

St. Vincent Ferrer -- Sermon on the Last Judgment

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Douay Translation of Luke 21:25-28

25 And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations, by reason of the confusion of the roaring of the sea and of the waves;

26 Men withering away for fear, and expectation of what shall come upon the whole world. For the powers of heaven shall be moved;

27 And then they shall see the Son of man coming in a cloud, with great power and majesty.

28 But when these things begin to come to pass, look up, and lift up your heads, because your redemption is at hand.

Our sermon will be on today's gospel, which consists entirely in the doctrine and instruction of Jesus Christ Himself. In this gospel He warns us of the great evils and tribulations which are to come at the end of the world, and tells us of the signs which will precede His coming in judgment. This subject will, I think, be of service to us. Let us begin with the Hail Mary.

"There will be signs in the sun and in the moon and in the stars." By study of Holy Scripture and by factual experience we know that when any great and heavy affliction is about to come on the world, often some warning sign is shown in the sky or in the upper air. And this happens by the mercy of God, so that people forewarned of impending tribulation by means of these signs, through prayer and good works, may obtain in the tribunal of mercy a reversal of the sentence passed against them by God the judge in the heavenly courts; or at least by penance and amendment of life, may prepare themselves against the impending affliction.

So, before the coming of any great mortality, phantom battles are seen in the sky; before famine there are earthquakes; and before a country is laid waste dreadful portents are seen. We are told of the terrible signs shown to the Jews for a length of time before the destruction of Jerusalem under Antiochus. "And it came to pass that through the whole city of Jerusalem for the space of forty days there were seen horsemen running in the air, in gilded raiment armed with spears like bands of soldiers. And horses set in ranks, running one against another, with the shakings of shields, and a multitude of men in helmets, with drawn swords, and casting of darts, and glittering of golden armor, and of harness of all sorts," (2 Macc 5:2,3). After this, Antiochus plundered the temple and slew the Jews. Therefore we read in Exodus: "And shall multiply signs and wonders in the land of Egypt," (Ex 7:3).

Now among all afflictions, three of the greatest and most terrible are shortly to come upon mankind: first, the affliction of Antichrist, a man but a diabolical one; second, the destruction by fire of the terrestrial world; third, the universal judgment. And with these tribulations the world will come to an end. Therefore, according to the rule of divine Providence, as set out above, before these three, there will be warning signs in the heavens, in the sun and in the moon and in the stars, as is set out in our text.

The first affliction to come on the world in a short space of time is the advent of Antichrist, a diabolical man, who will bring distress on the whole world as is implied in today's gospel where it is said: "And upon the earth distress of nations, by reason of the confusion of the roaring of the sea and of the waves."

In my text there are four clauses in which we are warned of the four ways in which Antichrist will deceive Christians. The first clause is this: "There will be sign, in the sun." You must know that in Holy Scripture Christ is called the Sun, and this is because, by the evidence of your own eyes, the sun is among the most beautiful of the creatures made by God. Taking the word etymologically, we have: S-O-L (Super omnia lucens), "Shining above all things." In the same way, Christ is more beautiful than all the saints, and shines above them all in the brightness of glory, not only inasmuch as He is God, but also as man. And as all the stars receive their light from the sun, who depends on nothing for its own brightness, so all the saints receive from Christ the brightness of glory, strength, sanctity, wisdom, understanding and influence. This is the reason why Christ is called the Sun, and under the same name of "Sun" God the Father sent Him into the world, saying: "But unto you who fear my name the Sun of justice shall arise" (Mal 4:2). This is not said of the natural sun. For the Church says in praise of the Virgin Mary: "For thou art happy, holy Virgin Mary, and most worthy of all praise, for out of thee has arisen the Sun of Justice, Christ, Our Lord."

The first clause tells us that there will be signs in the sun in the time of Antichrist; that is, there will be signs in Christ, and the precise sign is given by Saint Matthew saying: "The sun will not give its light." Such darkening does not happen with regard to the sun itself, for it is not in the nature of the sun to be darkened in itself. But by the interposition of clouds and vapor between the sun, and the earth the sun appears to be obscured. In the same way, in the time of Antichrist, the Sun of justice will be obscured by the interposition of temporal goods and the wealth which Antichrist will bestow on the world, inasmuch as the brightness of faith in Jesus Christ and the glow of good lives will no longer shine among Christians. For, lest they should lose their dominion, temporal rulers, kings and princes will range themselves on the side of Antichrist. In like manner, prelates for fear of losing their dignities, and religious and priests to gain honors and riches, will forsake the Faith of Christ and adhere to Antichrist. Now he will be a veritable man, but so proud that, not only will he desire to have universal dominion in the whole world, but will even demand to be called a god, and will insist on receiving divine worship. This we may gather from the second Epistle of Saint Paul to the Thessalonians (2:3): "For unless there come a revolt first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposeth and is lifted up above all that is called God or that is worshipped, so that he sitteth in the temple of God, spewing himself as if he were a god."

This will come about because Antichrist by the ministry of demons will possess all the gold and silver of the earth and seas, and pearls and all the precious stones that are in the world. As we read in Daniel (11:43): "And he shall have power over the treasures of gold and silver and all the precious stones of Egypt." With this wealth he will gather together in arms all the nations of the world, to fight against those who oppose him. As we read in the Apocalypse (20:7): "He shall go forth and seduce the nations which are over the four quarters of the earth, Gog, and Magog; and shall gather there together to battle the number of whom is as the sand of the sea."

Observe that he will seduce the peoples, that is, with gold and silver and honors; Gog which signifies "hidden," and Magog which signifies "that which is disclosed," because both hidden and open evil are on his side. Then temporal lords and ecclesiastical prelates, for fear of losing power or position, will be on his side, since there will exist neither king nor prelate unless he wills it. For the same reason, religious, priests and laity will also uphold him. "There will indeed be signs in the Sun of justice, for then it will be obscured in the hearts of Christians, since from those hearts it will not give forth the light of Faith; all preaching of a better life will cease, owing to the interposition of the vapor and clouds of temporal goods. As we are told in Daniel (11.39) : "He will multiply glory and will give them power in many things and divide up the earth at his pleasure."

I am asked why God permits this error among Christians, since He is God and the strongest cannot stand against Him? I answer by a dictum of theology taken from the Book of Wisdom (11:17) : "By what things a man sinneth, by the same also is he tormented." How do the peoples of the world sin against God today? They sin in order to gain honors, dignities and riches. Therefore, by honors, riches and dignities, God permits that Antichrist shall deceive them. If therefore you do not wish to be deceived, now with all your hearts condemn and despise all earthly goods, and long for those of heaven, considering that the goods of this world are transitory and empty, while heavenly and celestial goods are eternal. In this way you will be strong. Saint John gives this counsel: "Love not the world nor the things that are in the world. If any man loves the world the charity of the Father is not in him. And the world passeth and the concupiscence thereof" (1 Jn 2:15-17).

The second clause says that there will be signs in the moon. You must understand that in the Holy Scriptures the moon signifies our holy Mother the Universal Church, which implies the world-wide union of Christians; for when men speak of the Church, they do not speak of the material building, or the stone and the walls which compose it, but of that gathering of the faithful under one Head, which is the Church in reality. The Church is signified by the moon and its five phases: first there is the new moon, then the waxing moon, next the full moon, to be followed by the waning moon, and lastly the old moon.

The Church passes through these phases. The new moon signifies the Church of Christ in His own time; and as the new moon when first seen is like a bow-shaped thread with two horns following the sun, so the Church in the time of Christ had at first only two horns: Andrew and Peter who followed Christ. The waxing moon typifies the twelve Apostles, then the seventy-two disciples, then the three thousand converted by Peter on the day of Pentecost and so on. The full moon typifies the acceptance of the Gospel of Christ in every part of the world, in every kingdom and province. David says (Ps: 18.5) : "In the whole world their sound is gone forth, and their words to the ends of the earth."

The waning moon typifies the inability of men to preserve what the Apostles had acquired. In the first place, the Church was lessened by the loss of the whole of India, by means of him they called John the Presbyter; the second, Assyria by means of one of their tyrants; the third, Africa by means of Mahomet; the fourth, the Greeks under their Emperor Constantine; the fifth, the Armenians with their king; the sixth, the Georgians with a certain pseudo-prophet; the seventh, the bad example of the Christians led by a certain heresiarch [*Probably the Waldenses whom*

Vincent evangelized in the Alpine countries. We do not know the name of the individual heresiarch]; the eighth, the Italians with Bartholomew of Bari; the ninth, the French with Peter of Candia.

The old moon, because the horns are reversed, typifies that the Church is no longer in the state in which Christ founded it. Christ founded the Church in great lowliness and poverty; now all this is turned round to pride, pomp and vanity, as may be easily seen in every rank of the Church. Mercy and liberality are changed into simony, usury and rapine; chastity becomes licentiousness, uncleanness and corruption; the brightness of virtue is changed into envy and malignity; temperance has become gluttony and voracity; patience has given place to anger, war and divisions among the peoples; diligence is superseded by negligence. Nothing is now left to make matters worse but an eclipse which is caused by the interposition of the earth between the sun and moon such as only occurs at full moon. As Isaiah says in 59:2: "Your sins have put a division between us." In the time of Antichrist, the Church, typified by the moon, will be eclipsed; because then she will not give her light, since Christians will no longer work miracles by reason of their sanctity; but Antichrist and his followers will work miracles, not true miracles, but false ones having the appearance of true miracles, in order that they may deceive the people. As Saint John says in the Apocalypse (13:13) : "And he did great signs, so that he made also fire to come down from heaven unto the earth in the sight of men," that is, balls of fire, such as it is within the power of the devil to send down, if God should permit this and does not prevent him; as we read in Job (1:16) : "And while he was yet speaking another came and said: A fire of God fell from heaven and striking the sheep and the servants hath consumed them." O! The wonder of the people, this will be the downfall of many.

You must know that Antichrist will perform other prodigies by the power of demons, and these will be true miracles according to the nature of things in themselves, but false in regard to the definition of miracle (i.e. by the power of God). For he will cause both images and babes of a month old to speak. The followers of Antichrist will question these statues or babies, and they will make answer concerning this lord who has come in the latter times, affirming that he is the savior. The devil will move their lips and form the words they utter when they declare Antichrist to be the true savior of the world; and in this way he will cause the destruction of many souls.

And the Church, typified by the moon, will perform no miracles.

Some say that such phenomena are not real miracles in the sense that raising the dead to life is a real miracle. I can give concrete examples of the dead being apparently raised to life, but such are only phantoms. For instance, in the same way as Christians raise dead people in the Name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, so your dead father or mother may appear to speak to you; but in these latter times Christians will not be able to work similar miracles. Christ has warned us of these false miracles and signs, saying: "There will arise false christs and false prophets." That is to say, the sons of Christians who have already made shipwreck of their faith owing to the gifts of Antichrist. As Saint Matthew says (24:24) : "And they will show great signs and wonders in so much to deceive, if possible, even the elect. Behold I have told you beforehand."

Suppose someone should ask: Why does Christ permit these works of destruction of Christianity by the devil? I answer according to the rule of Theology: "By what things a man

sinneth, by the same also is he tormented." Since the people of the world sin against God by having recourse to the works of the devil, such as divination and fortune telling in their necessities—for instance, in order to find things they have lost, or to obtain health or children, instead of laying their needs before the omnipotent God—therefore God permits them to be deceived by the works of the demons.

If you do not wish to be deceived, then place the whole of your faith and confidence in the name of Jesus Christ., and refuse to acknowledge any miracle unless it is worked in that same name; and so you will be strong against seduction. David says (Ps 39:5) : "Blessed is the man whose hope is in the name of the Lord; and who hath not regard to vanities and lying follies." The name of the Lord is Jesus. "And thou shalt call His name Jesus," (Lk 2:21). If you should receive any wound or hurt you should sign it devoutly with the Sign of the Cross.

Antichrist arrogates to himself every other name of Christ, but as many of the saints tell us, he flies from the name of Jesus. Therefore, for that reason, the name of Jesus should receive the greatest respect from all Christians. Moreover, all the names of God, according to Saint Thomas Aquinas, should be honored in a sevenfold manner. Because the name of God is great it is to be feared; because it is holy it should be venerated; because it is sweet it should be savored in meditation; it is strong to save; rich in mercy; efficacious in impetration; and hidden in order to be discovered and known. He says also that the name of the Son of God is also the name of the father in a threefold way: for by it he is honored, invoked and manifested. He also says that in all the names given is also signified the name of Jesus, which is the sign of salvation, and therefore exceedingly to be honored.

The third clause says that there will be signs in the stars. In the Sacred Scriptures "star" signifies "light-giving"; and so it is the appellation of Masters, Doctors, and Licentiatees in Theology. This signification is found in Daniel (12:3) : "And they that are learned shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that instruct many to justice, as stars for all eternity." In these stars, that is learned men, there will be signs in the time of Antichrist; because, as Christ says in the Gospel of Saint Matthew (24:29) : "Stars shall fall from heaven"; and this is the third combat waged by Antichrist, that of disputation. Then stars, that is the learned, shall fall from heaven, that is, from the truth of the Catholic Faith. The disputations of Antichrist with the learned will be based entirely on the text of the Old Testament, and these doctors, so far from being able to answer him, will not even be able to speak. Then the stars, the masters, will fall from heaven, that is from the heights of the Faith. For, according to Daniel (11.36) : "And the king, Antichrist, will do all according to his will and will lift up and magnify all against God, and against the God of Gods he will speak great things;" that is, the matter of his blasphemies will be insoluble so far as men are concerned.

You may ask again why Christ allows this, that those who defend the Faith should fail so utterly? I answer that Christ allows this for two reasons: first, according to the rule of theology: "By what things a man sinneth, by the same is he tormented;" and this follows from the fact that masters and teachers no longer care for study of the Bible, but prefer the study of the poets and other profane works.

The second reason why Christ permits this, is because of the scandalous and wicked lives and the many sins of learned men; for in the case of many of them, the greater their knowledge the greater also is their sin and the worse their consciences; for they are proud, puffed-up, wine-bibbers and the rest. He who can bind a lioness can easily bind a sheep; if therefore the devil can hold in chains the minds of the learned by reason of their evil lives, how much easier is it for him to bind the sheep that is their tongues—so that they cannot speak. The ignorant are in much better case, for knowledge puffeth up, if therefore you wish to be strong, embrace the counsel of the Apostle Paul (1 Cor 2:5) : "That your faith might not stand on the wisdom of men but on the power of God." Reasoning and disputation are good for strengthening the intellect, but not for fortifying belief, since faith must be held from the motive of obedience, because Christ Himself has commanded us, announcing the gospel which the Apostles preached and Holy Mother Church has ordained. Therefore, O Lord, I believe.

The fourth clause tells us: "And on earth distress of nations by reason of the confusion of the roaring of the sea and of the waves." Behold these are the tortures which Antichrist will inflict, and on the earth distress of nations by reason of the confusion of the roaring of the sea and of the waves. That is the preparations for battle, the sanding of the arena before the combat, which will be the work of the lords who are already on the side of Antichrist; because then no one will dare to name Christ nor the Virgin Mary under pain of death; and the waves are those of torments which have never in the past been so dreadful as those which will be inflicted by Antichrist. In Saint Matthew, Christ warns us (24:21): "For there shall then be great tribulation such as hath not been from the beginning of the world until now, neither shall be. And unless those days had been shortened, no flesh should be saved; but for the sake of the elect those days shall be shortened." We read in the Apocalypse (17:10): "And when he shall come he must remain a short time," The Doctors in general say that Antichrist will reign for three and a half years only; which is the measure of a thousand and two hundred days and ninety days; "and from the time when the continual sacrifice shall be taken away and the abomination unto desolation shall be set up, there shall be one thousand two hundred and ninety days" (Daniel: 12:11).

If I am asked why Christ permits the Christians to be so terribly persecuted, I answer : "By what things a man sinneth, by the same also is he tormented." Because now, at the present time, people are offending God by wars, divisions and false flattery, by feuds and duels, so Christ permits them to be torn in pieces and slain by Antichrist. If therefore, you do not wish to be slain and destroyed, be at peace and concord now with everyone, according to the counsel of the Apostle: "Have peace with all men; revenge not yourselves, my dearly beloved; but give place to wrath, for it is written : "Revenge is mine, I will repay, saith the Lord" " (Rom 12:18).

The second evil or retribution will be the conflagration of the earthly world which is mentioned in the second part of the gospel of this Sunday: "Men withering away for fear and expectation of what is to come on the whole world; for the powers of heaven will be moved."

After Antichrist has been slain by lightning on Mount Olivet and his death has been made widely known through out the world, this our earth will exist for forty-five more days; I do not say years, but days. This is clearly to be seen in Daniel (12:11) : "And from the time when the continual sacrifice shall be taken away and the abomination of desolation shall be set up, there

shall be one thousand, two hundred and ninety days. Blessed is he that waiteth and cometh unto the one thousand, three hundred and thirty-five days."

The Doctors say that these forty-five days will be given by God for the conversion of those who have been seduced by Antichrist, but Antichrist will have left behind him so great riches and pleasure that hardly any of the nations will be converted to the Faith of Christ. For there is no savior but Christ, and yet they will not be converted.

Then in the four parts of the earth, east, and west, and north, and south, fire will blaze forth by thee divine power, and as it presses forward, the whole world in succession will be set on fire until nothing of the other three elements will remain. Then, when men are made aware of the tumult and the fire and see the lightnings bursting forth from it, they will wither away for fear of the fire, and expectation of eternal damnation. The Apostle Paul, in the epistle to the Hebrews (10:27) says of this: "But a certain dreadful expectation of the judgment and the rage of a fire shall consume the adversaries."

"For the powers of heaven shall be moved." This is said to imply that the fire has no natural cause, as some people erroneously imagine, for they say that for forty years before the consummation of the world it will not rain. This fire, however, comes from the rigor of divine justice and acts through the ministry of angels, as it is shown in the saying: "For the powers of heaven shall be moved." This fire comes down, likewise, for the purification of the other three elements—earth, air and water—which have been infected and corrupted by the sins of men. Concerning this, David says (Ps 96:3): "A fire shall go before him and shall burn his enemies round about. His lightnings have shone forth to the world; the earth saw and trembled. The mountains melted like wax at the presence of the Lord; at the presence of the Lord of all the earth."

You understand how sinners are the enemies of Christ; but why do they say, "and shall burn his enemies round about," when the good as well as the bad will be destroyed by the fire? The good and the friends of God will die in the fire it is true, but they will die without pain or suffering; but the wicked and God's enemies will die in the greatest pain and torment. Therefore, the enemies of God are named.

Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks beautifully of this when he says that this last fire, inasmuch as it precedes the Judgment, will act as an instrument of God's justice. It will also act like natural fire, inasmuch as, in its natural power, it will burn both wicked and good and reduce every human body to ashes. Inasmuch as it acts as an instrument of God's justice, it will act in different ways with regard to different people. For the wicked will suffer intensely through the action of the fire, but the good in whom nothing is found which must be purged away will feel no pain from the fire, just as the three children felt nothing in the fiery furnace, although the bodies of these others will not be preserved as were those of the three children. And this will come to pass by the divine power, that without pain or suffering their bodies will be resolved into ashes.

But the good in whom there is some stain to be purged away will feel the pain of this fire, more or less according to the merits of each. But they will be swiftly purged for three reasons. The first reason is that in them little evil is found, for they have been already in great measure purged by

the preceding tribulations and persecutions. The second is that the living will voluntarily endure the pain; and suffering willingly endured in this life remits much more quickly than suffering inflicted after death. This is seen in the case of the martyrs, for if, when they came to die, anything worthy of purgation was found, it was cut away by the pruning knife of their sufferings. And the sufferings of the martyrs were short in comparison with the pains of purgatory. The third reason is that the heat of the fire gains in intensity what it loses through the shortness of the time. But in so far as the fire is active after the judgment its power only extends over the damned, since all the bodies of the just will be impassible.

"This is a serious thought for those who will not do penance. In that last day, how greatly the temporal lords and prelates of the Church will desire to do penance when they see the fire. But then such repentance will avail them nothing, because they are acting not from charity, but from servile fear. Therefore, do penance now, forgive injuries, make restitution of any ill-gotten goods, live up to and confess your religion; and let priests obtain breviaries. If it were certain that in a short time this town was going to be destroyed by fire, would you not exchange all your immovable goods for something that you could take away with you? So it is with the world, which in a short while is to be destroyed by fire. Therefore place your hearts in heaven, and your lips by speaking with reverence of God, and your works by doing good. This is Christ's counsel, saying: "Lay not up to yourselves treasures on earth where the rust and moth devour and thieves break in and steal." Notice the word "rust," which is Antichrist, and "moth," which is fire, for these will devour all.

The third evil will be the tribulation of the universal Judgment which is mentioned in the third part of this gospel. "Then shall they see the Son of Man coming in the clouds with great power and majesty." After the destruction of the world by fire, Christ the Lord Judge, with the Virgin Mary and all the saints, will come to the judgment seated on a throne in the air. And the Archangel Michael will cry with a loud voice, saying: "Arise, ye dead, and come to judgment."

Then suddenly, by the divine power, all the dead, both good and wicked, will arise, children will rise with grown people and all will be gathered to the judgment. Even those who died in their mother's womb will be there, as Saint Thomas teaches, to accuse those through whose fault they died without Baptism. And the age at which all will rise will be thirty years.

Christ Himself says concerning the General Judgment: "When the Son of Man shall come in His majesty, and all the angels with Him, then shall He sit upon the seat of His Majesty. And all the nations shall be gathered together before Him; and He shall separate them one from another as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; and He shall set the sheep on His right hand and the goats on His left" (Mt 25:31-33). And the creed of Saint Athanasius: "At Whose coming all men must rise with their own bodies; and it will be rendered to every man according to his own deeds; those who have performed good works will go into eternal life, and those who have done evil into eternal fire."

The sheep are the good and the goats are the wicked. Christ will say to the sheep on His right hand: "Come, ye blessed of My Father, possess ye the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." To the goats on His left He will say: "Depart from Me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels."

The wicked will go into eternal punishment, the just into eternal life. But for the rest, no one will dwell in this world, because those things which are transitory and finite have passed away in their finite condition; movement has passed away.

Therefore, the Church in the person of every Christian makes petition in the Office for the Dead: "Deliver me, O Lord, from everlasting death, in that tremendous day when the heavens and the earth are moved, when Thou shalt come to judge the world by fire."