

St. Vincent Ferrer O.P. -- Sermon on the Feast of the Exaltation of the Cross (Sept. 14)

Philippians 2: 5-8

5 For let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: 6 Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: 7 But emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man. 8 He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross.

"He humbled himself, becoming obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross." (Phil 2:8)

Holy Mother the Church celebrates today a feast of the Exultation of the Holy Cross, which we honor twice in the year. The first is the Discovery, in the month of May (May 3). The second today (Sept. 14) on the Exultation. Reason, because after the Holy Cross was discovered by St. Helena, it came into the possession of the infidels, who contemptuously held it. But Heraclius, the Most Holy and Christian Roman Emperor, extracted it from the possession of the infidels and exalted it honorably, and today is the feast of that exaltation. So that our words be fruitful, let us now say the Hail Mary.

It is a common Catholic doctrine of sacred theology that although Christ had other innumerable ways of redeeming and saving mankind, he nevertheless chose to save us through his cross, and to redeem obedient and believers for himself. St. Thomas in his ([Summa theologiae](#)) III, q. 46, a. 4, assigns seven reasons why this was fitting. I shall speak of one, the second, as an introduction of this material to you.

This reason is, because when satisfaction needs to be made for some sin, it is reasonable that the satisfaction correspond to the sin. For example, if someone sins against God or neighbor by thinking evil in his heart, or by speaking evil, or doing bad things, for such a person to make fitting satisfaction (*condigne satisfacere*), he ought to take on pain in the heart from this sin, and to strike his heart. If one sins by mouth by defaming or swearing, proper satisfaction ought not only to be confessed by mouth but he should also to seek pardon from God and neighbor by mouth, if he offended him. Therefore if through the eyes you have sinned by gazing etc. proper satisfaction is to weep, etc. Also if you have sinned by ears, by listening to evil things about a neighbor, healing is made by hearing mass and sermons etc. If through taste, by breaking the fast of the church, etc., to abstain, and so the satisfaction corresponds to the offense. If you have sinned by hand, extend it in prayer. If you have shed blood, the proper penitence is to shed your own blood by the discipline. So it says in Genesis 9: " Whosoever shall shed man's blood, his blood shall be shed." (v. 6). If you have sinned by the body through carnal sins, you ought to wear a hair shirt (*cilicium*). See how appropriate satisfaction is made when the penalty corresponds to the offense. Scriptural proof if taken from that which [Christ, in fact John the Baptist] said in Luke 3 " Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of penance," (v. 8). The fruits of penance are worthy when they correspond to the offense.

Now we shall see how the offense against God was committed, from which flowed to mankind all perdition and all evil, from which we are "exiles in this valley of tears." (from the hymn *Salve Regina*). Was it not from the theft (*ex furto*) of a certain apple, contrary to an expressed

commandment? Therefore restitution, reparation, or amends ought to happen by the fruit being restored to the tree. Therefore Christ the redeemer of all, our fruit, about whom it is said to the Virgin Mary, "Blessed is the fruit of thy womb,"(cf. Lk 1:42), chose by the tree of the cross, that the fruit of infinite worth be restored to the tree. An ancient Greek history says that the wood of the cross was from that same tree of which Adam received the fruit. Therefore when Christ was placed on the cross, the fruit was restored to the tree.

About this David in the person of Christ says, "My enemies are grown strong who have wrongfully persecuted me: then did I pay that which I took not away." (Ps 68:5). Note, here two things are touched upon in this verse of David, namely the evil intention of the Jewish enemies of Christ who were not intending satisfaction, but the persecution of Christ. Therefore he said, "My enemies are grown strong who have wrongfully persecuted me." Second, the intention of Christ is touched upon. So he says, "then did I pay, etc."

The teaching then is clear, because although Christ had other ways of redeeming us, nevertheless this way, through the cross, was appropriate, in which the satisfaction corresponded to the offense. This the Holy Mother the Church touches in the Preface (of the Mass) saying, "You decreed that man would be saved through the wood of the cross. The tree of man's defeat became his tree of victory; where life was lost, there life has been restored through Christ our Lord." It is clear therefore that an appropriate manner of our redemption was through the cross. Therefore the theme says, "He was made obedient for us" not for himself, not only for the Father, but also for the judges and crucifiers, "even unto death, etc." The theme is clear. I am preaching on this material. The theme says, "He became obedient even unto death." And it adds, "Death on a cross," not by another death.

I find that Christ was in danger of death five times, and chose to accept only the cross.

1. First he was in danger of death from the sword.
2. Second in danger of being hurled down.
3. Third in danger of stoning
4. Fourth in danger of poisoning.
5. Fifth, in danger of crucifixion.

And he chose this one, about which the theme states: "He became obedient unto death, even to the death of the cross." (Phil 2:8).

THE SWORD

First I say, etc. and this immediately when he was born, from Herod the king, who when he heard of the signs and miracles surrounding the birth of Christ: of the angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest," of the brightness of the night, the visit of the shepherds, the adoration of the animals, the star and the arrival of the three kings, etc., and the prophecy of Anna and holy Simeon that he was the true Messiah, Herod thought to kill him, lest he lose his kingdom, for he was a foreigner and he was afraid that one day the Jews would rise up against him.. On this account he sent armed men into the town of Bethlehem to kill all the children, because he did not know who this Jesus was. But Christ willed to flee into Egypt.

About this there is a prophecy. Job in the person of Christ said, "[They] slew the servants [pueros, children] with the sword, and I alone have escaped ..." (Job 1:15) The question is this. Why did Christ choose not to die this kind of death? Because if he had wished, even this death would have been for the salvation of those believing in and obedient to him. The literal reason has already been said, because the satisfaction ought to correspond to the offense, therefore he willed not to die in such a way, but on the cross. The moral reason is, that he might instruct us to flee death by the sword of St. Peter, about which John 18: "Simon Peter, having a sword, drew it, and struck the servant of the high priest, and cut off his right ear." (Jn 18:10) This sword is the sentence of excommunication, which when it is used, cuts one off from the body of the Church. And just as a member cut off from the body received none of its influence, so no one excommunicated has any part in the divine works which take place in the Church.

See how this death is to be fled. I choose to die even more quickly, than to be excommunicated for an hour, not to say for a year, because there is nothing worse for a member than to be cut off from the body. Note. when he says, "Simon Peter having a sword," he implies that the sentence of excommunication should not be given except by a prelate, because Peter was a prelate. Second, when he says he "drew it," he hints that the sentence ought not be given except by a prelate as if by waving the sword saying, "Beware, beware," even through a third warning, because otherwise it would mean nothing, not strike you with the blow. [quia alias nihil valeret, te not faceret ictum.] Third when he said, "And he struck the servant of the high priest," he implies that the prelate ought to serve excommunication only on his subjects, because a bishop cannot excommunicate in another diocese. Fourth when he says, "And he cut off his right ear," The right signifies spiritual things, the left, temporal. It is indicated that the judgment of excommunication ought not be given except against disobedience in spiritual things, that if a husband or wife does not wish to remain with him or with her, unless they have a legitimate reason, the prelate can excommunicate them and so for the rest. This sword strikes so strongly, that it can kill the soul with eternal death. "Flee then from the face of the sword, for the sword is the revenger of iniquities," (Job 19:29).

HURLED DOWN

Second, I say that Christ was in the danger of being hurled down, as is found in Luke 4. It is told how Christ was dwelling in Nazareth, where he was living in a most holy way, yet he was not well known. Nicholas of Lyra says that he worked the craft of his putative father Joseph, who was a carpenter, and later went to Capharnum where he preached and worked many miracles, and then returned to Nazareth. And the rulers and magistrates of the town said to him, "...as great things as we have heard done in Capharnum, do also here in thy own country," (Lk 4:23). Christ replied insinuating that because of their unbelief and derision, because they were skeptical of him [truffabant de eo], as Mark has, ch. 6, "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joseph, and Jude, and Simon? are not also his sisters here with us?" (Mk 6:3). See, he preaches and yet he did not study."

Then he pointed out that they were not worthy, because miracles require a disposition, and not vain glory. For this reason Mark 6 says, " And he could not do any miracles there, only that he cured a few that were sick, laying his hands upon them." (Mk 6:5). It is told how they, indignant, led him out with a crowd to the brow of the hill and they wanted to throw him down. Jesus, however, " passing through their midst, went his way." (Lk 4:30).

Think here about the Virgin Mary who was present in the town, when she beheld her son being led to the cliff, how much sorrow she had, etc. The question is. Why did he choose not to die in this way, because if he had wished...etc? The literal reason has been told. The moral reason is so that we might be warned lest we die through falling, having ascended the mountain of pride. For the devil seeing that those who walk simply and humbly, go straight to heaven. "O," the devil says, "I shall make all ascend to the heights." Which is to say, the religious who lives simply, keeps his rule, the vows and customs, such takes a straight road to paradise. But the devil speaking to their imagination says, "If you wish to live such, you will never rise! Why do you not work that you might be a master [of theology], you can yet be the confessor of a king or a bishop," and when he is high, he loses all devotion and suddenly falls and dies and is hurled into hell.

The same for the simple priest, because at the instigation of the devil he ascends. Same for the laity. They demand interest so that they might get ahead. Also that he might gain public office, binds himself with others directly or indirectly, and they do well because of the wealth of the community, and when they are in office, they steal, they do this and that so that they might keep their hand in office. O how many are they by this ascent. Of this David says to the devil "For deceits," namely yours, "you have put it to them:" that is this imagination of ascending, "when they were lifted up you have cast them down." (Ps 72:18) Same for the women living simply, caring for the home, for children and family, these rightly go straight to paradise. But the demon says, "You have taken to your husband as such, therefore why to you not do as others do, give to him a bad dinner and supper."

Beware therefore, and walk simply, and plainly, because when a man falls from a higher place, so much more the fall is more dangerous. So Job in the person of a sinner speaking to the devil says, "You have lifted me up, and set me as it were upon the wind, and you have mightily dashed me. I know that you will deliver me to death," (Job 30:22-23).

STONING

Third, I say that he was in danger of death by stoning, as is clear in John 8, when Christ was preaching to the Jews and declared to them his divinity saying, "Amen, amen I say to you: If any man keep my word, he shall not see death for ever. (v. 51) Abraham, ...and the prophets are dead. Whom do you make thyself?" (v. 53) Christ was speaking of the death of hell and the Jews were thinking of bodily death. And Christ speaking more clearly of divinity said, "Amen, amen I say to you, before Abraham was made, I am, " (v.58) "I am" is the name of the divinity. "I AM WHO AM," (Ex 3:14). The Jews hearing that he said that he was God, wished to stone him. The text says that Christ hid himself, that is, he made himself to be invisible to them, and they searched for him asking "Where is he?" But the Virgin Mary and the Apostles, seeing him followed.

Question, why did he not wish to die in this way? Because it was etc. The moral reason is that we might be warned from the death of stoning from the sin of avarice, because an avaricious person is hard like stone, and cold. Hard, because he offers no sweetness to his debtors, but hard and harsh he demands payment and interest etc. Cold, because he is without the fire of charity. Seeing the poor dying of starvation he does not care to rescue them – and he has the

money – and the jailed, the enslaved and the poor girls are not able to receive any benefits. Thus Job speaking morally of the avaricious says, "His heart shall be as hard as a stone, and as firm as a smith's anvil," (Job 41:15)

The stones of avarice are the species of avarice. One stone is the one which is called robbery [rapina], and this stone strikes the head of the lords. Another stone is called simony of the church officials [prelates], giving benefices or sacraments for money. This stone strikes the heart. Another is called usury, which breaks the arms, that is, the workers. It is said in defense of this notion of avarice, usury, "If this person or community takes my money, why am I not able to receive something for its use [proper carentiam]?" This argument includes an error not only in its conclusion but in its premise. When he says "My money," he speaks falsely, because the lord is now bound to render an account to another, and you are bound, even to Christ, because "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, etc." (Ps 23:1) The rich are only the administrators. "Let a man so account of us as of the ministers of Christ, and the dispensers of the mysteries of God," (1 Cor 4:1). Christ is like the king appointing treasurers, that they might minister first in to his necessities, not vanities. Second in giving or lending to the poor, because God wishes such. It is wrong if they dispense against the will of the Lord. He knows how to punish. Thus the conclusion is erroneous, by saying that usury is not a mortal sin. Another species, to connive to buy things for a lesser price, or to sell for more than the usual profit, because it is usury. Another is the withholding of salaries from servants, etc., secret theft. It is said against those who believe that secret theft of produce [furtum secretum fructuum] is not a sin, "you dash your foot against a stone." (Ps 90:12) And, "Go not in the way of ruin, and you shall not stumble against the stones," (Sir 32:25)

POISONING

I say fourth that he was in danger of death by poisoning. The evangelists do not clearly say this, but for this there are arguments both from reason and prophecy. The reason is this, because while Christ went about preaching, he did not preach for money, but after preaching [on Palm Sunday], "looking around about," no one invited him, "and he return to Bethany," as is found in Mark 11:11. The Gloss says that he looked around, to see if someone might invite him to dinner saying, "Lord since you have given good spiritual food to us, come and we shall give you dinner," etc. Now someone who had so many enemies as Christ, might accept every invitation, even that of his enemies. Think how they could set forward potions, and this reason might dictate.

And about this is the prophecy, "But thou, O Lord, have shown me, and I have known: then you showed me their doings. And I was as a meek lamb, that is carried to be a victim: and I knew not that they had devised counsels against me, saying: Let us put wood on his bread, and cut him off from the land of the living, and let his name be remembered no more," (Jer 11:18-19) And the prophet speaks in the person of Christ. But Christ chose not to die in this way. Practically speaking when he was eating, first they gave him fruit or figs, and soups are offered, and sweet foods, and good wines, and he did not eat, keeping to his modest diet. Even if he had eaten, he took care not to harm himself.

Why did he choose not to die this way, because even that death would have been sufficient for redemption? Moral reason, that we might avoid the deadly poison of lust. For just as a poison is

placed in sweet foods, so also does the devil, that the food of lust might seem sweet to us and yet in it is the poison of mortal sin. For a man and woman joined in matrimony do not sin in keeping the manner etc. but in all others, whomsoever, there is lust, and there is mortal sin and damnation follows. It is believed that the greatest number of the damned are made so by the sin of lust.

So it is necessary to avoid such a death and to restrain the body through abstinence, by mortifying its inclinations, avoiding occasions of sin, and by prayer. Otherwise, St. Bernard says, that it would be a greater miracle to live chastely than to raise the dead. Therefore the whole world is corrupt. "All have turned out of the way; they have become unprofitable together: there is none that does good," that is, of chastity, "there is not so much as one," namely, of adults, etc. So a wise man says, "Look not upon the wine when it is yellow, when the color thereof shines in the glass: it goes in pleasantly, but in the end, it will bite like a snake, and will spread abroad poison like a basilisk," (Prov 23:31-32). And he declares in the next verse "Your eyes shall behold strange women," because it is good to look upon your own wives, "and your heart shall utter perverse things," (v. 33). Note. It is not understood as the color of wine but of beautiful women, "in the glass," in the weaker glass of the body. Reason, because it "goes in pleasantly" that is evil in thought, saying "O how much a comfort it would be," etc. and in the end, namely when man consents, "it will bite like a snake, and like a basilisk," which poisons by sight and vision, etc. Not so the other serpents. Behold the sin of lust, because by sight alone does a woman... With this poison David was poisoned and killed, but God raised him through repentance. Thus Job 6, "...or can a man taste that which when tasted brings death?" (v. 6) No one howsoever hungry would eat food which he knew to be poisoned, rather he would permit himself to die naturally, because then he would not have killed himself, nor would he drink poisoned drink however thirsty he was. So neither should the lustful taste because unless he were an unbeliever, he would know that this food is poisoned unto death.

CRUCIFIXION

Fifth I say that he was in danger of death by crucifixion. This is the death he chose. So the Jews said in counsel, "This man Jesus cannot die by the sword, nor by being thrown down, nor etc. Therefore we shall see whether we can kill him on a cross." And when Christ was in Galilee, the Jews readied the cross in Jerusalem. Christ knowing this called out to his disciples and said to them, "Behold we go up to Jerusalem, and the Son of man shall be betrayed to the chief priests and the scribes, and they shall condemn him to death. And shall deliver him to the Gentiles to be mocked, and scourged, and crucified," (Mt 20:18-19). He fled from the other deaths, but he came promptly to this one. And in the garden he went out to the Jews saying "Whom do you seek?" which is to say "You may take me, because this death pleases me." Again when sentence was passed on him to be crucified, "And bearing his own cross, he went forth to that place....," (Jn 19:17) as if to say, "I do not appeal, rather this death pleases me," and he received the cross. It is said how he was obedient on the mount of Calvary, when he was asked to undress himself, and more like that. Behold the love for the death of the cross, as if he were saying, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord," (Gal 6:14).

The literal reason why he chose this death has been said in the introduction. But the moral reason is this. Other deaths which Christ fled, signified bad deaths, which we should flee. But this death of the cross signifies a good death which we should choose. The inestimable pain of Christ hanging on the cross signifies contrition, which we should have for sins, by inclining the

head in contrition which ought to be made with a bowed head and not face to face. It is said how the penitent ought to be uncovered, and the confessor covered, for modesty, and the danger of the confessor looking on a young woman. His right hand pierced signifies that from good justice you should give alms. The left for returning usuries and theft etc. Two feet nailed signify two feet by which we walk and are sustained, the right is nailed with devotion, the left with abstinence. The opening of the side signifies the opening of the heart, for forgiving injuries and sparing enemies and those sinning against you. See the moral reasons why he wished to die on a cross. So the Apostle says, "They that are Christ's, have crucified their flesh, with the vices and concupiscences," (Gal 5:24), and that this was necessary is clear because Christ says, "And whosoever does not carry his cross," which is said from crucifying, behold penitence, "and come after me, cannot be my disciple," (Lk 14:27) See why the Theologian says, "He became," for us, that is for our redemption and moral instruction, "obedient, unto death," not of the sword, not by being hurled down, nor by stoning nor by poisoning, but "to the death of the cross."