

Item #9

**Antônio Vieira, “Children of God’s Fire,” in *Children of God’s Fire: A Documentary History of Black Slavery in Brazil*, edited by Robert Edgar Conrad (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 163-174.**

#### 4.2. "Children of God's Fire": A Seventeenth-Century Jesuit Finds Benefits in Slavery but Chastizes Masters for Their Brutality in a Sermon to the Black Brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary

The conflicting roles of the Church in regard to slavery are demonstrated in the following sermon by the noted Jesuit writer, diplomat, and adviser to the court of Portugal, Father Antônio Vieira. Speaking to both slaves and masters at the church of the black brotherhood of the Rosary in Bahia (for information on such brotherhoods, see Document 4.4), Vieira fashioned the Church's discordant doctrines on slavery into a complex baroque "harmony." Justifying slavery through scripture, especially the example of the Babylonian Captivity, he urged the slaves to submit willingly to their earthly chains. Only their bodies could be enslaved on earth, he told his black listeners, but their souls were free unless, by their own sins, they sold themselves to the devil. Lifelong slavery was hard, but when they served their masters with a good will, slaves were in reality serving God and making a place for themselves in heaven.

Himself a descendant of black Africans and a former protector of enslaved Indians, Vieira seems to have been convinced of what he preached, especially when he spoke of the cruel treatment that masters inflicted upon their slaves. He scolded them for their greed, their un-Christian behavior, their brutal punishments, and more than hinted at the likelihood that they would spend eternity in hell.

Source: *Obras completas do Padre Antonio Vieira, Sermões*, 15 vols. (Porto: Livraria Chardon, 1907-1909), xii, 301-334.

☪ One of the remarkable things witnessed in the world today, and which we, because of our daily habits, do not see as strange, is the immense transmigration of Ethiopian peoples and nations who are constantly crossing over from Africa to this America. The fleet of Aeneas, said the Prince of Poets, brought Troy to Italy . . . ; and with greater reason can we say that the ships which one after the other are entering our ports are carrying Africa to Brazil. . . . A ship enters from Angola and on a single day unloads 500, 600, or perhaps 1,000 slaves. The Israelites crossed the Red Sea and passed from Africa to Asia, fleeing captivity; these slaves have crossed the Ocean at its widest point, passing from that same Africa to America to live and die as slaves. . . .

Now if we look at these miserable people after their arrival and at those who call themselves their masters, what was observed in Job's two conditions is what fate presents here, happiness and misery meeting on the same stage. The masters few, the slaves many; the masters decked out in courtly dress, the slaves ragged and naked; the masters feasting, the slaves dying of hunger; the masters swimming in gold and silver, the slaves weighted down with irons; the masters treating them like brutes, the slaves adoring and fearing them as gods; the masters standing erect, waving their whips, like statues of pride and tyranny, the slaves prostrate with their hands tied behind them like the vilest images of servitude, spectacles of extraordinary misery. Oh God! What divine influence we owe to the Faith You gave us, for it alone captures our understanding, so that, although in full view of such inequalities, we may nevertheless recognize Your justice and providence! Are not these people the children of Adam and Eve? Were not these souls redeemed by the blood of Christ? Are not these bodies born and do they not die as ours do? Do they not breathe the same air? Are they not covered by the same sky? Are they not warmed by the same sun? What star is it, so sad, so hostile, so cruel, that decides their fate? . . .

There is not a slave in Brazil—and especially when I gaze upon the most miserable among them—who for me is not an object of profound meditation. When I compare the present with the future, time with eternity, that which I see with that which I believe, I cannot accept the idea that God, who created these people as much in His own image as He did the rest of us, would have predestined them for two hells, one in this life and another in the next. But when today I see them so devout and festive before the altars of Our Lady of the Rosary, all brothers together and the children of that same Lady. I am convinced beyond any doubt that the captivity of the first transmigration is ordained by her compassion so that they may be granted freedom in the second.

Our Gospel mentions two transmigrations, one in which the children

of Israel were driven from their country "in the transmigration of Babylon" [Matt. 1:11] . . . ; and the other in which they were brought back to their country "after the transmigration of Babylon" [Matt. 1:12]. . . . The first transmigration, that of captivity, lasted for seven years; the second, that of freedom, had no end, because it lasted until Christ's coming.

Behold in the following, black brothers of the Rosary, . . . your present condition and the hope it gives you for the future: "and Josias begot Jechonias and his brethren" [Matt. 1:11]. You are the brothers of God's preparation and the children of God's fire. The children of God's fire of the present transmigration of slavery, because in this condition God's fire impressed the mark of slavery upon you; and, granted that this is the mark of oppression, it has also, like fire, illuminated you, because it has brought you the light of the Faith and the knowledge of Christ's mysteries, which are those which you solemnly profess on the rosary. But in this same condition of the first transmigration, which is that of temporal slavery, God and His Most Holy Mother are preparing you for the second transmigration, that of eternal freedom.

It is this which I must preach to you today for your consolation. Reduced to a few words, this will be my topic: that your brotherhood of Our Lady of the Rosary promises all of you a Certificate of Freedom, with which you will not only enjoy eternal liberation in the second transmigration of the other life, but with which you will also free yourselves in this life from the most terrible captivity of the first transmigration. . . .

Although banished Children of Eve, we all possess or all expect a universal transmigration, which is that from Babylon to Jerusalem, from this world's exile to our true home in heaven. You, however, came or were brought from your homelands to these places of exile; aside from the second and universal transmigration, you have another, that of Babylon, in which, more or less moderated, you remain in captivity. And so you may know how you should conduct yourselves in it, and so that you will not yourselves make it worse, I want first to explain to you what it consists of. I will try to say it so clearly that you will all understand me. But if this does not happen (because the topic requires a greater ability than all of you can have), at least, as St. Augustine said in your own Africa, I will be satisfied if your masters and mistresses understand me, so that they may more slowly teach you what for you and for them is very important to know.

Let it be known, all of you who are slaves, that not all of what you are is a slave. Every man is composed of a body and a soul, but that which is a slave and is known as one is not the whole person, but only

half of him. Even the Pagans, who had little knowledge of souls, knew this truth and made this distinction. Homer . . . stated as follows . . . : "those men whom Jupiter made slaves divided them in half and did not leave them more than half as their own"; because the other half belongs to the master whom they serve. And which is the enslaved half that has a master whom it is forced to serve? There is no doubt that it is the more abject half—the body. . . .

Speaking of slaves, and with slaves, St. Paul said: "be obedient to them that are your lords according to the flesh" [Eph. 6:5]. And who are these "lords according to the flesh"? All interpreters declare that they are the temporal masters, such as yours whom you serve during your entire life; and the Apostle calls them "lords according to the flesh" because the slave, like any other person, is made up of flesh and spirit, and the master's control over the slave is only over the flesh, that is, the body, and does not include the spirit, which is the soul.

This is why among the Greeks the slaves were called *bodies*. Thus reports St. Epiphanius, who says that their normal way of speaking was not that this or that master had so many slaves, but that he had so many bodies. The same, according to Seneca, was the Roman custom. . . .

But we do not have to go as far back as Rome and Greece. I ask you this: in your own Brazil, when you want to say that so-and-so has many or few slaves, why do you say that he has this many or that many *pieças* [*peças*]? Because the first persons who named them this way intended to signify, wisely and in a Christian manner, that the slave's subjection to the master, and the master's control over the slave, consist only in the body. Men are not made of one piece only, like the angels and the beasts. The angels and the beasts are whole, the angel because he is all spirit, the beast because he is all body. But not man. Man is composed of two pieces: the soul and the body. And because the slaveowner is the master of only one of these pieces, that which can be dominated, that is, the body, for this reason you call your slaves *pieces*. And if this derivation does not satisfy you, let us say that you call your slaves pieces just as we say *a piece of gold, a piece of silver, a piece of silk*, or of any other thing among those which do not possess a soul. And in this way it is even more proven that the name *peça* does not include the slave's soul, and is only meant to mean his body. This is the only thing that is enslaved, the only thing that is bought and sold, the only thing that you [masters] have under your jurisdiction and as part of your fortune, and this, finally, is what was taken in the transmigration of the children of Israel from Jerusalem to Babylon, and was brought from Ethiopia to Brazil in the transmigration of those who are here called slaves and here remain in captivity.

Therefore, black brothers, the slavery you suffer, however hard and grinding it may be, or seems to be to you, is not total slavery, or the enslavement of everything you are, but rather only half slavery. You are slaves in your exterior part, which is the body; however, in the other interior and nobler half, the soul, . . . you are not a slave, but free. This first point accepted, it follows that you should know a second and more important point, which I now put to you: whether that free part or half, the soul, can also in some way be enslaved, and who can enslave it. I say to you that your soul too, like anybody's, can be enslaved; and he who can enslave it is not your master, not the king himself, not any other human power, but only you yourself, and this only by your own free will. Fortunate are those of you who can so adapt yourself to the condition of your half slavery that you can take advantage of your own servitude and may know how to make use of it to gain that which you deserve! . . .

And if you ask me, as you should—in what way are souls enslaved, who are those who sell them, and to whom do they sell them, and for what price?—I respond that each person sells his own; it is the devil to whom they are sold; the price for which they are sold is sin. And because the soul is invisible, and the devil also invisible, these sales are not seen; and so that you will believe that these are not exaggerations or mere forms of speech, but rather truths of the Faith, let it be known that it is thus defined by God, and often repeated throughout the Holy Scriptures. . . .

Tell me, white people and black, do we not all condemn Adam and Eve? Do we not know that they were ignorant and more than ignorant, mad and more than mad, blind and more than blind? Are we not the same people who curse them for what they did? Then why do we do the same and sell our souls, as they sold theirs? Let the white people listen first to an example, so that they may recognize their dishonor, and then we will demonstrate others to the black people, so that they may recognize theirs. . . . Is it necessary that, in order to add another fathom of land to your cane fields, and another day's work each week on your plantation, you must sell your soul to the devil? Your own soul, however, since it is yours, you may go ahead and sell and resell. But those of your slaves, why must you sell them too, putting your lust for gold and your damned and always ill-acquired possessions ahead of their salvation? Because of this your slaves lack Christian Doctrine; because of this they live and die without the Sacraments; and because of this, even if you do not altogether prohibit the Faith to them with a level of greed which only the devil might invent (to express this in popular language), you do not wish them to come near the door of the Church. You allow

the slave men and women to go about in sin, and do not permit them to marry, because you say that married slaves do not serve you as well. Oh reason (if such it is) so unworthy of your intelligence and Christianity!

Let us turn to the example most appropriate to the slaves, who for no reason at all should sell their souls, even if this might cost them their lives. . . . If the master orders a slave to do something, or wants from a slave anything that gravely harms his soul and conscience, the slave is obliged not to obey. I have told you repeatedly that you must not offend God; and if [the masters] threaten you because of this, and punish you, suffer it bravely and with a Christian spirit, even if this lasts your entire life, since these punishments are martyrdoms.

We have seen that, just as man is made up of two halves, the body and the soul, slavery is of two kinds: the first, the captivity of the body in which the bodies are the involuntary captives and slaves of men; the other, the slavery of the soul, in which the souls, by their own will, sell themselves and make themselves slaves and captives of the devil. And because I promised you that the Virgin, Our Lady of the Rosary, will free you, as one might say, from the greater form of slavery, . . . it is important that you first understand which of these two types of slavery is the better one. The soul is better than the body, the devil is a worse master than a man, however tyrannical the latter may be; enslavement by men is temporal, but that of the devil eternal; thus there can be no mind so coarse and blind who does not understand that the greater and worse captivity is that of the soul. But since the soul, the devil, and this type of slavery are, as I said, things that cannot be seen by the eyes, where shall I find a way fitting your ability to make this lesson clear? Let us base it on your own slavery, which to you is a more understandable thing. I ask you: if at this moment God freed all of you from your present slavery and you suddenly found yourselves liberated, would this not be a remarkable and admirable blessing which God would grant you? Well, the grace which the Lady of the Rosary will grant you, freeing your souls from the slavery of the devil and of sin, is . . . of a greater and higher value. We find this in the Gospel. . . .

And if we look for the basic reason why Christ, mankind's Redeemer, came only to redeem and liberate men from the slavery of the soul, and not from the slavery of the body, the clear and manifest reason is that mere men would be sufficient to liberate men from the slavery of men; [however,] to free from the enslavement of the devil and from sin, all God's power is required. These same children of Israel of whom we spoke were often enslaved by various nations; very early [they were] slaves of the Egyptians; later slaves of the Mesopotamians; slaves of the Ammo-

nites; slaves of the Canaanites; slaves of the Midianites; slaves of the Philistines. And from all these captivities God always freed them through the power of men. . . . For the slavery of souls, to free them from the devil's yoke and from sin, only God himself had the power, and this with both His arms extended on a cross. . . . To redeem from the slavery of the body, it is enough to pay as much gold or silver as the slave costs. But to redeem from the slavery of the soul, how much gold or silver would be enough? Would a million be enough? Would two million be enough? Would all the gold of Sofala [a Mozambique seaport identified with Solomon's Ophir] and all the silver of Postosí [a rich source of silver in Upper Peru] be enough? Oh the baseness and ignorance of human conception! If the whole ocean were changed to silver, and the whole earth into gold; if God had created another world and a thousand worlds of a material more precious than gold and more desirable than diamonds, this entire price would not be enough to free a single soul for a single moment from the devil's slavery and from sin. For this it was necessary that God's son become man and die on a cross, so that with the infinite price of his blood he could redeem and did redeem the souls from the devil's captivity and from sin. And it is from this slavery, so harsh, fearsome and immense, that I offer you your Certificate of Freedom, through the devotion of the rosary of God's mother. . . .

Thus freed from the greatest and hardest slavery, that of the soul, you remain slaves of the second kind, that of the body. But you should not therefore suppose that the compassion which Our Lady of the Rosary feels for you is less complete. That Our Lady of the Rosary is able to free people from the slavery of the body has been seen in the countless examples of those who, finding themselves captives in an infidel land, were freed through devotion to the rosary, and after offering to the altars of the same Lady the broken chains and fetters of their captivity, as trophies to her power and charity, they hung them in the temples. When God descended to free His people from slavery in Egypt, why do you suppose that he appeared to Moses in a burning bush? Because the burning bush, as the saints tell us, was the figure of the Virgin, Our Lady; and already at that time God wished to make known to the world that the same Most Holy Virgin was not only the most appropriate and able instrument of Divine Omnipotence to free men from the slavery of the souls (for which reason he chose Her as His Mother when he came to redeem mankind), but also to liberate them from the slavery of the body. . . . Thus the Redeemer's Mother is also capable of freeing you from this second and lesser slavery. However, the fact that you now live as slaves and captives is by a special providence of God and of Our Lady,

so that through that same temporal captivity you may more easily acquire eternal freedom.

We have arrived at the second part of the liberation which I promised you, and at a point where you lack only the knowledge of how to make good use of your condition to become this world's most fortunate people. Regarding this topic, I have only to quote the two princely Apostles, St. Peter and St. Paul, who quite deliberately dealt with it in various places, speaking with slaves as seriously as if they had spoken with emperors of Rome. . . . The Apostle Paul spoke to the slaves in two places as follows: "Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh; not serving to the eye, as pleasing men, but in simplicity of heart, fearing God. Whatsoever you do, do it from the heart, as to the Lord, and not to men. Knowing that you shall receive of the Lord the reward of inheritance. Serve ye the Lord Christ" [Col. 3:22, 23, 24; Eph. 6:5, 6, 7, 8, 9].

When you serve your masters, you are neither their heirs, nor do they pay you for your labor. You are not their heirs because the inheritance belongs to the sons and not to the slaves; and they do not pay you for your labor, because the slave serves through an obligation and not for wages. A sad and miserable condition, to serve throughout life without hope of reward, and to work without hope of rest except in the grave! But there is a good remedy, says the Apostle (and this is not exaggeration, but Catholic Faith). The remedy is that when you serve your masters, you do not serve them as someone who serves men, but rather as someone who serves God; . . . because then you do not serve as captives, but rather as free persons, nor do you obey as slaves, but as sons and daughters [of God]. You do not serve as captives, but as free men, because God will pay you for your labor; . . . and you do not obey as slaves, but rather as sons and daughters [of God], because God, to whom you are similar in that fate which He gave you, will make you his heirs. . . .

Thus far according to St. Paul. And what does St. Peter say? . . . "Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle but also to the froward" [1 Pet. 2:18]. This is the . . . advice which the Prince of Apostles gives you, and later he adds reasons worthy of being given to the noblest and most generous spirits. Firstly, because it is the glory of patience to suffer without guilt. "For what glory is it, if committing sin, and being buffeted for it, you endure?" Secondly, because this is the way in which men make themselves more acceptable to God. "But if doing well you suffer patiently; this is thankworthy before God." Thirdly, and truly stupendous: because in that condition in which God has placed you, your vocation is similar to that of His

Son, who suffered for us, providing you the example which you are to imitate. "For unto this are you called; because Christ also suffered for us, leaving you an example that you should follow his steps" [1 Pet. 2:20, 21].

I most justly called this reason "stupendous" because who will not be amazed by the low condition of the subjects with whom St. Peter speaks, and by the highness of the most lofty comparison to which he raises them? He does not compare the slaves' vocation to another grade or condition of the Church, but to Christ Himself. "For unto this are you called; because Christ also suffered." More still: the Apostle does not stop here, but adds another new and greater prerogative of the slaves, declaring for whom Christ suffered, and why: "leaving you an example that you should follow his steps." . . .

Do you know what the condition of your servitude is if you make good use of the means it contains? It is a state not just of religion, but of one of the most austere religious orders of the entire Church. It is a religious order according to the apostolic and divine purpose, because if you do what you are obliged to do, you do not serve men, but rather God, and with the express title of servants of Christ: "as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With a good will serving, as to the Lord, and not to men" [Eph. 6:6, 7].

Carefully observe the wording: "With a good will serving." If you serve through force and ill will, you are apostates to your religious order, but if you serve with a good will, you are true servants of Christ. . . . Thus, just as in the Church there are two religious orders dedicated to the redemption of slaves, yours is an order of slaves without redemption, so that it will not be without perpetuity, which is a perfection of your condition. Some religious are barefoot, others wear shoes; yours is one of bare feet and rags. Your habit is of your own color; because you do not wear the skins of sheep and camels, as did Elias, but rather those which nature covered you with, or with which she left you naked, exposed to the sun's rays and the cold rain. Your poverty is poorer than that of the poorest and your obedience more complete than that of those we call the Minims [a religious order instituted by Saint Francis de Paula near the end of the fifteenth century]. Your abstinences better deserve to be called hunger than fasting, and your vigils are not from one o'clock until midnight, but the whole night without relief. Your Rule is one of many, because it is the decision or decisions of your masters. You are obliged to them because you cannot abandon your slavery, and they are not obliged to you, because they can sell you to someone else when they wish to do so. Finally, every religious order has a purpose and vocation and a special grace. The grace of yours is whips and punishments. . . .

Your vocation is the imitation of Christ's patience . . . ; and its purpose is the eternal inheritance as a reward. . . .

Believe everything I have told you, because everything, as I said before, belongs to the Faith, and upon this Faith raise up your hopes, not only for Heaven, but for what you will now hear, that preparations are being made there for you. Oh what a change of fortune will be yours at that time, and what astonishment and confusion for those who have so little humanity today, and so little understanding that they do not desire it. Tell me this: if as you serve your masters in this life, they in the other life would have to serve you, would this not be a most remarkable change and a glory for you never imagined? Then, understand that it will not happen that way, because this would be very insignificant. Does God not tell you that when you serve your masters you do not serve men, but rather God? . . . Those who will serve you in Heaven will not be your masters, many of whom will probably not be going there, but instead the one who will serve you is God Himself. It is God who will serve you in Heaven, because you served Him here on earth. . . . In this way you will be twice liberated and free: freed from the slavery of the devil, through the liberation of the souls, and free from temporal slavery, through the liberation of all eternity. . . .

This was my lesson for the slaves. And will the masters also gain something from this Babylonian Captivity? It seems not. [You may say] I, by the grace of God, am white and not black; I am free and not a captive; I am a master and not a slave; in fact I possess many slaves. And those who went as captives to Babylon, were they black or white? Were they captives or free? Were they slaves or masters? Neither in color nor in freedom nor in lordliness were they less than you. Well, if they could be lowered into slavery, having to drop so far for this to occur, you who by taking a single step could find yourselves in this condition, why do you not fear your peril? . . . Look to the two poles of Brazil, that of the North and that of the South, and see if there was ever a greater Babylon or a greater Egypt in the world, in which so many thousands of captives have been made, seizing those who were free in nature, with no more right than violence, and with no greater cause than greed, and selling them as slaves. When Joseph's brothers sold him to the Ismaelites to be taken to Egypt, they seized only one free man, but, as punishment for this one act of enslavement, God enslaved in Egypt the whole generation and descendants of those who enslaved Joseph to the number of six hundred thousand, and for a period of forty years. But why should we search for examples far from home and so long ago, if we have them in all our Conquests? Because of the existence of slavery in Africa, God subdued Mina, Santo Tomé, Angola, and Benguela; be-

cause of slavery in Asia, God subdued Malacca, Ceylon, Armuz, Muscat, and Cochin; because of slavery in America, He conquered Bahia, Maranhão, and, under the name of Pernambuco, four hundred leagues of coastline over a period of twenty-four years [a reference to the Dutch conquest of northeast Brazil during Vieira's own lifetime]. And because our own acts of enslavement began on Africa's shores, God allowed there the loss of King Sebastian, after which came the sixty-year captivity of the Kingdom itself [a reference to the death of King Sebastian of Portugal in Morocco in 1578 and the subsequent domination of Portugal by the Spanish Hapsburgs (1580-1640), sometimes called the Babylonian Captivity].

I understand full well that some of these acts of enslavement are just: those which the laws permit, and supposedly also those slaves bought and sold in Brazil, not the natives, but those brought from other places. But what theology could justify the inhumanity and brutality of the exorbitant punishments with which these same slaves are mistreated? "Mistreated," I said, but this word is totally inadequate. . . . Tyrannized, one might say, or martyred; because they injure these miserable people, drop hot fat or wax on them, slash them, cudgel them, and inflict many other kinds of excesses upon them, of which I will not speak, these deserving more the name of martyrdoms than of punishments. Well, be certain that you should not fear such injustice less than the slaves themselves; I say rather that you should fear them more, because God feels them much more. As long as the Egyptians only enslaved the children of Israel, God accepted their captivity; but in the end Divine Justice cannot abide its own dissimulation, and after the ten plagues with which the Egyptians themselves were punished, he totally finished with them, and he destroyed them and laid them waste. And why? God Himself says it: "I have seen," says God, "the affliction of my people in Egypt, and I have heard their cry; because of the rigor of them that are over the works" [Exod. 3:7].

Observe two things: first, that God does not complain about the Pharaoh, but rather about his overseers; . . . because the overseers are often those who cruelly oppress the slaves. Secondly, that he does not give slavery as the reason for his act of justice, but rather the oppression and hardship which they inflicted upon the slaves. . . . "I have seen the affliction of my people." And God adds that he had heard their cries, which for me is a cause for great pity, and for God must be a circumstance that greatly arouses His anger. The miserable slave is being whipped, and with every lash he cries out: "Jesus! Maria! Jesus! Maria!"—and the reverence that these two names deserve is not enough to arouse pity in a man who calls himself a Christian. And how do you expect these two

names to respond to you when you call upon them at the hour of your death? Know full well that God hears these cries for help which you do not hear; and though they do not touch your heart, you should know that they make your own punishment certain. . . .