

"Children of God's Fire": A Seventeenth-Century Jesuit Finds Benefits in Slavery but Chastises 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 Antonio Vieira. Speaking to both slaves and masters at the church of the black brotherhood of the Rosary, in Bahia, Vieira fashioned the Church's discordant doctrines on slavery into a complex baroque "harmony." Justifying lavery 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, heir brutal punishments, and more than hinted at the likelihood that they would spend eternity in hell. Source: **Obras tompletas do Padre Antonio Vieira, Sermoes**, 15 vols. (Porto: 1907-1909) XII 301-334. Thanks to Professor Richard Slatta for permission to reproduce his introduction and translation from his website.]*

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, 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 *pieces* [*pecas*]? 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 *peca* 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 hot `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!