

A150 In Vigilia nativitatis Christi. Sermo unicus

### **St. Vincent Ferrer: Sermon for Christmas Eve (Mt 1:18)**

Mt: 1:18 Now the generation of Christ was in this wise. When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child, of the Holy Ghost.

"She was found with child, of the Holy Ghost," (Mt 1:18)

Our whole sermon is about the impregnation of the Virgin Mary. But that you may perceive this material in your souls with the sweetness of devotion first we shall salute the pregnant Virgin, etc. [Here all recite the "Hail Mary."]

"She was found," etc. I find a great difference in sacred scripture between the conception of Christ and his birth, especially in this because the birth of Christ was not entirely hidden and secret, rather he wished that it would be announced to the world and published through the angels and through the heavens, through the star in the east, through the animals, through Eastern kings, just as it had already been prophesied. "I will move the heaven and the earth, and the sea, and the dry land. And I will move all nations: and the desired of all nations shall come," (Hag 2:7-8). Note, "the heaven," that is, the holy angels.

But about his conception he wished that it would be hidden. To no one in this world was it revealed, not to the patriarchs, not to the prophets, nor to holy persons, but only to the archangel Gabriel and to the Virgin Mary, as it had been prophesied by Isaiah, "From the ends of the earth we have heard praises, the glory of the just one. And I said: My secret to myself," (Isa 24:16). And the prophet speaks in the person of Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. Note, "from the ends of the earth." The ends of the earth are taken in two ways, either locally or temporally.

With respect to the first by calculating from the center of the earth, that which is most distant from the center is the circumference. The earth is the center, the circumference is the empyreal heaven. Behold the ends locally from which Gabriel and the Virgin Mary heard the praises of the just one, because it is a rule in holy theology that when he is called just, it is understood absolutely, always of the savior.

As for the second, the ends can be taken temporally. There are seven temporal ages of the world. The first was from Adam to Noah. The second from Noah to Abraham. Third from Abraham to Moses. The fourth from Moses to David. The fifth from David to the Babylonian captivity. Sixth from the Babylonian exile to Christ. The seventh and last, from Christ to the end of the world. About which the Apostle [Paul] says: "[We are] upon whom the ends of the world are come," (1Cor 10:11). Behold the temporal limits, about which Gabriel and the Virgin Mary speak. "From the ends of the earth, "that is in the ultimate age of the world "we have heard praises, the glory of the just one," that is, the savior. "Tell us Angel Gabriel about these praises and the glory of the savior. Say something to us." He responds, "My secret to me," supply "I shall keep." See how the conception of Christ was hidden and secret. About which David said: "He shall come down like rain upon the fleece; and as showers falling gently upon the earth," (Ps 71:6). The difference then is clear between the birth of Christ and his conception.

Nevertheless although his conception was so secret at the beginning, nevertheless it gradually became manifest, because a pregnant woman at least in giving birth reveals her pregnancy. So it was of the Virgin whose belly and uterus had swelled, and she could no longer hide her pregnancy. On this account the proposed theme speaks, "She was found with child." The theme is clear.

And since I am concerned with the pregnant Virgin in this sermon, I find that the Virgin was found pregnant by her fiancé Joseph in three ways:

First through sense experience, [per experientiam sensualem]

Second through divine wisdom, [per sapientiam divinalem]

Third through a special excellence. [per excellentiam specialem]

For each of these the theme speaks, "She was found with child," (Mt 1:18) etc.

### **SENSE EXPERIENCE**

I say first, that the Virgin Mary was found pregnant by her espoused Joseph through sense experience. All knowledge is had through some sense perception. Through sight we recognize colors; through hearing, sound; through the sense of smell, odors; through taste, flavors; through touch, hard or soft, hot or cold. If you say to someone "How do you know this?" He replies: "Because I have seen or heard it," etc. It is clear therefore that all our cognition is through the senses. The Philosopher [Aristotle], "Sense is not deceived about the proper object, especially sight unless there is a defect." On account of this honorable judges make a great difference between eyewitnesses and hearsay [de auditu], or belief [credentia]. An eyewitness is greater. And so Christ rebuked the Jews who refused to believe, saying, "We speak what we know, and we testify what we have seen, and you receive not our testimony," (Jn 3:11). Note "what we know" namely, I and the holy prophets, "we speak," in this way, from sight. The Virgin Mary was found by her espoused Joseph to be with child. Imagine how after Mary had conceived, filled with joy she went to visit Elizabeth her cousin [literally, her related sister], who was pregnant with John the Baptist, as the angel had told her. She stayed with her for three months, as Luke says, (cf. Lk 1:56).

Her fiancé Joseph came to Nazareth to visit her, and saw her womb swollen, so he found her pregnant. Think how Joseph should have wondered, because he had not touched her. Moreover, as the holy doctors say, after they had become engaged, the Virgin Mary persuaded her fiancé, who was also a virgin, that they would take a vow of virginity together. So much the more did he wonder when she seemed pregnant. Therefore the beginning of today's gospel says, "When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together," that is, to live together and have relations, "she was found to be with child, of the Holy Ghost. Whereupon Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing publicly to expose her, was minded to put her away privately," (Mt 1:18-19).

Think also when she was found pregnant by her parents, who did not believe that she had sinned, but they wondered what this was. On the one hand they were thinking of her great devotion; on the other hand they saw her pregnancy. Her mother said to her, "Daughter, what is this?" The Virgin Mary replied to her mother, this is that which pleases God, who can do to his

creatures whatever he pleases. "O daughter, what will people say, that my daughter got pregnant before she was married."

Think of the distress of the Virgin, who dared not reveal because "my secret to me." Think of the entanglement in which Joseph found himself, who was old and poor, and the Virgin Mary, young and stunningly beautiful. Bernard says that Joseph, on one hand was considering the holiness of the Virgin, and that it could not be that she had sinned, and on the other hand he beheld her pregnant. And since by nature a woman cannot conceive without a man, therefore like an olive, his heart was between two millstones.

#### SIGNS OF A BAD WOMAN

And because he was prudent and wise he considered all the signs of a bad woman, which are: 1) an irreligious heart, 2) garrulousness in speech, 3) personal untidiness, 4) voraciousness in eating and drinking, 5) laziness toward work, 5) vanity of dress, and 6) contempt for her husband. Each of these signs indicate a woman is bad. But Joseph found none of these signs in the Virgin Mary. Rather, the total opposite; all the signs of a good woman.

1) The first sign of a dishonorable [inhonesta] woman is an irreligious heart toward God, disregarding masses and sermons, because she does not fear God. May God keep her from being inconsiderate, because unless a woman retains a fear of God, no other fear will hold her back from evil. Fear of God and devotion restrained Susanna lest she sin, when she said, "I am straitened on every side: for if I do this thing, it is death to me: and if I do it not, I shall not escape your hands. But it is better for me to fall into your hands without doing it, than to sin in the sight of the Lord," (Dan 13:22-23).

Joseph however was thinking about his fiancée whether she was devout, or irreligious, and he saw that he had never seen such a holy and devout woman, because she always wanted to pray, or read, or contemplate. And on this foundation of devotion a woman should ground herself, otherwise she will fall. "For other foundation no man can lay, but that which is laid," (1Cor 3:10). But Joseph did not find these things in the Blessed Virgin Mary, since she was most devoted and ardent toward God. So scripture says of her in Proverbs, "The woman that fears [God], she shall be praised," (Prov 31:30).

2) The second sign is garrulous talkativeness. [garrulatio oris loquax]. God keep her from the opportunity. Reason, because no devotion remains in the soul from words, just as no scent remains in the nutmeg jar which is left open. Authority: "Where there are many words, there is oftentimes want," namely of goodness (Prov 14:23). And so you should raise your little daughters lest they become talkative. And so, 1 Tim: "Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection," (1Tim 2:11), otherwise it is a bad sign. But a quiet woman is good.

Note the signs of taciturnity of the Blessed Virgin, because she is painted with her eyes larger than her mouth, and so she is properly represented to indicate that she had a great eye of the heart for thinking and contemplating, but a mouth small for speaking little. Mary "kept all these words in her heart," (Lk 2:51). Joseph considered for himself if his fiancée was loquacious, or garrulous, and he saw that she was not. Moreover she preferred not to speak. A sign of this, as I said, that



the Virgin had large eyes and a small mouth, is clear in the portrait which St. Luke painted, which is in Rome.

3) The third sign is bodily untidiness. When a woman goes about, lascivious, dissolute and vulgar, it seems that she has ants on her feet [formicas in pedibus!]. Ambrose: A man's body is an image of his soul. So Solomon says, "A woman [meets him] in harlot's attire prepared to deceive souls; talkative and wandering, not bearing to be quiet, not able to abide still at home, now abroad, now in the streets, now lying in wait near the corners," (Prov 7:10-12). And she immediately put herself at the windows etc.

But Joseph did not find this sign in the Blessed Virgin, because she never left home, unless when she went to the temple. And thus she went about totally composed. She always had her eyes toward the ground in a gesture of holiness. She never went dancing, but went about with downcast eyes. So scripture says about her, "How beautiful are you, my love, how beautiful are you! your eyes are doves' eyes, besides what is hid within," (Song 4:1). The Holy Spirit says "how beautiful are you" to the Virgin twice, because she is beautiful in body and beautiful in soul. Note, "Your eyes are doves' eyes," he does not say, "falcons' eyes."

4) The fourth sign is stuffing the belly with food and drink. It is a bad sign in a man and in a woman, because of those nearby parts, and stimulate each other. Hence a full belly immediately stimulates its neighbor, and because of this a gluttonous person necessarily is lustful. Holy Scripture says of the gluttons, "They shall eat ... and shall lift up their souls to their iniquity," (Hos 4:8).

But the Virgin Mary ate very little, only enough to sustain the body. She was almost always fasting.

5) The fifth sign is laziness, as when some woman says, "I will not work. I have brought so much from my dowry to my husband." Therefore St. Bernard [[De consideratione](#), II, 13,22] writes, "Idleness is the mother of trifles, the stepmother of virtues," so because our body is of the earth, it has the conditions of the earth, which if left uncultivated, brings forth thorns of lust, and weeds of bad thoughts and sins. Also, about the body of the lazy, on this account Sacred Scripture says of the body, "Send him," -- the servant, that is, the body which is like a servant who is to be directed -- "to work, that he be not idle: For idleness has taught much evil," (Sir 33:28-29).

But the Virgin was never lazy, rather she was always busy about holy works. Jerome says that she would arise in the middle of the night and pray. Then she spun and wove.

6) Sixth is vanity and excess in dress [ornatus]. Women may dress themselves decently and honestly according to their status and condition, but when they pour all their time and zeal in dressing themselves, or their body and they don't care about their soul, God help them, because such women are vain and have a vain heart. So Scripture says, "Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity," (Eccl 1:2). Note the rule of the Apostle [Paul], "Women also in decent apparel: adorning themselves with modesty and sobriety, not with plaited hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly attire, but as it becomes women professing godliness, with good works," (1Tim 2:9-10). Note

"sobriety" in measure, according to the condition of their status and the ability of their husband. But there are many women with no regard, and they should be ashamed at what they wear, like the outfit or jewelry which a prostitute wears. And so scripture says, "Favor is deceitful, and beauty is vain: the woman that fears the Lord, she shall be praised," (Prov 31:30).

But the Blessed Virgin did not care about jewelry. She washed her face well with the pure water of tears. St. Anne, her mother was adorning her with much jewelry [dives]. Out of love for her mother she wore it in the house, but not outside the house. But the daughters of today do just the opposite.

7) The seventh sign is contempt of the husband. It is a sign that she has her heart for another, when she argues with her husband about fashion [de genere ?] and about other things, she immediately wants him to get it for her. According to scriptures, a woman ought to honor her husband, and so the Apostle commands, saying, "Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to use authority over the man: but to be in silence," (1Tim 2:11). We also read in Esther 2, that Assuerus and his people were saying, "Let all wives, as well of the greater as of the lesser, give honor to their husbands...and that the husbands should be rulers and masters in their houses," (Est 2:20,22).

Neither is this sign of contempt found in the glorious Virgin, because although she was young, beautiful, noble and rich, and her spouse old, and poor, nevertheless she honored him more than any woman in the world. All in all, Joseph found no sign of a bad woman in the Virgin Mary, but all the virtues and traits [afflictiones?, perhaps affectiones] of a good woman.

On the other hand he considered whether nature would permit a woman to conceive without a man, and he saw that it seemed not. See how perplexed he was; it was like his heart was pressed between two millstones. On the one hand he was afraid to make her condition public, because she would have immediately been stoned to death, according to the law. On the other hand, since he was a just man, lest he seem to consent, he thought about going away quietly and leaving her. And so the prophecy of David was fulfilled saying, in the person of Joseph, "Fear and trembling are come upon me: and darkness has covered me. And I said: Who will give me wings like a dove, and I will fly and be at rest?... and I abode in the wilderness," (Ps 54:6-7,8). As for his proposal: note "fear" of consenting in sin if he stayed with her, and "trembling" lest he defame an innocent one. So he proposed to put her away. It is clear, therefore, how the Virgin Mary, "was found with child," (Mt 1:18).

**Morally.** You should take care, like Joseph, that there be no impediments when you wish to contract marriage, like parental [permission], or affinity, or something else. And so it is an ordination of the church that it be declared. And so scripture says, "Marriage honorable in all, and the bed undefiled," (Heb 13:4). It is honorable when there is no impediment.

## **DIVINE WISDOM**

Second, I say that the Virgin Mary was found to be with child, through divine wisdom. This is based on a rule of theology, says St. Thomas in I Pars that the mysteries of God, that is the

secrets, depending on his will alone cannot be known unless through his revelation. None of you can know my heart unless I should reveal and manifest it. How much more so with God.

But that which happens naturally can be known. In this way doctors know the hour of death of a sick person, because although the effect is in the future, nevertheless the cause is already present. Not so with the will of God. And so scripture says, "For who among men is he who can know the counsel of God? or who can think what the will of God is?," (Wis 9:13). It is added, "And who shall know your thought, unless you give wisdom, and send thy Holy Spirit from above," (Wis 9:17). Now Joseph, when he saw that his fiancée was pregnant, could not naturally know the truth, because the conception of Christ had no natural cause. For it did not come through the celestial constellations, nor through angelic processes, nor elemental, or human, therefore it could not have been known unless through divine revelation. Think, therefore how Joseph, who was a holy man, just and good, turned to God in prayer about this, asking the good pleasure of God to reveal [the answer], according to that of James, "But if any of you want wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men abundantly, ... and it shall be given him," (Jas 1:5). So Joseph did, when he wanted at night to retire, he first knelt down in prayer, saying, "Lord, you have given me a great grace, giving me this damsel as my fiancée, but Lord, I see that she is pregnant. How is it that a woman so holy is pregnant?" and similar words. And he wept much.

I believe also that the Blessed Virgin, on the other hand was praying to God, lovingly compassionate over her predicament, and that her saddened fiancé might be consoled. I believe that even the mother of the Virgin was praying that they not be disgraced, etc. Think how God listened to these devout prayers. The Gospel says, "But while he thought on these things, behold the angel of the Lord appeared to him in his sleep, saying: Joseph, son of David, fear not to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her, is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son: and you shall call his name JESUS. For he shall save his people from their sins.

Now all this was done that it might be fulfilled which the Lord spoke by the prophet, saying: Behold a virgin shall be with child, and bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us," (Mt 1:20-23). Think, how the angel spoke to him the prophecy of Isaiah, "Behold a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son," (Isa 7:14), not the Father nor the Holy Spirit. Think what kind of joy Joseph had, when he knew the truth.

From this a question emerges: Why did the Virgin not reveal it to him, when she saw his sadness, and perplexity, because he believed her – although nowadays a fiancé does not believe his fiancée. I respond that a secret entrusted should not be revealed, where the one by whom the secret is entrusted, is good, just and holy. Otherwise it can be revealed. "For it is good to hide the secret of a king," (Tob 12:7). Therefore the Virgin Mary, who had a most delicate conscience, chose not to reveal it, lest she offend the king, especially God.

Note [this is] against many vain persons who, if God gives them some grace or revelation, cannot keep silence. They immediately reveal it, and wrongly, unless about this they expressly know the will of God, especially because sometimes they believe the illusions of the devil to be divine revelations. They are like hens who can not keep quiet until they lay an egg. About such scripture says, "He who discloses the secret of a friend loses his credit, and shall never find an

intimate friend," (Sir 27:17). See the reason why the Virgin Mary did not reveal the secret committed to her to Joseph or to her mother, but the Holy Spirit revealed it to Elizabeth.

### **SPECIAL EXCELLENCE**

Third, I say that the Virgin Mary was found to be with child through a special excellence. Generally, when women are pregnant, they are thin, pale, tired and hungry for all kinds of things. But it was not so with the Blessed Virgin. Some holy theologians say that from the fact that the Virgin was pregnant, rays of splendor shone forth from her face, especially when she was close to childbirth. This can be proved in three ways, through philosophy, through theology and through experience.

As for the first, the Philosopher Aristotle says that every natural agent to the extent that it gives of the substantial form, to that extent it also gives the accidents following the form. What gives fire, gives also heat and light. So God the Father, of his substantial form, gave his Son to the Virgin Mary. That the Son of God is called "form," the authority of scriptures: "Who being in the form of God,...emptied himself, taking the form of a servant," (Phil 2:6-7). It is no wonder then that it conveys a radiance in the face etc. And so when pregnant, the Virgin was more beautiful and more glowing.

Second, it is proved theologically. We read in Exodus 34, that because Moses had spoken with God on the mountain, rays of splendor shone forth from his face, so much so that the people could not even gaze on him. Behold the reason. If the face was so splendorous from just a conversation with God, how much more therefore the face of the Virgin Mary from the conception of his Son. The Apostle Paul makes this point saying, "Now if the ministration of death, engraved with letters upon stones, was glorious; so that the children of Israel could not steadfastly behold the face of Moses, for the glory of his countenance, which is made void: How shall not the ministration of the spirit be rather in glory?" (2Cor 3:7-8). The "ministration of death" was the law of Moses which did not confer a life of glory.

Third, it is proved by experience, of a crystal lamp, which is beautiful in itself and bright, but if the lamp within is lighted it shall be more beautiful and even brighter. The same with the Virgin Mary. Think how her body, beautiful and pure like a lamp, and the light inside illuminating the whole world is the Son of God. No wonder therefore if the Virgin was then brighter and more beautiful, inasmuch as the text says that Joseph "knew her not," (Mt 1:25). From these rays of splendor, because eternal light was in her.

Note here how Joseph, having received the divine revelation, humbly sought pardon from the Virgin for his suspicion which he had had of her, saying, "O Blessed, why did you not tell me, because I believed you. And that she comforted him sweetly congratulating him that he would be the groom and companion of the mother of the Son of God, and his parent. O blessed family [societas]. How reverently, then, did they both adore God incarnate in the womb of the Virgin.

And so if you wish to have this association for yourself, you should do like the merchant Valentine did, who every year on Christmas, invited [to his home] one poor old man and one woman having a little child. They represented for him the Virgin with her son, and Joseph. It was revealed about him that at his death the Virgin with her son and Joseph appeared to him,

saying, "Because you have received us in your house, so we receive you into our house." About this Christ says, in Matthew 25, "Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren, you did it to me," (v. 40). And so the money which you pay out in gambling, you should for the love of Christ give to the poor. The poor however, who do not have, nor can give money to themselves, can at least present tomorrow [Christmas day] as many "Hail Marys" as days she bore him in the womb, or how many weeks, or months. Forty weeks, nine months, 277 days.