible have been made. Since therefore the divine power has made wonderful things, and great excellences in St. John the Baptist, so says the theme, "The hand of the Lord was with him." I have found that the hand of the power of God has worked in St. John the Baptist five wonders, exalted and singular:

The first is a glorious annunciation.

The second, a virtuous generation.

The third, a gracious sanctification.

The fourth, a joyful manifestation.

The fifth, a miraculous naming.

About these the theme speaks: "The hand of the Lord was with him," (Lk 1:66).

GLORIOUS ANNUNCIATION

I say, first that the hand of the power of God has worked in St. John the Baptist a glorious annunciation, because before he was begotten or conceived in the womb of his mother, he was marvelously announced. The angel Gabriel himself, who to announced to the Virgin Mary the miraculous incarnation of the son of God, announced also to Zachary his father the birth of St. John. In fact Zachary, the father of St. John and Elizabeth his mother, had been married for many years, and they never had a child. Since however they both were feeble and old, just as Master Nicholas of Lyra says, but they were praying to God that he might send a Messiah promised to them, a savior of the world, because they were aware that the time was completed, and the prophecies, and they prayed as if wishing to say, since I was not worthy to have a child, at least, Lord, send the Messiah. And he while so praying, behold the archangel Gabriel appeared to him, resplendent and shining, so much so that Zachary trembling was afraid, because the condition of the spirit whether good or bad is to be terrified and overwhelmed with fear when he appears. Reason: because from the weakness of the flesh we are not able to bear the sight of a spirit. And so St. Luke says of the Virgin Mary etc., "[she] was troubled at his saying," (Lk 1:29). However a good angel immediately gives comfort. So immediately he said to him, "Fear not, Zachary, for your prayer is heard," (Lk 1:13), because the Messiah comes immediately and you shall see him. Also, I announce to you that "your wife Elizabeth shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you shall have joy and gladness, and many shall rejoice in his nativity. For he shall be great before the Lord," (Lk 1:13-15).

First he shall be great in the harshness of his life, for he shall not drink wine, nor any other inebriating liquor, nor eat bread or meat, or fish, or fruit, but his food shall be wild honey and locusts. His clothing will not be of gold, or silk, or wool or linen, but of camel's hide; he will not sleep on a bed, but on the ground, he will not dwell in the cities, but in the desert. Second, "he shall be great before the Lord," (Lk 1:15), in the holiness of his life, because before his birth he shall already have been sanctified. "He shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb." (ibid.). Third he shall be great before the Lord God in great usefulness, because, "he shall convert many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God," (Lk 1:16), and to faith in the Messiah, and to repentance. Fourth he shall be great before God in dignity, because, "he shall go before him in the spirit and power of Elias," (Lk 1:17) because just as Elias is to come before the general judgment to preach against the Antichrist, so he shall come before the advent of the Saviour, announcing him to the world and pointing him out. About this news Zachary had a special joy.

But considering his old age, seeing his hands wrinkled, thinking of the old age of his wife, and his sterility, he doubted. Here he failed, and he said to the angel: "Whereby shall I know this? for I am an old man, and my wife is advanced in years," (Lk 1:18). The angel replied in the manner of a person indignant: "You doubt my words, I who cannot lie?" because a good angel cannot lie nor deceive, and he said: "In this you shall know the truth of what I am announcing to you. "you shall be dumb, and shall not be able to speak until the day wherein these things shall come to pass, because you have not believed my words," (v. 20). And the angel withdrew. And

Zachary remained mute. Behold here his glorious annunciation, because, "the hand of the power of God..." etc.

Morally. Here when it says that Zachary doubted, in which he erred, just like many people who doubt the secrets of the faith and divine truths, whom God revealed not only through the prophets but also through angels and through himself incarnated. But many say with Zachary "How can I know this? Wishing to dispute how it can happen that Christ so great becomes such a little consecrated host. Also how the host is broken and Christ is not broken. Arguments are natural. How can we know this? It is a great sin, especially because about this you have already an example in nature, namely in a mirror etc. And so Ambrose says (De Fide 1): "Put arguments aside where faith is sought." If one should say, doesn't Augustine and Thomas and the other doctors seek arguments? I say that reasons and arguments are good for bolstering understanding, but not for strengthening belief, nor as the basis of belief. If it had been said to St. Augustine, "Why do you believe there are three persons in the Trinity, and one God? Certainly he would not respond with such an argument or reason, but he would have said because thus Christ, true God and true man, preached and taught, and the apostles also determined. Therefore whoever now seeks an argument and reasons for the basis of faith, such with Zachary will be rendered mute at the time of the antichrist, because they shall fall immediately to him, because they make infinite reasons and arguments. But obedient persons, and simple shall stand firmly and securely. Our new things [nova] are pleasing to us, because our faith is not founded in arguments, but in obedience. And so Paul says: "And my speech and my preaching was not in the persuasive words of human wisdom, but in showing of the Spirit and power; That your faith might not stand on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God," (1 Cor 2:4-5). Note "my preaching" etc., that is, I do not lay the foundations in logical or physical arguments, but in the power of God through faith and simple trust. And this is about the first wonder etc.

VIRTUOUS GENERATION

I say, second, that the hand of the power of God operated in the virtuous generation of St. John, because he was begotten by his parents virtuously and miraculously, because the power of his father for begetting was not sufficient, nor the power of his mother of conceiving, but the power of God supplemented, giving power to the father for begetting and to the mother for conceiving. Note, practically. This good man Zachary having completed his prayer returned home. He was indeed of the nobility of Jerusalem, and also Elizabeth his wife, and because of their old age they had already separated their beds. Each were sleeping by themselves alone in their own rooms. These holy old people observed this holy practice, because they cared not for carnal intercourse unless for the purpose of a child. And so when a woman was pregnant, they immediately separated their beds until the child was weaned. The same when they were old. This is found in the text of the bible, Genesis 18, the elderly Sara says and Abraham, an old man, when God promised them a son, "After I am grown old, and my lord is an old man, shall I give myself to pleasure?" (Gn 18:12). Zachary, therefore, coming from prayer, mute, entered his home and was not able to speak to his wife, nor to seek the debt by word, but by signs. And amazed Elizabeth was saying, "Hey, hey, hey sir, blessed God what do you have? What happened to you? Knowing nothing of the announcement of the angel, and she began to hug him. Think how the old Elizabeth wondered, but finally recognizing the will of her husband, she consented.

Note here that from the fact that they are married, one ought to consent to the other, whether they are young or old, nor ought one excuse the other because of some false devotion, otherwise she damns herself and the other. And so the Apostle writes: "Let the husband render the debt to his wife, and the wife also in like manner to the husband. The wife has not power of her own body, but the husband. And in like manner the husband also has not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud not one another, except, perhaps, by consent, for a time, that you may give yourselves to prayer, " (1 Cor 7:3-5). Note here about the devout woman, when the husband would ask of her the debt, she would always find excuses. If on Sunday, "Hey, holy Mother of God, today, which is the day of the resurrection of the Lord, you wish to do that?" If Monday, she would say, "Hey, today a man ought to pray for the dead." If on Tuesday, "The church sets aside today for the angels." If Wednesday, "Today Christ was sold." If Thursday, "Hey, sir, because today Christ ascended into heaven." If Friday, "because today Christ suffered and died for us." If Saturday she would say, "Today is for the Virgin Mary, because on that day she alone kept faith." The husband seeing that she always was finding excuses, called his servant girl saying "This evening come to me, you will sleep with me." She replied, "Gladly my lord. When the wife sees this, then she wished to hop into bed, but the husband did not. No lady, pray for us sinners! And never, from then on, did he wish to know his wife. He hated her, and he fell in love with the slave girl. He sinned mortally and damned himself because of the fault of his wife.

And so St. Elizabeth, although she was devout, holy and elderly, consented to that which was required of her by her husband, and conceived by him, and after three months she began to enlarge, and she was saying "O, misery, what is this? Could it be dropsy? Finally she recognized that she was pregnant. St. Elizabeth was greatly ashamed of this, so much so that Luke says that she hid herself for five months. I think that she made for herself ample sized jumpers or dresses that she might hide her tumescence lest people might say, "See, although she is devout, she nevertheless has time for lust," etc. Behold here the virtuous generation of St. John, because "the hand of the Lord...etc."

Morally, here is a consequence. If Elizabeth was so ashamed of this that one might presume that she with her husband used matrimony, how much shame ought there be for women or men who care for others? Such are traitors. And if the woman were strong, she might be able to kick out [*assignare campum*, allot open ground to] her traitor husband. And so St. Paul: "Marriage honorable in all, and the bed undefiled. For fornicators and adulterers God will judge," (Heb 13:4).

GRACIOUS SANCTIFICATION

Third, I say that the hand of the power of God has worked on St. John through a gracious sanctification, because while yet existing in the womb of his mother, Lk 1, not only was he filled with the Holy Spirit, but also abundantly filled [repletus]. Now hear the manner how he was sanctified. Chrysostom says that St. John, in the womb of his mother for five months, and for some days in the sixth month remained in original sin; but in the sixth month he was sanctified. In the sixth month of his conception the angel Gabriel was sent to the Virgin Mary, who then conceived the son of God, and then the angel said to the Virgin how the sterile Elizabeth had conceived a son. And so because of this the Virgin Mary went to visit Elizabeth. And when she

entered the house, it was said that it was Elizabeth who Mary venerated. Elizabeth rejoiced, and coming out to her saluted her. Then the Virgin Mary said to her, "O my blessed cousin, may it go well for you for you have conceived a son." These words were of such power, that just as the word of a priest in Baptism, by the power of Christ sanctifies the soul of the one baptized, so this word of the Virgin by virtue of the incarnate Son of God in her, existing in her, sanctified John the Baptist. The creature "is sanctified by the word of God," (1 Tim 4:5), says St. Thomas *In 4 Sent., d. 6, in literalibus*, that then the use of reason was accelerated in St. John, and he had the use of free will, and he rejoiced in the womb, like a soldier rejoices if the king would give him a thousand florins, or one castle as a special gift. So then St. John was completely happy and joyful. Bernard calls this joy a solemn dance [*tripudium*]. Then Elizabeth inspired by the Holy Spirit, recognizing that the Virgin Mary had conceived the son of God, with a loud voice said, "Blessed art you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Lk 1:42-43). I beg you to contemplate this for a moment. St. Elizabeth was old, the Virgin Mary was then a 14 year old girl, and as they were embracing and kissing each other, the stomach of Elizabeth was above the stomach of the Virgin. And so John was higher than Christ. For this reason John withdrew himself in the womb of his mother giving honor to the son of God, just like a soldier honors his king wishing to sit on the same step. The soldier would immediately throw himself to the ground. Behold here the gracious sanctification.

Morally. St. John shows to us how much reverence we ought to give to the altar of Christ and to his ministers. The Virgin Mary was then the altar on which was the body of Christ, and when John approached to Christ through the embrace of his mother, St. John pulled himself back humbly bowing. Many err in this, by standing near the altar, even on a balcony above. I am amazed that they are not struck dead by the angels who are present there. As St. Gregory the Elder said, and is found in Numbers, ch. 1 that a man, unless of the tribe of Aaron, "if he approaches to my altar he shall die the death." Yet on that altar was not sacrificed the body of Christ, but animals. How much the more ought there be a greater reverence for the altar on which is offered the son of God? Think also what happens when immoral clerics uncleanly handle him. David so great and holy a king with great reverence approached the temple of the Lord, and he himself said: "But as for me in the multitude of your mercy, I will come into your house; I will worship towards your holy temple, in your fear," (Ps 5:8). It is said of these who less justly happen in the churches, etc.

JOYFUL MANIFESTATION

I say, fourth, that the hand of the power of God worked on St. John a joyful manifestation, because in the joyful birth he was manifested, because in birth he cannot be hidden. Secretly they can conceive, but not without clamor give birth. And because Zachary and Elizabeth were nobility, so they were known by all and people were saying "Did you hear the news? And what is it? That noble woman Elizabeth gave birth to a son. And the others replied. She didn't seem to us that she was pregnant, and still she was so old." But others, on the contrary, said, "Certainly true, but she hid herself." Then their friends and relatives would come to her and congratulate her saying: "O, it surely seems good that God loves you, because in such old age he gave you an heir." See how the hand of the Lord was with him in the joyful manifestation.

Morally. It is shown to us here how we ought to rejoice over a person sterile in good works, and aged in sins, and living a bad life, when they bear the fruit of good works and of merit, as Elizabeth's friends congratulated her. Note that this name Elizabeth is composed of three names, *El*, that is, God, *i* that is my, and *zabeth* that is seventh. Thus Elizabeth, "seventh of my God." This is the interpretation of this name Elizabeth. Now we see what this seventh of my God is. I respond and say that this seventh of my God is the human creature. Everything which God made comes from seven in seven. Seven are the principal creatures which God made: namely, earth, water, air and fire, the fifth essence, that is the heavens, the sixth is the angelic nature, the seventh human nature. Behold the seventh of my God. But many creatures grow old and antique, sterile without the fruit of good works and virtues. O how many religious and priests and men and women are sterile in the world, because they never bore the fruit of a good work, but rather dumped sins and bad lives and want to return to God, by proposing to do those things for which they are bound by their state. Then they conceive. They give birth when they do good works, when the religious keeps his rule, vows and observances. Then they give birth. The same for the others. When all his friends and neighbors ought to rejoice and congratulate him, and thanking [*regratiando*] God to say, "O this blessed one, now in his old age gives himself to God." But today he does the entire opposite in the world. If there is some dissolute and ribald religious, no one says anything to him, moreover all commend and praise him. But if he wishes to keep his rule and live according as he vowed, immediately he is persecuted by others. The same for the cleric. The same for the lay person, man and vain woman, if he wishes to dismiss vanities and can say: "Rejoice with me, because I have found my sheep that was lost," (Lk 15:6). Yet nevertheless that one is pursued by others, until they make him lose his soul with the rest.

MIRACULOUS NAMING

I say, fifth, that the hand of the Lord worked on St. John the Baptist a miraculous naming, for he was wonderfully named. After his birth, namely, on the eighth day according to the law of Moses, boys are circumcised. And just as now in Baptism we confer names, so then in circumcision it was imposed. When the rabbi had already grasped the skin etc. he asked of the mother what he was called. Those standing around spoke: "He is named after his father Zachary." But the mother, because of a revelation of the Holy Spirit, contradicted: "Not so; but he shall be called John," (Lk 1:60). The others were amazed at such a name. They said to her that no one in her family was called by this name. Then they turned to his father, and signaled to him what he wished to name him. The father was still mute. And here the Gloss says that he was even deaf, and so they asked him through a note what he is to be called. Requesting a writing tablet he wrote, "John is his name," which was to say "I do not impose this name, but the Lord does." Then the father suddenly recovered his speech saying "Blessed be the Lord the God of Israel etc." See how here this naming was miraculous.

Morally. Note this, and we shall begin with a question. Which name is better, Zachary or John? And it seems that John, because the mother said, "Not so; but he shall be called John." I respond "Zachary" according to the Hebrew meaning stands for "remembering God." That name "John" is better than Zachary in ten ways. For if some person is in sins and wishes to rid himself of sins, desiring to be saved by the grace of God, it is necessary that this person be first "Zachary," that is, "remembering God," whom he offended, and that he have contrition for his sins. Second that he have a resolve not to return to sins etc. I say that the penitential works are nine,

nevertheless John is not in the ninth work, but Zachary. But in the tenth work, namely in sacramental communion, because then they have the gift of grace, or the one in whom is grace, and then it is John. Behold the reason why she said, "Not so; but he shall be called John," was to suggest that he would be perfect in penitence and in the grace of God. Therefore Isaiah 49:1, "The Lord has called me from the womb, from the bowels of my mother he has been mindful of my name." And this is said in the person of St. John, because he imposed on him the name according to the grace and perfection which God should give to him. Therefore, "The hand of the Lord was with him," (Lk 1:66)