

Item #10

Antônio Vieira, “Sermon on the First Sunday of Lent,” in *Colonial Latin America: A Documentary History*, edited by Kenneth Mills, William B. Taylor, and Sandra Lauderdale Graham (New York: SR Books, 2002), 228-233.

≈ “*Sermon on the First Sunday of Lent,*” preached in the city of São Luís do Maranhão, 1653

“All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.”

(Matthew 4: 9)

The Devil takes Christ by the hand and takes him to a mountain higher than the clouds and shows him from there the kingdoms, the cities, the courts of the entire world and their grandeur, and says to him: “All this I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” Can there be such a proposal? Come now, Devil: do you know what you say or what you do? Is it possible that the Devil promises the world for only one act of adoration? Is it possible that the Devil offers the world for only one sin? Is it possible that it does not seem much to the Devil to give the world for only one soul? . . .

At what a different price does the Devil buy souls today than he offered for them previously! And in our land, I say to you! The Devil has no other market in the world where they go more cheaply. In the Gospel he offered all the kingdoms of the world for one soul; in Maranhão the Devil need not offer such a purse for all souls. It is not necessary to offer worlds, nor kingdoms; it is not necessary to offer cities, nor towns, nor villages. All he has to do is wave toward a thatched hut and two Tapuya Indians and at once he is adored on both knees. Oh, what a cheap market! An Indian for a soul! And even better a female Indian than a male! This

Indian will be your slave for the few days that he lives; and your soul will be the Devil's for all eternity, as long as God is God. This is the contract the Devil makes with you. And not only do you accept it, but you give him your money on top of it!

My Senhores, impelled by the Gospel we have entered into the most serious and useful subject this State has. A subject from which comes either the salvation of the soul or life's remedy—see if it is serious and if it is useful. It is the most serious, the most important, and the most intricate subject. And being the most useful, it is the least pleasing. For this last reason of its being least pleasing I had determined never to speak of it, and thus also not to climb up into the pulpit. To mount the pulpit in order to give displeasure is not my purpose, and even less to people to whom I wish all that is pleasing and good. On the other hand, to climb into the pulpit and not to say the truth is against office, obligation, and conscience. . . . I ask you: Which is the better friend, he who warns you of danger, or he who, not wanting to cause you pain, leaves you to perish? Which doctor is more Christian: he who warns you of death, or he who, not wanting to upset you, lets you die without the sacraments? I had all these reasons but I had not finished deliberating. I went Friday morning to say Mass with this purpose, that God would enlighten and inspire me in what would be to His greater glory. On reading the Epistle, God told me what He wanted me to do, with His own words. They are from Isaiah: "Cry aloud, spare not, lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression." (Isaiah 58:1)

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Isaiah 58:6)

Do you know, Christians, do you know, nobles and people of Maranhão, what fast God wants of you during this Lent? That you loosen the bonds of injustice and let go free those whom you have [held] captive and oppressed. These are the sins of Maranhão; these are what God commands me to make known to you: "Declare to my people their transgressions." (Isaiah 58:1) Christians, God commands me to disillusion you, and I disillusion you on God's behalf. You are all in mortal sin; you all live and die in a state of condemnation, and you all will go directly to Hell. Many are already there and you will soon be there too if you do not change your life.

God help me! An entire people in sin? An entire people to Hell? Whoever is surprised by this knows nothing of unjust captivity. The sons of Israel went down into Egypt and, after the death of Joseph, the Pharaoh captured them and used them as slaves. Wanting to liberate this miserable people, God sent Moses there and gave him no other escort than a stick. God thought that to free the captives a stick was enough, even though he would free them from a king as tyrannical as the Pharaoh and from a people as barbarous as the Egyptians. When the Pharaoh refused to free the captives, plagues began to rain down on him. The land was filled with frogs, the air with mosquitoes; the rivers ran with blood, and the clouds were changed into thunder and lightning. All Egypt was awestruck and perishing. Do you know who brings plagues to Earth? Unjustly taken captives. Who brought the

Dutch plague to Maranhão? Who brought the plague of smallpox? Who brought hunger and scarcity? These captives.

Moses insisted and urged the Pharaoh to release the people. And what did the Pharaoh respond? He said one thing and did another. What he said was: "[Who is the Lord, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go?] I do not know the Lord, and moreover I will not let Israel go." (Exodus 5:2) Now that seems clear to me; let us say it now. Do you know why you do not give liberty to your ill-gotten slaves? Because you do not know God. Lack of faith is the cause of everything. If you had true faith, if you truly believed in the immortality of the soul, if you believed in Hell for all eternity, it would make me laugh that you would want to go there for having a Tapuya slave. With what confidence does the Devil say to you today: "if you fall down and adore me"? With the confidence of having offered you the world. The Devil made this speech: "I offer to this man everything; if he is greedy and avaricious, he must accept. If he accepts it, without doubt he worships me, committing idolatry, because greed and avarice are the same as idolatry." It is a saying expressed by Saint Paul: "... covetousness which is idolatry." (Colossians 3:5) Such was the avarice of the Pharaoh in wanting to retain and not give freedom to the captive sons of Israel, and at the same time confessing that he did not know God: "I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go." This is what he said.

What he did, the same Pharaoh, was to go after the fleeing Israelites with all the power of his kingdom in order to return them to captivity. And what happened? The Red Sea opened that the captives might pass on dry footing (God knows how to make miracles in order to liberate captives). Do not think that the Hebrews merited this by their virtues, because they were worse than these Tapuyas. A few days later they worshipped a [golden] calf, and of all six hundred thousand men only two entered the Promised Land, but God so favors liberty that he frees even those who do not deserve it if they are unjustly enslaved.

The Hebrews having passed to the other side, the Pharaoh entered along the same road which was still open, the sea separated like walls, then the waters fell over him and his army and drowned them all. What I notice here is the way in which Moses tells this in his song: "Thou didst blow with Thy wind, the sea covered them; they sank as lead in the mighty waters. . . . Thou didst stretch out Thy right hand, the earth swallowed them." (The Song of Moses, Exodus 15:10 & 12) That the sea fell over them and drowned them and the earth swallowed them. Now if the sea drowned them, how could the earth devour them? Those men, like us, had both body and soul. The water drowned the bodies because they were at the bottom of the sea; the earth devoured the souls because they descended into Hell. All went to Hell, without anyone excepted because where all pursue and all capture, all are condemned. Is this not a good example? Now, consider the reasoning.

Any man who receives services and deprives others of their freedom and, being able to restore it, does not do so, is certainly condemned. All, or nearly all, men of Maranhão receive services and deprive others of their freedom and, being able to restore it, do not restore it. Therefore, all or nearly all are condemned. You will say to me that even if this were so, they did not think about it or know it, and their

good faith will save them. I deny this. Yes, they did think about it, and, yes, they did know it, just as you also think about it and know it. And if they did not think of it or know it, they ought to have thought of it and known it. Some are condemned by their knowledge, others by their doubt, others by their ignorance. Those who have knowledge condemn themselves by not restoring it; those who doubt condemn themselves by not examining it; those who are ignorant condemn themselves by not knowing when they have the obligation to know. Ah, if graves would open now and some of those who died in this unhappy state would appear here in their burning flames, you would clearly read this truth! But do you know why God does not permit them to appear before you? It is as Abraham said to the rich miser when he asked him to send Lazarus to this world: "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'" (Luke 16:29) It is not necessary for someone to come here from Hell to tell you the truth. You already have Moses and the law, you have the prophets and learned men. My brothers, if you doubt this, here are the laws, here are the learned men, question them. You have three religious orders in this State with so many members of such virtue and learning. Ask, examine, inform yourselves. But it is not necessary to go to the religious, go to Turkey, go to Hell, because there is no Turk so Turkish in Turkey, nor a Devil so devilish in Hell who will tell you that a free man can be a slave. Is there any among you with natural intelligence who denies it? Then why do you doubt?

I see what you tell me: "This is all very well, if we had another solution. . . . This people, this republic, this State cannot be sustained without Indians. Who will go in search of a bucket of water for us or a bundle of firewood? Who will plant our manioc? Will our wives have to do it? Will our sons?" First, these are not the straits in which I put you, as you will soon see. But when necessity and conscience require such a thing, I say yes, and yes again: you, your wives, your sons, we all should sustain ourselves by our own labor. It is better to live from our own sweat than from the blood of others.

You will say that your slaves are your feet and hands. You will be able to say that you love them greatly because you raised them as children, as your own. And so it is, but Christ has already responded to this reply: "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; . . . And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." (Matthew 5:29; Mark 9:42 & 44) Christ does not mean to say that we should gouge out our eyes or cut off our feet. He means to say that if that which we love as our eyes and that which is as necessary as our feet and hands causes us injury, cast it from us even though it hurts us as if we had cut it. Who is there who does not love his arm or his hand but, if it suddenly became diseased, would not permit its amputation in order to save his life? . . . If in order to calm your conscience and save your soul it were necessary to lose everything and become like Job, lose everything.

But take heart, my Senhores, it is not necessary to arrive at such a point, nor even close to it. I have studied the matter with all care and purpose; and following the most liberal and favorable opinions, I have narrowed things down such that with very little worldly loss, and with very great benefits, all the residents of this State can improve their prospects for the future. Give me your attention.

All the Indians of this State are either those who serve you as slaves or those who live in the King's villages as free persons, or those who live in the wilderness in their natural and even greater liberty. These latter are the ones you go upriver to buy or to "rescue" (as they say), giving the pious name of rescue to a sale so forced and violent that sometimes it is done with a pistol at the chest. Regarding those who serve you, all in this land are inherited, gotten, and possessed in bad faith, and therefore they will be doing no small thing (even if they do it easily) if they forgive [what you owe for] their past service. However, once you have declared their freedom, if they, having been raised in your house and with your children, more or less domesticated, spontaneously and voluntarily want to remain there, no one can separate them from your service. And what will be done with those who do not wish to continue in such submission? These will be obliged to go and live in the King's villages where they also will serve you, as we will soon see. Every year you will be able to make your expeditions into the wilderness truly to rescue those who are (as it is said) tied up ready to be eaten, and this cruelty will be commuted to perpetual captivity. So, too, all those who, without violence, were sold as slaves by their enemies or taken in a just war will be [your] captives. The judges in this will be the Governor of the State, the Magistrate General, the Vicar of Maranhão or Pará, and the Prelates of the four religious orders: Carmelites, Franciscans, Mercedarians, and the Society of Jesus. All of those judged to be true captives will be distributed among the colonists at the same price for which they were bought. And those who were not taken in a just war, what will happen to them? All will be divided into new villages or divided among the villages that exist today. These along with all the other village Indians will be distributed among the colonists to serve them for six months of the year, alternating every two months, so that for the other six months they will attend to their own fields and families. In this way all the Indians of the State will serve the Portuguese either as properly and fully slaves—those tied up or taken in a just war—or those who freely and voluntarily wish to serve or, as half-captives, all those from the former and new villages who, being free, will submit themselves to serve half the time of their lives for the good and conservation of the State.

It only remains to know the wage for those called "half captives" or "half free" with which their labor and service will be paid. It is a matter that would make any other nation of the world laugh, and only in this land is it not surprising. The currency of this land is cotton cloth, and the usual price for which Indians serve and will serve each month are two lengths of this cloth, worth a few cents. From which it follows that an Indian will serve for less than a few copper coins a day! An amount not worth mentioning, and much less worthy of men of reason and Christian faith who, for not paying such a small price, condemn their souls to Hell.

Could there be anything more prudent than this? Could there be anything more reasonable than this? Whoever is not content or not satisfied with this is either not Christian or lacks reason. Otherwise, let us press the point and weigh the benefits and costs of this proposal.

The cost is only one, that there will be some private individuals who lose a few Indians, and I promise you they will be very few. But to those who seek

compensation, I ask: Do not some of your Indians die? Do not some of your Indians flee? Many. Then does death do what reason will not? Does chance do what an uneasy conscience will not? If smallpox comes and carries off all your Indians, what will you do? You will have to have patience. Is it not better to lose them to the service of God than to lose them by a punishment of God? This has no reply.

Let us go to the benefits of which four are the most important. The first is that you will acquire a clear conscience. You see what a great good this is. You will be removed from a state of mortal sin. You will live as Christians, confess yourselves as Christians, die as Christians, you will bequeath your goods as Christians. Finally, you will go to Heaven, not to Hell which, at the least, would certainly be a sad thing.

The second benefit is that you will remove this curse from your houses. There is no greater curse on a house or a family than to be unjustly served with the blood and sweat of others. Everything is undone; nothing is gained. The Devil takes everything. The bread thus earned is like that today offered by the Devil to Christ: bread of stones which, if it does not stick in your throat, cannot be digested. See that in this much bread is taken from Maranhão, see if any is digested, see if anything is gained. . . .

The third benefit is that in this way there will be more rescues by which more Indians will be removed [from cannibalistic practices], which by any other way there will not be. Do you not say that this State cannot sustain itself without Indians? Well, if the wilderness is closed and the rescues completely prohibited and the few remaining Indians dead, what solution do you have? It is important that Indians be rescued and only by this means can the rescues be permitted.

The fourth and last benefit is that a proposal made in this way will be worthy of going to the hands of His Majesty for approval and confirmation. Whoever asks for the illegal and unjust deserves to have the legal and just denied him; and whoever petitions with conscience, justice, and reason deserves to have his request fulfilled. You know the proposal that you made here? It was a proposal that vassals could not make in conscience, nor ministers deliberate in conscience, nor a king grant in conscience. And even if it were possible that the King would permit such a thing, how would this serve you? If the King allows me to swear falsely, does the false oath cease to be a sin? If the King allows me to steal, will the theft cease to be a sin? The same applies to Indians. The King can order that the captives be freed, but his jurisdiction does not extend to making the free captives. If such a request went to the Crown, the very stones of the street would cry out against the men of Maranhão. But if the request were legal, just, and Christian, those same stones would line up with you.