

Sunday – October 20, 2024

The Medieval Angel of the Apocalypse

Dear Thomas,

Perhaps you have come across **the name Vincent Ferrer** (1350-1419 AD) in the past but did not know about how significant he was in the life of the Church. He's one of those saints whose **extraordinary accomplishments** tend to fade into history, but they shouldn't.

His impact on the Church and society of his day did not come from holding a high office, like bishop or abbot. In fact, he forthrightly **rejected an offer to become a cardinal** when he was offered the red hat.

Rather, he was a humble **Dominican priest** who preached so persuasively that people considered him the living incarnation of the Angel in Chapter 14 of the Book of Revelation:

Then I saw another angel flying high overhead, with everlasting good news to announce to those who dwell on earth, to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people.

He said in a loud voice, **“Fear God and give him glory, for his time has come to sit in judgment. Worship him who made heaven and earth and sea and springs of water.”** (Rev 14:6-7).

Even in his lifetime St. Vincent was called the “Angel of the Apocalypse” because he found that **holy balance of the heavenly angel** of Revelation: he proclaimed the Good News of Christ to all before he announced God's divine judgment on sinners.

Of all the sermons I've heard in my life, that seamless melding of the good news of the Gospel with **ferve calls to repentance** seems to be the hardest balance for a preacher to find. Vincent lived it.



Unique but Not

As one quite familiar with Church history, even I marvel at this medieval Dominican preacher, who **has no rival**. Here are just a few facts about his remarkable life and work.

1. Today we would call him a Spaniard, but he was a native of the medieval Kingdom of Valencia. **He spoke a dialect called Limousin, a cousin of Catalán**, not Spanish. This will be important as we will see.
2. He was born in the year 1350, in the very middle of the **Black Death** (1346 to 1353), which killed half the population of the European continent.
3. He came of age and was ordained exactly at the time the Church itself was torn apart by the **Great Western Schism** (1378–1414), where for 36 agonizing years two popes claimed the papacy, followed by [a third claimant](#) toward the end. Vincent was hugely instrumental in bringing this schism to an end.
4. History would not know him if he had died before age 50. During his early career he was a seminary professor, but **at age 50 he was sent on a mission to preach** repentance to the nations, and he didn't stop until his death at age 70.
5. On the mission trail, he **traveled with more than 50 priests** and several hundred Dominican tertiaries (lay helpers) who assisted with the needs of the faithful who came to hear Vincent preach.
6. During most of those 20 years, **an extended entourage of 10,000 people** traveled with him and accompanied him with their prayers and penance. They practiced that gruesome medieval penitential devotion of self-scourging to support the saint's preaching with tangible works of atonement.
7. No single priest, save St. Paul himself, brought as many conversions by his preaching as did Vincent Ferrer. The **standard size of crowds** that came to hear him preach was between *50,000 and 80,000 souls*, and the number of conversions (heretics, non-Christians, and inveterate sinners) is incalculable.
8. This was in an age before electronic speaker systems. His outside pulpit was equipped with a shell-like canopy behind him **to amplify his voice** so that the massive crowds could hear him. Even then, imagine preaching to a stadium-sized crowd without a



microphone!

9. Except when he traveled by boat to a foreign country, St. Vincent **almost always traveled on foot**, which amounted to *thousands of miles* over the course of his career. He believed that riding on a horse was a sign of luxury and status, and he steadfastly refused to do it. Only at the end of his life, because of leg problems, did he agree to ride on a donkey.
10. In most places where he walked, he had to be **surrounded by a wooden cage** carried by his helpers so that the people wouldn't overwhelm him and tear his garments to shreds for relics of the living saint.



That last part I find so fascinating. **How persuasive must he have been** to generate such zeal and devotion in the common people!

In all these matters, Vincent showed himself to be a one-of-a-kind preacher, yet, he also stood in a tradition. A century and a half before Vincent was born, **St. Dominic formed the Order of Preachers** precisely for the mission Vincent was exercising so heroically.

In the days of Dominic and his successors (St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Raymond of Peñafort, particularly), the main focus was on preaching to the Albigensian heretics to return them to the Church. In Vincent's day, more than a hundred years later, **the number of schisms and heresies had multiplied**, and Vincent climbed mountains and descended

into valleys in order to treat them all to the gift of his eloquent tongue.

Angelic Characteristics

Vincent Ferrer was a human, of course, but he was considered by the people of the Middle Ages **as a kind of incarnate angel**. That's probably because he lived like one. Everything he did had an angelic quality in God's service.

Messenger

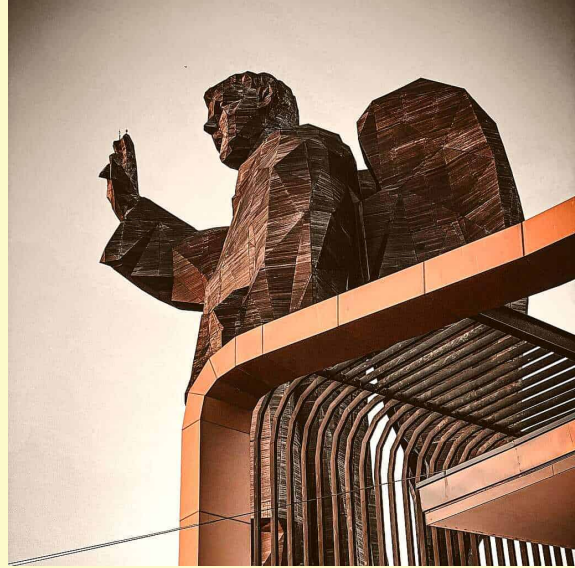
The word "angel" in Hebrew is *mal'ākh* which simply means "messenger". In the grip of a sickness that almost killed him, Vincent received **a vision of Jesus** who was accompanied by Sts. Francis and Dominic and myriads of angels. Jesus told him,

*Arise, and be consoled; the schism shall soon be at an end, when men have ceased from their iniquities. Arise, then, and go to preach against vice, for this have I specially chosen thee. Exhort sinners to repentance, for My judgment is at hand. (Fr. Andrew Pradel O.P., *St. Vincent Ferrer: Angel of the Judgment*, TAN Books, 2014.)*

Then Jesus cured him which is why, throughout his future mission, Vincent understood that his mandate to preach was from the highest authority, Christ Himself.



Stained Glass Window, Church of St. Vincent Ferrer, Zaragoza, Spain



165-ft. Bamboo Statue of St. Vincent Ferrer, Pangasinan, Philippines

Mobility

Angels are not bound by space and time, and it seemed that Vincent wasn't either. He **preached in all the main countries of Western Europe**—Spain, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Netherlands, Flanders, Lombardy (Northern Italy), and even England. Remember that he traveled on foot!

Gift of Tongues

Angels speak any language they turn their minds to, and this may be the most remarkable aspect of St. Vincent's preaching, though he overcame language barriers in another sense. **He was like Pentecost revisited** because he preached only in his native dialect of Limousin. Yet, everyone who heard him preach *in any country* was able to understand what he was saying, just as happened to the Apostles in Acts 2.

Austere Zeal

Since angels do not need to sleep, they are always *at work* for God. The daily work schedule of St. Vincent **was almost as angelic**. He slept only five hours a night, which is not extraordinary in itself, but what he did in the other 19 hours of the day was. [Catholic Encyclopedia](#) recounts:

The floor was his usual bed; perpetually fasting, he arose at two in the morning to chant the Office, celebrating Mass daily, afterwards preaching, sometimes three hours, and **frequently working miracles**. After his midday meal he would tend the sick children; at eight o'clock he prepared his sermon for the following day.

He kept this schedule virtually every day for 20 years. What is not mentioned is that after his preaching, **he also spent hours with those who came to him** with needs and prayer requests, which leads us to the next point.

Miracle Worker

Angels have the power of God to work miracles as God wills, and apparently God willed that Vincent would also have that power. It is said that by the end of his life, **over 40,000 miracles had been attributed** to this one saintly man.

St. Vincent once **brought a baby back to life** who had been killed by its (repentant) mother. The miracle is all the more remarkable in that the child had been *dismembered*. Ugh! But that didn't faze Vincent Ferrer. There are **at least 28 documented cases** of Vincent raising people from the dead. In that, he far outdistances Jesus, Himself.

Even if we entertain the possibility that some of those

were resuscitations of people who were not technically dead according to modern medical standards, **bringing even one person back to life would be an extraordinary event.** Vincent did it for 28!



Force of Unity

Like the angels who serve God, Vincent worked tirelessly to **restore the unity of a Church** that was torn apart by schism. Ironically, Vincent was ordained and employed in the service of *the anti-pope of the Great Schism*, Benedict XIII! Wonders never cease.

While **St. Catherine of Siena** (herself a Dominican tertiary) had worked to bring the authentic pope back from Avignon to Rome, St. Vincent Ferrer was backing his rival who had rejected the true pope in Rome. Perhaps due to the confusion and complexity of the situation, Vincent was convinced that the authentic pope, Urban VI, was not validly elected.

It just goes to show that **even saints are children of their times**, subject to the ups and downs of information—and politics.

HOWEVER... Vincent was also an honest **man of discernment**, who was fully in favor of healing the schism and restoring unity to the Church.

When the **Council of Constance** (1414-1418) proposed that all 3 rival popes should resign so that a unity candidate could be chosen as the legitimate pope, Benedict XIII stubbornly refused, which caused Vincent no end of misery. One [article](#) stated:

Vincent tried unsuccessfully, in 1408 and 1415, to persuade his former friend to resign. He **finally concluded that Benedict was not the true pope.** Though very ill, he mounted the pulpit before an assembly over which Benedict himself was presiding, and **thundered his denunciation** of the man who had ordained him a priest. Benedict fled for his life, abandoned by those who had formerly supported him.

Imagine that scene! It was the end of the anti-pope who immediately **lost all his support** in Europe due to Vincent's preaching. In other words, St. Catherine of Siena was right, and Vincent was humble enough to admit it.

With clear eyes, and despite his friendship, the saint saw the work of division in the very bishop who had ordained him. Vincent understood that **such division was not of God.** So, he did what a saint does. He humbled himself and forcefully rebuked the lie.

(**Image:** Dominican-run St. Vincent Ferrer Church, Manhattan, NYC)

In a time like ours, so rife with venal and weak Church leadership, let us pray that God will



raise up new saints like St. Catherine and St. Vincent who will lead our Church back to unity by their virtue and in so doing, lead *the whole world* to Christ.

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Peter Darcy

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