

Table of Contents

Psalm 72: (71)

[Icon # 740 = The Importance of Exercising Justice and Righteousness](#)

[Icon # 741 = Mountains and Hills of Prosperity and Righteousness](#)

[Icon # 742 = God's Predilection for the Poor and the Needy](#)

[Icon # 743 = Wishing Someone to live Forever](#)

[Icon # 744 = Righteousness and Peace Shall Flourish and Abound for all eternity](#)

[Icon # 745 = The Lord Jesus' Dominion is boundless](#)

[Icon # 746 = The Kingship of Christ and Our Participation in it](#)

[Icon # 747 = Characteristics of the Reign of the Lord Jesus](#)

[Icon # 748 = Long Live the Lord Jesus Christ!](#)

[Icon # 749 = Abundance of Life, Joy, and Happiness in the Kingdom of Heaven](#)

[Icon # 750 = The Most Powerful Name in the Universe](#)

Psalm 73: (72)

[Icon # 751 = Truly God is good to the Upright, to those who are pure of heart](#)

[Icon # 752 = The Danger of Being Envious](#)

[Icon # 753 = The Lost of the Sense of Sin](#)

[Icon # 754 = They Say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"](#)

[Icon # 755 = Will the Wicked be always at Ease?](#)

[Icon # 756 = The effectiveness of Crosses and Trials in molding us into the kind of Person We are meant to be](#)

[Icon # 757 = Not acting out unwholesome thought](#)

[Icon # 758 = The Advantage in meditating in Church or Chapel](#)

[Icon # 759 = Compunction and Counsel will lead us to eternal glory](#)

[Icon # 760 = Whom do we have in Heaven?](#)

[Icon # 761 = All those who abandoned God shall perish](#)

[Icon # 762 = It is Good to be near God](#)

Psalm 74: (73)

[Icon # 763 = Does God cast off people forever?](#)

[Icon # 764 = God's Chosen Community for the Communication of His divine Life](#)

[Icon # 765 = The Persecution of Christians](#)

[Icon # 766 = Is the Enemy of God revile His name forever?](#)

[Icon # 767 = Christ is King and God](#)

[Icon # 768 = Who Shall Crush the Serpent's head, He or She?](#)

[Icon # 769 = Christ is Really a living Water](#)

[Icon # 770 = The Big Bang and the Word](#)

[Icon # 771 = The Scoffers and the Impious People](#)

[Icon # 772 = Deliverance of the Dove and the life of the truly Poor](#)

[Icon # 773 = Covenant with God](#)

[Icon # 774 = Let not the downtrodden be put to shame; let the poor and needy praise thy name](#)

[Icon # 775 = Arise, O God, Plead Thy Cause](#)

Psalm 75: (74)

[Icon # 776 = Absolute Duty to Give Thanks to God](#)

[Icon # 777 = Time Set for Judgment](#)

[Icon # 778 = God is our support when we totter](#)

[Icon # 779 = The Wrong and the Correct boasting](#)

[Icon # 780 = God bends down to the humble soul to lift it up](#)

[Icon # 781 = Who can imagine God's wrath, poured unmixed into the Cup of His anger?](#)

[Icon # 782 = We will rejoice forever](#)

Psalm 76: (75)

[Icon # 783 = God is known in Christ Jesus the Prince of Peace](#)

[Icon # 784 = The Glory and Majesty of God](#)

[Icon # 785 = The stouthearted were stripped of their spoil](#)

[Icon # 786 = Who can stand before God when once His anger is roused?](#)

[Icon # 787 = God arose to establish judgment to save all the oppressed of the earth](#)

[Icon # 788 = The wrath of men shall redound to the glory of God and fulfill them](#)

[Icon # 789 = Make vows to God and Fulfill them](#)

Psalm 77: (76)

[Icon # 790 = It is beneficial to recourse to the Lord in times of trouble](#)

[Icon # 791 = So troubled to the point that one cannot speak](#)

[Icon # 792 = Will the Lord spurn for ever and never again be favorable?](#)

[Icon # 793 = Has the steadfast Love of God ceased Forever?](#)

[Icon # 794 = The grief when the right hand of the Most High has changed](#)

[Icon # 795 = The Works of the Lord](#)

[Icon # 796 = The Way of God is Holy. No other god is great as Our God](#)

[Icon # 797 = The God Who works Wonders](#)

[Icon # 798 = The Redemption](#)

[Icon # 799 = The Storm of our Passions and Emotions](#)

[Icon # 800 = The Lightnings, the Thunder, and the Clouds](#)

Icon # 801 = The Unseen Coming and Going of God
Icon # 802 = Shepherd

Icon # 740 = The Importance of Exercising Justice and Righteousness

Psalm 72 (71)

“Give the king thy justice, O God, and thy righteousness to the royal son! May he judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with justice!”

No matter how high or lowly our standing in life is we all need justice, but much more is needed of kings, princes, presidents, governors, mayors, and judges. Of course, there are various modalities of justice, such as: Distributive justice; Retributive justice; Commutative justice; Restorative justice, that is, punishment of criminal activity should be to: preserve and protect the common good, restore public order, and restore or convert the offender; and social justice.

Justice should not only be done, but should manifestly seen have been done. Justice, like charity, starts with ourselves. Only, thus, can we be in a position to understand and correct others, if such correction is required by family responsibility or professional status, without restricting the liberty of those corrected, so that they may themselves choose to do good.

When we throw barbs at others and wound their self-respect, we keep them at arm's length and further off, too, because they have been hurt, and are resentful or confused; we deprive them of the great healing benefit of charity. “So speak and so act, as men about to be judged by the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to him who has not shown mercy, but mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2: 13).

Pope emeritus Benedict XVI, in *Deus Caritas*, asserts that there is an apparent difference between social work and social justice. Of course, St. Teresa of Calcutta observed this when she argued that her Missionaries of Charity “were not social workers.” Social work is about meeting a need, while social justice has to be meeting the need in a manner that primarily highlights the “godly dignity” of both the person being served and the person doing the serving. For instance, if we are not particular about how the need of others is met, we undermine the dignity of our own personhood if we serve them in a way that we believe is contrary to our dignity as a child of God.

The Lord Jesus told us to: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well” (cf. Mt. 6:33) Of course, the Lord said this reference to food and clothing, concerning which He told us that we ought not to be solicitous, because Our Heavenly Father, in His unspeakable charity, will provide them. And He will do so for two reasons: first, lest we should look upon Him as our enemy, and thus fall into despair, if He refused to supply our temporal wants; secondly, lest an excessive anxiety regarding the things of this world should prove an obstacle to the interests of our souls. For without sufficiency of earthly goods both the service of God and life itself would be impossible (cf. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon on Psalm 90).

It is truly right and just to affirm that righteousness stands for justice and blamelessness for meekness. Take for example, when we are trying to implement righteousness and justice, we usually leave blamelessness and meekness behind; when we wish to execute blamelessness and meekness, we leave righteousness and justice behind.

Certainly, rulers and kings really need a proper balance of these virtues to be able to rule wisely and judge rightly. For this reason, they need to pray to God to give them these virtues, because God is the source of all virtues. In doing so, they will participate in the virtues of God Himself, fully manifested in His Incarnate Word, no other than the Lord Jesus.

Christ is the perfect paradigm in the exercise of virtues. For instance, He had both blamelessness and righteousness, for His meekness did not lack strict justice, nor on the other hand did His strict justice lack the virtue of meekness. And so, when certain people led an adulteress to Him, trying to trap Him to offend the virtue of either meekness and justice, His answer rightly satisfied both: "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn. 8: 7).

The words "him who is without sin among you" satisfy both blamelessness and meekness; and the words "let him be the first to throw a stone at her" satisfy zeal for justice. Thus it is written, "For the sake of truth, meekness, and justice, set out, prosper and reign." Hence in search of truth He keeps meekness and justice together, so that the weight of meekness may not make Him lose His zeal for justice, nor on the other hand should He free Himself from the weight of meekness to keep His zeal for justice.

For this reason, it is right and fitting to cry out: →

Icon # 741 = Mountains and Hills of Prosperity and Righteousness

"Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness."
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Mountains have always been important to "Man's relationship with God." It is there perhaps more than anywhere else save deserts, that man has been drawn in search of the invisible God and the meaning of his life, for instance: Mount Moriah, Mount Sinai, Mount Horeb, Mount Nebo, Mount Carmel, Mount Tabor, Mount of Olives, and Mount Calvary.

Mountains mean isolation, and therefore solitude and silence, where we can be alone with God. The Lord Jesus Himself often went up to a mountain, a solitary place to spend the night alone in prayer to His heavenly Father.

Mountain is a natural place for retreat from the hectic conventional life of a city. We can be alone with God, as in the secret Chamber. So it has been with all the serious seekers of God, they ascended often where the clamorous echoes of the world did not penetrate, and where only the still small voices of the soul were heard. As we make progress in the spiritual, the more we are attracted to a solitary place.

It might be poetic for choosing the mountain for prayer, but it is more than poetic, it is also practical. In the mountain we can be alone and quiet still; the sights and sounds of city life are far down below in the valley. And as we are quiet still we are closer to God.

We may poetically think of God as in the sky above, thus we may approach His kingdom more closely by getting up into a mountain. This we may say is simply poetic, imaginative, but it has a spiritual aspect to it as much as the lifting up of the nature in spirit to heavenly things disposes it to pray with greater realization of the Divine presence, and less of distraction from worldly anxieties.

Hence, it suggests a wholesome thought that Our Lord Jesus should choose the most solitary place for His prayer. He could, without difficulty, withdraw Himself from the sights and sounds of earth. Although His devotions could not really be hindered by these things, yet inasmuch as He had taken upon Him the form of a servant, being like us in all things, except sin, He willed to use all the helps to spiritual living which the heavenly Father provident His servants.

It is the mountain considered as the place of prayer, which is to bring us peace in this present world. The external life is not likely to be calm and placid so far as temporal conditions are concerned, for the sphere of human existence is almost invariably a troubled one. The peace is to be found within. And how can we secure it for ourselves? Certainly, prayer has its lion's share. The heart need to be still to converse with God, all alone with Him, and pervaded with a sense of the nearness and the solemnity of His presence.

The thought of the mountains may suggest to us characteristics of genuine prayer. Thus when we pray after this sort the peace of God creeps gradually into our lives. Very likely, the tribulations of life do not vanish, the difficulties are still there, but in the transfiguring light of the sense of the Divine nearness they no longer seem unbearable, no longer hopeless.

If we really believe that God cares, and is guarding us, we cannot be greatly disturbed by anything which happens in this present life. No blow of fate can snatch God from us or us from Him, neither tribulation nor distress, nor persecution, nor famine, nor nakedness, nor peril, nor sword, and we need no more than that.

Prayers correctly used throws all about this common weary life of ours a heavenly atmosphere, a halo of the eternal love and goodness of God. Everything in that condition assumes its true relation to the immortality of our soul, the temporal things is like a dream, an illusion of the moment; the eternal things are the realities, and in them nothing dwells but peace. For this reason "the mountains bear prosperity for the people and the hills, in righteousness!" We can also declare: →

Icon # 742 = God's Predilection for the Poor and the Needy

"May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor!"

It is truly right and just to assert that the Lord Jesus had a predilection for the poor. He even beatified them and gave to them the kingdom of heaven, Saying: "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven" (Lk. 6: 20).

The preferential option for the poor has been one of the major developments in the social teaching of the Catholic Church in the 20th century. This preferential option for the poor is simply the idea that, as reflected in Canon law, "The Christian faithful are also obliged to promote social justice and, mindful of the precept of the Lord, to assist the poor." It denotes a responsibility, on all of us who call ourselves Christian, first and foremost to care for the poor and destitute, and all who are less privileged in life.

In the 70's till around the middle of the 80's the liberation theology of Latin America became so popular especially in Latin American countries and also in the Philippines when President Ferdinand Marcos declared Martial Law on September 21, 1972, which some conscientious objectors considered as a beginning of the reign of dictatorship.

In its early usage, the preferential option for the poor referred essentially to a trend throughout biblical texts, where there is a manifest preference given to powerless individuals who live on the margins of society. The liberation theology movement fully espoused the concept, especially when they intimately associated the poor and vulnerable with the Lord Jesus Himself, citing Mt. 25: 31-45, "...Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me."

Certainly, liberation theology traced not only to Latin American economic, social, political circumstances, but also to the aggiornamento of the Church in the 2nd Vatican Council and 2nd General Conference of the Latin American Bishops at Medellin, Columbia in 1968 to implement the aggiornamento, that is, updating.

The main principles guiding these approaches are: 1st, God is present in the history of His people, bringing them salvation; and 2nd, He is the God of the poor and cannot tolerate oppression or injustice. Therefore, it follows that exegesis cannot be neutral, but must, in imitation of God take side on behalf of the poor and be engaged in the struggle to liberate the oppressed.

Moreover, it includes elements of undoubted values, such as: The deep awareness of the presence of God who saves; the insistence on the communal dimension of faith; the pressing sense of the need for a liberating praxis rooted in justice and love; and a fresh reading of the Bible which seeks to make the word of God the light and nourishment of the people of God in the midst of its struggles and hopes.

However, critics of liberation theology pointed out the grave dangers in reading the Bible from a stance of such commitment, such as: 1st, this mode of reading the Bible is selective, limited, and become one-sided; it does not give enough attention to biblical texts that may bear other messages, for instance, Is. 2: 4 which says: "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." It centered only on narrative and prophetic texts which highlight situations of oppression and call for social change.

2nd, the direct task of the interpreter should not be social and political action. Such action springs from an ideology, which may invoke biblical teachings for motivation, but which cannot be equated with or supplant the function of the biblical exegete. 3rd, some theologians and exegetes of liberation theology brought to their interpretation of the Bible an analysis inspired by materialist doctrines, especially Marxist principle of class struggle.

4th, under the pressure of enormous social problems, it emphasizes more and more on an earthly eschatology to the detriment of the more transcendental dimensions of Scriptural eschatology; 5th, recent social and political changes are calling liberation theology to redefines its directions, and this, in turn demands a clarification of its hermeneutical presuppositions, its coherence with the faith and the Tradition of the Church as a whole.

Here are some of the more well known adherents of liberation theology: Ernesto Cardenal from Nicaragua, became Minister of Culture. He was a novice at Gethsemane Abbey at one point; Fernando Cardenal from Nicaragua, a Jesuit, became the Director of the Sandinista literacy program; Miguel D' Escoto from Nicaragua, a Maryknoll priest, became Foreign Minister; Jon Soberino and Ignacio Ellacuria from El Salvador, Jesuits and Liberation Theologians; and Leonardo Boff from Brazil, a Franciscan and theologian. He eventually left not only the Franciscans, but also the Church.

It is intriguing to note that the “option for the poor” did not solely remain in the liberation theology camp. In 1991, Pope John Paul II used the term, and elaborated on the concept in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*. In that encyclical, which celebrated the 100 – year anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (On Capital and Labor), Pope John Paul II expanded the use of the “option for the poor” to include spiritual as well as material poverty.

Pope Benedict XVI, who was rather famously antagonistic to liberation theology, embrace the option for the poor as a true Catholic obligation, and extended the understanding of the poor to include all those are marginalized in society: widows, children, people with disabilities, and victims of oppression, among others.

In our contemporary political landscape, this preferential option for the poor gets circulated about by people on all sides of the political spectrum. It is part and parcel of debates regarding social welfare, food stamps, private charity, political advocacy, and more. At the end of the day, the preferential option for the poor does not tell how we are to achieve it. It only lets us know that in our lives as Christians, we are called to share some of our God-given resources to care for the less privileged in society.

On the other hand, we have also to reckon with a singular fact that in affluent countries the deepest and most debilitating poverty is moral, not financial; the most excruciating deprivation is cultural, not economic. Certainly, many people living at the bottom of those countries have cell phones, flat-screen TVs, and some of the other goodies of consumer culture, but their lives are in a miserable mess.

They, too, are being oppressed by their inordinate desires and cravings for the things of this world. Hence, we beseech the Lord to grant them deliverance, because the Lord, who is compassionate and merciful, does not disdain to be the hope of the miserable; He does not refuse to show Himself the Defender and the Deliverer of them that trust in Him.

If these things are theirs and abound, it would signal a good omen for them. Thus we can gladly wish them well: →

Icon # 743 = Wishing Someone to live Forever

“May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations! May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.”

It is not farfetched to assert that to wish someone to “live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations,” is nearly tantamount to wish the person to live forever. The reason why it is certainly not unreasonable, because finite beings as we are, yet to live as long as the sun still shining is already mind boggling.

We are told that the life span of our sun began roughly 4.6 billion years ago, and will continue for about another 4.5 – 5.5 billion years, when it will deplete its supply of hydrogen and helium. In other words, in the distant future our sun will eventually run out of fuel and slowly slouch towards death. Hence, it will come to an end, and that is true for our beloved earth as well.

Although 4.5 – 5.5 billion years sound relatively small, but it is already mind boggling if we break in down into millions, then thousands, then hundred of years. Four point five to five point five billion years is actually equivalent to four point five to five point thousand million years (4.5-5.5,000,000,000 years); Four point five to five point five thousand million years is actually equivalent to four point five to five point five million thousand years (4.5-5.5,000,000,000); and four point five to five point five million thousand years is actually equivalent to fourty point five to fifty point five million hundred years (40.5 - 50.5, 000,000,00 years).

Actually, it is virtually impossible to comprehend even one billion years considering the fact that one billion seconds is roughly 32 years; one billion minutes is roughly 2,000 years; one billion hours is approximately 115,000 years; one billion days is nearly three million years (3,000,000 yrs).

These words may be easy to say, and within our mathematical calculation, but this, too, is very limited and carry no significant meaning. They may perhaps, capable of impressing knowledge but not of conveying understandable information. Think about it. What could 4 billion years possibly mean to a person, bored enough, who could hardly endure one day? or what it could mean to an old person who has lived just 32,850 days?

A billion years might just as well be eternity, an equally unfathomable time word, we can't comprehend either, but we believe it because the Creator of time promised it to us: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believe in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3: 16). “Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee, since thou hast given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom thou hast given him. And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God,

and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent”(Jn. 17: 2-3). “If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you will abide in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he has promised us, eternal life” (1Jn. 2: 24-25)

For this reason, it is a wholesome gesture to wish someone to “live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon throughout all generations! May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.” Very likely, rain reminds us of God’s love – we can’t live without it. Our soul will be in utter destitute if we are deprived of it.

Maybe sometimes we take a shower not so much to clean our body as to comfort our soul, or at least to feel washed. If we feel distressed or dirty inside, a shower of the sacrament of Reconciliation can help to clean our soul. It is the shower of God’s loving presence that provides the personal nourishment we need. Of course, the Holy Spirit lives inside each one of us who trust Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ – our bodies are His temple and He provides all that we need.

In another sense we need to be continually re-filled and renewed by the Spirit of Christ. It is not only that we need more of God, but that we can turn over more of ourselves to Him, more of our attention and affection, more of our dependence and devotion. We pray for God’s spirit to rain down upon us. Again and again we need to be cleansed of sin and also of feeling of guilt or shame; to be washed by the water of mercy.

We must also discover, at the center of our loves, the hidden spring of water that God has wisely hidden there! We must continually return to it like the Samaritan woman to her well. Discovering that deep well within ourselves is perhaps the primary activity of our spiritual search. Truly, without being continually watered by God’s love, each thing hardens, becomes static, fossilized, as the Psalmist rightly says: “Rain in abundance, O God, thou didst shed abroad; thou didst restore thy heritage as it languished” (Ps. 68: (9).

It is right and reasonable to avow that a particularly poignant form that water takes is tears. People who experienced true repentance, had been touched by grace, or had been moved by the words, deeds, and goodness of others, certainly shed tears. There are truly tears of repentance and tears of joy in God’s kindness.

It is not farfetched to say that tears are the humble, created water of our heart that corresponds to the potent uncreated water of the Holy Spirit’s life within us. Plausibly, tears are probably the most rejuvenating and re-creating water of all, the obvious evidence that we have allowed the grace of God to melt the ice of self-centeredness at the core of our being. As the great French novelist, pamphleteer, essayist, and poet Leon Bloy strikingly says: “Where there are tears,

there is the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit of God is always, as at the beginning, 'hovering over the waters.'

In the words of our heavenly friend, no other than the illustrious St. Peter Damian: "The moisture of tears cleanses the soul from all stain and makes fertile the fields of the heart so that they may bring forth the seeds of virtue. The tears which come from God approach the judgment seat of the divine mercy with perfect confidence, and obtaining at once what they ask, are assured of the certain forgiveness of our sins. Tears are the trustees in the making of peace between God and man, and true and wise masters amid the doubtings of human ignorance. For if we are wondering whether or not we are pleasing to God, no better guarantee can be given us than that we pray with genuine tears."

If these things are ours and abound, they will prevent us from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Thus we can heap more wholesome wishes for them such as: →

Icon # 744 = Righteousness and Peace Shall Flourish and Abound for all eternity

"In his days may righteousness flourish, and peace abound, till the moon be no more!"

Again, this wish is intertwined with the previous wish, because the light of the moon is intimately dependent upon the sun, that is, when the sun dies out the moon will also die, that is, no longer gives light. Therefore, to wish that righteousness may flourish and peace abound in his days till the existence of the moon is identical to wish that righteousness and peace may flourish and abound for all eternity. For us, believers, it is not difficult to believe that it is certainly true in the kingdom of heaven where peace and righteousness flourish and abound forever and ever, from glory to glory.

We are told by our other heavenly friend, no other than the well-beloved Irish saint, St. Patrick, that "the kingdom of God is so full of light, and peace, and charity, and wisdom, and glory, and honesty, and sweetness, and loving kindness, and every unspeakable and unutterable good, that it can neither be described nor envisioned by the mind....every good abounds and there is nothing evil....In the eternal kingdom there shall be life without death, truth without falsehood, and happiness without shadow of unrest or change, in Christ Jesus Our Lord, who lives and reigns world without end. Amen" (cf. St. Patrick, Heaven and Hell, What no eye has seen nor ear heard....1Cor. 2: 1-10).

No doubt that it is very consoling to think of the life of righteousness and peace in heaven. Our imagination, no matter how powerful it is, can hardly imagine a life without the slightest trouble or distrust, a life without a past to excite regrets,

or a present to gall with a yoke, or a future all dim and misty in its uncertainty. The sleep of a peaceful honest work is an image of this delicious righteousness.

The starry skies at soundless midnight give us a feeling we can adequately express, but which helps to conceive a notion the utter peace of that blissful righteousness hereafter. It is like no other; for it is a participation in that peace and righteousness of God which surpasses human understanding. An ocean of heavenliest peace, bound in mysterious and happy tranquility, inviting us to cruise upon its bosom, onward into the brightness forever and forever.

It is fitting and correct to say that there is a significant difference between peace of mind and peace of soul. Peace of mind is the outcome of pulling together ordering principle to bear on discordant human experiences; this may be achieved by tolerance, or by a gritting of one's teeth in the face of pain; by killing conscience, or denying guilt, or by finding "new loves" to assuage "old griefs."

On the other hand, the peaceful soul seeks not only to live morally, but to live for God; morality is a by-product of the union with God. All the energy that was previously wasted in conflict, either in trying to find the purpose of life or in trying alone and futilely to conquer one's vices, can now be released to serve a single purpose: to know, to serve, and to love God in this life and be happy with Him in the next. Therefore, we can continue to desire that: →

Icon # 745 = The Lord Jesus' Dominion is boundless

"May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth!"

We have abundance and overwhelming evidence that the kingdom, the dominion, and the authority of the Lord Jesus are "from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth!" We will lay out some of them. However, to simplify our assertion we will just mention the ones in the New Testament, because if we will also include the Old Testament this whole notebook might not be enough, especially if we will also include its exegesis.

The foremost, of course, is at the "Annunciation" when the archangel Gabriel told the Blessed Virgin Mary that "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Lk. 1: 31-33).

Second, of course, is from the Son Himself who testified "The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son, even as

they honor the Father....For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of man" (Jn 5: 22-23, 26-27).

Finally, when the Lord Jesus was about to ascend to heaven, He told His disciples, saying: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt. 28: 18-20).

Therefore, it is reasonably clear that His dominion is boundless, "from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth!" Of course, God shared His dominion with our human race, beginning from our first parents – the first man and woman. "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," He said; "and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (Gen. 1: 26).

"This family arrangement," says our heavenly friend, no other than the genius St. Augustine, "is what nature prescribes, and what God intended in creating man: 'let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, over all the wild animals and every creature that crawls on the earth.' God wanted rational man, made to His image, to have no dominion except over irrational nature. He meant no man, therefore, to have dominion over man, but only man over beast. So it fell out that those who were holy in primitive times became shepherds over sheep rather than monarch over men, because God wishes in this way to teach us that the normal hierarchy of creatures is different from that which punishment for sin had made imperative. For, when subjection came, it was merely a condition deservedly imposed on sinful man. So, in Scripture, there is no mention of the word 'servant' until holy Noe used it in connection with the curse on his son's wrongdoing. It is a designation that is not natural, but one that was deserved because of sin.

"The Latin word for 'slave' is servus and it is said that this word is derived from the fact that those who, by right of conquest, could have been killed were sometimes kept and guarded, servantur, by their captors and so became slaves and were servi. Now, such a condition of servitude could only have arisen as a result of sin, since, whenever a just war is waged the opposing side must be in the wrong, and every victory, even when won by wicked men, is a divine judgment to humble the conquered and to reform or punish their sin. To this truth Daniel the great man of God, bore witness. When he was languishing in the Babylonian captivity he confessed to God his sins and those of his people and avowed, with pious repentance, that these sins were the cause of the captivity.

“It is clear, then, that sin is the primary cause of servitude, in the sense of a social status in which one man is compelled to be subjected to another man. Nor does this befall a man, save by the decree of God, who is never unjust and who knows how to impose appropriate punishments of different sinners.

“Our heavenly Master says: ‘everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin.’ So it happens that holy people are sometimes enslaved to wicked masters who are, in turn, themselves slaves. For, ‘by whatever a man is overcome, of this also he is a slave. Surely it is better to be the slave of a man than the slave of passion as when, to take but one example, the lust for lordship raises such havoc in the hearts of men. Such, then, as men now are, is the order of peace. Some are in subjection to others, and, while humility helps those who serve, pride harms those in power” (St. Augustine, City of God, Book XIX, Philosophy and Christianity, On Man’s End, Ch. 15).

Our Catholic faith tells us that Our Lord Jesus the Word of God became a human being in order to redeem us. In that redeeming mission He came as Teacher- Prophet to free us from the darkness of error, and to point out the way of Truth, the way to heaven, our true home. He came as Priest to offer sacrifice in reparation for our sins, and to win back for our human race the divine life of grace and access to heaven lost by the sins of our first parents.

He came as king to conquer Satan and his kingdom established at the fall of our first parents, thus liberating our human race from his dominion which is also “from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth,” and to establish on earth the kingdom of God made up of the redeemed.

As Pope Pius XI pointed out in his encyclical on “Christ the King,” Christ’s kingship is founded on the ineffable “hypostatic union,” that is, the union between the human nature of Christ and Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. By reason of that union Christ as man transcends every creature, “from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth,” and even the highest angels who must adore and serve Him.

The eagle like St. John the Evangelist testifies that the Lord Jesus is king of all creation and “have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth,” because “all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (Jn. 1: 3). And as our other heavenly friend, no other than St. Cyril the Patriarch of Alexandria, testified: “Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but His by essence and by nature.”

Accordingly, not only does Christ’s dominion stem from His very nature, but he also acquired the right to kingship “by reason of conquest,” for He purchased us by His sacrifice on Calvary, redeeming us from the slavery of sin and Satan. That

is why our good friend, St. Paul, reminds the Christians in Corinth, “you were bought with a price” (1Cor. 6: 20); and it was after His redeeming sacrifice and resurrection that Christ said to the Apostles: “All power is given to Me in heaven and on earth.”

In addition, although the dominion that the Lord Jesus exercised in our world is of spiritual nature, yet by reason of His divine nature and His role as Redeemer He has a temporal power as well, but He did not choose to use it. As our other heavenly friend, no other than the angelic doctor of the Church, St. Thomas explains, He did not will to have on earth the temporal administration of an earthly kingdom: “Christ, although established king by God, did not wish while living on earth to govern with temporal power on earthly kingdom; consequently He said: ‘My kingdom is not of this world’” (III, 59, 4, ad 1).

We have to assert strongly, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant for some people to hear, that all human beings, believers as well as unbeliever, “from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth,” are completely subject to the sovereign dominion of the Lord Jesus. All are subject to His dominion even though some refuse to accept Him as Lord and Master, or submit to Him. At the end of time His temporal power will be made manifest, and all will submit to His dominion willingly or unwillingly, to the eternal anguish of those who refused to recognize and submit to His authority during their life on earth, and to eternal glory, honor, and happiness of those who accepted and submit to His rule.

As our good friend, St. Paul, rightly says: “For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for every one who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek” (Rom. 2: 6-10).

On this ground, we can deduce: →

Icon # 746 = The Kingship of Christ and Our Participation in it

“May his foes bow down before him, and his enemies lick the dust! May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles render him tribute, may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him!”

Although it is not hard to imagine “his foes bow down before him” but it is not that easy to describe “his enemies lick the dust” until we can pierce the mysteries of God and understand what become of them. However, how can we understand the mysteries of God unless He reveals them to us? Therefore, in

order to pierce the mysteries of God we have to recourse to God Himself the author of His mysteries. To do so we will use His own sword, that is, His own word who is incredibly sharp, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

For this reason, let us listen to God Himself who said: "But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me" (Lk. 19: 27); also, "The Lord says to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool'" (Ps. 110: 1). Thus when His enemies become His footstool they are now in touch with the dust.

To make our point clear, we have to assert that to "lick the dust" is certainly a metaphorical expression of someone being in utter humiliation and destitution. This is rightly applicable to all the enemies of God who will suffer an infinite and unimaginable humiliation when the inexpressible glory, majesty, and grandeur of God be revealed and they themselves be cast out and be told: "Depart from me, you workers of iniquity!" The prophet Daniel testified to this too, saying: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan. 12: 2).

On the other hand, "the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts! The kings of Tarshish and of the Isles render him tribute," that is, all the saints and baptized Christians shared in the Priestly, Prophetic, and kingly roles of Christ, thus we all pay tribute to Him and bring gifts of virtues the fruits of a well lived Christian life, speaking the truth in love, always prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls us to account for the hope that is in us, lifting up our hands in prayer to God, singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving, and offering our lives to God the Lord of lords and the King of kings. Hence as kings, in virtue of our participation in the kingship of Christ, we fall down before Him, all Christian believers serve Him!

God is absolutely worthy to be served simply because He is God, and not only that He made us but He also saved us. Hence He is doubly worthy to be served. In the words of our heavenly friend, no other than the humble St. John Mary Vianney: "Even if there were no Heaven or hereafter, it was Heaven enough to serve God on earth."

Let us add another witness to attest that God is absolutely worthy to be served and received gifts and tribute. This is from our other heavenly friend the great St. Augustine who certifies: "In order to be immortal and blessed, both immortal and blessed spirits and we miserable mortals must worship the One God of gods who is Our God as well as theirs.

"Both in outward signs and inner devotion, we owe to Him that service which the Greek call *latreia*. Indeed, all of us together, and each one in particular,

constitute His temple because He deigns to take for a dwelling both the community of all and the person of each individual. Nor is He greater in all than in each, since He cannot be extended by numbers nor diminished by being shared. When raised to Him, our heart becomes His altar; His only Son is the priest who wins for us His favor. It is only by the shedding of our blood in fighting for His truth that we offer Him bloody victims. We burn the sweetest incense in His sight when we are aflame with holy piety and love.

“As the best gifts we consecrate and surrender to Him our very selves which He has given us. On the altar of our heart, we offer to Him a sacrifice of humility and praise, aglow with the fire of charity.

“In order to see Him as, one day, it will be possible to see and to cling to Him, we cleanse ourselves from every stain of sin and evil desire, sanctifying ourselves by His name. For He is the source of our happiness and they very end of all our aspirations. We elect Him, whom, by neglect, we lost. We pursue Him with our love so that when we reach Him we may rest in perfect happiness in Him who is our goal. For our goal (or, as the philosophers in their endless disputes have termed it, our end or good) is nothing else than union with Him whose spiritual embrace, if I may so speak, can alone fecundate the intellectual soul and fill it with true virtue.

“It is this Good which we are commanded to love with our whole heart, with our whole mind, and with all our strength. It is toward this Good that we should be led by those who love us, and toward this Good we should lead those whom we love. In this way, we fulfill the commandments on which depend the whole law and the Prophets: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord Thy God with thy whole heart, and thy whole soul, and thy whole mind; and ‘Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.’

“In order that a man might learn how to love himself, a standard was set to regulate all his actions on which his happiness depends. For, to love one’s own self is nothing but to wish to be happy, and the standard is union with God. When, therefore, a person who knows how to love himself is bidden to love his neighbor as himself, is he not, in effect, commanded to persuade others, as far as he can, to love God?

“This, then, is the worship of God; this is true religion and the right kind of piety; this is the service that is due only to God. It follows, therefore, that if any immortal power, however lightly endowed with virtue, loves us as itself, it must wish us to be subject, for our own happiness, to Him in submission to whom it finds its happiness” (St. Augustine, City of God, Book X Christian Worship Contrasted with Platonic Theology, Ch. 3).

On this ground, we can happily declare: →

Icon # 747 = Characteristics of the Reign of the Lord Jesus

“For He delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is the blood in his sight.”

Undoubtedly, these are the characteristics of the reign of the Messiah, no other than the Lord Jesus. However, His reign is not the conquest of arms, but the godly influences of humane and peaceful regulations, for His kingdom is within and His triumph is in the moral lives of each person.

His just and merciful rule shall induce the poor and the needy to put themselves under His governance and protection, for His yoke is easy and His burden light. He shall take pity on them and add no heavier burden unto that of their lamentable poverty.

Here is an excellent ground for our submission to the Lord Jesus; it is not because we dread His overwhelming power, but because we are won over by His righteous and condescending rule. Who would not be in awe and reverence of so good a king who makes the poor and needy His peculiar concern and pledges Himself to be our helper and deliverer in times of need?

He permits us to be weak and needy as to be driven to cry bitterly for help, but then He hears us and comes to our aid. He redeems us from the oppression of vices and from the violence of inordinate desires, for, truly, a child's cry touches a father's heart, and our king is the Father of all, who sent His rain on the good and the wicked and let His sun shine on the just and the unjust.

If we can do no more than cry it will bring omnipotence to our aid. A cry is the native dialect of spiritually weak and needy soul, but it grasps the most potent of all weapons, for heaven always yields to such artillery: “Call on me in times of distress, and I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me,” says the Lord.

The proverb says: “God helps those that help themselves,” but it is equally true that the Lord Jesus helps those who cannot help themselves, nor find help in others. His pity shall be manifested to them nor will He allow their trials to overwhelm them; they shall find that He will deliver them and give them His salvation; “and precious is their blood in his sight;” and if they must die for Him as martyrs, He loves their memory and count their lives as His precious treasures. Therefore: →

Icon # 748 = Long Live the Lord Jesus Christ!

“Long may he live, may gold of Sheba be given to him! May prayer be made for him continually, and blessings invoked for him all the day!”

It's so amazing that even though Christ was crucified and condemned to death as criminal yet billions and billions of people adore Him as God. No wonder that kings render tribute to Him and all nations serve Him; golds are also given to Him though He really doesn't need them, because He owns everything in the world. Gold and silver are His and all the precious metals in our world. He made them, so they belong to Him, yet He appreciates the gifts given to Him as a token of submission to His sovereignty. Thus we have good reason to rejoice that the resources of His kingdom are inexhaustible; it will never run out of funds to support all its citizens.

Since the Church is His mystical Body, hence it is truly right and just to pray for the Church and all its members. In other words, we pray to God the Father for the Church through Our Lord Jesus Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. It is through Christ as our Mediator that prayer enters heaven and prevails. We pray that His kingdom come; His name be glorified, His will be done on earth as it is heaven.

Long may He live! Many purported great kings of old such as Herod the Great and Alexander the Great, to name a few, were miserable and weak at their moment of death. Consider the case of Alexander the Great who acknowledged at death that he was weak and feeble man. “Lo!” he says, ‘I am dying whom you falsely called a god.’”

On the other hand, Christ proved that He was God when, by His own death, He conquered death and is now sitted at the right hand of the Father, for all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. Hence, “all kings fall down before him, and all nations serve him.” Truly, truly, it is a great consolation for us who enter into the service of Our Lord Jesus to know that He lives forever. “For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God” (Rom. 6: 9-10).

Hence, on our part, we also must consider ourselves dead to sin and live to God in Christ Jesus. We should do our best not to let sin reign in our mortal bodies to make us obey their passions and inordinate desires. We should pray to God with humility for the grace not to yield the member of our bodies to sin as instruments of wickedness, but we should earnestly ask Him to submit ourselves to Him as men and women who have been brought from death to life, and the various parts of our bodies as tools of righteousness, godliness, and all the other virtues. If these things are ours and abound, then, undoubtedly: →

Icon # 749 = Abundance of Life, Joy, and Happiness in the Kingdom of Heaven

“May there be abundance of grain in the land; on the tops of the mountains may it wave; may its fruit be like Lebanon; and may men blossom forth from the cities like the grass of the field!”

In a mystical sense “abundance of grain in the land” can be considered as abundance of life, joy, and happiness in the kingdom of heaven. The Lord Jesus referred Himself as a grain of wheat which unless it falls into the ground and dies it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit. He also likens His kingdom to a grain of mustard seed which a man took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches (cf. Mt. 13: 31-32).

The Church which He has founded, no other than the Catholic Church, was also very small in the beginning with only a handful of believers, but is now the largest religious denomination in the world with countless religious orders, dioceses, and parishes making their nests in its branches.

This abundance rightly corresponds with the increased productiveness of its teachings, its influence in the lives of the believers, and its engagements in the mundane affairs of our world. So, as the blessings of the Gospel are diffused, there shall arise increasing recipients of them, out of the Church in which the Lord Jesus resides as Head, for as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.

The blessings of grace, which come through the death and resurrection of Christ are meant as righteousness, peace, pardon, joy, above all, eternal life. The increasing recipients of God’s blessings shall blossom forth from the cities in the various countries of the world like the grass of the field. They shall flourish like grass of the earth, as grass springs out of the ground – producing the idea of beauty and abundance.

The curious characters of the grass are its unquestionable humility and cheerfulness. Its humility, in that it seems created for menial and humble service, appointed to be trodden underfoot by men. Its cheerfulness, in that it seems to flourish under all kinds of trials and violence. You mow it, and it proliferates its shoots; you roll it, and it is stronger the following day; you trample upon it, and it conveys the pleasant perfume of a gentle and quiet spirit. Then, spring comes, and it rejoices with all the earth as if it were supremely grateful, glowing with multifarious varieties of flowers both wild and tame.

Truly, the sufferings and trials of this present life are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us, for the momentary afflictions that we might experience while still on this earth are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory

to be revealed to us in the kingdom of heaven. It may well be that our body is only a veil that prevents us from seeing God; between Grace in this life and the glory of Heaven, there is nothing but a thin curtain of the flesh. At the moment of death, this veil will be withdrawn, and then we shall see Him whom we unseeingly possessed on earth whenever we were in the state of Grace. Thus we will blossom like the grass of the field in the green pasture of eternal life in the kingdom of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who lives and reigns forever and ever. Accordingly: →

Icon # 750 = The Most Powerful Name in the Universe

“May his name endure for ever, his fame continue as long as the sun! May men bless themselves by him, all nations call him blessed! Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name for ever; may his glory fill the whole earth! Amen and Amen!”

When one of our race, that is, a human being, does something either ordinary or extraordinary, his or her deeds takes its place in history. Granted, it also bears a sense that outlives time – that by which it will be judged and transported into eternity. Generally speaking, any of our action as a human being is a part of time, and when its hour has passed, the act is also a thing of the past. However, with the Lord Jesus it is quite different. He is true man and true God in hypostatic union, completely one, and what He did is the result not only of His human and temporal decision, but also of His divine and eternal will.

Thus His action is not merely a part of transitory time, but exists simultaneously in eternity. For this reason, the Lord Jesus rightly says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing, and greater works than these will he show him, that you may marvel.” He also says: “My Father is working still, and I am working” (Jn. 5: 17, 19-20).

In other words, the Lord Jesus and the Father are one; and since the Father endures forever, so it follows that the Son also endures forever and His fame continues for all eternity since the fame of the Father, as the source of the godhead, is from everlasting to everlasting.

Even while still on earth His fame already spread everywhere throughout all the surrounding region of Galilee and throughout all Syria. Undoubtedly, everyone who serves the Lord Jesus and believes in His name will also participate in His fame because He gives them power to become children of God, and the Father will honor them, as it is written: “If any one serves me, he must follow me;

and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any one serve me, the Father will honor him” (Jn. 12: 26).

Since He is the only begotten Son of God and by right possesses all the treasure of wisdom, glory, and blessedness His Father possesses, the Lord Jesus obviously desires nothing more than to share these treasures and glory with us by granting us a share in His very sonship. Hence our association with Him within time would then be molded on the pattern of His own association with the Father in eternity. Thus His presence among us is truly an opening up an extension within us of the eternal relationship of love between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. On this ground, it is truly right and just to cry out: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name for ever; may his glory fill the whole earth! Amen and Amen!”

Although the poverty of our words does not really do fair justice to describe the glory of God, not only because it is ineffable, but also because we are just like bats attempting to describe light, yet since we believe in the Lord Jesus and are given power to become children of God, so we will avail of this power as a feeble attempt to tell of His glory, just as a little child is proud enough to speak about his or her parents.

First and foremost, we have to ask, “what is glory?” To save other people the embarrassment to answer this question, especially if they only hear about it, but do not know what it really meant, we will provide a well reasonable and acceptable answer. Glory is “clara notitia cum laude” – a clear understanding of the worth of another which prompts us to praise. Glory, then, is the result of knowledge and love.

Take for example, when we are interested in a certain subject, either in sports or politics or economics or religion, we love to talk about it, as it is written: “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Mt. 12: 34). Parents never tire of enthusing about their children. In like manner, a soul that knows God is his or her Creator and also Father, thinks about God, loves Him, and knows Him to be “so good” cannot keep the good news to himself or herself. The overflow of human love for Divine Love is what is meant by giving glory to God.

And who is the best person, the most qualified with the highest and infinite credential to tell us of the glory of God? Of course, no other than the Lord Jesus, the Word of God Himself, who became a human being, like us in all things except sin. To hammer down our point, let us listen to the Lord Jesus Himself who unequivocally testified, saying: “I glorified thee on earth, having accomplished the work which thou gavest me to do, and now, Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made” (Jn 17: 4-5).

He goes on to say: "I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them to me, and they have kept thy word. Now they know that everything that thou hast given me is from thee; for I have given them the words which thou gavest me, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from thee; and they have believed that thou didst send me. I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine; all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them" (Jn. 17: 6-10)

It is interesting to notice that the glory of the Lord is a thousand leagues apart from the publicity of the world. Publicity is a very artificial stimulation. It is the attribution of worth to those who have either not earned it, or who have no right to it. For instance, movie stars need publicity agents, as cosmetics need advertising. But did we ever hear of a hero who needed a press-agent? Not at all, for "praise" is a by-product of his or her worth. The hero has worth.

Publicity tries to stimulate worth; glory recognized it. Publicity is the rouge on the anemic cheek of unloveliness; glory is the bloom which is the healthy sign of salubrity. Aside from the Lord Jesus, and of course the Blessed Virgin Mary, who are the most qualified to tell us of the glory of the Lord? Certainly, the angels because they always behold the face of God in heaven (cf. Mt. 18: 10). And among our human race, who are the best representatives and the most qualified to tell us of the glory of the Lord? Without the slightest shadow of a doubt, verily, it is the saints because they are the ones who follow Christ more closely.

So, since this is the case, we will summon one of them to come forward and bear a potent testimony of what this glory of the Lord is really about. We will warn, in advance, all our readers to hold one's breath because this is a very graphic and beatific description. We will ask one of the greatest lover of the Lord, who had a very high credential of knowing Him intimately, and following Him more closely, no other than St. Teresa of Avila, the pride of Spain.

Please continue to hold your breath, for we will add one more important thing, that is, this glory of the Lord is also shared by all the saints in varying degrees. Here comes St. Teresa of Avila; here is her testimony: "When the state of a saint's soul burst forth visibly, it is not to say that his faith had not already that beauty, but it is in order to show forth his virtue and draw souls to the practice of it, just as the glories of Thabor and the miracles of Jesus Christ were not, as it were, "extras," but rather flashes of His glory which from time to time pierced the dark cloud of His humanity in order to render it venerable and lovable to others.

"There is such beauty about glorified bodies that the glory which illumines them throws all who look upon such supernatural loveliness into confusion. I will only say that, if there were nothing else in Heaven to delight the eyes but the

extreme beauty of the glorified bodies there, that alone would be the greatest bliss. A most especial bliss, then, will it be to us when we see the Humanity of Jesus Christ; for if it is so even on earth where His Majesty reveals Himself according to what our wretchedness can bear, what will it be where the fruition of that joy is complete?

“If I were to spend years and years imagining how to invent anything so beautiful, I could not do it, and I do not even know how I should try, for even in its whiteness and radiance alone, it exceeds all that we can imagine. It is not a radiance which dazzles, but a soft whiteness and an infuse radiance which, without wearying the eyes causes them the greatest delight, nor are they wearied by the brightness which they see in seeing the Divine beauty. So different from any earthly lights is the brightness and light now revealed to the eyes that, by comparison with it, the brightness of our sun seem quite dim and we should never want to open our eyes again for the purpose of seeing it.

“It is as if we were to look at a very clear stream, in a bed of crystal, reflecting the sun's rays, and then to see a very muddy stream, in an earthly bed overshadowed by clouds. Not that the sun, or any other such light, enters into the vision: on the contrary, it is like a natural light and all other kinds of light are artificial. It is light which never gives place to night, and, being always light, is disturbed by nothing. It is of such a kind, indeed, that no one, however powerful his intellect, could, in the whole course of his life, imagine it as it is.

“I can say, then, that if I were asked whether I should prefer to endure all the trials in the world until the world itself ends, and afterwards to gain a little more glory, or to have no trials and to attain to one degree less of glory, I should answer that I would most gladly accept all the trials in exchange for a little more fruition in the understanding of the wonders of God, for I see that he who understand Him best loves and praises Him best” (From the Autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila).

What more can we say!? We could have add also the writer of the book of Revelation and the other saints, such as our good friend, St. Paul, who was transported to the third heaven, St. Bernadette, the three little children of Fatima, St. Faustina, etc.; but since the testimony of two witnesses are fair enough to confirm the verity of one's assertion; and having examined closely the truthfulness of our two witnesses, St. Teresa of Avila, a doctor of the Church, and the Lord Jesus who is TRUTH Himself; and knowing by experience that for us believers even the testimony of the Lord alone is more than sufficient – thus no explanation is necessary, and that for unbelievers even if the whole company of angels and saints come down to bear witness to the glory of God they still would not believe – thus no explanation is possible, therefore, it is our conclusion that the testimony of the Lord Jesus and St. Teresa of Avila, is true, fair, reasonable, and credible enough, hence, worthy of belief, and in believing and trying to live

the Christian life as best as we can, and practice virtues, we too, in all likelihood will also behold the glory of God.

In this manner, we can rightly proclaim: "May his name endure for ever, his fame continue as long as the sun! May men bless themselves by him, all nations call him blessed! Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. Blessed be his glorious name for ever; may his glory fill the whole earth! Amen and Amen. Moreover, →

Icon # 751 = Truly God is good to the Upright, to those who are pure of heart

Psalm 73 (72)

"Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure of heart."

It is certainly true that God is good to the upright and those who are pure of heart, but it is also true to say that God is good to all His creatures both the upright and pure of heart and those who are not upright and pure of heart. It is His goodness that sustains all His creatures, hence if He ceases to be good to all His creatures all of us will cease to exist. However, it is correct to affirm that God has a predilection for the upright and pure of heart, simply because He Himself is upright and pure of heart. He even made "purity of heart" as a pre-requisite of seeing Him, as the Lord says: "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God."

Truly, whoever longs, with utmost desire, for the kingdom of heaven – the eternal fatherland undoubtedly strives to live honestly and uprightly: honest at work, indeed, and upright in faith; trustworthy in good works here on earth and upright in spiritual thoughts within. There are those who do good works without being honest, for they do not desire any interior benefit from them, rather, they curry favor exteriorly. It is to such people that a certain wise man says, "Woe to the sinner who enters the land by a double path." It is indeed by a double path that sinners enter the land when their good works belong to God while the desires in their heart belong to the world.

Take for example the case of Cain the brother of Abel. The reason why God did not honor Cain's offering was that it was indiscreet, that while he gave to God some possession that was his, he kept himself for himself. This, in fact, is what all those do who, following their own desires and own will rather than God's or living with a perverted rather than an upright heart, offer to God some gift and do seemingly good work which they imagine He can be bribed to help them in satisfying their passion and desires rather than in healing their inner infirmities.

Now, once Cain knew that God had accepted the sacrifice of his brother but had no regard for his, he should have humbled himself and made a change in order to emulate his brother, but what he did was to succumb to envy and

dishonesty. He let himself yield to depression and “his countenance fell.” It is this sin of pride and anger that God held against Cain. Hence, the Lord said to Cain: “Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it” (Gen. 4: -6-7).

Abba Moses, one of the prominent desert fathers, has this to say: “For what else does it mean not to be envious, not to be boastful, not to be angry, not to do evil, not to seek the things that are not one’s own, not to rejoice over iniquity, not to think evil and all the rest, if not always to offer God a perfect and utterly clean heart, and to keep unsullied by any passion.” He also said: “Just as the kingdom of the devil is gained by conniving at the vices, so the kingdom of God is possessed in purity of heart and spiritual knowledge by practicing the virtues” (cf. John Cassian’s *Conferences*, *The First Conference of Abba Moses*).

It is truly right and just to assert that no person is better because he or she knows the five proofs of the existence of God, but he or she becomes better when that knowledge is allowed to transform his or her will. Purity of heart is therefore the condition of prayer; we cannot be intimate with God so long as we cling to unlawful attachments. The needed purity must be fourfold: purity of mind, so that we persevere in continual consciousness of God; purity of action, so that we keep our intentions selfless and abandon our self-will, and finally, purity of heart, so that we keep all our affections for God.

If these things are ours and abound, we have every good reason to avow: “Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure of heart.” At the same time, we have to be realistic and humble enough to admit: →

Icon # 752 = The Danger of Being Envious

“But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

It is safe to say that in this case the Psalmist was saved by grace, because he never really stumbled. He was about to stumble, but it did not happen. He was honest enough to give the reason why he had almost stumbled; it was because he “was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

Riches, wealth, honor, and prestige, are like shining gold for many people, very likely! Who would not be attracted with someone living in a 20 million dollar mansion, and cruising with different kinds of luxurious cars, such as: Rolls Royce, Alfa Romeo, Ferrari, Porche, Mercedes Benz, or a Mustang? These things are object of envy for most people in our world, and many people would be willing to barter their immortal souls for these things if it would be possible.

However, the Lord Jesus is very blunt in saying: "For what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, but suffer the loss of his own soul" (Mt. 16: 26, New Catholic Edition of the Holy Bible)? The consensus of the Fathers of the Catholic Church is that wealth of itself is not a bad thing so long as it is properly used, just as poverty, pure and simple, is not virtuous in itself.

Our heavenly friend, St. Ambrose, pointedly says: "For not all poverty is holy, nor are all riches criminal. The crime is not in possessing worldly goods but in not knowing how to use them." The abuse of wealth, which was so widespread, provided for a number of the Fathers of the Church to propose a form of sharing of goods as a model for Christian living. Indeed, this had been an ideal from the origins of Christianity, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles.

St. Cyprian of Carthage writes that it was the very breakdown in the sense of shared property and common goods which was highly responsible for the Christians' dismaying weakness in the face of the Decian persecution of 249-251. In the years of peace preceding the persecution, St. Cyprian asserted that both clergy and laity had spent their energies on making money and acquiring lands. When the years of trials came upon them, they were unwilling to abandon their material gains; rather than do so, they denied their faith.

On the other hand, despite the vehemence of their feelings on the abuse of wealth, the Fathers of the Church never demand unconditionally that the rich distribute everything that they possess to the poor. At the same time they incessantly warn of the temptations that the possession of wealth brings with it. The greatest was to avarice, so frequently pictured as the root of all sins, master mind of insatiable desires that would afflict rich and poor alike with equal fury.

Accordingly, we know that great losses cause the mind to undergo greater pain. Let us take, for instance, the case of Job. We are informed that Job patiently suffered many losses in order that we might clearly see the extent of his virtue. It is right and fitting to say that nothing is ever lost painlessly unless it is possessed without attachment. Thus since Job's enormous property holdings are sharply delineated and yet a little later we are told that he lost them all patiently and painlessly, it follows that his possessions were held without affinity.

It is also interesting to notice that the richness of his heart was described before his material riches. Ordinarily, the abundance of material possessions usually makes the soul lose its grip of divine Providence, and this is all the more likely the more such abundance pushes the mind to concentrate on various things, for when the mind is pulled in many different directions, it cannot remain centered in itself. "The whole case for Christianity," asserted Gilbert K. Chesterton, "is that a man who is dependent upon the luxuries of this life is a corrupt man, spiritually corrupt, politically corrupt, and financially corrupt. To be rich is to be in peculiar danger of moral wreck."

Hence, to be envious of the arrogant upon seeing how the wicked prosper is a dangerous thing, because it can cause us to stumble. Envy in itself, either it be of the arrogant and corrupt wealthy person or of the simple and virtuous person, is very detrimental to our soul, for envy is one of the seven capital sins.

Let us take again the case of Cain and some biblical figures. The story of Cain and Abel suggests that it was envy that corrupted Cain to the point of committing fratricide, for when his own sacrifice was disregarded, he was maddened against the one who was preferred to him, whose offering God accepted, and him who he hated for being better than himself he cut down, to put a final end to his existence.

It was envy that instigated Esau to persecute his brother Jacob, because he lost the blessing of the first born, which, however, he had himself sold for a meal of lentils; nevertheless, he groaned at being less than him who he had preceded at birth. It was envy that caused Joseph's brothers to sell him to the Ishmaelites as they passed, because they knew the mystery had been revealed, and lest he do better than they, they tried to hinder his progress. It was envy that caused Saul to attack his son-in-law, David, with a spear, because he saw that he was growing stronger and more successful every day, and he was afraid that David would have more power than he.

On this issue, however, it is noteworthy to realize that while the poison of the ancient enemy is injected into the human heart by every wicked action that is perpetrated, in this egregious malice the cunning serpent agitates all his spleen and lets loose a pollution of infectious bitterness. About this behavior we are told: "By the envy of the devil death has entered the world."

Thus when we are envious if celebrities, the rich, and the famous, and how they prosper, we have to realize that we are infected with the venom of envy. However, if there is really in us even a scintilla of desire to be healed we should not be disheartened, because this infection is curable. We have a very good, well-seasoned, and experienced Physician, no other than the Lord Jesus, who knows full well the kind of medicine to treat this illness. The Physician of souls has infinite power to cure, but we must know that we are sick and must want to be cured. We need to acknowledge how serious is this malady, since to heal it, it was necessary that the Son of God has to die, even death on the cross.

"Just as a doctor comes to a wounded man," says our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "so the Holy Spirit comes to the soul. Is it possible to find any person whom the devil's sword does not wound, even after the wound of original sin has been healed by the medicine of baptism?"

"Therefore, when the Spirit draws near to a soul that says: 'My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness,' what is the first thing he should do?"

Before all else he must amputate the ulcerous tumor that has grown upon the wound and prevents its healing. This ulcer, caused by inveterate bad habits, must be sliced away with the scalpel of piercing sorrow. The pain will be bitter, but it can be alleviated with the ointment of devotion which is nothing other than the joy borne of the hope of pardon.

“This in turn springs from the power of self-control, from victory over sin. Soon the victor is pouring out words of thanks: ‘You have loosed my bonds, I will offer you the thanksgiving sacrifice.’ He then applies the medicine of penance, a poultice of fasting, vigils, prayers, and other tasks that penitent perform. And as he toils he must be fed with the food of good works that he may not falter. We are not left in doubt what the necessary food is: ‘My food’ said Christ, ‘is to do the will of my Father.’ Hence works motivated by love, that are source of strength, should accompany the performances of penances. For instance it is said: ‘Alms is a most effective offering for all those who give it in the presence of the Most High. Food causes thirst, therefore one must drink, so let the food of good works be moistened with the beverage of prayer, that a work well done may rest quietly in the stomach of conscience and give pleasure to God. In prayer one drinks the wine that gladdens a man’s heart, the intoxicating wine of the Spirit that drowns all memory of the pleasures of the flesh. It drenches the arid recesses of the conscience, stimulates digestion of the meats of good works, fill the faculties of the soul a robust faith, a solid hope, a love that is living and true; it enriches all the actions of our life” (Sermon 18, On the Song of Songs I, III. 5, pp. 137-138).

However in spite of the kindness of God shown to them, yet they hardened their hearts and blunted their conscience, and unabashedly wore their hubris as a necklace, then, this is what they will hear: →

Icon # 753 = The Lost of the Sense of Sin

“For they have no pangs; their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in trouble as other men are; they are not stricken like other men. Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out with fatness, their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth.”

Just as there is no way of knowing which keys on the piano ought to be played and which keys ought not to be played, except by having a musical score outside the keys, so the very existence of conscience implies that there is outside of us a Divine Lawmaker, who legislates, a Divine Executive, who witnesses our correspondence with the law, and a Divine Judge, who poses sentences. At all times, we feel that there is confronting us an unseen witness in whose inner

praise we rejoice and in whose inner reproof we blush with shame; this witness is God.

The very word conscience is derived from two words: Con which means with and Science which means knowledge. Thus conscience means "knowing with," of course, knowing with God, for conscience is the impact of Divine Truth and Goodness on our inner self.

But there are two kinds of consciences: there is the one God gave us, and there is also the one we may have fabricated for ourselves. Guided by the former, we recognized that God has not only implanted in us a desire to make a journey to His Heavenly kingdom, but that He has provided us a map, or to use a modern jargon, a GPS, of how to get there. On the other hand, following a self-made conscience, we may deny there is an eternal destiny in life, may throw away the map or do not bother to read, or turn off the GPS, and then call any mood we feel the right mood, as the famous saying goes: "If it feels good, do it!" Owners of such false consciences are the ones who boast that "my conscience is at peace," "for they have no pangs; their bodies are sound and sleek. They are not in troubles as other men are; they are not stricken like other men. Therefore pride is their necklace...."

Pope Pius XI rightly pointed out that "the sin of this century is the lost of the sense of sin." The voice of conscience will eventually become weak by frequently "overruling" what it tells us. Sin has startling power to blunt or dull our conscience. It muffled our understanding of objective truth, presenting us a moral lies of our actions which does not properly manifest the depravity of our actions, due to our conscience being "coated with the balm of sin," if we might coin the phrase to describe how sin tranquilizes the "prick" of conscience.

"Hardened" is precisely the word needed to express what happens to a sinner's conscience: it becomes hard like a callous, because it has been abused and misused. No wonder that "their eyes swell out with fatness, their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth."

Undoubtedly, sinners do not care about sinlessness. On the other hand, those who strive to live good moral lives and earnestly cultivate their spiritual lives, make immediate reparation for whatever may have dragged them down from wholesome thoughts. Therefore those who are serious in their spiritual lives are struck with compunction because of the weakness of their fragile human nature, and with daily sighs they scrutinize their unhealthy thoughts, and humbly crying out: "Do not enter into judgment with thy servant; for no man living is righteous before thee."

They consider the righteousness of human beings so weak and imperfect and constantly in need of God's mercy that one of them, whose iniquities and sins God cleansed with the fiery coal of His word that was sent from His altar, said after having contemplated God in wondrous fashion and after having seen the lofty seraphim and a revelation of the heavenly mysteries: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Is. 6: 5).

In all probability he would perhaps not even have felt the uncleanness of his lips if he had not deserved to know the true and integral purity of perfection, thanks to his having contemplated God. Upon seeing Him he immediately recognize an uncleanness that had hitherto been unknown to him.

On the other hand, the more one's conduct is out of harmony with God, the harder it is to see one's inner malady, one's pride and malice, and boastfulness. They would dare to "set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth." To them the words of St. James are addressed: "So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things."

Hence, those whom they swindled and deceived believed in them and drank in all their words, repeatedly nodding their heads, and clapped their hands. In other words: →

Icon # 754 = They Say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"

"Therefore, the people turn and praise them; and find no fault in them. And they say, 'How can God know? Is there knowledge in the most High?'"

Of course, this shows clearly their ignorance, for nothing has the remotest chance of hiding from Him, or escaping that light of His that penetrates everywhere, "piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creatures is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Heb. 4: 12-13).

We may not be certain when the Divine penetration to our soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, has occurred. We might say that God enters the soul like a thief in the night, we may choose whether to welcome Him or to reject Him, but we cannot prevent Him from entering the soul that He has made.

As the sun rises without asking permission of the night, so God enters our soul without consulting the darkness of our mind. He establishes a foothold in our unsuspecting moments, almost incognito, without our being consciously aware of His presence. He comes as a sudden thought burst forth into our mind, an

intense desire that moves our will. His entrance is imperceptible, who penetrates without sound; who is effective though not pronounced, who wins our affections without striking on the ears. He never ceases, in one way or another, to reveal Himself to our inward eyes, so long as we seek Him earnestly, thus fulfilling the promise that He made: "Behold, I am with you always until the end of time."

In the beginning, we do not know that it is He. We may even think that the sudden upsurge of our spirit is our own, with no suspicion that it comes from God – just as we may think that our eyes do all the seeing, without being conscious of our reliance on the sun. It is only later that we understand, looking back, that the initiative was divine and eternal.

Therefore, those who say, "How can God know? Is there any knowledge in the Most High? Are completely wrong, because, can He who formed the eyes not see? Or He who made the ears not hear? Or He who is THOUGHT Himself not know the thoughts of men? Truly, truly, God's knowledge does not grow as ours does, from ignorance to wisdom. God knows all things merely by looking into Himself. "The fact is that," says our heavenly friend, no other than St. Augustine, "God, whose knowledge is simple in its multiplicity and one in its diversity, comprehends all incomprehensible things with an incomprehensible comprehension. And this is so true that, even if He willed to keep on endlessly creating one new and dissimilar thing after another, not one of them could possibly seem new and unexpected to Him, nor would He foresee them merely, as it were at the last moment, but by His foreknowledge He would have them before Him throughout all eternity" (St. Augustine, City of God, Book XII Created Will and the Distinction of Good and Evil, Ch. 19).

Just as an architect can tell us how many rooms will be in our building, and the exact dimension of each, before the building is built because he is the cause of the becoming of our building, so God knows all things, see all things before they came into being because He is the CAUSE of the existence of all things. Certainly, without Him nothing will or has come into being. Just as the director of a movie knows the whole story before it is shown on the screen, so God knows all events, sees all things before it is acted on the stage of both angelic and human history.

In God there is no future. God knows everything, not in the succession of time, but in the "now standing still" of eternity, that is, all at once. His knowledge that we shall act in such and such a particular manner is not the immediate cause of our acting, any more than our knowledge that we are sitting down caused us to sit down, or prevents us from getting up, if we willed to do it.

Most people who deny God and those who say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" do not do so because their reason tells them there is no God or God does not know, but their denial is rather because of

“wishful thinking,” for how could reason witness against Reason? In all likelihood, they feel they would be happy if there were no God or does not know what they are doing, for then they could do as they pleased even in amassing ill-gotten wealth. Hence, it is not surprising to: →

Icon # 755 = Will the Wicked be always at Ease?

“Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease; they increase in riches.”

We have to confess that it is very disappointing, though not surprising, that there are people of unequivocal depravity who live in this present world regardless of God, and yet they are seemingly at ease, tranquil, prosperous, and lucky. These are people whose character of wickedness is well known, and yet they are permitted to live on earth relatively in peace and prosperity; many people even “praise them and find no fault in them.”

They use the surplus of their riches in promoting intrinsically evil cause, such as the killing of “innocent little children” in the womb, sugar coating this wicked action with the euphemistic parlance: “Reproductive Right.” It sounds like an angel of darkness appears as an angel of light!

“Behold, these are the wicked,” who prosper in the world. Here is the standing enigma! The crux of Providence! The increase in earthly riches and temporal things and has stopped their ears to hear the solemn admonition: “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt. 6: 19-21).

All their prosperity and riches are in this present life; they are unmindful that if they are not rich in the things of God, their utter destitution will be in the next life, as the Lord says: “But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger. Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep” (Lk. 6: 24-25).

These are the ungodly who are still moving around in this world, and they prosper as long as they are still here; they are at ease and in peace and have nothing to disturb them, they are not in outward trouble, their sins so not distress them, and they have no concern about another.

For the time being, we may say, they see no reversal, they are the same through life; they are “always at ease,” happy, and successful. On the other hand, many pious people have been stricken by many sufferings, and since they have not yet reach the caliber of a St. Paul and a St. Teresa of Avila, therefore, they were tempted to say: →

Icon # 756 = The effectiveness of Crosses and Trials in molding us into the kind of Person We are meant to be

“All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken, and chastened every morning.”

It is correct to say that it is really a tremendous grace from God to be able to accept our trials and pains, even though not courageously on the greater scale as we ought, but in a small and humble manner, for thus we become patient, small, and humble.

To endure trials patiently and in peace and without offering any resistance is to suffer in the right way, even though we do not then make any very vigorous acts of acceptance. It is always very legitimate to say, “Lord, let this cup pass from me, but if it will not pass unless I drink it, then, not my will but your will be done.” The submissive heart offers these, without taking thought, in the humility and simplicity of its passive acquiescence.

When a good father discipline his son, does it mean that he does not love him? On the contrary, it means that he loves his son, since he wants what is best, what is perfect for him. Of course, the father takes no pleasure in disciplining his son, in seeing him suffer. He himself is pained when he sees his son cringed in the struggle. But he is pleased with the fight that is going on inside his son because he sees the victory which awaits him. Later, when the fight is over, what greater joy and happiness could there be than that of the father for his victorious son and that of the son for his father? If this happens with human sonship, think of how it will be if we live our divine filiation with our Heavenly Father.

On our part, we have not yet struggle against sin to the point of shedding our blood, as the letter to the Hebrews says: “And have you forgotten the exhortation which addresses you as sons? – ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.’” It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

“Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it” (Heb. 12: 5-11).

Ultimately, it is the pains and trials and crosses that are most effective in molding us into the kind of human person we are meant to be. Crosses and trials transform us by ripping away all the silliness and vanity and triviality and shallowness that worldly people hold dear, and showing us the things that are really important – the things that concern God.

There is no absolute necessity that we should clearly know when our trial is directly from God. Indeed, it is generally an essential part of the trial that we should not plainly know it. It is not essentially necessary to know it, because the knowledge would not altogether alter our manner of dealing it. If the trial came to us as an “operation of grace,” it is very likely that it would bring with it a modest degree of humility which would counterbalance this discouragement.

To have accepted the Lord Jesus as our righteousness and to have embraced His holy faith is no guarantee of freedom from trials. He never said to His Apostles: “Be good and you will not suffer,” but He did say: “In this world you shall have tribulations.” And as our good friends, St. Paul and St. Barnabas, added: “through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14: 22).

Let us also listen to one of the greatest athletes of the spiritual life, no other than our heavenly friend, Abba Daniel. He gave twofold reason for God’s design and trial: First, so that by being forsaken by the Lord for a short while and humbly seeing the frailty of our spirit, we may not become proud because of any previous purity of heart which has been granted us by His visitations; and so that, by proving to us that we are forsaken by Him we cannot regain that condition of joy and purity by any groans and effort of our own, we may understand that even our previous joy of heart was conferred on us not by our own doing but by His condescension, and that present joy must be sought anew from His grace and illumination.

“The second reason for these trials is to put to the proof our perseverance and steadfastness of mind and our desire, and also to manifest in us with what yearning of heart and earnestness of prayer we must look for the visitation of the Holy Spirit when He has left us. Thus, when we realize how much effort it takes to seek out that spiritual joy and gladness of heart once it has departed, we may strive to guard it more carefully and to hold on to it more attentively once it has been found” (Fourth Conference – The Conference of Abba Daniel: On The Desire of the Flesh and the Spirit).

It is reasonable to say that it is easy to be discouraged in our effort to purify our heart when we focus more on how the depraved people seemed to prosper while we are being stricken by illness and chastened by suffering. This sounds a very common temptation which assailed even pious people. On the other hand, if we focus our attention on the cross and how much Our Lord had suffered for us, certainly, our pain and sorrow become bearable, and we will not

whine even if depraved people spend their lives on earth without much illness and end them without great suffering.

We will realize that adversity is the touchstone of the soul, for it discovers the character of the virtue which it possesses. The way we react in our suffering is what defines us, not suffering itself. We will learn by experience that the true course of sanctification consists in cleansing our heart from the pollution of inordinate desires and washing our hands from the grease of vices. "If these things are ours and abound, they keep us from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of Our Lord Jesus." They forestall the temptation of thinking: "All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken, and chastened every morning." Accordingly, we will come to our senses and come to understand that: →

Icon # 757 = Not acting out unwholesome thought

"If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' I would have been untrue to the generation of thy children."

Once we made progress in the spiritual life, and by the grace of God were able to ward off nagging temptation, then we are in a fairly good position to repent of the unhealthy thoughts we were entertaining in our heart. It is safe to say that the Psalmist did not really act out the unwholesome thoughts that were boiling in his heart. He certainly felt disappointment, frustration, and even envy of the public sinners who were "always at ease" and "increase in riches," while he was stricken all day long. We have to admit that thoughts, either wholesome or unwholesome, will come to us even uninvited.

The struggle against unhealthy thoughts is certainly among the most difficult. However, this struggle has to be conducted with strategic tactics, with calmness and gentleness, with patience and even greater constancy, and without pretending that one's purity of heart and cleanliness of mind could ever achieve a perfection which is certainly not of this present life.

Our heavenly friend, St. Francis de Sales, has this to say: "You ask how you might go about concentrating your spirit completely on God so that nothing could pull it back or detach it. To do that, two things are necessary: to die and to be saved. For then there will be no more separation."

Truly, it does not depend on us whether we are more or less assailed by useless thoughts. So far as we know, no soul, no matter how perfect, so long as we are still in this present life, can pretend to become free from this struggle. We would be swindling ourselves if we believe it would ever come to an end in this present world. It suffices for us not to deliberately admit such unhealthy thoughts. Of

course, an effort is necessary for it is impossible to love God with one's whole mind unless the mind be free from other thoughts.

Our good friend, St. Paul, rightly told us: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col. 3: 1-2). Certainly, by the grace of God, of course, the Psalmist was able to overcome his temptation. He maintained his respect for God's children, for that reason he bridled his mouth from evil and his lips from speaking what he had thought inappropriate.

It is a positive sign that we are mindful of God when we do not act out the evil thoughts in our heart. It would be disrespectful to God's children, that is, to those who believe and serve His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus, to say that it is vain to serve Him, to purify one's heart, and to wash one's hands in innocence, for it is contrary to their universal experience. We truly are able to overcome our trials and temptations by making them occasions of prayer and channels of merit. What were frustrations and disappointment are thus beneficial for growth.

To go to chapel to meditate and pray is certainly one of the best ways to find resolution to our temptation, frustration, and disappointment although we can always enter into our inner room, that is, our heart to pray to God in secret, but a chapel or a Church is very conducive for reflection because of its atmosphere of silence.

Oftentimes, things are so complicated, beyond our mind to understand. Hence, we can fairly identify ourselves with the Psalmist when he says: →

Icon # 758 = The Advantage in meditating in Church or Chapel

"But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end, Truly thou dost set them in slippery places; thou dost make them fall into ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! They are like dream when one awakes, on awaking you despise their phantoms."

High mountains and hills, or solitary places are certainly conducive for meditation. However, it is equally true that a Chapel or a Church is very productive not only for prayer, or even just for relaxing oneself, but above all for reflection and meditation, mainly because of the presence of God in the Blessed Sacrament.

Of course, God is everywhere and He even made our body a "mobile temple," so that we can pray and meditate wherever we are and whatever time we want, but He sets for Himself a special place where His notable presence abide.

Take for instance the temple built by King Solomon and God's predilection for that place. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth?," king Solomon asks, "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain thee, how much less this house I have built! Yet have regard to the prayer of thy servant and to his supplication, O Lord my God, hearkening to the cry and to the prayer which thy servant prays before thee this day; that thy eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which thou hast said, 'My name shall be there,' that thou mayest hearken to the prayer which thy servant offers toward this place" (1kings 8: 27-29).

Since this is the case, then we have a persuadable reason to go to a chapel or to a church to pray, and especially if there is something that we are seriously thinking about. Truly, there are many things that are very hard for our mind to understand, but amazingly in prayer and meditation flashes of insight pierced the darkness of these difficulties. This is certainly the experience of the Psalmist. It was very hard for him to comprehend why the morally depraved in this present world seem prosperous and are not stricken like others, but it was only when he went to the sanctuary of God, that is, to the house of prayer, that he understood the wretched end of evil people; even in the apex of their prosperity they are progressing for disaster.

In meditation he realized that even though bad things happened to good people their afflictions end in peace, whereas the evil people's ephemeral pleasures end in ruin, how slippery those enjoyments are, therefore, they are miserable. Their prosperity, luxury, and comfort are short and passing like the flowers of the field which today blossom and on the morrow wither away. They are like a dream, a mere shadow passing by which stimulates one's imagination, but on awaking it was found out that it was a phantom, an illusion. For this reason, the morally depraved wealthy people and all godless celebrities should not be objects of envy but of pity, because if they would persist in their depravity until death, then there would be a grave danger that they would be "swept away utterly by terrors!"; Terrors that never ever crossed their imagination even in their wildest dreams. On the other hand: →

Icon # 759 = Compunction and Counsel will lead us to eternal glory

"When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was stupid and ignorant, I was like a beast toward thee. Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou dost hold my right hand. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward thou will receive me to glory."

If we give "envy," especially of wealthy people and celebrities, and ill will for the bad things that happen to us, a platform in our heart, certainly our soul will be embittered and will be cut to the quick. However, if we really want to be healed

of this serious malady, the best remedy, of course, is repentance. We have to humble ourselves before the Lord and acknowledge that this is an act of stupidity and ignorance. The “pricking” of our heart is a positive sign that our conscience is not yet “muffled.” The sorrow and shame that we feel in acting such stupidity and ignorance is a gracious grace that leads us to compunction of heart, a puncture, we would say.

Compunction is something more than remorse for past sins. It is a habitual awareness of the tendency to sin. It has a twofold thrust: 1st, it keeps alive in us a sense of guilt with regard to previous failures; 2nd, it warns us of weakness in the face of future temptations. Compunction view both past and future in terms of God's mercy.” Our soul, conscious of personal insufficiency and seeing ourselves powerless to remedy what we found within our heart, puts our complete trust in the power of grace.

Where remorse and self-pitying are often tending towards despair and work its emotion inwards so that it can become to some as an obsession, compunction on the other hand works towards God. It is just as much aware of evil as remorse but sees it chiefly in relation to God rather than to self. An example of this is what our good friend, St. Paul, said in his 2nd letter to the Corinthians, “As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produce repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death” (2Cor. 7: 9-10). This is what happened to both Peter and Judas. Peter's grief produces repentance that leads to salvation, but Judas' grief produces death that leads to suicide.

On this account, we can say with the Psalmist: “Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou dost hold my right hand. Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory.” To be continually with God and be guided by His counsel is, undoubtedly, a tremendous blessing because it will lead us to glory and be with God forever without the slightest worry that we might be separated from Him.

As we know, Counsel is one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. It allows us to be guided by God in matters necessary for our salvation. We human beings are rational creatures. Our actions, typically, follow some degree of forethought and consideration. We ponder and reflect, think about, meditate, weigh, and deliberate. We consult other peoples' experiences, seek out expert opinions, and compare present options with choices of the past. All of this reasoned inquiry so characteristics of thinking, self-reflective beings can be referred to as “taking counsel.”

The Holy Spirit approves and respects this most human dynamic, and tailors it to our way of thinking a special “gift” that deepens and perfects our human power

of deliberation. Such is the divine "Gift of Counsel." It renders us sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit in a manner supremely compatible and congenial to the deliberating way that we become motivated to act. As a human being we stand in a constant state of searching. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that "only in God will man find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for....He cannot live fully according to the truth unless he freely acknowledges God's love and entrust himself to his Creator" (#27).

Accordingly, in our searching, we need the invaluable guidance, the advice or "counsel" of God who knows all things and sees all things. Such direction comes to us from heaven through the Holy Spirit's Gift of Counsel, whereby we are "guided" by the very advice of God. It is liken to the experience of those involved in human affairs that lack what they need to work things out for themselves. In such a case, we simply turn to those more suitably qualified in order to benefit from their wisdom and expertise.

Thus the divine gift of counsel so moves us to avail ourselves of the guiding insights and direction of the Holy Spirit. If we would like to use a modern parlance, divine counsel is like a divine GPS. It will eventually lead us to our true homeland, that is, the kingdom of heaven where we will contemplate God's unimaginable glory for all eternity and where God will be our all. On account of this, we can gladly exclaim: →

Icon # 760 = Whom do we have in Heaven?

"Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever."

One thing is absolutely certain, without the slightest shadow of a doubt: If we will be one, of course by God's grace, of those luckiest and happiest people who are now in heaven, then we can truly say with the Psalmist, "whom have I in heaven but thee!?"

Even if we are not a theological savvy we are definitely correct to affirm that even while still on earth if we are in a state of grace we already possessed God, much more in heaven where this possession will never be lost nor suffer any alteration due to change. Each one of us will possess God, of course, according to each one's capacity, and will see Him as He is, with all His Omnipotence, Omniscience, and glory. This possessing and seeing God will be our primary happiness that is why it would be enough for us to have God alone; and that is why to lose Him is the primary pain of the damned.

However, although to have God alone in heaven will be utterly enough for us, it is also true to say that seeing and possessing one another in God, we will love one another as God loves us. The degree of our love for one another will be measured by our nearness to God. Each one of us will rejoice at the degree of beatitude which each one of us has received. Each one of us will have our own personal distinction. Each is himself or herself, with all our natural gifts and supernatural privileges, all of them perfectly developed. Yet we resemble one another since each one of us contemplates one and the same divine truth, each one of us will be on fire with one and the same love of God.

We will go so far in saying that in heaven there is no more marriage, as the Lord decrees, because each one of us will possess one another in God, hence if we possessed one another in God, there is no more necessity for marriage. Therefore, we will be like angels who, individually, have also God as their main possession.

In heaven, we will see the Godhead in its entirety, because we will see all the perfections of God and all the Persons of the Blessed Trinity; and yet our vision is limited according to our capacity, because it has neither the infinite clearness that corresponds to the Divine Perfections, nor does it extend to everything that actually is or may still become, an object of God's free decrees. Hence it follows that each one of us may see God more perfectly than another, and that this seeing of God admits of various degrees.

We theologians call this "Seeing God" as the Beatific Vision. This is very mysterious to us but not for God. Of course reason cannot prove the impossibility of such Vision. For why should God, in His Omnipotence, be unable to draw so near and adapt Himself so fully to our intellect, that our soul may, as it were, directly feel Him and possessed Him and look on Him and become entirely immersed in Him, to the point that we can say, "Whom have I in heaven but thee?"

On the other hand, we cannot prove absolutely that this is possible, for this Beatific Vision lies beyond the natural destiny of our human intellect, and it is so extraordinary a mode of perception that we cannot clearly comprehend either the factor of the manner of its possibility.

From what has been said thus far it is apparent that there is a twofold beatitude: the natural and the supernatural. We, human beings, are by nature entitled to beatitude, provided we do not forfeit it by our own fault. We have also laid out that beatitude is eternal and that it consists in the "possession of God," for creatures cannot fully satisfy our deepest desires.

Again, our soul is to "possess God" by knowledge and love. But the knowledge to which we are entitled by nature is not an immediate vision, but an analogous

perception of God in the mirror of creation, still a very perfect knowledge which really satisfies our heart. Hence the beatitude to which we alone have a natural claim consists in that perfect analogous knowledge and in the love corresponding to that knowledge. This natural beatitude is the lowest kind of felicity which God, in His goodness and wisdom, can grant to saintly people. But, instead of an analogous knowledge of His Essence He may grant to us a direct intuition which includes all the excellence of natural beatitude and surpasses it beyond measure. And by granting it He not merely satisfies our natural desire for happiness but satisfies it superabundance.

It is a dogma of faith that the happiness of the saints, that is, all the redeemed in heaven is eternal. This truth is clearly biblical; it is professed by the Church in the Apostles' Creed, and it has been repeatedly defined by the Church, especially by Pope Benedict XII. Even reason can plausibly demonstrate it, for truly, if the angels and the other citizens of heaven, that is, the redeemed, knew that their happiness and possession of God was ever to come to an end, this knowledge alone would prevent their happiness from being perfect.

It may well be that our body is only a veil that prevents us from seeing God in this present life; between Grace in this life and the glory of Heaven, there is nothing but a thin curtain of the flesh. At the moment of death, this veil will be withdrawn; and then we shall see Him whom we unseeingly "possessed" on earth whenever we are in the state of Grace. On the other hand: →

Icon # 761 = All those who abandoned God shall perish

"For lo, those who are far from thee shall perish; thou dost put an end to those who are false to thee."

In the singing version of the Psalms by Fr. Joseph Gelineau, S.J., this passage is translated as: "All those who abandon you shall perish; you will destroy all those who are faithless."

It is right and fitting to assert that those who abandoned God can be dubbed as "apostate." Thus we heard of the phrase the "apostate angels." These are the angels who abandoned their adherence to God. Some, remaining "faithful" to God, the common good of all, have lived in the enjoyment of His Truth and love, while others, preferring the enjoyment of their own will and their own power, as though they were their own good, abandoned the higher good and common blessedness for all and turned to goods of their own choosing.

Since true happiness consists in union with God, it follows that unhappiness must be found in abandoning God – going to a very far place, to a land of unlikeness, that is, unlikeness to God, a godless existence.

Since angels who abandoned their adherence to God are called as apostate angels, so it is arguable that those men and women who abandoned God can be dubbed as “apostate people,” that is, those who abandoned the belief of the existence of God. These are the “faithless,” “those who are false to God.” In a classic term they are called “atheists.” Thus we have the “apostates” who abandoned God, hence “far from Him,” and the “atheists” who are faithless, hence “false to Him.”

In a sociological term, the American sociologist Lewis A. Coser defines an apostate as not just a person who experienced a dramatic change in conviction but “a man who, even in his new state of belief, is spiritually living not primarily in the content of that faith, in the pursuit of goals appropriate to it, but only in the struggle against the old faith and for the sake of its negation” (The Age of the Informer Dissent: 1249-54, 1954).

The Christian understanding of apostasy is “a willful falling away from, or rebellion against, Christian truth. Apostasy is the rejection of Christ by one who has been a Christian.” In the Old Testament the Greek word “Apostasia” was used to portray a rebellion against God. For instance, in the book of Joshua, it says: “Then the Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh said in answer to the heads of the families of Israel, ‘The Mighty One, God, the Lord! The Mighty One, God, the Lord! He knows, and let Israel itself know! If it was in rebellion or in breach of faith toward the Lord, spare us not today for building an altar to turn away from following the Lord....’” (Ch. 22: 21-22).

Apostasy is also pictured as the “turning away” of the heart from God and from righteousness. For example, in Jeremiah 17: 5-6, it says: “Thus says the Lord, ‘cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his arm, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.’” And in Ezekiel 3: 20, it says: “Again, if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and I lay a stumbling block before him, he shall die; because you have not warned him, he shall die for his sin, and his righteous deeds which he has done shall not be remembered.”

In the Old Testament, Apostasy is focused on Israel’s breaking the “covenant relationship” with God through disobedience. For instance, in Jeremiah 2: 19, it says: “Your wickedness will chasten you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God; the fear of me is not in you, says the Lord God of hosts.”

Apostasy is also pictured as following other gods. For example, in Joshua 24: 20, it says: “If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” And in Judges 2: 19, it says: “But whenever the judge died, they turned back and behaved worse

than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing to them; they did not drop any of their practices of their stubborn ways.”

Let us go back to the apostate angels and their blatant apostasy that drove them away from God. They became evil themselves, devoid of any scintilla of good, and encouraging people to do evil by using enticing words to lead others toward unlawful actions, presenting these actions as good.

Having deceived themselves as to the truth regarding both themselves and God, these apostate angels exalt their self-will over the will of God and desired equality with God, only to be cast away far from God to a life of restless misery. These apostate angels preferred to rule over other human beings in misery rather than to be subject with others to God in happiness and to reign over the sons of darkness rather than to share the lot of the sons of light.

Thus in persuading other people, especially the faithless, that is, the atheists and agnostics who are “false to God,” to join in their vainglorious rebellion against God, they moved them to turn their hearts from God to themselves, and so to share in their own eternity of proud misery. They are blinded by their pride and ignored the truth that those who are far from God shall “perish,” that is, will be confined into the “Abyss of Nothingness;” that God “dost put an end to those who are false to thee,” that is, the atheists – the fools who say in their hearts: “there is no God.”

The nameless “anxiety” of so many people today testifies to their passive participation in the platform of atheism; the more sophisticated and articulate of them speak of an “abyss” that seems to have opened up within the heart of the human person. This “anxiety” and this “abyss” are precisely the “nothingness” out of which God has called each human person into being, and back to which a human being seems to fall when he or she denies God, and in consequence, denies his or her own creation and his or her own being.

Nothingness, incoherence, atheism, hatred of truth, is more than mere philosophy, more than even a rebellion of man or woman against a God he or she will no longer serve. A very subtle intelligence lies behind these phenomena, and on an intricate plan which philosopher and revolutionary alike merely serve and do not command; they have to do with the work of Lucifer or Satan the first Apostate.

For most people in our world today “life” is a small thing, a fleeting thing of small affirmation and small denial, veiled in comforting illusions and the hopeful prospect of ultimate nothingness; such people will know nothing of “those who are far from God,” and of Hell until they live in it.

But God loves even such people so much to allow them simply to “forget” Him and “perish” into nothingness, out of His Presence which alone is life to human

beings; he offers, even to those who are far from Him, to those in Hell, His Love which is torment to those who have not prepared themselves in this present life to receive it. many, we know, are severely tested and purified in those flames, that is, "the living flame of love" and made it fit by them to dwell in the kingdom of heaven, for a little while they have to suffer various trials so that the genuineness of their faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, will redound to the praise and glory and honor at the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ; but others, with the demons for whom Hell was made, must dwell there for all eternity; For God will render to every human being according to what he or she has done in the body: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, God will give eternal life, but for those who are far from Him and for those who are factious and faithless and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, for God shows no partiality.

Hence life and death or "far from God and to be near God" are being put in our presence, being offered to us, and we will get what we will choose. On my part, I would absolutely prefer: →

Icon # 762 = It is Good to be near God

"But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of all thy works."

Since to be far away from God is an utter misery, it follows that to be near God is an utter happiness, for it satisfies all our desires, as one of our Cistercian monks, no other than the illustrious abbot of Swineshead in Lincolnshire, England, Gilbert of Hoyland, testifies: "Your presence ever satisfies what our experience desires, so that the mind which holds and beholds you is at once intent upon you by attraction and content with you by satisfaction" (Sermon on the Song of Songs, 9).

We, humans, are composite beings, that is, made up of body and soul; and because of the special presence of God in our soul, our body now becomes the Temple of the Holy Spirit, a living tabernacle of God, thus have all the means to be near God.

If only we are near God, He at our side, we would have a high confidence that even if all the forces of the enemy, that is, the power of darkness at work in our world, would hurl themselves against us from all sides, they shall be beaten back and perish at the presence of God as wax melts before the fire.

To be near God is to be concerned about the things which serve our ultimate welfare and would habitually take those steps required by the reality of our own situation. It connotes a seriousness in the ordering of our spiritual life and a care to follow God's will. It facilitates the transformation of our state of consciousness in which every thought and word and action take place within the context of the divine.

Our heavenly friend, St. Thomas Aquinas, noted that if union with God is not our ultimate goal, some lesser good, such as the pursuit of riches, honor, pleasure, or power, will replace this greatest good. In our past, present, and future, whenever God is not the criterion and the goal, our activity serves some other end, some selfishness or self-service. The crux of the matter lies in realizing that any ultimate goal other than union with God, to be near Him, will lead us to be dissatisfied, as the often quoted sayings of our heavenly friend, St. Augustine, indicates: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in God."

To be near God and union with Him comes about through our practice of regular prayer, reflection on the Scriptures, and partaking of the Sacraments. As we open up to and deepen this union, fortify this intimacy, we will gradually discover a peace and joy in our life that we had not previously experienced. The Lord will be a stronghold of our life, "I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all thy works." The Lord is good, a fortress in times of distress, a stronghold in the day of trouble; He knows who take refuge in Him.

There are many things that peddle themselves to us in the day of trouble, offering to console us in our sorrow, to give us comfort in our pain and distress, but only one that provides true safety and comfort, namely, the Lord Our God, for he promised Himself as a stronghold in the day of trouble, as He says: "Call on me in the day of trouble, I will deliver you and you will glorify me."

Unlike the fortresses offered by the world, His walls cannot be torn down. His defenses are not made of air. His arms is mighty to save and He has bent His arms for our good, for "as the mother-bird," says our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "observing the approach of the hawk, spread out her wings in order that her young ones may enter under them and there find a safe asylum; so does the infinite and ineffable loving-kindness of Our Lord prepare itself to shelter us, expanding its bosom, as it were, and opening wide its arms" (Sermon Psalm 90).

On the other hand, if we will not make God our refuge in times of distress and in the day of trouble, but seek refuge in the crumbling and shifting sand of the world, seeking comfort in pleasure to distract us from our sorrow and distress, finding solace in entertainments to console us in our pain, then, there will be a grave danger that we will be cast off by God, for nothing is fearful than to have once "made God our refuge" then to have go out again to the fleshly

consolations, which are really desolations, and to endure once more the tumult of physical desires, and be abandoned by grace. For this reason, we can only lament: →

Icon # 763 = Does God cast off people forever?

Psalm 74 (73)

“O God, why dost thou cast us off for ever? Why does thy anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?”

It can be strongly argued that many people would rather prefer to be delivered from fire than to be cast off by God either for a short duration or forever. Fire is utterly intimidating that people instinctively would rather jump from 100 stories high building than to be devoured by fire. We have seen this on 9/11 wherein people spontaneously jumped from those twin towers than be swallowed by the scorching flame.

And yet, in the other side of reality, the sense of excruciating pain cause by fire, a pain that even affects the demons, is far inferior to the sense of loss caused by being cast off by God, as the Catechism of the Church emphatically asserted: “The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life of happiness for which he was created and for which he longs” (#1035).

In other words, the pain of loss consists in the loss of the beatific vision, a seeing that causes happiness, and in so complete a separation of all the powers of the soul from God that it cannot find in Him even the least peace and rest. It is accompanied by the loss of all supernatural gifts, e.g., the loss of faith.

The pain of loss is not the mere absence of superior bliss, but it is also a most intense pain, that is, the utter void of the soul made for the enjoyment of God and of infinite truth and infinite goodness and beauty causes those cast off by God immeasurable anguish. The desire for happiness inherent in their very nature, who unsatisfied and no longer able to find any compensation for the loss of God renders them utterly miserable.

The pain of loss is the very core of eternal punishment. If the reprobate beheld God face to face, hell itself, notwithstanding its fire, would be a kind of heaven. Had they but some union with God even if not precisely the union of the beatific vision, hell would no longer be hell, but a kind of purgatory. And yet the pain of loss is but the natural consequence of that aversion from God which lies in the nature of every mortal sin.

The pain of loss and the pain of sense constitute the very essence of hell, the former by far the most dreadful part of eternal punishment. To bolster our

argument, let us listen to what Our Lord said to our other heavenly friend, St. Catherine of Siena: "The first suffering which the damned endure is that they are deprived of seeing Me. This suffering is so great that, if it were possible, they would choose to endure fire and torments, if they could in the meantime enjoy My Vision, rather than to be delivered from other suffering without being able to see Me. This pain is increased by a second, that off the worm of conscience, which torment them without cessation. Thirdly, the view of the demon redoubles their suffering, because seeing him in all his ugliness, they see what they themselves are, and thus see clearly that they themselves have merited these chastisements. The fourth torment which the damned endure is that of fire which burns but does not consume. Further, so great is that hate which possesses them that they cannot will any good. Continually they blaspheme Me. They can no longer merit. Those who die in hate, guilty of mortal sin, enter a state which lasts forever."

For this reason, to be cast off by God forever and to lose Him is the greatest failure. On our part, since we are still in this present life we do have a chance for reformation and a deeper conversion. Therefore we pray: →

Icon # 764 = God's Chosen Community for the Communication of His divine Life

"Remember thy congregation, which thou has gotten of old, which thou hast redeemed to be the tribe of thy heritage! Remember Mount Zion, where thou has dwelt."

It is not farfetched to assert that the Church is Christ's congregation which He has gotten from of old, that is, He redeemed by His own blood to be the tribe of His heritage. To support our claim, let us listen to the testimony of the first letter of Peter which says: "But you are a chosen race; a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deed of him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy" (1Pt. 2: 9-10).

Truly, the love of a loving husband for his wife is just a flicker of the love of Christ for the Church, His body, His spouse. It as bright as a noontday sun that Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, by the blood of His cross, to redeem her that He might sanctify her and cleanse her, then present the Church to Himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (cf. Eph. 5: 25-27).

Since the Church is Christ's congregation, it follows that the Church can be rightly called the people of God. These are the people from every nation and

tongue whom He draws to Himself to seek Him, to know Him, to serve Him, and to love Him in this life and be eternally happy with Him in the next.

Our heavenly friend, no other than the gentle St. Francis de Sales observes that “every mother shows her love to her baby in three ways: feeding, cleaning, and correcting, and thus did the risen Savior impart to Mother Church the mandate to cleanse in baptism, feed in the Eucharist, and correct in penance.”

Throughout the Jewish history, the community always holds first place, and the greatest punishment which could be inflicted upon any individual Jew was to be cut off from this community. When the Messiah finally did come in the person of Our Lord Jesus, true God and true man, consubstantial with the Father, it was only natural to expect that God would now continue to deal with us humankind in much the same way that He dealt with it before, namely through a community, that is, a corporate body, presided over by a Head whom He Himself would choose.

A community was already in existence when “God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law” (Gal. 4: 4). The Lord Jesus was born in the very heart of a divinely chosen community, or we can also call it a “Congregation.” God, who in previous times spoke through the prophets, now would speak to all humanity through His Son to give the fullness of revelation. Thus the fullness of time has come, God intended to elevate this divinely chosen community to the fullness of truth and power and grace.

As once before He had named Abraham, Moses, and David as its head, and since new powers and privileges were to be given, He changed the name of that individual. For instance, He changed Abram’s name to Abraham, Jacob’s name to Israel, so now He changed the name of the individual Who is to be new head, from Simon to Rock; or Saul to Paul.

On the day when the “Rock” confessed that Christ Our Lord was the “Son of the living God,” the Divine Master authoritatively answered: “Thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Hence from that very moment God’s Church would be built upon the Rock and it would be to the whole human race God’s chosen community for the communication of His Divine Life, as Israel before had been the community for the communication of its promise.

The Lord Jesus said that this new community of believers would start small, like a mustard seed, but it would grow into a great tree, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade (cf. Mk. 4: 30-32). It would be a new society with ideals, purposes, and goal contrary to the world, and hence, would be hated by the world as He was hated: “If the world hates you know that it has hated me before it hates you,” He said. Its members would be so closely united to each

other and in Him, so much so, that if anyone did any kind act to any other member, for example, giving him or her food, or as simple as giving a cup of cold water, they would be doing it for Him. The unity between Him and this new community, or we can call it a "Congregation" or a Church, He said would be like the unity between the vine and the branches.

If there is any human analogy for this new community, it is the human body. As the body is composed of billions of tiny cells, each living its own individual life, and yet no one is able to live apart from the body, so this community of believers would be made up of billions of individuals who are incorporated in the Lord the Jesus.

Just as one cell is not another, as an arm is not an ear, as an eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need your services," so the missionary is not the family, the teacher is not the priest, and yet all through their different functions contribute to the beauty and order of the whole body, because it has one invisible Head, Christ, and one visible head, the Rock, and one soul which is the Spirit of God.

That men and women of His time might have no advantage over us, or the generation before or after us, He gave to this new Body His Truth, His Power, and His Sanctification. "I am the Truth," He said. But that truth He communicated to His new Body: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Lk. 10:16)

When, therefore, this new Body, or new community, or congregation, or church began to teach, it would be He who is teaching through them, just as He once taught through His human nature. Since it was God's truth, it would necessarily be infallible or free from errors on matters pertaining to faith and morals.

The same is true of His Power: "And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt. 28: 18-20). He was now saying that His Will, His Power, and His Authority would be exercised through another body, namely, His Church. Disobedience to it, therefore, would be disobedience to Him, just as an insult to our body is an insult to our person.

Finally, His Forgiveness and Sanctification He communicated to His new body or Church. How would our sins be forgiven? Could Mary Magdalene be forgiven and we not be forgiven? Everywhere this power to forgive sins is in the world today, and if He forgave her sins through a human nature, then, normally He will forgive our sins through other human natures in that Church to whom He gave the power when He said: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn. 20: 23).

Unequivocally, these poor human natures that were given the awesome power to forgive sins would not be holy as His nature was, but that would not spoil the absolution because the human nature is only the "instrument," not the cause of the forgiveness, just as the sunshine is not polluted because it shines through a dirty window.

Just as the Lord Jesus had taken a human nature from the womb of His Blessed Mother, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, through which He exercised the Office of Teacher, King, Prophet, and Priest, so now He takes from the womb of humanity, overshadowed by the Pentecostal Spirit, a new body, a new community, a new congregation, a new Church, through which He still continues to teach, to govern, to prophesy, and to sanctify.

In the day of His earthly life, the life and love and power of the Lord Jesus were manifested under the limited and localized form of lips, hands, and feet, however, after His Resurrection and Ascension, they are manifested through other human natures, whom He has compacted and united to Himself as His new Body or Church.

It was through His human body that He came to us on earth; it is through His "Mystical Body" or Church that He comes to us now. Whenever, therefore, we confess our sins to a priest and hear the words: "Through the ministry of the Church, may God grant you pardon and peace, and I absolve you from your sins," we may rightly protest: "How can man forgive sins?" The answer, of course, is: "Man cannot forgive sins, but God can forgive sins through man." Thus the Priest is not only the representative of God, he is also the representative of the Church, the Community, the Congregation, through which God's pardon is communicated to us.

Would we, then, be surprised to hear that the Lord Jesus, who is at the right hand of the Father with the glorified human nature, is now the Head of the new body of regenerated humanity, which has been growing since the day of Pentecost, and through which His Truth is still preached, His authority is still exercised, and His forgiveness is still applied?

Then, recall the story of the conversion of our good friend Paul, which took place a few years after the Ascension of Our Lord. This fiery Hebrew of the Hebrews grew up with a dreadful hatred of Christ and all things Christian, and as a young man he held the garments of those who stoned Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Our good friend Paul was not just a bigot. He was a very learned man, a pundit, trained under the famous rabbi Gamaliel, so powerful a disputant that the early Christians must have often wondered after the death of Stephen whom they could find to refute him.

However, in the gracious Providence of God, it was reserved that our good friend Paul should refute a Paul. Saul, as he was formerly called, was to strike the body of believers in the city of Damascus, Syria, in exactly the same way as Christians are persecuted today, and the voice from heaven says: "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"

Hence, it is bright as the noonday sun that Christ and His Church are the same. The risen Lord, only four or five years after he had left this earth, broke open the heavens to declare to Paul and the world, that in striking His Body they strike His Head, that the branches and the vine are one; that, when the Body of the Church is persecuted, it is Christ who arises to speak. No wonder that the transformed and converted Paul understood Christ as well as the other apostles for they, too, had touched His Body.

If Christianity is only the memory of a Great Personage, a Moral Teacher who taught, lived, and suffered for an ideal in the past, and to whom we can get no closer than by our imagination flying back to Galilee, then Christianity is hardly worth preserving and "remembering." Since Christ is true God, consubstantial with His Father in His Divine nature, as well as true man, consubstantial with His Mother in His Human nature, He should be able to do what no human being has ever been able to do, namely, to project His Life, His Truth, and His Love to the very doors of our day and the very threshold of our hearts. Thus those who lived in His times should have no advantages in love and truth and forgiveness over those who live in our times.

No single drop of blood can exist apart from our body, but our body can exist without that single drop of blood, so the Body of Christ can live without you or me, but we cannot live without the Body of Christ. Even unbaptized souls belong to it in intention if they live up to God's will according to the light of their conscience, and would accept Revelation if they knew about it.

As we were born out of the womb of political society, so as Christian we were born out of the womb of Christ's society. We live by it, before we know it. It creates us spiritually by birth of the Spirit, as our native place created us by birth of the flesh. The fact is that the Church is prior, both logically and chronologically, to its individual members. This Church was spread throughout the entire Roman Empire even before a single book of the New Testament was written. It was the Bible that grew out of the Church, not the Church out of the Bible.

"The only-begotten Son of the Eternal Father, who came on earth to bring salvation and the light of divine wisdom to men, conferred a great and wonderful blessing on the world when, about to ascend again into heaven, He commanded the Apostles to go and teach all nations, and left the Church which He had founded to be the common and supreme teacher of the people.

For men whom the truth had set free were to be preserved by the truth; nor would the fruits of heavenly doctrines by which salvation comes to men have long remained had not the Lord Christ appointed an unfailing teaching authority to train the minds to faith. And the Church built upon the promises of its own divine Author, whose charity it imitated, so faithfully followed out His commands that its constant aim and chief wish was this: to teach religion and contend forever against errors" (On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy, Aeterni Patris, Encyclical of Pope Leo XII promulgated on August 4, 1879).

Therefore, for great affection and solicitude for the Church, we pray: "Remember thy congregation, which thou hast gotten of old, which thou hast redeemed to be the tribe of thy heritage!"

On the other hand, we are very displeased and horrified of the persecution of our fellow Christians in non-Christian countries, especially in Iraq and Syria carried out by the Jihadist group popularly known as ISIS which destroyed churches and every traces of Christianity. For this reason, we could not help but expressed our profound sadness and send out our petition to Our Lord saying: →

Icon # 765 = The Persecution of Christians

"Direct thy steps to the perpetual ruins; the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary! Thy foes have roared in the midst of thy holy place; they set up their own signs for signs. At the upper entrance they hacked the wooden trellis with axes. And then all its carved wood they broke down with hatchets and hammer. They set thy sanctuary on fire; to the ground they desecrated the dwelling place of thy name. They said to themselves, 'we will utterly subdue them'; they burned all the meeting places of God in the land. We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long."

It is clear as a noonday sun that ISIS had done an unimaginable havoc in Iraq and Syria and causes immigration crises. In February of 2016, Pope Francis, in a historic joint statement with Patriarch Kirill of Russia, asserted that Islamist extremists were waging a very severe religious persecution that "whole families, villages and cities of our brothers and sisters in Christ are being completely exterminated."

Let us rewind a year earlier. In February of 2015, ISIS published a very graphic YouTube video methodically beheading a line of bound, kneeling men, all of whom were dressed in orange jumpsuits, on a Libyan beach. These ISIS victims were twenty-one Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Christians and a Christian from Ghana who had worked in Libya as migrants and had been selectively abducted from their dormitory after confessing their Christian faith. This

beheading video has become emblematic of the modern manifestation of anti-Christian genocide and an icon of the suffering under ISIS.

An occasional video or report of an ISIS demolition of a church or monastery has reached the international media, but few in the West understand that within ISIS – controlled territory, all churches have been shut, desecrated, or destroyed, all clergy have been assassinated or driven out, and no Christian community has been left intact (cf. “The Persecution and Genocide of Christians in the Middle East: Prevention, Prohibition, & Prosecution, edited by Ronald J. Rychlak & Jane F. Adolphe, 2017).

Thus the enemy of God “has destroyed everything in the sanctuary! Thy foes have roared in the midst of thy holy place; they set up their own signs for signs. At the upper entrance they hacked the wooden trellis with axes. And then all its carved wood they broke down with hatchet and hammers. They set thy sanctuary on fire; to the ground they desecrate the dwelling of thy name. They said to themselves, ‘we will utterly subdue them’; they burned all the meeting places of God in the land. We do not see our signs; there is no longer any prophet, and there is none among us who knows how long.”

It is not an exaggeration to say that Christians are the most persecuted religious group in our world today. Of course, the Middle East accounts for a majority of countries for extreme persecution of Christians. However, North Korea ranked number one in the top 10 for this severe persecution of Christians. The following, in order, are the countries: North Korea, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, and Eritrea. Egypt ranks No. 21.

The center for the Study of Global Christianity, an academic research center that monitors worldwide demographic trends in Christianity, estimates that between the year 2005 and 2015, 900,000 Christians were martyred, an average of 90,000 Christians each year. Moreover, according to the Christian advocacy group, one in 12 Christians today experiences “high”, “very high”, or “extreme” persecution for their faith. Nearly 215 million Christians face “high” persecution, with 100 million of those living in Asia.

Study also shows that between Nov. 1, 2015 and Oct. 31, 2016, a total of 1,329 “documented” Churches attacked worldwide for faith related reasons, happened in the Middle Eastern or Muslim-dominated countries. Also, according to a report from the International Catholic Charity, Aid to the Church in need, “anti-Christian persecution is at an all-time high world-wide. The report, which tracks worldwide persecution from 2015-2017, found that 75 percent of religious persecution was directed against Christians.

The report’s editor, John Pontifex, said that “in terms of the number of people involved, the gravity of the crimes committed and their impact, it is clear that

the persecution of Christians is worse today than at any time in history.” “Not only are Christians more persecuted than any other faith, group, but ever-increasing numbers are experiencing the very worst forms of persecution,” he added.

The report draws its findings from fact-finding trips and studies such as the Pew Forum’s Social Hostilities Index and Open Door’s World Watch List. They found that Christians have “suffered increased violence and oppression as a result of a rise in religious nationalism,” noting, for instance, “In India persecution has risen sharply since the rise to power of the right-wing Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014.

The report also highlights increased persecution in China “where the President has described Christianity as ‘a foreign infiltration.’” The report also noted “increased hostility to Church communities accused of resisting government control has resulted in the increasingly widespread removal of crosses from churches and the destruction of Church buildings. Some regional authorities have banned Christmas trees and greetings cards.”

North Korea is the worst offender, according to the report which found, “unspeakable atrocities” against Christians that include “enforced starvation, abortion and reports of faithful being hung on crosses over a fire and others being crushed under a steamroller.” For this reason, we continue to send up our sighs and groaning: →

Icon # 766 = Is the Enemy of God revile His name forever?

“How long, O God, is the foe to scoff? Is the enemy to revile thy name for ever? Why dost thou hold back thy hand, why dost thou keep thy right hand in thy bosom?”

“We’re gonna beat ISIS very, very quickly, folks. It’s gonna be fast. I have great plan. It’s going to be great. They ask, ‘what is it?’ Well, I’d rather not say.” The presidential candidate, Donald Trump, made this promise to his supporters in Connecticut in April of 2016 as he was campaigning. At the time, it seemed very unlikely he would ever have to make good on the promise. After all, Hilary Clinton was leading comfortably in the polls. However, Trump’s miraculous victory gave him the compelling opportunity to fulfill his promise. Many were really openly skeptical he could do it.

But one year into his administration, the facts on the ground, in Syria and Iraq, have dramatically changed. ISIS lost control of Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq, in July 2017. Three months later, ISIS’ Capital, the Syrian City of Raqqa, fell. Many fighters fled to Deir ez-zor in the Eastern part of the country. In November

of 2017, that too fell. The 'Caliphate' that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi proudly announced with such fanfare in the summer of 2014 was in tatters.

It is fair to say that president Trump deserves credit for hastening the downfall of ISIS. On January 28, 2017 he signed a memorandum to security services directing them to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. However, it is also true to say that the war is not yet over. The threat has greatly mutated and will continue to mutate.

While the loss of the "Caliphate" damages the ISIS brand, yet it maintains sufficient quality to inspire attacks abroad. Even outside physical domains, ISIS has access to electronic spaces where it can continue its recruitment effort. Therefore, the Trump administration has a fairly good reason to celebrate the progress they have made but also accept that a tremendous amount of work lies ahead.

Of course, how long is the foe to scoff, to revile the name of God, is an open question. It is fair to say that it will last till the end of time. However, we have a promise of God who explicitly says: "I am with you always, to the close of the age;" also, referring to His Church, He said: "and the powers of death shall not prevail against it."

One thing also is certain, that is, this scoffing and reviling will come to its appointed end when the sentences of destiny and doom are passed by Our Lord Jesus the Judge of the living and the dead. On that day, as the Lord says: "The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth" (Mt. 13: 41-42).

If the enemies of God have a dim awareness, even in this present life, of the meaning of hell, they have no idea of its full extent, which cannot be adequately experienced in this life. Even the most scoffer and reviler of God have no "spiritual insight" necessary to see them as they are. The spirit of their "father," the spirit of Hell, is always disguised in this world. It is only in the next life that they will realize the full bitterness of hopeless misery.

The Starets Zossima, in the Brothers Karamazov, speaks of one kind of such people: "There are some who remain proud and fierce even in hell....They have cursed themselves, cursing God and life....They cannot behold the living God without hatred, and they cry out that the God of life should be annihilated, that God should destroy Himself and His own creation. And they will burn in the fire of their own wrath for ever and yearn for death and annihilation. But they will not attain to death...."

They will be tormented day and night, as the book of Revelation says, without a millisecond of relief. Their torture will be a torture of a scorpion when it stings a

person. "And in those days men will seek death, and death will fly from them." However, for those who have attained salvation, they can rightly declare: →

Icon # 767 = Christ is King and God

"Yet God my King is from of old, working salvation in the midst of the earth."

We are on a very solid ground to affirm that the Lord Jesus is Our God and King, "working salvation in the midst of the earth." Just as God from of old delivered His people from bondage in Egypt, and conducted them to the promised land, so the Lord Jesus, by His death on the cross, delivered us from the slavery of sin, and conducting us to the kingdom of heaven.

Of course, the kingship of the Lord Jesus calls attention, first of all, to His lofty personality and the dignity and grandeur of His own inborn substance, for He is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through Him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man."

As Pope Pius XI pointed out in his encyclical on Christ the King, Christ's Kingship is founded on the ineffable "Hypostatic Union," that is, the union between the human nature of Christ and the second Person of the Blessed Trinity. By reason of that union Christ as man transcends every creature, even the highest angels who must absolutely adore and serve Him.

St. John the Evangelist testifies that Christ is king of all creation, since "all things were made through Him." And our other heavenly friend, St. Cyril of Alexandria pointed out that "Christ has dominion over all creatures, a dominion not seized by violence nor usurped, but by His essence and by nature." Not only does Christ's kingship issued from His very nature, but He also acquired the right to kingship "by reason of conquest," for He purchased us by His sacrifice on Calvary, redeeming us from the slavery of sin and Satan.

That is why our good friend, St. Paul, reminded our fellow Christians in Corinth: "You were bought with a price. So glorify in your body" (1Cor. 6:20). Moreover, it was after His redeeming sacrifice and resurrection that Christ said to His apostles: "all authority in heaven and an earth has been given to me" (Mt. 28: 18).

Although the kingship that the Lord Jesus exercised in our present world is of a "spiritual" nature, yet by reason of His "Divine" nature and His role as "Redeemer" He has a "temporal power" as well, but He opted not to use it. As our other heavenly friend, the angelic doctor St. Thomas Aquinas explains, He did not will to have on earth the temporal administration of an earthly kingdom: "Christ, although established king by God, did not wish while living on earth to

govern with temporal power on earthly kingdom; consequently He said: 'My kingdom is not of this world'" (III, 59, 4, ad 1).

His kingdom is "in the world," but not "of the world," that is, He does not rely on temporal power as earthly kingdoms do, but spiritual power. He rules not by physical force in the conquest of nations, but by the conquest of hearts and minds by means of divine grace in conjunction with human free-will.

Christ's kingdom, that is, the Church is indeed in the world, but its purpose, its power, and its means of conquest are of the spiritual order and ordained for their fulfillment in the world to come. It is a kingdom "not of this world" inasmuch as it establishes and imposes principles which are folly to the world, principles quite contrary to those by which the world is govern. It is a kingdom in which its citizens obey, not by force, but freely out of love; but is a kingdom where that freedom can be abused, where the will of Christ the king can be rejected.

Christ intends to reign in our minds and hearts through the virtues of faith, hope, and love which find expression in the acknowledgment of His dominion, and the return of His love through obedience to His will. His kingdom is one of peace, justice, and love. Such will be the state of affairs if His teachings are accepted and followed. His laws are needed to keep our selfish and unruly tendencies in check, for He knows well the weakness of our fallen nature and the evil that human beings are capable of if left to themselves.

Of course, as God, He knows all men because He, not only is King, but also the Creator of man. That is why though many believed in His name when people saw the signs which He did, but He did not trust Himself to them, because He knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man, for He Himself knew what was in man (cf. Jn. 2: 23-25).

For the reasons mentioned above, where His teachings are rejected we have the opposite: wars, injustice, hatred, and all kinds of immoralities. How clearly the situation of our world today verifies this. We live in a chaotic and troubled world in which injustice, hatred, lawlessness, and all kinds of immoralities and evils, which certainly would spin the imagination of Adam and Eve, Abraham, and Moses, are commonplace. Yet still our Christ our King and God greets each of us as He greeted the Apostles: "Peace be with you."

If we acknowledge His kingship and dominion, if we bear in mind that we are citizens of His kingdom and members of His Mystical Body, and strive to act justly, to love tenderly, to live morally, and to walk humbly with Our God, then, that peace He offered can be ours as well, regardless of the turmoil in the world around us. The rationale behind this is that as King and God He has absolute power to: →

Icon # 768 = Who Shall Crush the Serpent's head, He or She?

"Thou didst divide the sea by thy might; thou didst break the heads of the dragons on the waters. Thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan, thou didst give him as food for the creatures of the wilderness."

It is probable that many Christians have heard or have seen, if they were born in the 50's or before those years, the movie: The Ten Commandments, which was released in 1956. For those who are interested it is still available on DVD and Video.

In general, it was about the exodus of the Israelites out of Egypt into the Promised Land wherein, in a miraculous way, God divided the Red Sea, so that His people can cross the sea on dry ground. Of course, they were pursued by the Egyptian army who were like "dragons" and "sea-monsters" in strength and cruelty, ready to devour God's people.

Then the Lord said to Moses: "Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen." So Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen and all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not so much as one of them remained (cf. Ex. 14: 21-28).

There are several obvious things in this passage; first God is clearly fighting for His people; second, He will perform a miracle when it is really necessary; and third, God highly appreciate human cooperation to carry out His plan. For this reason it is really for our good to put our trust in God because His divine providence is a nourishment for our faith and hope, to sustain and encourage us in times of difficulties.

Whether we like it or not we have to pass through many trials and tribulations before we can enter the Promised Land, that is, the kingdom of heaven, but we should not be discouraged of the return of consolation just as we trust of the return of spring after we passed through the severity of winter.

Now let us examine these "breaking the heads of the dragons" and "crushing the heads of Leviathan" and see who these figures are. Leviathan is a transliterated Hebrew word meaning "twisted," "coiled." In the book of Job, it denotes the dragon which, according to Eastern tradition, is an enemy of light (cf. Job 3: 7-9). In Job 41: 1, it signifies a crocodile; in Psalms 104: 26, it denotes any large animal that moves by writhing or wriggling the body, the whale, the monsters of the deep. This word is also used figuratively for a cruel enemy, as some think "the Egyptian host, crushed by the divine power, and cast on the shores of the Red Sea" (cf. Ps. 74: 14).

The references to God “playing” with Leviathan (cf. Ps. 104: 26; Job 41: 5) are explainable on the basis of God’s Omnipotence which reduces this mighty rebellious dragon to a plaything. They mythological pagan drama is ultimately transposed in Israel into a moral lesson. The future and final destruction of Leviathan becomes a symbol in Isaiah (27: 1) for the death of the wicked, to be succeeded by the redemption of Israel, as it is written: “In that day the Lord with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea.” “In those days to come Jacob shall take root, Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit” (Is. 27: 1, 6); (cf. Harper’s Bible Dictionary; Dictionary of the Bible, John L. Mckenzie, S.J.).

It is not surprising that in the course of history a meaningful discussion arises on “who” shall crush the serpent’s head, that is, Satan. It focuses on whether God says “he” shall crush Satan’s head or whether “she” shall crush Satan’s head (cf. Gen. 3: 15).

There are variations in different versions of the Bible. For instance, the Jerusalem Bible (JB), the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) use the word “it” instead of “he” or “she.” Here’s the text of Gen. 3: 15 in JB and NJB versions: “I will make you enemies of each other: you and the woman, your offspring and her offspring. It will crush your head and you will strike its heel.”

On the other hand, the Gideons International Version uses “it” and “his”: “And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.” However, the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New American Bible (NAB), New Catholic Edition (Douay Version), St. Joseph Edition, use the word “he.” Here’s a sample from RSV, where it says: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”

It seems to us that it would be certainly reasonable that the obvious explanation to this variation is simply to examine the original Hebrew text, but according to the scholar Taylor Marshall that is where the problem begins. The medieval Hebrew Masoretic manuscripts read “he shall crush.” However, Taylor Marshall continues, there are two Hebrew manuscripts that read “she shall crush.” There is a good reason to doubt the majority Hebrew reading of “he shall crush.”

He pointed out three best Jewish witnesses to Gen. 3: 15 interpret the passages as “she shall crush,” namely, Philo Judaeus, Josephus the Roman historian, and Moses Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish philosopher. Philo argues that the Hebrew parallel poetry of Gen. 3: 15 demands the reading of “she shall crush.” Josephus, also writing in Greek, describes the passage for us as reading “she

shall crush." Then last of all, Maimonides also states that Gen. 3: 15 teaches that the woman shall crush the head of the serpent.

Hence, these three great Jewish scholars testify to the traditional Catholic reading of the Latin Vulgate. The reason why the Hebrew manuscript we have today vary from these ancient Jewish witness, Taylor Marshall pointed out, is that the Masoretic manuscript has been corrupted – something claimed by both the Eastern and Western Fathers throughout the centuries (cf. Dr. Taylor Marshall, "Who crushes Satan's Head in Genesis 3: 15? Mary or Jesus?").

Either the Blessed Virgin Mary or the Lord Jesus will crush the head of the serpent in Gen. 3: 15 doesn't really matter because either reading is Orthodox and true, that is, Christ absolutely crushes the head of Satan, and the Blessed Virgin "crushes the head of Satan by virtue of her role as the Mother of God and the New Eve."

For Catholics, the "she" reading is the traditional reading of the Latin Vulgate and it is important because it highlights the importance of "the woman," that is, the Blessed Virgin Mary in the history of human salvation. In other words, the "she shall crush" reading supports the Catholic argument that Mary's role as Mother of God makes her Mediatrix and her role as New Eve makes her Co-redemptrix.

How about us? Can we also crush the head of the serpent, that is, Satan? Of course, we can; every time we reject an evil or sinful suggestion we crush the head of Satan, that is, we weaken his power over us. However, we should not be complacent because vices which we think are crushed will crane their heads again if we are careless and self-satisfied. Can we say in all honesty that we have completely destroyed in ourselves all superfluous things and all unhealthy desires that we think there is nothing more in us worth crushing?

Certainly, if we are truly honest with ourselves we will always find something deserving to be crushed, as our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux rightly pointed out that no matter what great progress we made in this life we are wrong if we think vices are dead when they are merely suppressed. Whether we like it or not, the Jebusite dwells within our borders. He can be subdued but not exterminated (cf. Sermon 58 on the Song of Songs).

For this reason, we should keep on resisting and crushing the insinuation of the serpent. The Church constantly warns us that no person, so long as we are still in this present life, is secure; that no community, however holy it may be, is exempted from the cunning of the serpent; that the regularity of exterior practice does not always prove the uniformity of spirits and agreement of wills; in short, holy places only sanctify a person in proportion as he himself or herself aspires holiness.

Whenever we are able to crush the head of the serpent we should attribute this victory to God, for certainly this is not our own doing but owing to God's grace. The overcoming of temptation, the controlling of immoral habit, the forestalling of an impending downfall, the detection of the trap of the cunning serpent, the subduing of a long indulged passion, and the obtaining by God's grace the virtue persistently desired and repeatedly sought, are more than enough to evoke a profound sense of gratitude to God. Moreover, He has absolute power to: →

Icon # 769 = Christ is Really a living Water

"Thou didst cleave open springs and brooks; thou didst dry up ever-flowing streams."

Just as God has amazing power to open a door and no one can shut, and also shut a door and no one can open, so it would not be surprising that He cleaves open springs and brooks and dries up ever-flowing streams. This certainly is His prerogative.

Christ Himself is the "Fountain of Life" and His Spirit, which of course, is the Holy Spirit, who is also the Spirit of the Father, is the "living water," as He Himself said: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now this He said about the Spirit, which those who believed in Him were to receive" (Jn. 7: 37-39).

We are not naïve to assert that this "living water" will be "dried up" in a person who losses his or her faith. Evidence showed that it was obviously dried up in the case of Judas, but not in the case of Peter. Faith is certainly a good image of a flowing stream which is possible to be "dried up" or "ever-flowing" depending on how a person cultivates, relates, and interacts with it.

It is truly right and just to say that hearing the words of God and putting them into practice, even if we fail from time to time, is the greatest assurance that we can keep our faith "ever-flowing;" on the other hand, hearing them but not putting them into practice is truly the leading reason in which our faith can be "dried up," that is, lost.

To prove our point let us listen to the Lord Himself who emphatically said: "Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand,

and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it" (Mt. 7: 24-27).

We should emphatically and categorically refuse to believe that a single "slip" is the cause of a person's sudden ruin, that is to say, an "ebbing" of a stream is the origin of its being dried up. No one would ever believe that the faith of Judas dried up suddenly, but we can reasonably argue that it dried up gradually. It is also correct to assert that Judas listen more to the insinuation of the devil than to the teaching of Christ.

Having been misled by the subtle suggestion of the devil, his faith gradually decreases and thus as disbelief slowly increases, he sinks into a wretched condition. Take another example, a house or a building certainly never abruptly crumbled except because of some old weakness in the foundation or because of extended neglect by its owners. Hence, the structure of the roof is eventually destroyed by what had began as a tiny leak, but through long neglect, a mighty tempest of rain pours like a flooding river, and then an enormous breach has been made.

In other words, through carelessness and neglect what began as a tiny leak of passion and evil desire infiltrated the soul. Once these little, very little and insignificant leaks are let go unattended they weaken the structure of the virtues, and afterward they pour in a heavy shower of sinfulness, deceitfulness, and double-life.

As a consequence, on a stormy days, that is, in times of trials, pressures, and tribulations, the mind is driven out by the onrushing assault of the devil from the dwelling place of virtue, in which it had once reposed as it were its own house when it maintained a careful watchfulness (cf. John Cassian's *Conferences*, Sixth Conference: Conference of Abba Serapion On the Slaughter of some holy persons).

We really need to keep on adhering to Our Lord Jesus, to His words and teaching for the maintenance of our faith, to prevent it from being depleted. We believe that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." We also unequivocally believe that Christ is a living water, that is, a water that has life, not just an ordinary life but a supernatural life, a life that is eternal. Although faith is "the conviction of things not seen," but all the evidence support that Christ is really a "living water" and source of eternal life. We have to reiterate that He was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in Him were to receive.

Here's an evidence from the mouth of "TRUTH" Himself: "Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (Jn. 4: 14). And our good friend, St. Paul, who has the spirit of Christ

and has testified that it is no longer he that live, but Christ lives in him, emphatically said: "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit" (1Cor. 12: 13).

In conclusion, since we are made to drink of one Spirit, and since Christ and the Holy Spirit are one, and whoever drinks of the water that Christ shall give will become in that person a spring of water welling up to eternal life, therefore, Christ is really and unequivocally a "living water" and source of eternal life. For this reason, Christ can definitively avow: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn. 11: 26). No wonder, then, that: →

Icon # 770 = The Big Bang and the Word

"Thine is the day, thine also the night; thou hast established the luminaries and the sun. Thou hast fixed all the bounds of the earth; thou hast made summer and winter."

It is really very hard and extremely absurd to believe or even imagine that our sun, our moon, and our earth exist by itself without someone responsible for their existence, let alone of their roles for the maintenance of "life" on earth, just as it is absolutely insane even to suggest that we exist by ourselves without our parents or our parents without their parents and so forth.

Two hundred years ago, that is, the year 1818, there were less than one billion human beings on earth. Today, according to UN calculations there are over 7 billion people in our world. It is not farfetched to assert that out of these 7 billion people not even 500 million have heard about the "Big Bang" theory. It is not even ridiculous to suggest that more than half of college students around the world do not know what is Big Bang theory.

The Big Bang Theory is the leading explanation about how our universe began. At its simplest, it says that the universe as we know it started with a small singularity, then inflated over the next 13.8 billion years to the cosmos that we know today.

Since our universe has a beginning, therefore, it is a creation. Since it is a creation, there must be someone who created it because a thing could not just exist by itself. We may call this "Someone" as "Intelligent Designer," or "Supreme Being," or "Higher Power," etc. To be sure, this "Someone" is a "Person" who has intelligence, memory, and will.

We Christians call this "Someone" the "Word" who was with God, and was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things, seen and unseen, were made through Him, by Him, in Him, and with Him, and without Him was not anything

made that was made. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, before the earth with its fields, or the first of the dust of the world had been made, when the heavens was established, the skies above made firm, the fountains of the deep was established, the foundations of the earth marked out, and the limit of the sea was assigned, so that the waters might not transgressed God's command, this "Word" was beside Him, like a master workman; and was daily His delight, rejoicing before Him always, rejoicing in His inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men (cf. Prov. 8: 25-31).

It is truly right and just to say that God has made our universe and all that is in it in such a way that He is the point of everything we see. The material is meant to be a revelation of the spiritual; the human, a revelation of the Divine; and the fleeting experiences of our days, a revelation of Eternity. The universe, according to God's original plan, was made transparent, like a window pane: a mountain was not to be just a mountain, but a symbol of the power of God. Snowflake was not just a snowflake, but a clue to the purity of God, a sun was not just to be a sun, but symbol of God's majesty and splendor.

Everything created was to tell something about God, for "by the visible things of the world is the invisible God made manifest." According to this plan, every human person is endowed with a sense of the invisible, infinite values in everything.

Sin was the act by which human beings refused to see creatures for what they are – stepping stones to God, a means to an end – and began, instead, to clutch at them as ends in themselves. In the theological order the first truth is, of course, God. Omnipotent and Omnipresent Creator of all, revealed to faith and in the experience of the faithful (and not contradicted by the reason of those who do not deny faith), God is the supreme end of all creation and Himself, unlike His creation, finds His end in Himself; everything created stands in relation to and dependence upon Him, who alone depend upon nothing outside Himself; He has created the world that it might live in enjoyment of Him, and everything in the world is oriented toward this end, which however we may miss by a misuse of our freedom.

When we zealously organize the knowledge of God gathered from the consideration of His creation, we open up, as it were, the passages of His whisper to us. When we see the things He has made the luminaries and the sun, the bounds of the earth, day and night, summer and winter, we wonder at the power of Our Creator.

Truly, truly, there is no Creator higher than God, nor art more efficacious than the word of God, no better reason why something good should be created than that the God who creates is good. Therefore, the explanation, then, of the

goodness of creation is the goodness of God. It is reasonable and sufficient explanation whether considered in the light of Philosophy or of faith.

When all creation was complete, Scripture concludes: "God saw that all he had made was very good." Surely, this can only mean that there was no other reason for creating the world except that good creatures might be made by a good God. If no one had sinned, this beautiful world could have been filled with created natures that are good. Even now, with sin in the world, it does not follow that all things are sinful. The great majority of those in heaven preserve the integrity of their nature; and not even the sinfulness of a will refusing to preserve the order of its nature can lessen the beauty of God's total order, designed, as it is, according to the laws of His justice. For, as the beauty of a picture is not dimmed by the dark colors, in their proper place, so the beauty of the universe of creatures, if one has insight to discern it, is not marred by sins, even though sin is an ugly blotch (cf. St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XI Creation and the Two Societies of Angels, Ch. 23).

It is not farfetched to assert that the sin of the sinner blunts or dulls his understanding of the truth, giving him or her a moral values of his or her actions which does not properly reveal the depravity of his or her actions, due to his or her conscience being "covered with the salve of sin," if we might use a phrase to describe how sin mollifies the "prick" of conscience.

Thus our good friend, St. Paul, rightly says: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse; for although they knew God they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened" (Rom. 1: 18-21).

On this ground, we have to send up our sighs to God, saying: →

Icon # 771 = The Scoffers and the Impious People

"Remember this, O Lord, how the enemy scoffs, and impious people reviles thy name."

Both the second letter of Peter (3: 3-4) and the letter of Jude (vv 18-19), forewarned us that in the last days scoffers will come with scoffing, following their own ungodly passions. It is these who set divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit; "impious people" reviling the Lord saying: "Where is the promise of

his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation.”

Notice that the enemy of the Lord who scoffs Him and the impious people who revile His name are those who follow their “ungodly passions;” those who “set up divisions;” “worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.” Undoubtedly, these are the people who made friendship with the world, therefore made themselves enemies of God. “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world” (1Jn. 2: 16).

The Lord Jesus is light, and the world is darkness; and as light and darkness cannot exist together, one casts out the other, so neither can Our Lord and the world be one. When the spirit of the world gets entrance into our heart, Our Lord is cast out, rejected; and in proportions as the spirit of Our Lord gains ground in our soul, the spirit of the world is cast out.

Worldly spirit is directly opposed to the spirit of the Lord Jesus, as our heavenly friend, St. John, declares: “If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1Jn. 2: 15). The world is composed of those who center their happiness in earthly things, detest and shun poverty, suffering, humiliation; while they have love and worship wealth, pleasure, and dignity, esteeming these the only treasures worthy of man's ambition; pursuing them with unrelenting ardor and deliberately sacrificing their souls to attain them, to the insane point of scoffing the Lord and reviling His name.

Since this is a very dangerous condition to be in, therefore, we have to beseech the Lord and cry out: →

Icon # 772 = Deliverance of the Dove and the life of the truly Poor

“Do not deliver the soul of thy dove to the wild beasts; do not forget the life of thy poor for ever.”

The dove is the loveliest and most striking symbol of the Holy Spirit. Its form and color put us in mind of the grace and purity of the Holy Spirit, its rapid but unagitated flight represents His lively yet controlled motion, its low murmur is like the expression of love which we have come to associate with the Holy Spirit.

Since the dove is the loveliest and most striking symbol of the Holy Spirit, hence, the wild beasts are fitting symbol of the Devil, the roaring lion seeking someone to devour, and his principalities, powers, and dominions; or men of savage dispositions, persecuting principles, and cruel practices – as Herod is called a fox by Christ, and Nero a lion by the apostle (cf. 1Pt. 5: 8).

We may well say: do not deliver those men and women whom the Holy Spirit had favored to the Devil who is like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour; do not deliver them to the wild beasts, that is, to the unruly passions and inordinate desires that wage war in the inner recesses of their hearts, lest they would be torn to pieces with no one to rescue them.

It is interesting to notice that the Psalmist specifies the poor that belong to God rather than the poor in general. The reason for this is simply not esoteric because in reality not all poor people belong to God, as our heavenly friend, St. Pope Pius X, says: "According to the law of spirit and truth I call them truly poor who, even in the midst of riches, in heart and mind are indifferent to any advantage that worldly goods may bring them." Moreover, "we must not call poor the one who desires riches, however poor he may be," interjected our other heavenly friend, Blessed Marie of the Incarnation, "but only the one who is pleased and content with his poverty and does not desire more."

Of course, God has a predilection for the "poor," because though He was rich He became poor by becoming a human being like us in all things except sin, so that by His poverty we might become rich by sharing in His divinity.

"Evil doers," says our heavenly friend, St. Augustine, "feel no shame that they themselves are evil amid the things they praise as good. They are more pained if their villa is poor than their life is bad, as though man's greatest good were to have everything good except himself" (City of God, Book III Physical Evils Were not Prevented by the Gods, Ch. 1).

Certainly, God does not forget the life of His poor forever, because His own Incarnation is itself a memorial that He once became poor, as though His poverty was engraved on the palms of His hands. To His poor, He may well say: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands" (Is. 49: 15-16).

Since this is so, therefore, we are in a fairly good position to petition the Lord in these words: →

Icon # 773 = Covenant with God

"Have regard for thy covenant, for the dark places of the land are full of the habitations of violence."

At its most basic level, a covenant is an oath – bound relationship between two parties. However, it is more than a mere impersonal contract into which two parties agree to an exchange of goods and services. It binds persons together beyond the mere contractual agreement. Marriage is an excellent example.

While marriage has “contractual” elements and promises, it is a covenant that binds two persons together. Obviously, marriage binds two persons in a singular way.

According to Wikipedia on Ancient Near Eastern treaties, there are two major types of covenants in the Hebrew Bible, including the obligatory type and promissory type. The obligatory covenant is more common with the Hittite people, and deals with the relationship between two parties of equal standing. In contrast, the promissory type of covenant is seen in the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants.

Promissory covenants focus on the relationship between the suzerain and the vassal and are similar to the “royal grant” type of legal document, which include historical introduction, border delineations, stipulations, witnesses, blessings, and curses. In royal grants, the master could reward a servant for being loyal. For instance, God rewarded Abraham, Noah, and David in His covenants with them.

As part of His covenant with Abraham, God has the obligation to keep Abraham's descendants as God's chosen people and be their God. When taking this oath, God is accompanied by a smoking oven and a torch. These were objects used in the procedure of taking an oath much like oaths that involved sacrificing animals while taking the oath.

God act as the suzerain power and is the party of the covenant accompanied by the required action that comes with the oath whether it be fire or animals in the sacrificial oaths. In doing this, God is the party taking upon the curse if He does not uphold His obligation.

The New Covenant in Christ binds together God to His people with a future promise of redemption. It also binds God's people to one another (cf. Eph. 2: 11-22). The New Covenant, ratified by the blood of Christ Himself, the Creator, brings all parties within the scope of salvation and the New Covenant – Jew and Gentile. Christ tells us in John 10: 16 that “I have other sheep, which are not of this fold (*non-Jews*); I must gather them also, and they shall heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.”

Our good friend, St. Paul, tells us that the great mystery is that the plan of God is to include not just the Jew but also the Gentiles, that is, the whole world (cf. Eph. 3: 3-6). So why did God decide to make a covenant with humanity? Well, we are God's people and through sin we have separated ourselves from the eternal love of God, preferring instead the fleeting pleasures of this world. Hell awaits us if we fail to unite ourselves to Him while we are still in this present life.

Therefore, to help and guide us along the right path of life, God made a covenant with us to bring us back to Him, “for the dark places of the land are full

of the habitations of violence." For instance, in his lecture at Regensburg University on September 12, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI pointed out that spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. "God," he says, "Is not pleased by blood – and not acting reasonably is contrary to God's nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats....To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death...."

The decisive statement in this argument against violent conversion is this: not to act in accordance with reason is contrary to God's nature. "Who can describe or even imagine all the later ills that befall mankind?" asked our heavenly friend, St. Augustine, "when we are not victims of the lawlessness and lust of the wicked men, we have to suffer the miseries that no one in our present condition can escape. Who can be free from fear or grief in a world of mourning and bereavement, of losses and legal penalties, of liars and deceivers, of the false imputations, violences and other wickedness of our neighbors? Think of the tragedies of being robbed or reduced to slavery, of bonds and prison walls, of banishment and torture, of limbs cut off and eyes torn out, of bodies made to minister to an oppressor's lusts, and of all other no less dreadful possibilities. Or think of the perils of voyagers at sea and of travelers on land. Even a man taking a walk is liable to the most unsuspected accidents. Here is a man in perfect health returning from downtown to his home; he slips and breaks his legs; the wound festers and he dies. Or take a man sitting down. You would think that no one could be safer, yet Heli, the priest, slipped from a chair and was killed. God, who permits this tragedy, could not teach us more emphatically how much the misery of this life is to be moaned and how greatly the blessedness of eternity is to be desired" (St. Augustine, City of God, Book XXII The Eternal Bliss of the City of God, Chapter 22).

For this reason, we have to beseech the Lord in these words: →

Icon # 774 = Let not the downtrodden be put to shame; let the poor and needy praise thy name

"Let not the downtrodden be put to shame; let the poor and needy praise thy name."

It is truly right and just to say that the downtrodden includes those who are oppressed, the underprivileged, the dispossessed, the handicapped, and also the disadvantaged. Hence we pray that though they are crushed and broken that they may have the grace not to be disappointed but shall recourse to the

Lord with confidence, trusting that they will not be put to shame because the God whom they put their trust has also power to lift them up that they may praise His name, as the Psalmist in another occasion avers: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God" (Ps. 42: 5).

Our good friend, St. Paul, also asserted that "God keeps his promise. He will not let us be tested beyond our strength. Along with the test he will give us a way out of it so that we may be able to endure it" (cf. 1Cor 10: 13, NAB version). He prayed that the thorn in his flesh – some kind of illness – should be taken from him. This request was made three times and never granted; yet his prayer was answered. He received the answer: "My grace is sufficient for you." And so, although the illness continued, he did not rebel against the God who did not cure him, but rather said: "More than ever, then, I delight to boast of the weaknesses that humiliate me, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. I am well content with these weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, the times of calamities I undergo for Christ; for when I am weak, then, I am strong" (cf. 2Cor. 12: 7-10).

Our heavenly friend, St. Teresa of Avila, has this to say: "I can say, then, that if I were asked whether I should prefer to endure all the trials in the world until the world itself ends, and afterwards to gain a little more glory, or to have no trials and attain to one degree less of glory, I should answer that I would most gladly accept all the trials in exchange for a little more fruition in the understanding of the wonders of God, for I see that he who understands Him best loves and praises Him best."

Who, then, can measure the happiness we will have with God in heaven, where no oppression and persecution at all can touch us, no good and worthy of praise will be out of reach; where life is to be eternally praising and glorifying God, who will be all in all, no place for any energy but praise and glory?

All the redeemed poor and needy shall praise His name, every fiber and organ of their imperishable body will play its part in the praising of God. On the other hand, the unredeemed perpetually scoff at God. Therefore we have to cry out:

→

Icon # 775 = Arise, O God, Plead Thy Cause

“Arise, O God, plead thy cause; remember how the impious scoff at thee all the day! Do not forget the clamor of thy foes, the uproar of thy foes, the uproar of thy adversaries which goes up continually!”

Since the downtrodden includes those who are oppressed, the underprivileged, the dispossessed, the handicapped, and also the disadvantaged, Hence it is also fitting to say that the impious, who scoffs at God all the day, and God's adversaries includes those who make friend with the world, as the Scripture says: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4: 4).

They scoff God all the day in the sense that “thoughts of heaven” and the things that are above are a thousand leagues apart from their mind. Their thoughts and interest in life are mainly on this world and the pleasures and vanities it offers.

The impious and God's adversaries certainly includes also the wicked and the godless. These are the “fools” who say in their hearts: “There is no God.” God's judgment is very far from their minds. Thus the impious and the wicked God constantly scoff at God either by their language or their conduct. For this reason we call upon God to interfere: “Arise, O God, plead thy cause, remember how the impious scoff at thee all the day! Your own honor is concerned; Your own law and authority are assaulted; this insult is really made upon You. Therefore, plead thy cause, O Lord, so that your adversaries will no longer revile your name.

Maintain your honor, and worship, and service against those that scoff at you. If they are willing, convert them that they may praise You!

It is truly right and just to assert that the cause of the Church is also the cause of God; therefore, God cannot let His Church to be oppressed unless He loses His own right. Moreover, everything in regard to truth, to justice, to humanity, to temperance, to life, to liberty, to religion, is also the cause of God. All the assaults made on these are assaults made on God. For this reason, O Lord, “Do not forget the clamor of thy foes, the uproar of thy adversaries which goes up continually!”

Their roaring against your name and your church, their reproaching and blaspheming uproar goes up continually to you, O Lord, like that of Sodom and Gomorrah; thus regard their cry, not in the sense that you would grant them the fulfillment of their desires, but that you would recompense them as they deserved: either to salvation if they will repent for you do not desire the death of the wicked, or to condemnation if they will persist on their evil deeds till death.

However, we hope against hope that they may repent, for there are lots of rooms in Our Father's house for them; certainly, there will be celebration prepared for them, and besides, all the angels are happy even if just one sinner will repent. If this would be the case, then, we have a fairly good reason to: →

Icon # 776 = Absolute Duty to Give Thanks to God

Psalm 75 (74)

"We give thanks to thee, O God; we give thanks; we call on thy name and recount thy wondrous deeds."

It is truly right and just to declare that we have absolute duty to give thanks to God not only for giving us life, but also in dying for us on the cross to save us; for greater love has no one than this that Our God, in the person of the Lord Jesus, laid down His life for us.

It is not farfetched to assert that to give thanks to God for what He has done for us is the minimum gesture we can do to acknowledge His "wondrous deeds." In the last analysis, what have we that we did not receive!?! If we argue that we bought such and such a thing, then, we will be asked where we got our money. If we respond that we have a salary or own a business, etc, then, we will be ultimately asked, did we have a salary or own a business, etc, when we were born? Of course, not; therefore, everything we have from the moment of our existence we received it from someone else either for free or for a certain recompense. But, to be sure, we are not the source of everything and anything we have!

Hence, let us give thanks to God for our life, the joys and sorrows that we share with our human race, and the spiritual highs and lows that bind us together. "My brethren," exhorts our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "let us give thanks to Our Creator, to Our Benefactor, to Our Redeemer, to Him in whom we have placed all our hope, or I should rather say, to Him who is Himself all our hope. For He who is Our Redeemer already, is likewise to be our Reward: nor do we now seek from Him any other reward than Himself" (Sermon of Psalm 90).

Thus the exercise of stirring up gratitude cannot but stir up marvel at the goodness of God. When we consider the blessings of our lives, we allow ourselves to connect these blessings to God who is all good, all loving, and always at work to bring about our fullness, for He comes that we may have life and have it abundantly.

In the words of our heavenly friend, no other than the prominent St. Augustine, "We can never sufficiently thank Him for the gifts of nature: that we exist and are alive, that we can enjoy the sight of earth and sky, that we have a reasoning mind by which we can seek Him who has made all these things. Yet, for the

greater gifts of grace there are not hearts enough or tongue enough in all the world even to try to thank him” (City of God, Book VII Criticism of Pagan Moral Theology, Ch. 31).

If this is the case, then, it would not be surprising that on God's side this is what we will hear: →

Icon # 777 = Time Set for Judgment

“At the set time which I appoint I will judge with equity”

It is the belief of the Catholic Church that Christ, Our Lord, will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. “On Judgment Day at the end of the world, Christ will come in glory to achieve the definitive triumph of good over evil which, like the wheat and the tares, have grown up together in the course of history. When He comes at the end of time to judge the living and the dead, the glorious Christ will reveal the secret disposition of hearts and will render to each man according to his works and according to his acceptance or refusal of grace” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #'s 681-682).

Of course, “The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the son, even as they honor the Father....For as the Father has life in himself, So he has granted the Son also to have life in himself, and has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the son man” (Jn. 5: 22-23, 26).

Christ will absolutely judge uprightly, with equity, in the most righteous manner, rendering to every person according to one's deed in the body; hence the judgment is called a righteous one, and so is the Judge; no injustice will be done to men, but the strictest integrity, uprightness, and impartiality, will be observed in pronouncing the verdict on the righteous and on the wicked, and in adjudicating them to their proper place and state.

Whether we like it or not, there is no escaping of the truth: “It is appointed for men to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9: 27). Judgment will be two-fold, that is, we will be judged at the moment we depart from this present life, which is the “Particular Judgment,” and we will be ultimately judged on the last day of the World, which is the “General Judgment.”

We will be judged on the Particular Judgment, that is, the first judgment because we are “a person,” therefore, we are individually responsible for our free acts, everything we did in our body; hence our works will follow us. We will be judged on the General Judgment, that is, the second judgment because we worked out our salvation in the context of a social order, and the mystical Body of Christ; therefore, we must be judge by our repercussions upon it.

The particular judgment will be tantamount to an evaluation of ourselves as we really are, for in each of us there are several persons: there is the person others think we are; there is the person we think we are; and there is a person we really are. When the split second, at the blink of an eye, of judgment comes, we will take off these smoked glasses and see ourselves as we really are. Now what are we really? We are what we are, not by our emotions, our feeling, or our likes and dislikes, but by our choices. The decisions of our free-will will be the content of our judgment.

Our judgment will be based not on our background or social position, but on the way we lived, the choices we made, and whether we obeyed the commandments of God. We should not think that at the moment of judgment we will argue our case. We will not plead any extenuating circumstances; we will not ask for a change of venue, nor for a new jury, nor allege an unfair trial. We will be our own jury; we will pass our own sentence. God will merely seal our verdict. Since this is the case, what sort of persons, then ought we to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of the Final Judgment of God.

On the part of God, since He is kind and merciful, slow to anger and rich in mercy, whose kindness is meant to lead people to repentance, and is eager to strengthen us in our weakness if we entrust ourselves to Him, He fortifies us by these encouraging words: →

Icon # 778 = God is our support when we totter

“When the earth totters, and all its inhabitants, it is I who keep steady its pillars.”

In his 1st letter to Timothy, our good friend, St. Paul, instructed Timothy that if St. Paul is delayed, St. Timothy may know how a person ought to behave in the household of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth (cf. 1Tim. 3: 15).

This instruction certainly reverberates to the general instruction of Our Lord Jesus to all the members of His Mystical Body, the Church, and to all humanity that if He delayed in His second coming, which people think He is delayed, we may know how to conduct ourselves not only when we are at Church, but also when we are at work-place, or at home, or anywhere, that is, we ought to be in lives of holiness and godliness, and to watch and pray.

However, if in our days some aspects of the teaching of the Church are assaulted and are tottering, and we, too, are tottering in the practice of virtues: to live a godly and holy life, fulfilling God's commandments, then we need God's help to steady our practice of virtues and adhering to His teaching.

Humanity's sin threatened to destroy the whole of creation; our sins and the sins of the members of the Mystical Body of Christ weakened the influence of the Church in our society, especially in issues dealing with morality; but Christ saved the world and the Church from utter ruin. He whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, and redemption, bids us be wise. To the proud, daring sinners He admonishes, "Boast not of your power, persist not in contempt, lest you utterly tottered and there is no one to support you."

On the other hand, if we acknowledge our sins and weaknesses, and humble enough to ask God's grace to be able to walk uprightly in the path of God's commandments even though we stumble and fall from time to time, then God in His kindness and mercy will fill up what is wanting in us, because He desires more of our progress in virtues than in our wish to practice them.

Without God's assistance we certainly are not able even to preserve and guard what He bestows upon us. We have to be aware how comparatively little which we have obtained, and how easily it will be tottered or lost unless He who gave it helps us to keep it! These are considerations which should render us all very careful and very obedient to God, so that the pillars of our moral life will be kept steady.

The good angels rejoice greatly in the presence of God; and it would be highly beneficial for us if we could abide in His protection. His presence overwhelms them with happiness beyond measure; it is our hope and prayer that His divine support may keep us steady and secure. This will help us to rely on God, and not on ourselves: boasting on our strength and accomplishments. Otherwise, we will be told: →

Icon # 779 = The Wrong and the Correct boasting

"I say to the boastful, 'Do not boast,' and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horn; do not lift up your horn on high, or speak with insolent neck.'"

The other meanings of "boastful" are these: bragging, inflated, swollen, vaunting, bombastic, cocky, proud, vain, egotistic, conceited, haughty, arrogant, overweening, pretentious, and pompous. Therefore, boasting is certainly a form of self-exaltation, and "self-exaltation is a form of pride," pointed out our father St. Benedict.

In the singing version of the Psalm by father Joseph Gelineau, "strength" is used instead of horn, "pride" instead of neck. Hence, the translation goes this way: "To the boastful I say: 'Do not boast,' to the wicked; 'Do not flaunt your strength on high. Do not speak with insolent pride.'" It is correct to say that in all sin there

is an appalling pride, because all sin is an arrogation to ourselves of the sovereignty of God.

Pride is the exaltation of self as an absolute standard of truth, goodness, and morality. It judges everything by itself, and for that reason everyone else is a rival, particularly God. Pride makes it impossible to know God. If we know everything, then not even God can teach us anything. If we are filled with ourselves, then there is no place for God. Like the inns of Bethlehem, we say to the divine visitor: "There is no room." If there ever come a moment in our lives when we admit that we do not know, as we ought to know, or say: "Oh! What a fool am I," we created a vacuum and a void which God's grace could fill.

In his narrative of pride's fourth step, boasting, our father St. Bernard explains that the proud monk "hungers and thirst" not for righteousness, but "for an audience, on whom he might pour out all the vanity he feels within himself so that they might see how great and wise a man he is."

According to St. Benedict's ninth step of humility, the monk should "restrain his tongue and remain silent, not speaking until he is asked a question." Not so the boastful monk of St. Bernard's fourth step of pride. As soon as he finds an opportunity to speak, this monk "brings forth from his treasury things old and new; his opinions spill forth, his wealth of words resound. He interrupts his questioners, he does not answer those who ask. He will ask the questions, he will provide the answers as he cuts off all who try to speak."

Though he may indeed be able to edify his hearers with his learning, this is not his intention: "He is not concerned to teach you or to learn from you what he does not know, but only to ensure that you know how much he knows." Should the topic of conversation turn to religion, he is delighted to boast of his visions and dreams, to urge vigils, fasting, and prayer, and St. Bernard's quips, "to offer interminable and vain lectures on patience, humility, and each of the other virtues."

On the other hand, in his sermon 69 On the Song of Songs, our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux also acknowledges that "certainly there are within the Church of God spiritual persons who serve him faithfully and with confidence, speaking with him as a man speaks with his friend, and whose consciences bear witness to his glory. But who these are is known only to God, and if you desire to be among them, then hear what sort of people you should be. I say this, not as one who knows it by experience, but as one who desires to do so. Show me a soul which loves nothing but God and what is to be loved for God's sake, to whom to live is Christ, and of whom this has been true for a long time now; who in work and leisure alike endeavors to keep God before his eyes, and walks humbly with the Lord his God; who desires that his will may be one with the will of God, and who has been given the grace to do these things.

“Show me a soul like this, and I will not deny that she is worthy of the Bridegroom’s care, of the regard of God’s majesty, of his sovereign favor, and of the attention of his governance. And if she is minded to boast, she will not be a fool, so long as she, who boasts, boasts in the Lord” (Sermon 69, On the Song of Songs).

Of course, the rationale behind this, is this: →

Icon # 780 = God bends down to the humble soul to lift it up

“For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up, but it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another.”

In the Gospel of Luke, the Lord Jesus said that “Every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk. 4: 10). Pride is too great admiration of ourselves. The ultimate stage of pride is to make ourselves our own law, our own judge, our own morality, our own god. The Evil spirit first promised Eve: “You will be as gods.” We make ourselves a god by the exaltation of our own will against God’s will; from this rebellion flows contempt of others’ rights, excessive love of personal advancement, the desire to be in the spotlight, and intolerance of opinions that differ from our own.

In our modern world, pride disguises itself under the prettier names of success and popularity. We are encouraged by quack psychologists to “trust ourselves” instead of trusting God. False confidence in the self is encouraged although the only formula for our true contentment lies in our saying to God: “Thou alone are the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

On the other hand, humility is the practical and continuous avowal of our nothingness before God, for when we recognize, indeed, that of ourselves we are weak, poor, nothing, infirm, we implicitly proclaim the power, the wisdom, the holiness, and the goodness of God. Doing this is to render homage to the Divine Majesty, and such homage is so delightful to God that He bends down to the humble soul to lift it up.

When humility has prepared the soul to be lifted up, grace flows upon it, for there is a close affinity between grace and humility. Nothing, then, is more efficacious than this virtue for meriting grace, for being lifted up by God, for retaining it within us, or recovering it if we have fallen down, as the 1st letter of Peter rightly says: “Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that in due time he may exalt you.”

There are, at least, two practical things to help us how we may cultivate humility. First, we can consider the facts. No human person is wise in any ultimate

sense, good in any celestial sense, or powerful in any eternal sense. Human life, on earth, is ephemeral; our days are few and full of trouble; at our best, we are above only a few of our contemporaries, and that only for a brief moment in time; hence, "why should the spirit of mortal beings be proud?" Second, we can look at the lives and achievements of others which exceed our own in excellence and glory, as someone pointed it out: "Many a man has decided to burn his clubs after watching the Golf Open Championship."

One of the beautiful effects of Hope is that it relieves us of the morbid fear of failure. As pride diminishes in us, there is an accompanying relief from our old terror of humiliation through failure. On the other hand, if we are adamant in maintaining our pride, no matter what, we will truly be in a very dangerous situation. Here's the rationale: →

Icon # 781 = Who can imagine God's wrath, poured unmixed into the Cup of His anger?

"For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, with foaming wine, well mixed; and he will pour a draught from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs."

When Moses was on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments, he was told by God to go down because the people whom he brought out of Egypt have corrupted themselves by making a molten calf, and have worshiped and sacrificed to it. God said to Moses: "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them....But Moses besought God, saying: "O Lord, why does thy wrath burn hot against thy people, whom thou hast brought forth out of the land of Egypt with great power and with mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'with evil intent did he bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against thy people."

So the Lord did not carry His plan to destroy His people. However, when Moses went down the mountain and saw with his own eyes and heard with his own ears the shouting and the dancing, and the worshiping of the molten calf, his anger burned hot, and he threw the table of the Ten Commandments and broke them at the foot of the mountain. And he took the calf which they had made, and burnt it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it upon the water, and made the people drink it.

It is interesting to note that what Moses asked God to refrain from, he did it himself when he saw the evidence. Like God, his anger burned hot when he saw what his people were doing.

Our good friend, St. Paul, told us that “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body,” “for he will render to every man according to his works” (cf. 2Cor. 5: 10; Rom. 2: 6). Moreover, the book of Revelation is very emphatic in forewarning us, saying: “If any one worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also shall drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” (Rev. 14: 9-11).

What it would be like to drink the wine of God’s wrath poured unmixed into the cup of his anger? Certainly, no human mind can fully comprehend this no matter how brilliant our intellect would be and whether we will spend a thousand years just to imagine and think what it would be like to drink the wine of God’s wrath. Hell is the closest we can think of, yet even Hell is already hard to imagine because it is a super natural torment, hence our mind can only think at a certain point. It is correct to say that both human beings and God express wrath. However, there is a tremendous disparity between the wrath of human beings and the wrath of God. As human beings, our wrath is never holy and is rarely justified.

In the Old Testament, the wrath of God is a divine response to human sins and disobedience. Idolatry was most often the occasion of divine wrath as in the case of the people at the foot of Mount Sinai. Psalm 78: 56-58 delineates another description of Israel’s idolatry which of course, provokes God’s anger, in this way: “Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God, and did not observe his testimonies, but turned away and acted treacherously like their fathers; they twisted like a deceitful bow. For they provoked him to anger with their high places; they moved him to jealousy with their graven images. When God heard, he was full of wrath, and he utterly rejected Israel.”

Accordingly, the wrath of God is consistently directed towards those who do not follow His will (cf. Joshua 7: 1; Ps. 2: 1-6). Finally, God’s anger against sin and disobedience is perfectly justified because His plan for us humankind is holy and perfect, just as God Himself is holy and perfect. He provided a way to gain divine favor – repentance – which turns His anger away from the sinner. Therefore, to reject that perfect plan is to reject God’s love, mercy, grace and favor, and incur His righteous wrath. “For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup, with foaming wine, well mixed; and he will pour a draught from it, and all the wicked of the earth shall drain it down to the dregs.”

On the other hand, the righteous shall rejoice in God and shall exclaim: →

Icon # 782 = We will rejoice forever

“But I will rejoice for ever, I will sing praises to the God of Jacob. All the horns of the wicked he will cut off, but the horns of the righteous shall be exalted.”

To rejoice forever and sing the praises of God is certainly a gratifying portrayal of the happiness of all the saints and angels in heaven who are now rejoicing and singing the praises of God. Undoubtedly, it is a rejoicing beyond measure where no scintilla of evil can touch us, no virtue will be out of reach; where life is to be eternally rejoicing and singing praises to the God of Jacob, who will be all in all; where there will be no weariness to make us rest, no necessity to make us work, no place for any energy but rejoicing and singing the praises of God.

Of this we are assured whenever we read or heard the words: “Blessed are they that dwell in thy house, O Lord, they shall praise thee forever and ever” (cf. 84/83: 4). Certainly, the promised reward of virtue will be the best and the greatest of all possible prizes – the very Giver of virtue Himself, for that is what the Prophet meant: “I will be your God and you shall be my people.” Hence, God will be the source of every satisfaction, more than our heart can rightly crave, more than life and health, food and wealth, glory and honor, peace and every good, so that God “may be all in all.”

He will be the consummation of all our desiring, the object of our unending happiness, of our undiminishing love, and of our unwearying song of praise and thanksgiving. Beyond the physical beauty is the beauty of the community of heaven. There are cherubim and seraphim, choirs of angels who surround the throne of God and “rejoice in Him eternally.” How beautiful would they appear to our simple eyes? These pure spirits “rejoice for ever” and sing in endless praises, honoring God by their whole existence, spotless and glorious. To see them would be to see creatures whose whole existence is rooted deeply in praise of God that they never leave the throne of God. We share with them a purpose: to exist for the praise of God’s glory, to rejoice forever in God the ultimate source of our existence.

But “the horns of the wicked, he will cut off” because “there will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil,” but “the horns of the righteous shall be exalted,” because there will be “glory and honor and peace for every one who does good,” “for he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-dong seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury” (cf. Rom. 2: 6-10). Accordingly: →

Icon # 783 = God is known in Christ Jesus the Prince of Peace

Psalm 76 (75)

“In Judah God is known, his name is great in Israel. His abode has been established in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion. There he broke the flashing arrows, the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war.”

In many and various ways God indeed is obscurely and darkly known, as in a dim mirror, in His works of creation, in His divine providence, and in His judgments; but in Christ Jesus Our Lord, revealed and preached in the Gospel, God is known with a clear and saving knowledge as a father of grace and singular mercy and lovingkindness. In Judah, that is, in His Church, where His word and ordinances are, where the Lord Jesus is preached and the mystery of human salvation is opened, there God is truly known without uncertainties. His name is great in Israel, that is, His power, wisdom, truth, love, and goodness are much magnified and splendid to those who know Him in Christ Jesus who is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

His abode has been established in Salem. Salem means “peace,” commonly supposed to be another name of Jerusalem. Hence, it is in peace that God’s abode has been established. It is not necessarily means the absence of trouble, but it means everything which makes for our highest good. It is not something diplomatically contrived, but the effort of self-surrender to God from the heart. It is the counterpart of our pardons, and the composure of our minds.

The peace which the world offers is the peace of escape, the peace which comes from the avoidance of troubles, and from refusing to face things. The peace which Our Lord offers is the peace of conquest, when we pursue an upright way of life and live in righteousness and virtue. It is a peace that is distinct from what the world gives. Thus the Lord said to His disciples: “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give it to you” (Jn. 14: 27).

“There he broke the flashing arrows, the shield, the sword, and the weapons of war,” “For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples, and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks, nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Is. 2: 3-4).

They shall not learn war anymore because their passions and desires that waged war in their inner self are totally under control by the soul. When our passions and desires are regulated and tame, are made subservient to virtue, they become like a horse with a bit in his mouth. For instance, the desire to covet will be tamed by the practice of generosity. The passion to be a friend of the world will be tempered by a conscious effort to live a hidden life, free from publicity.

And above all, the passion of the body will be tempered by a consciousness that its highest destiny is to be a Temple of God. There God is known, His name is great. Thus it is truly right and just to affirm: →

Icon # 784 = The Glory and Majesty of God

"Glorious art thou, more majestic than the everlasting mountains."

Our heavenly friend no other than the great St. Teresa of Avila describes in her autobiography a vision she had of the "extreme beauty of the glorified bodies" and the majestic splendor of the Humanity of the Lord Jesus.

She says: "There is such beauty about glorified bodies that the glory which illumines them throws all who look upon such supernatural loveliness into confusion. I will only say that, if there were nothing else in Heaven to delight the eyes but the extreme beauty of the glorified bodies there, that alone would be the greatest bliss. A most especial bliss, then, will it be to us when we see the Humanity of Jesus Christ; for if it is so even on earth, where His Majesty reveals Himself according to what our wretchedness can bear, what will it be where the fruition of that joy is complete? If I were to spend years and years imagining how to invent anything so beautiful, I could not do it, and I do not even know how I should try, for, even in its whiteness and radiance alone, it exceeds all that we can imagine. It is not a radiance which dazzles, but a soft whiteness an infuse radiance which, without wearing the eyes causes them the greatest delight; nor are they wearied by the brightness which they see in seeing Divine beauty.

"So different from any earthly light is the brightness and light now revealed to the eyes that, by comparison with it, the brightness of our sun seems quite dim and we should never want to open our eyes again for the purpose of seeing it. It is as if we were to look at a very clear stream, in a bed of crystal reflecting the sun rays, and then to see a very muddy stream, in an earthly bed overshadowed by clouds. Not that the sun, or any other such light, enters the vision: on the contrary, it is like a natural light and all other kinds of light are artificial. It is light which never gives place to night, and, being always light, is disturbed by nothing. It is of such a kind, indeed, that no one, however powerful his intellect, could, in the whole course of his life, imagine it as it is."

This, too, is too little when we actually see God's glory and majesty ourselves. What the Queen of Sheba said to King Solomon concerning the report she heard about him, we can also say to Our Lord Jesus concerning the report we heard about Him from our heavenly friend, St. Teresa of Avila. Thus we can say to Him: The report was true which we heard on earth about you, your affairs, your majesty and glory, and of your wisdom and power, but it sounded too good for us to be true until we entered the kingdom of heaven and our own

eyes have seen it; behold, not even half was told to us; your wisdom and power, your majesty and glory, your riches and splendor, and your goodness and knowledge infinitely surpass the report which we heard. Happy are those who consecrated their lives on earth for your sake and are now your espouses in heaven! Happy are all the saints and angels who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom and see your infinite beauty! Blessed be God the Father who has delighted in you and has given you all authority in heaven and on earth and under the earth that you may execute justice and righteousness, helping the oppressed and giving courage to the timid.

On the other hand: →

Icon # 785 = The stouthearted were stripped of their spoil

“The stouthearted were stripped of their spoil; they sank into sleep; all the men of war were unable to use their hands.”

In Scripture “death” is often signified by sleep, both the death of the righteous and of the wicked, but there is a dramatic difference between them. To the righteous death is a true and proper rest from toil and labor, but to the wicked only a cessation from doing evil; the righteous sleep in God, in His arms, and under His guardianship, the other in horror and agony; the former rests in hopes of a glorious resurrection and will awake in the likeness of God and to everlasting life; the latter in the likeness of the devil and to everlasting shame and condemnation.

The stouthearted were stripped of their spoil; they sank into sleep and none of them were unable to use their hands, that is, God has taken their spirits and strength from them as though their hands were cut off. They had lost the use of their hands, that is, they had no use for them or did not find them of any use. They could not empty them for the purpose for which they were intended, but were suddenly stricken down.

The psalmist called their death “sleep,” because they were slain in the night, when they had composed to rest and sleep, hence passed insensibly from one sleep to another. It is thought that this Psalm was composed upon the occasion of that prodigious slaughter of the Assyrian armies in Judah by an angel of the Lord (cf. 2Kings 19: 85).

“The stouthearted were stripped of their spoil,” that is, the Assyrian army, its general and officers that invaded Jerusalem with great determination and courage, and with daring impiety and blasphemy against the God of heaven and earth, were spoiled and their armor and riches became a prey to those they thought to have made a prey of.

Thus the principalities and powers and dominions were stripped of their spoil by the Lord Jesus upon the cross; and Satan, the strong man armed, has in the conversion of a sinner his armor taken away from him, and his spoils divided by Him who is stronger than he.

Such are the stouthearted and far from true righteousness are stripped of their own and made willing, in the day of Christ's power upon them, to submit to His; and as for the anti-Christ whose appearance is more stout than his fellows, that exalts himself above all that is called God, and open his mouth in blasphemy against Christ and His followers, he shall be destroyed with the breath of Christ's mouth, and the brightness of His coming in glory. Therefore: →

Icon # 786 = Who can stand before God when once His anger is roused?

"At thy rebuke, O God of Jacob, both rider and horse lay stunned. But thou, terrible art thou! Who can stand before thee when once thy anger is roused?"

If God is a consuming fire and the wicked and evildoers are chaff and stubble, so how can they stand before Him once His anger is roused even just a little, and how much when it is kindles in its full strength? Undoubtedly, no one can stand before His justice and at His judgment seat with boldness and confidence, or come off acquitted, without having any righteousness; much more there is no standing before His wrath and fury when He takes hold on judgment to execute it.

Our respect and reverence of God truly transcends admiration of His greatness and might. It is also related to our knowledge of His righteousness, His power, and His supreme authority as Judge. We understand that God is the best friend and the worst enemy.

Who can stand when His anger is roused? Who indeed? The dissenting angels fell when their dogged rebellion provoke his justice; Adam and Eve lost their place in Paradise in the same manner; Pharaoh and other proud monarchs lay stunned at His rebuke; neither is there on earth or in hell anyone who can stand before the terror of His anger. On the other hand, blessed are those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High God, in the saving power of the Lord Jesus on the Cross, and thus have no cause to fear the righteous anger of the Judge of all the earth.

The anger of God is a terrible, unspeakable, unsupportable, intolerable, burden. Who can stand it? Shall devils? If God speak the word, they are tumbled down from heaven like lightning. Our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux says: "If you have seen Satan falling as lightning from heaven, cast down by the force of God's fury, you know what the fury of God is."

The reason for this is simply that: →

Icon # 787 = God arose to establish judgment to save all the oppressed of the earth

“From the heavens thou didst utter judgment; the earth feared and was still, when God arose to establish judgment to save all the oppressed of the earth.”

The first well-known event that “God arose to establish judgment to save all the oppressed of the earth” was when He delivered His people from slavery in Egypt who were oppressed by too much hard labor. The other most well-known and stupendous event that “God arose to establish judgment to save all the oppressed of the earth” was when He died on the cross to save all who are oppressed by the slavery of sin, burdened by unbearable guilt and remorse.

Truly, the safest place to rest for our troubled conscience is in the wounds of Our Lord Jesus. We have sinned mortally, our conscience is disturbed but will not be confounded, because we remember how much He loves us by dying for us. Without any shadow of a doubt no sin is so grave enough that would not be forgiven in the death of Our Lord. His death is a very powerful and efficacious medicine to heal the diseases of our soul no matter how virulent they might be.

Are we oppressed by the unbearable burden of sin? Then we have to gaze upon the cross of Our Lord Jesus. In doing so, we will find mercy and receive grace to help us in times of need. Whatever is lacking in our own resources we appropriate for ourselves from the heart of the Lord, which overflows with mercy.

Through the fissures of His pierced hands and feet and side we can suck honey from the rock and oil from the flinty stone. We can taste and see that the Lord is good. The nail that pierced Him is truly a key which we can use to unlock the door of His will. Hence we have to gaze through this cleft. The nails and the wounds join in unison in crying out that God is truly in Christ Jesus, reconciling the world to Himself and “to save all the oppressed of the earth.”

Certainly His heart is laid open through His wounds. Therefore our merit is the mercy of the Lord. Truly we are not devoid of merit as long as He is not of mercy. And if the Lord abounds in mercy, we too must abound in merits. But what if we are aware of our failures and sins? This should not discourage us, because where failures and sins abound, the grace of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord abounds all the more.

Remorse is the negative presence of God in the soul, as grace is the positive presence of God. Remorse is incomplete, for it is self-disgust divorced from God; but remorse can become sorrow, and then hope, the moment we turn to God for help. Unrelated to God, the emptiness, loneliness, and oppression of a guilty

conscience beget despair. But once related to God, the misery of remorse becomes repentance from sin. As soon as our soul turns to Our Redeeming Savior, seated on the judgment seat of the cross, the burden of guilt disappear just as a patient forgets his or her pain in the consolation of seeing the Physician who can cure him or her.

On the other hand, if we don't want to be healed but persist in our sins and declare an open rebellion against God, then we have to expect to hear these words: →

Icon # 788 = The wrath of men shall redound to the glory of God

"Surely the wrath of men shall praise thee, the residue of wrath thou wilt gird upon thee."

In his letter to the Romans, our good friend, St. Paul, had indicated that God "desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience the vessels of wrath made for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared before hand for glory..." (cf. Rom. 9: 22-23).

Undoubtedly, the wrathful attempts and blasphemous sarcasm of God's enemies will certainly serve His glory, and cause His people and others to praise and magnify Him for the admirable wisdom, power, gentleness, and goodness exhibited on that occasion.

In other words, men's wicked wrath and hostility of God and His people shall give occasion for tremendous deeds on God's part – deeds which will redound to His honor and glory. He will forestall and hamper the succeeding malicious plans of His enemies who meditate revenge for their shameful and terrible defeat. "The residue of wrath thou wilt gird upon thee," that is to say, God will put in on as an ornament, which the girdle was; He shall adorn Himself with as a conqueror adorns himself with the spoils of his enemies.

Our heavenly friend, St. Augustine, has this to say: "This life of ours if a life so full of great ill can properly be called a life – bears witness to the fact that, from its very start, the race of mortal men has been a race condemned. Think first, of that dreadful abyss of ignorance from which all error flows and so engulfs the sons of Adam in a darksome pool that no one can escape without the toll of toils and tears and fears. Then, take our very love for all those things that prove so vain and poisonous and breed so many heartaches, troubles, griefs, and fears; such insane joys in discord, strife, and war; such wrath and plots of enemies, deceivers, sycophants; such fraud and theft and robbery; such perfidy and pride, envy and ambition, homicide and murder, cruel and savagery,

lawlessness and lust; all the shameless passions of the impure – fornication and adultery, incest and unnatural sins, rape and countless other uncleannesses too nasty to be mentioned. Yet, for all this blight of ignorance and folly, fallen man has not been left without some ministries of Providence, nor has God, in His anger, shut off His mercies” (St. Augustine, City of God, Book XXII The Eternal Bliss of the City of God, Ch. 22).

Since this is the case, it follows that the malice and wrath of men shall redound to the glory and praise of God. For this reason, all people of good will and especially all of us who consecrated our lives to God and to His service has to:
→

Icon # 789 = Make vows to God and Fulfill them

“Make your vows to the lord your God, and perform them; let all around him bring gifts to him who is to be feared, who cuts off the spirit of princes, who is terrible to the kings of the earth.”

In general, a vow is defined as a promise made to God. We religious of the Cistercian Order, which followed the Benedictine tradition, made several vows, such as: the vow of obedience which placed ourselves under the direction of our superior, the vow of stability committing ourselves to a particular monastery, and the vow of conversion of manners committing ourselves to make progress in Christian virtues, which includes renouncing private ownership and celibate chastity.

According to our heavenly friend, no other than the angelic doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas, “In making a vow,” he said, “the person takes the most radical means of focusing his will in the good. The purpose of the vow is to establish the will in the good. And the acts which proceed from a will thus fixed in the good become perfect virtue.”

On the other hand, we have to remember that in taking vows we remain the person we were before, with the temptations and the desires which others have. When we took vows we committed ourselves to the service of God; when we live out our vows that surely is pleasing to our heavenly Father.

The sacrifices of our prayers and praises, especially our hearts, our bodies and souls, that is, the whole person are the gifts we should bring to God. They are expressive of gratitude and homage of our deliverance from the bondage of this world and of sins and vices. Hence, our most important duty is to reflect within ourselves that God was the author of our salvation and to stimulate others also to the performance of this duty.

He shall cut off the spirit of princes, that is, He will humble their proud spirits and bring them down; He shall slip it off easily as we slip off a flower from the stalk, such as was that of the king of Assyria and his army before they were forced to return with shame of face to their own land.

He can dispirit those that are most daring and make them heartless, for He is or will be terrible to the kings of the earth who do not obey His command. And sooner or later, if they are not wise enough to repent and submit themselves to Him, then they will be forced to call in vain to rocks and mountains to fall on them, and hide them from His wrath.

This is all they shall get by opposing the God of heaven and earth. Since, then, there is no contending with Him, it is as much the wisdom, as it is the duty, of all, even of mayors and governors, legislators, attorney generals, congressmen and senators, captains and generals of armies, of princes and kings, to submit to Him, and make their peace with Him.

He is terrible to the kings of the earth and to these public officials when they are arrayed against Him. They are wholly under His control; He can defeat their plans; He can and will make their plans, even their wrath, the means of promoting or carrying out His own purposes; He can cut down the most mighty of them at His pleasure and destroy them forever, as He said: "Do not fear those who kill the body and cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt. 10: 27).

Since this is the case, it would be our justification and wisdom to adhere to Him and cry out: →

Icon # 790 = It is beneficial to recourse to the Lord in times of trouble

Psalm 77 (76)

"I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuse to be comforted."

Although there are several kinds of prayer, but two are more well-known, namely: verbal or vocal prayer, and the other mental prayer or meditation. It sounds obvious that the prayer "I cry aloud to God, aloud to God, that he may hear me" is a verbal or vocal prayer, that is, it is said audibly which other may hear. We do this daily at Lauds, Mass, and Vespers in which we offer and audible intercessory prayer, for ourselves and for other people.

It is also clear that the Psalmist was in trouble as he himself has indicated. However, what is gratifying and worthy of commendation is that in his trouble he seeks the Lord, and not alcohol or other kinds of drugs or food. It is not only

beneficial for our soul but also for our body if we recourse to the Lord in times of trouble. The ideal is to go to a church or a chapel, but if we are not able to go to a church, we can always pray within our heart because our body is also a temple of the Holy Spirit, as the Scripture says.

It is also advisable that in our prayer we should not be too wordy; we should not suppose for one moment that God can be influenced by the number of choice of our words. It is good to remember that we are conversing with Him who knows everything. Actually, our words are superfluous, yet He does want them. They too should be modest.

When we pray we have to remind ourselves that God sees better than us what we need, though He wants us to ask for it, so that when our prayer is answered we will know that it comes from God, hence incites us to be grateful and humble. When we cry out to God either audibly or just silently in our heart, He already "hears" us before the words are uttered, because everything in us stands open before Him, even our innermost thoughts. When we really know this, not only with the mind but with the heart our prayer will be as the Lord wants it.

For us to cry out is to plead with God in humble prayer; for God to answer is to grant an effect to our prayers. On the other hand, God may ignore our prayer when we cry out in the day of adversity if we had scorned His commandments in time of prosperity. We may cry out as much as we can in our affliction but God may not answer us, because the voice in adversity is not a guarantee to find God whom the mind in prosperity despised.

Our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux said that "the Lord often allows us to be troubled for a long time with certain temptations, in order to protect us from more dangerous ones; and from some He delivers us quickly so that we may be exercised in others which He foresees shall be more profitable to us" (Sermon on Psalm 90). Accordingly: →

Icon # 791 = So troubled to the point that one cannot speak

"I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints. Thou dost hold my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak."

To be so troubled to the point that we could not sleep or speak certainly indicates a very serious suffering. Again, it is very commendable that in spite of his afflictions the Psalmist never blotted out God from his mind.

We have to assert though that it does not please God to see us suffer or any person to suffer. He desires to see in what way and how much we love Him in our suffering. He wants to see what love we can produce in the face of afflictions, of our pain and miseries. The positive side of suffering though is that it

can serve as a remedy against our pride, vainglory, and ambition which would lead us astray. Of course, we absolutely need the grace of God to be able to bear our afflictions if not with joy but at least with patience. Our heavenly friend, St. Isaac of Syria, notes that "as bitter medicines destroy the impurity of bad juices in the body, so grievous afflictions purify the heart from evil passions."

Although it may not be a pleasant reality, but it is absolutely true that it is good and advantageous for us to be afflicted provided that we have God as our companion. Certainly, it is far better to experience tragedy so long as we are in good standing with Our Lord than to immerse in pleasures without Him, or without Him to be exalted. It is far better to clasp Him in trials and difficulties, better to endure pain and suffering than without him to gain the whole world.

We have a good glimpse of this in the life of Job when the devil challenged God against Job. As the account of the story of Job goes, after the Lord described Job's virtues as He had formerly done, He immediately commended him, saying: "He still maintains his integrity." He might as well outrightly said to the devil: "You indeed employed your malice, yet Job did not lose his integrity; you thought you constituted a threat to his way of life, but you were forced to support that way of life, because he kept his integrity of soul even more magnificently in time of trial than he had in time of peace" (cf. *Moralia* by St. Gregory the Great).

Finally, in the words of our other heavenly friend, no other than St. Augustine of Hippo: "In view of all that, when good and bad men suffer alike, they are not, for that reason indistinguishable because what they suffer is similar. The sufferers are different even though the sufferings are the same trials; though what they endure is the same, their virtue and vice are different. For, in the same fire, gold gleams and straw smokes; under the same flail the stalk is crushed and the grain threshed; the lees are not mistaken for oil because they have issued from the same press. So, too, the tide of trouble will test, purify, and improve the good, but beat, crush, and wash away the wicked. So it is that, under the weight of the same affliction, the wicked deny and blaspheme God, and the good pray to Him and praise Him. The difference is not in what people suffer but in the way they suffer" (St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 1 Christianity Did Not Cause The Fall of Rome, Ch. 8).

Wherefore, in retrospect: →

Icon # 792 = Will the Lord spurn for ever and never again be favorable?

"I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints. Thou dost hold my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak."

It is truly right and just to contend that the Lord will never spurn for ever and never again be unfavorable if a person before he or she dies, or at the moment of his or her death, is in good standing with God. If that person had grievously sinned he or she has to repent and not harden his or her heart, as the Scripture says: "If today you hear His voice harden not your heart."

We may be tempted to imagine that God has abandoned and cast us off; that the covenant of the blood of Our Lord Jesus might have failed us, and that the tender mercy of Our God shall be for ever withheld from us. However, we must not succumb to such disingenuous suggestions as these.

Of course, He will only spurn us forever and never again be favorable to us if we doggedly hardened our heart in spite of the kindness and patience He shows to us; covering the ears of our heart lest we should hear the charm of His voice; in other words, if we are impenitent till the moment of our departure from this present world.

This impenitence can be either temporal, lasting throughout the course of our present life, or final, existing at the moment of death. Temporal impenitence is the mastermind of final impenitence. Final impenitence presents itself under two different forms: impenitence of fact, that is, the simple absence of repenting, and impenitence of will, that is, the positive resolution not to repent. In this last case we have the special sin of impenitence which, in its development, becomes a sin of malice.

Temporal impenitence of will leads directly to final impenitence, even though at times Our Lord, by special mercy, preserves the soul from final impenitence. The soul on this road persevered in sin, deliberately and coldly. It repels all thought of contrition and penance which might deliver it. Thus, as our heavenly friend, St. Augustine, says: "It is not only a sin of malice; it is also a sin against the Holy Spirit, that is to say, a sin which contradicts directly that which would save the sinner."

On the other hand, if we repent of our sins, no matter how grievous they are, God is more than happy and ecstatic to blot out all our sins, as it is written: "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (Ps. 103: 12); Again, "Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool" (Is. 1: 18); and again, "But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of

the transgression which he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness which he has done he shall live” (Ezek. 18: 21-22).

Again, if we ask: →

Icon # 793 = Has the steadfast Love of God ceased Forever?

“Has his steadfast love for ever ceased? Are his promises at an end for all time? Has God forgotten to be gracious? Has he in anger shut up his compassion? And I say, ‘It is my grief that the right hand of the Most High has changed.’”

Certainly, in times of sorrow and adversity, it is very good and beneficial for us to remember the good things that the Lord has done in our lives, no matter how little and insignificant they might be, as it is written: “In times of adversity do not be forgetful of prosperity, and in times of prosperity do not be unmindful of adversity.”

In the first question: “Has his steadfast love for ever ceased?” We can absolutely answer: No! It might have different effect to different people according to the state of one’s soul, just as the light of the sun has different repercussion according to the condition of the eyes of the person. It is pleasant to those who have good eyes, but painful to the diseased eyes; so it is with the love of God: it is pleasant to those who are prepared for it, but a torment to those who have not prepared themselves in this present life to receive it. The same is true with fire: it glistens gold, but burns straw. Even in hell the love of God never ceases, but have just different effect.

“Are his promises at an end for all time? Of course not! Because He is immutable. Foremost, He promised to Abraham and the other patriarchs of sending the Messiah – the Christ who is His very Word, His only begotten Son, that in Christ Jesus Our Lord, the blessing of Abraham might come upon us, that is, the Gentiles, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (cf. Gal. 3: 14).

Hence, in Christ Jesus Our Lord, we also who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of our salvation, and have believed in Him were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of His glory (cf. Eph. 1: 13-14). Of course, He promised us eternal life and truly this life will never at any time will come to an end.

“Has God forgotten to be gracious?” Again, of course, not! Because He is gracious and merciful. On the other hand, since He is absolutely free, He has complete freedom to be gracious to whom He will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom He will show mercy (cf. Ex. 33: 19).

“Has he in anger shut up his compassion?” Certainly Not! Mercy is so dear to Him that it ranks high as instrument in drawing us to Himself. His mercy is meant to lead us to repentance; spiritual newness comes from repentance and it is through Our Lord’s mercy that we are renewed, because there was never once in our lives that we are free from sin.

The alternation of light and darkness, of consolations and desolations, are as useful, are as indispensable in the growing and ripening of virtues in our souls as changes in the weather are vital for crops to grow and ripen in the field. Thus we have to learn to resign ourselves to them, and to most painful of these trials, whether they come from God’s justice, that is, His anger or from His compassion, for they are equally just blessed, adorable, and beneficial to our soul.

Often His anger, that is, His justice and compassion rightfully blend in sending them, but on this present world the operation of His anger is never wholly divided from His compassion. If it happened, then it would be legitimate to: →

Icon # 794 = The grief when the right hand of the Most High has changed

“And I say, ‘it is my grief that the right hand of the Most high has changed.’”

It is truly a cause of grief if the right hand of the Most High has changed; first and foremost, because God is immutable, that is, unchangeable. But now His right hand has changed. Why is this so? Is His left hand also changed? Is God now changeable? We strove to fathom this enigma and we have to confess that it is very hard for our mind to understand why His right hand changed and what causes this extraordinary change until we pierced the mysteries of God and understood that the “right hand” of God denotes all the effects of His power, strength, and omnipotence.

We also searched the Scripture and found out that often to be at “one’s right hand” signifies to defend, to protect, to support, as for instance: “Wondrously show thy steadfast love, O Savior of those who seek refuge from their adversaries at thy right hand” (Ps. 17: 7), and again, “for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory; but thy right hand, and thy arm, and the light of thy countenance; for thou didst delight in them” (Ps. 44: 3).

Since this is the case, hence it is possible that the right hand of the Most High has changed or will change, that is, He withdrew or will withdraw His support and protection. We have an example of this even among His chosen people, as it is written: “Thou hast cast us off and abased us, and hast not gone out with armies. Thou hast made us turn back from the foe; and our enemies have gotten spoil. Thou hast made us like sheep for slaughter, and hast scattered us among the nations. Thou hast sold thy people for a trifle, demanding no high

price for them. Thou hast made us the taunt of our neighbor, the derision and scorn of those about us. Thou hast made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples" (Ps. 44: 9-14).

We also found out that it was His chosen people who abandoned Him first by serving other gods and breaking His commandments in spite of the warning that was given to them, as it is written: "The Lord warned Israel and Judah and every prophet and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law which I commanded your fathers, and which I sent to you by my servants the prophets.' But they would not listen, but were stubborn, as their fathers had been, who did not believe in the Lord their God. They despised his statutes, and his covenant that he made with their fathers, and the warnings which he gave them. They went after false idols and became false, and they followed the nations that were round about them, concerning whom the Lord had commanded them that they should not do like them. And they forsook all the commandments of the Lord their God, and made for themselves an Asherah, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the Lord, provoking him to anger. Therefore the Lord was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight" (2Kings 17: 13-18).

Hence, there is a compelling reason why the right hand of the Most High has changed. However, we have to forcefully assert that so long as we are still in this present life the "change" of the right hand of the Most High has a beneficial effect on us if there is still a flicker of humility left in our heart, because being jettisoned and in a crucible of trial by the Lord for a short while and humbly seeing the frailty of our spirit, we may not become proud because of any consolation which has been granted us by His support and protection; and so that, by proving to us that apart from Him we can do nothing, we may understand that even the previous consolation that was conferred on us was not by our own merit and goodness but by His condescension, and that any solace and comfort must be sought again from His grace and illumination.

The other consoling reason why it could be beneficial that the "right hand of the Most High has changed" is that this "trial" is to put to the proof our perseverance and steadfastness of mind and soul, and also to manifest in us with what yearning of heart and earnestness of prayer we must look for the protection and assistance of the Most High when His "right hand has changed." Hence, we realize how much effort it takes to seek out His support and protection once it has changed, we may strive to guard it more carefully and to hold on to it more attentively once it has been reestablished. If these things are ours and abound, then we are in a fairly better position to: →

Icon # 795 = The Works of the Lord

"I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord; yea, I will remember thy wonders of old. I will meditate on all thy work, and muse on thy mighty deeds."

Truly, truly, it is not farfetched to assert that it will take us all eternity to "call to mind the deeds of the Lord;" to "remember" His "wonders of old;" to "meditate on all His work, and muse on His mighty deeds." Even the whole world and the whole universe would not be enough to hold all the books and articles if all His works and wonders be written down, for who has ever traversed the whole universe, from one galaxy to another galaxy of which there are billions and billions of them, and whose distance alone from one galaxy to another would take us about 100,000 years at the speed of light, that is, 186,000 miles per second, and wrote down what he or she saw? Here, we are just talking about our own beloved galaxy, the "Milky Way," and how long will it take to entirely traverse it. We are not even talking about our neighboring galaxies, much more of the whole universe!

And what about the 10 million known species in our world alone?! Of course, all these are in the realm of the "Works of Creation." How about the more stupendous works, that is, the "Works of Redemption and Sanctification"! As Christian believers, we appropriate the work of Creation to the Father, the work of Redemption to the Son, and the work of Sanctification to the Holy Spirit, that is, to the Blessed Trinity itself. And who can ever fathom the unfathomable infinity of the Blessed Trinity!?

We are told by one of our Cistercian fathers of old, no other than the amiable St. Aelred of Rievaulx, that "Every creature bear some mark of the Father by its being which is good; is an image of the Son by its form which makes it beautiful; and is related to the Holy Spirit by its serviceable purpose which makes it of use." For this reason, a flower bear some mark of the Father by its being which is good; is an image of the Son by its form which makes it beautiful; and is related to the Holy Spirit by its serviceable purpose which makes it of use, for instance, for decoration or even just for admiration.

Much more of us, human beings, in the highest degree, we are made in the image of the Blessed Trinity, for we bear some mark of the Father by our "being" which is good, hence, every human being is precious in the eyes of God; we are an image of the Son by our "form" which makes us beautiful in the sight of God; we are related to the Holy Spirit by our "serviceable purpose" which makes us of use, even as simple as giving a cup of cold water, or as sophisticated as electronic devices, or as grandeur as St. Peter's Basilica. It has been said that "Creation is the direct expression of the divine imaginations, it is the most intimate reflection of God's sense of beauty."

One of the Titans of the desert fathers, no other than our heavenly friend, Abba Moses, pointed out that “the contemplation of God is arrived at in numerous ways. For God is not known only through wondering at His incomprehensible substance, because that is still concealed in the hope of the promise, but He is also clearly perceived in the grandeur of things that he has created, in reflecting upon His justice and in the assistance provided by His daily providence” (The First Conference of Abba Moses: On the Goal and the end of the Monk).

Now, let us broach the other stupendous work of God, that is, the work of “Redemption” which is appropriated to the Son. So as not to rely in our own intelligence, let us listen to our good friend, St. Paul, who confessed that it is no longer he who live, but Christ who lives in him, thus he is united with Him and became one spirit with Him. Therefore, he has a solid credential to say: “Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2: 5-11).

Isn't it prodigious which really boggles our mind that Christ, though He is God, not only humbled Himself in the Incarnation by becoming a human being like us in all things except sin, but even went deeper so far by becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross for our redemption! This too we will meditate for all eternity! Just as the rainbow was given to us as a sign of a covenant which God made between Him and His people for all future generations, a remembrance that “the water shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh,” so the crucifixion of Christ will be for us a remembrance, for all eternity, that His Love for us conquers sin and death, that sin and death has no more power to destroy the souls of the redeemed.

The Son of God, Christ the Lord, loves us so much that He died for us. Take for instance, if a father of a family of which he is the head would die for his family, why should not Christ die for the human race of which He is the head? And if the deeper the love the more poignant the pain, why should not the crucifixion be born of that love?

The possibility of supernatural life was brought to our fallen human race through the Incarnation, when we were redeemed; and for justice to be done, the “Redeemer” of our race, the Lord Jesus, had to be both God and man. He had to be a man, for otherwise He could not have acted in our behalf as

representing us; He had also to be God, for otherwise He could not have paid the infinite debt owed to God by our sins and the sins of humanity.

Hence, if we would successfully undertake and complete our journey from our fallen and wounded condition to the promise beatific vision, union with God for all eternity, we can do so only in and through the redemptive work of the Lord Jesus the Incarnate Word.

Thus without any shadow of a doubt all God's works are mighty indeed, because He is Himself mighty. Accordingly, there are three of His mighty deeds particularly which proclaim resoundingly how splendidly He has dealt with us, namely: the work of our first creation, the work of our present redemption, and the work of our on-going sanctification and glorification.

For this reason, let us now mention the work of sanctification which is attributed to the Holy Spirit. Generally speaking, when the Sacred Scriptures tell us of the activity of the Holy Spirit, He is shown as stirring the mind and will to some great or heroic action. So it is here, when the Lord Jesus was led into the wilderness; so it was on the first Pentecost, when the coming of the Holy Spirit sent the Apostles forth to preach the wonderful work of God. But the Holy Spirit is given, not just to chosen few, but to all who are admitted to God's friendship, to the inner circle of the Blessed Trinity, for we are all given to drink at a single source, the one Spirit.

In this way, the Holy Spirit is present and active within us, to lead us forward to the activity proper to God's children – and lead us, not in ways of our own choosing, but according as we are led by the Holy Spirit. Hence, our good friend, St. Paul, rightly says: "But we are bound to give thanks to God always for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God chose you from the beginning to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit, and belief in the truth" (2Thes. 2: 13).

On the other hand, we have to assert boldly that the Holy Spirit works so subtly that, generally speaking, even faith is blind to His presence and action, that is, the soul is led without being aware of it. His manifest comings, as at the baptism of the Lord or the first Pentecost, are the exception; normally, like the "spirit" or "breath" from which He is named, He is seen not in Himself but in His effects, just as the leaves of the tree move, and we know it is the breath of the wind that moves them; the wind itself we do not see. "If He comes to me," said our heavenly friend, Job, "I shall not see Him; if He departs I shall not understand."

Is there anything in ourselves to which we can point as proof of the Holy Spirit's presence and activity within us? Can we say that we have risen to heights worthy of His leadership; or are we still groping dully about on the plains, our energies at best taken up with the struggle against the lure of sinful pleasures or

laziness, against difficulties and failures in prayer, against weariness and boredom in our efforts to do good? If we seem to be in this latter case, it may be that we have failed to take the necessary steps to increase and intensify the workings of the Spirit within us.

Our heavenly friend, St. Luke, tells us that the Lord Jesus went into the desert filled with the Spirit, and we, too, from no matter how great distance, we have to aspire to a similar fullness of life and power. An increase of that divine life and power comes to us through the sacraments, through prayer, and through good deeds. Perhaps, then, we are careless in our use of the sacraments, neglect of prayer, or lacking in the Zealard energy to attempt to live a really good life. If so, we not only prevent an increase within us of the activity of the Holy Spirit. We fail to respond to the impulse, the leading, which are already there. The failure, then, is ours: we have the gifts, but we fail to use them. We are like the servant in the parable who buried his talent in the napkin instead of making good use of it.

To be led by the Holy Spirit, to be docile to His leadership, is to be led according to the measure of our God-given strength; it is not to be immune from trial and temptation. If we are humbly trying to do our best with our individual capacities, and fully aware of our own limitation, then, temptation will not come as a surprise: It will indeed be for us an honor if we feel that the Holy Spirit is leading us into trials as He led Our Lord Jesus, as the letter of our heavenly friend, St. James, tells us: "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (James 1: 2-4).

But having allowed us to meet various trials, the Holy Spirit will not leave us helpless. For He is the Spirit who not only leads but comforts and strengthens as well. The true meaning of comfort is indeed "to strengthen": not a soft, sentimental attempt to persuade us that all is well when all is far from well, but an attempt to pour into us new strength and courage to meet whatever demands are to be made of us, as our good friend, St. Paul, blessed the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, "Who comfort us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too" (2Cor. 1: 4-5).

Christian life is at bottom about continually rejuvenated and recreated by the power of the Holy Spirit; but this cannot happen automatically: we must want to be sanctified, to be made young and new again and cooperate in this on-going process of sanctification. Positively, even though we are still in this present life we may reap with joy the fruits of the Holy Spirit, as our Fathers in Faith enjoin us to reap the "hope of eternal life," that is our final glorification; and certainly

the hope of eternal happiness is not without happiness itself. For when by the grace of the Holy Spirit we grow in holiness in this life, this growth in holiness grounds our confidence in the forgiveness of our sins, affords us ever growing hope of eternal life, and enables us to savor even now something of the joy we will know perfectly in our final glorification in the beatific Vision to come.

Moreover, we will discover this confidence, hope, and joy through our developing knowledge of ourselves as being renewed and sanctified in the Holy Spirit, for those of us who now experience the Holy Spirit at work within us know what the Spirit says because his voice never contradicts His work. For this reason, we understand what the Holy spirit says, for what we hear from without we experience from within, as the first letter of our heavenly friend, John, says: "the anointing which you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that any one should teach you; as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie, just as it has taught you, abide in him" (1st Jn. 2: 27).

Since what the Holy Spirit teaches us is true and His work is for our sanctification and glorification, therefore, it is absolutely right and just to declare full throated:

→

Icon # 796 = The Way of God is Holy. No other god is great as Our God

"Thy way, O God, is holy. What god is great like our God?"

Without any shadow of a doubt, the way of God is holy because He Himself is holy, as He said: "Be holy as I am holy." In other words, God Himself is the Way. Moreover, God is also Truth, hence His Way is truth. Not only that God is Truth and the Way, but He is also Life, not just ordinary life, but divine life, an eternal life.

For this reason, the Lord Jesus can unequivocally say: "I am the Way, the truth, and the life." Amazingly, not only that the Lord Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, but He is also "light," and since light travels in a straight line, thus the way of the Lord Jesus is faultlessly perfect. That is why it is called "holy", the way of perfection, a divine Super Highway.

Since the Lord Jesus is light, therefore, His Way is superlatively brilliant with no atom of darkness in it, because in this Highway night as clear as the day. In other words, in the Way of Perfection the night of trials and sufferings work together for good to lead the people of God to holiness of life. This is certainly not our own doing, but owing to God's grace, that is why no other god is great like our God, for never was it heard since the foundation of the world that any people has a god so holy and so near to it as the Lord Our God is to us whenever we walk on His Way. For once we were darkness, walking by the impulse of fleshly desires, but now we are light in the Lord, thus we have to walk as children of light,

looking carefully how we walk, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time for we are surrounded by the forces of darkness.

When people, even religious people, grow tired of spiritual things and become lukewarm, when their spiritual vigor is drained away, it is very likely that they will walk in sadness along the Way of the Lord Jesus. They will fulfill the tasks assigned to them with hearts that are worn-out and dry, they will grumble continuously, they will complain of the long days and the long nights in the words like those of Job: "When I lie down I say, 'when shall I arise?' And then I shall be waiting for evening.'

If we find ourselves among those who are subject to these moods but remain in patience and hold on to our faith, the Lord Jesus, in His mercy and love, draws near to us on the way we are traveling, and being from heaven starts to speak to us about heavenly truths, opens to us the Scriptures, communicates to us about the City of God, on the peace of that City, on the eternity of that peace, and the never ending life of that eternity.

The Lord Jesus is not only the Way that leads to Truth, but also the Life, the "Viaticum", the life-giving food which sustains and nourishes us and those traveling along this way. It was in order to make our mind able to advance more confidently toward the truth that Truth itself, the divine Son of God, put on our human nature without putting off His divinity and built this solid highway of faith so that we, human beings, by means of the God-Man, could find our way to God and to our eternal home, no other than heaven itself.

For it is as man that the Lord Jesus is the Mediator and as man that He is the Way. Where there is a way between a traveler and his/her destination, he/she can hope to reach it, but, if there is no way or if he/she does not know which way to take, what is the good of knowing the destination? Now our Catholic faith affirms that there is one way and one way alone that can save us from all aberrations, the Way which is both God and Man – God as the goal and Man as the means to reach it, no other than the Lord Jesus. Hence, if we would only entrust ourselves entirely to God, and let Him do with us what He wants, very likely, we would make great progress in holiness, for He knows what is best for us.

The command that we should be holy as God is holy, is certainly not impossible because God does not command impossible things. Besides, we are made in the image and likeness of God, thus it is in our capacity to be holy as God is holy. If it is difficult for us to do so, then we have to ask Him for help, and He is more than willing to help us that we may be able to do His command.

It is right and just to say that holiness is accessible to us, in whatever walks of life we find ourselves, for "holiness" can be built out of "patient endurance of the incessant grumbling of a husband, the almost intolerable nagging of a wife, the

boss' habit of smoking pipe while he dictates, the noise the children make with their soup, the unexpected illness, the sudden death of a loved one, the failure to find a husband, the sorrow of a man jilted by his girlfriend, the inability to get rich, etc." All these can become occasions of holiness and be made into prayers if they are borne patiently for love of the God who bears patiently with us, despite our sins, our failures, and short comings.

Hence holiness can be bought with the coin we make from the metal of our everyday actions and reactions, for just as the stone in a river bed are worn smooth by the current of water and rubbing against one another, so we are purified by the constant friction of the events of our daily lives.

Devotion to duty, in whatever state of life we are in, either we are religious or lay, married or single, to the utter disregard of "self" is known to be the safest, surest, and shortest way to holiness, as our heavenly friend, no other than St. John Henry Newman, says: "The secret of sanctity is to do the ordinary things of life extraordinarily well for the glory of God and love of His people. If we wish to be perfect, we have nothing more to do than perform the ordinary duties of the day well."

In other words, holiness lies in fulfilling our duties day after day, whatever it may be, completing well and finishing off everything we undertake. It is living the small details of charity with others, knowing how to deal with the apparently trivial things that bother us or which we don't like.

Let us listen to a transcendental insight of our other heavenly friend, no other than the Blessed Bishop Fulton Sheen, who rightly says: "The good thief and the bad thief on the cross had the same crisis of fear and suffering – one of them complained and lost his chance for heaven that day; the other spiritualized the brief moment of suffering. Some souls win peace and sanctity from the same trials that make other rebels and nervous wrecks."

Finally, let us hear from one of the cloud of witnesses who testifies that no other god is great like Our God, no other than our heavenly friend the brilliant St. Augustine who precisely says: "Of all visible things, the universe is the greatest; of all invisible realities, the greatest is God. That the world exists we can see; we believe in the existence of God. But there is no one we can more safely trust than God Himself in regard to the fact that it was He who made the world. Where has He told us so? Nowhere distinctly than in the Holy Scriptures where His Prophet said: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and earth.' Well, but was the Prophet present when God made heaven and earth? No; but the Wisdom of God by whom all things were made was there. And this Wisdom, entering into holy souls, makes of them the friends and prophets of God and reveals to them, silently and interiorly, what God has done" (St. Augustine, City of God, Book XI Creation and the Two Societies of Angels, Ch. 4).

For this reason, we could not help but proclaim throughout the whole world and throughout the whole universe that: →

Icon # 797 = The God Who works Wonders

“Thou art the God who workest wonders, who hast manifested they might among the peoples.”

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to declare, with all our might, the greatness of God who alone works wonders, no matter how poor, limited, and insignificant our human words are. But since God is Our Father and we are His children, and it is the instinct of a father to appreciate a compliment from his children, whether he expresses it or not, thus that is what we will do.

We could have ask the help of angels who know God more closely, but we will just limit ourselves to our human resources believing that God will accept and be pleased, not so much by the poverty of our words, but by our earnest desire to praise Him for His greatness and for the wonders of His works. First and foremost, we have to declare that God is Omnipotence and Omniscience, that is, All-powerful and All-knowing; and since He is Omnipotence and Omniscience, therefore, it follows, that He can do whatever He wants and works all kinds of wonders as it pleases Him; He also knows everything He created, to its minutest details, and sees them good even before He made them. That's how great Our God is!

Truly, truly not one of the things and the wonders He made would have been created had He not known already that they were good. For this reason, what He sees is good would not have been created unless He had seen that it was good before He made it. Just as an artist rejoices in his finished product, so God is pleased in the wonders He made.

God's mind is so mighty that it really boggles our comprehension. “His mind,” says our elder brother in faith, no other than our heavenly friend, St. Augustine, “does not pass from one thought to another. His vision is utterly unchangeable. Thus, He comprehends all that takes place in time – the not yet – existing future, the existing present, and the no-longer- existing past – in an immutable and eternal present. He does not see differently with the eyes and the mind, for He is not composed of soul and body. Nor is there any then, now, and afterwards in His foreknowledge, for unlike ours, it suffers no change with triple time – present, past, and future. With Him, ‘there is no change, nor shadow of alteration.’ Neither does His attention pass from thought to thought, for His knowledge embraces everything in a single spiritual contuition.

“His knowledge of what happens in time, like His movement of what changes in time, is completely independent of time. That is why it was one and the same to God to see that what He had made was good and to see that it was good to make it. When He saw what he had made, His knowledge was neither doubled nor in any way increased – in the sense that it could have been less before He made what He saw. For He could not have been so perfect a Creator without so perfect a knowledge that nothing could be added to it by seeing what He created. Hence, we can see that, if the only truth Scripture needed to tell us was who created the light, it would have sufficed to say: ‘God made the light.’ And if there was also a reason for telling us how God made it, it was enough to report: God said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light.’

“Thus, we would know not only that God created the light but that He did so by means of the Word. But, since there are three truths concerning every creature which we needed to know – namely: Who made it? How did He make it? and Why? – Scripture relates: God said, ‘Let there be light, and there was light. God saw that the light was good.’ So, if we ask, ‘who made it?’ The answer is ‘God’; if we ask, ‘how?’ The answer is that God said: ‘Let it be. And it was done.’ If we ask, ‘why?’ The answer is ‘Because it is good.’” (St. Augustine, City of God, Book XI Creation and the Two Societies of Angels, Ch. 21).

Therefore, it is truly right and just to declare throughout the whole universe that God, Our Father, is Great and Mighty “the God who workest wonders, who hast manifested thy might among the peoples.”

Of course, we would not be tired of proclaiming the wonders of God, because:
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Icon # 798 = The Redemption

“Thou with thy arm redeem thy people, the sons of Jacob and Joseph.”

It is really worthwhile to mention the semantic meaning of the word “redeem,” such as: ransom, repossess, convert, reclaim, recover. It is a universal knowledge that the “sons of Jacob and Joseph,” that is, the Israelites – the people of God, were enslaved in Egypt for 400 years. Then came Moses the servant of God who delivered them from slavery and brought them to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

The allegorical meaning of this dramatic event is also very intriguing, for instance: Egypt represents our present world; the sons of Jacob and Joseph represent the human race that believe in the existence of God, the minimum requirement of belonging to the people of God, “For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. Without faith it is impossible to please him” (Heb. 11: 6); Pharaoh represents the

“prince of darkness” – the ruler of the hosts of wickedness and the mastermind of all the evils in our present world; the 400 years represent the number of years the people of God will be in our present world.

Then comes the Lord Jesus – the new Moses who delivers those who sincerely believe in Him, and strive to put into practice His teaching, from the slavery of vices and sins and from all unhealthy desires, and brings them to the “Promised Land,” that is, the kingdom of heaven, a land flowing with the milk of happiness and honey of gladness, a land abundant with eternal life.

It is also very important to mention that not all the people of God whom Moses led out of Egypt really entered the “Promised Land,” but only the little children for to such belongs the “Promised Land.” We are told that the majority of the people whom Moses led out from Egypt died in the wilderness; they grumbled against Moses and disbelieved in God in spite of the “great wonders” God worked for them. They made idols for themselves, sitting down to eat and drink, then rose up to dance. They preferred to live a very hedonistic life-style: “let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”

In the same way, not all the human race will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the little ones – the little children – those who are innocent to what is evil but is very wise to what is good for to such belongs the kingdom of God. These are they who are courageous enough, of course by God’s grace, to enter the narrow gate and traverse the less travelled road of sincerity and truth. We are told that many will try to enter this gate but will not be able, because deep down in their hearts they prefer the wide gate of godlessness and the easy road of reveling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy, and the like.

They grumbled against the Lord Jesus and disbelieved in His words in spite of the many signs and great wonders He had done: healing the sick, casting out demons, cleansing lepers, raising the dead, and dying on the cross. They made idols for themselves: worshipping mammon, bowing down to riches, prestige, power, honor, vanity, and vainglory. They sat down to eat the bread of dishonesty and drink the wine of insincerity, then rose up to dance the music of worldly desires. They were heavily drunk and completely forgotten that they were made in the image and likeness of God and could have been destined to enter and inherit the kingdom which God has prepared since the foundation of the world for those who love Him and obey His commands.

On the other hand, to the redeemed these consoling words are addressed: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk. 12: 32). These are the little ones, the sons of Jacob and Joseph, who bear fruits of virtues in their lives that befit repentance. Thus they know how

to give and take forgiveness, for they know by experience that they were forgiven sinners, redeemed by the arms of the Lord – crucified on the Cross.

Of course, this is very amazingly marvelous; no wonder why: →

Icon # 799 = The Storm of our Passions and Emotions

“When the waters saw thee, O God, when the waters saw thee, they were afraid, yea, the deep trembled.”

We are told by the Scripture that in one of His maritime journeys the Lord Jesus and His disciples were caught in a great storm, so that “their boat was being swamped by the waves, but he was asleep.”

This sounds very intriguing. The waters were so impudent enough to rage against the Lord and His disciples while the Lord was sleeping. Of course, it was the disciples who were afraid and trembled. They were like children being bullied by the storm and need to have recourse to their Father, who said to them: “Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?” In other words, although the disciples were grown up men, but they are still little children in their faith. Then the Lord arose and rebuked the winds and the sea; thus when the waters saw Him, they were the ones who were afraid and trembled, then there was a great calm.

In our lives, too, we have episodes of being caught in the storm of our passions and emotions; the waves of vices and worldly desires were battering the skiff of our souls. It was only by the grace of God, when we cried out for help, that the storm of our passions and emotions died down and the waves of our vices and worldly desires subsided.

However, we have to admit that although we are glad to be free of some of our passions and emotions, vices and worldly desires, we are still alarmed and in great trepidation even in our exultation, because even though we have already escaped the violence of one storm, we know very well by experience that we are still subject to the uncertain changes of a troubled sea. Our hope is exultant in such a way that we can tremble with fear, and we tremble with fear in such a way that we can exult with the trust of hope, as it is written: “Serve the Lord with fear, and tremble in your exultation.” In this way, we would be wise enough to follow the intuitive advice of our forefathers in faith that in the time of adversity we should not be unmindful of prosperity, and in the time of prosperity we should not be forgetful of adversity.

So long as we are still in this present world we have to expect: →

Icon # 800 = The Lightnings, the Thunder, and the Clouds

“When the waters saw thee, O God, when the waters saw thee, they were afraid, yea, the deep trembled.”

God's majesty is really very amazing, because not only the waters below, that is, the sea, but also the waters above, that is, the rain yielded to God the honor to which He is entitled, the air, by the shaking of the thunder poured forth abundant waters. The goal is to illustrate that to whatever direction we turn our eyes, the glory of God is magnificently manifested, that it is so in every part of creation, above and beneath, from the heavenly skies to the depths of the sea.

We are told by the scientific pundits that lightning is caused by static between two clouds with opposite charges, a cloud and the ground, or the cloud and an object with an opposite charge. When a thunderstorm occurs lightning also exists. This is because thunderstorm is classified by lightning. When charges are separated, an electrical force appears between them. This force is voltage, which could be more than 100 million volts, the electromotive force. As more charges separate, voltage builds, and at some point, this voltage will be so great that it will ionize the air between the charges. Current will flow along this ionized path, and this is lightning. Moving electrons carry the current. The ionized air is superheated, and it emits intense light. The light we see is the lightning, and the superheating of the air causes a shock wave we perceive as thunder.

Of course, all this explanation of the scientific pundits just shows how brilliant and powerful God is in creating our world and sustaining it by His divine providence. We have to be really grateful to God for inventing the lightning, because if lightning was not invented we would not have electricity. Of course, we need also the sun.

Now, let us consider also the clouds and see its significance. At His transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared to the Lord Jesus and to His disciples which prompted Peter to suggest that he will make three booths: one for the Lord, one for Moses, and one for Elijah. He was still speaking when a “bright cloud” overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (cf. Mt. 17: 1-8). The Lord Jesus, too, speaks of His second coming as “in a cloud” with power and great glory (cf. Mt. 24: 30; Lk. 21: 27).

It has been said that our thoughts are like clouds and we are the sky. This sounds a reasonable thought in itself, because clouds, like thoughts can take different shapes. Sometimes they look gorgeous like chariots and different kinds of figures, sometimes awesome and sometimes gruesome. This is also true of our thoughts: sometimes we have good thoughts and sometimes bad thoughts, and like clouds that come and go so quickly so our thoughts also come and go.

The struggle against useless thoughts is certainly among the most difficult, but the struggle has to be conducted with proper direction, with calmness and gentleness, with patience and even with greater constancy, and without pretending that one's purity of mind could ever achieve a perfection which is not of this life. Our Heavenly friend, St. Francis de Sales said that "You ask how you might go about concentrating your spirit completely on God so that nothing could pull it back or detach. To do that, two things are necessary: to die and be saved. For then there will be no more separation."

Thus on the journey of life, we can rediscover the wisdom, peace, and well being that are always inside us, and we do that by learning things about the nature of thoughts which happen to be pretty similar to clouds that "poured out water" to sprinkle the earth and make plants grow. Moreover: →

Icon # 801 = The Unseen Coming and Going of God

"Thy way was through the sea, thy path through the great waters; yet thy footprints were unseen."

As a creator, God is really creative and has lots of sense of humor too. Just consider how He makes the clouds His chariots and rides on the wings of the wind (cf. Ps. 104: 3)! Isn't this fascinating!? He likes to travel not only by air, but also by sea!: "Thy way was through the sea, thy path through the great waters; yet thy footprints were unseen." This, too, is really very amazing.

For us Christian believers, it is not really hard to believe that the Lord Jesus is God, because all these amazing things that God did Christ also did. For instance, God rides on the wings of the wind; Christ too rides on the wings of the wind when He ascended into heaven. God's way was through the sea, His path through the great water, yet His footprints were unseen. The Lord Jesus, too, walks on the sea and His footprints were also unseen.

In other words, the Lord Jesus is doing what God is doing, therefore, He is really God. He confirms this not only by deeds, but also by words. Let us hear directly from Him: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise" (Jn. 5: 19).

Of course, the Lord Jesus was falsely accused of blaspheming because He said: "I am the Son of God." Even if we will not recourse to our faith, it is very obvious to our reason that the Lord was not blaspheming, for how can he be guilty of blaspheming when He was only doing what the Father does!? The Lord really hold their feet to the fire when He told them: "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not

believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (Jn. 10: 37-38).

Christ must have appeared very mysterious to them and it has to be so, because He hides Himself to those whom He wills and also reveals Himself to those whom He wills. There is something in Him which lies between the finite and the infinite, the known and the unknown, the mystery of God's providence and the mystery of His grace. But there is more mystery about the providence of God than about the grace of God, for He has revealed much more clearly what He does and what He wills about our souls than about our bodies, as He said: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt. 4: 4); also He said: "For what does it profit a man, if he gain the whole world, but suffer the loss of his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul" (Mt. 16: 26, Mk. 8: 37)?

Perhaps, this is the reason why it is much harder work to trust for the present time than it does for eternity, and why there are so many who are anxious about their daily wants, and yet have no fear for their eternal salvation.

With regards to the mysteriousness of God: "thy path through the great waters; yet thy footprints were unseen," we need to consider a couple of things. First, we will never fully understand them, as our good friend, St. Paul, attested: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways" (Rom. 11: 33)! Of course, we have to search the solution of the hard problems that come our way, the overcoming of our fears, and the enlightenment of our doubts, not in the episodes itself, but in the character of God. Second, Faith has the upper hand. As we continue living on, putting our trust in God, many of the things which were once fearsome and hard come out to be amiable, simple, and understandable. We understand, though not all, some of the rationale behind them, hence, we are satisfied where we were once dissatisfied.

Now, let us listen to our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux as he speaks of his own experience of the mysteriousness of the Lord Jesus – the Word of God, His going and coming in our hearts, "yet thy footprints were unseen"; he said: "I want to tell you my own experience....Now bear with my foolishness for a while. I admit that the Word has also come to me – I speak as fool – and has come many times. But although he has come to me, I have never been conscious of the moment of his coming. I perceived his presence, I remembered afterwards that he had been with me; sometimes I had a presentiment that he would come, but I was never conscious of his coming or his going. And where he comes from when he visits my soul, and where he goes, and by what means he enters and goes out, I admit that I do not know even now.

“The coming of the Word was not perceptible to my eyes, for he has no color; nor to my ears, for there was no sound; nor yet to my nostrils, for he mingles with the mind, not the air. You ask then how I knew he was present, when his ways can in no way be traced? He is life and power, and as soon as he enters in, he awakens my slumbering soul; he stirs and soothes and pierces my heart, for before it was hard as stone, and diseased. So he has begun to flock and destroy, to build up and to plant, to water dry places and illuminate dark ones; to open what was closed and to warm what was cold; to make the crooked straight and the rough places smooth, so that my soul may bless the Lord, and all that is within me may praise his holy name.

“So when the Bridegroom, the Word, came to me, he never made known his coming by any signs, not by sight, not by sound, not by touch. It was not by any movement of his that I recognized his coming; it was not by any of my senses that I perceived he had penetrated to the depths of my being. Only by the movement of my heart, as I have told you, did I perceive his presence; and I knew the power of his might because my faults were put to flight and my human yearnings were brought into subjection. I have marveled at the depth of his wisdom when my secret faults have been revealed and made visible; at the very slightest amendment of my way of life I have experienced his goodness and mercy; in the renewal and remaking of the spirit of my mind, that is of my inmost being, I have perceived the excellence of his glorious beauty, and when I contemplate all these things I am filled with awe and wonder at his manifold greatness.

“But when the Word has left me, all these spiritual powers become weak and faint and begin to grow cold, as though you had removed the fire from under a boiling pot, and this is the sign of his going. Then my soul needs be sorrowful until he returns and my heart again kindles within me – the sign of his returning” (Sermon 74, Song of Songs, Vol. IV, II, 5-7).

What more can we say!? Only this: →

Icon # 802 = Shepherd

“Thou didst lead thy people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.”

Without any shadow of a doubt, the dominant image that stands out in this verse is that of a “shepherd.” Just as God had led out His particular people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron out of Egypt, from slavery, so in the fullness of time God is leading His universal people like a flock by the hand of His only begotten Son – the Lord Jesus who is the “Good Shepherd” out from the corruption of this present world, from the slavery of sin, into the “Promised Land” – the kingdom of Heaven.

The ultimate insignia of a good shepherd is to lay one's life for his sheep. This is exactly what the Lord Jesus did as the Good Shepherd – laying down His life on the cross for His universal sheep. He laid it down on His own volition, no one took it from Him. He has absolute power to lay it down, and also absolute power to take it back again. This charge, of course, He received from His Father. And what He received from His Father He also handed, first and foremost, to St. Peter – His Vicar on earth.

It is certainly correct to say that what the Lord said to Peter, three times, “Do you love me?” is also applicable to all the “shepherds” of His Church and all would be shepherds. It is as though the Lord Jesus is saying to all shepherds, to us, and to all would be shepherds that unless our conscience bears witness that we love Him so intensely and wholeheartedly, more than we love for our reputation, our possessions, our loved ones, and even ourselves, that this threefold command of His is fulfilled, we must not and never should, on any account, take this charge upon us, nor must we have any dealings with these sheep of His for whom His blood was shed (cf. Sermon 76 On the Song of Songs by St. Bernard of Clairvaux).

In this same sermon, our father St. Bernard also pointed out ways and means on how to shepherd the sheep. He said: “The sheep must all be pastured on the Scriptures, which are the legacy of the Lord, but there are differences among them. There are commandments, the rough pasturage appointed for the stubborn and unspiritual as a guide to life and discipline, and there is the lush grass of dispensations granted out of pity to the weak and timid; and there is the strong solid grass of the counsels provided for the healthy, whose faculties have been trained to distinguish between good and evil. The young, the lambs, then must be given the milk of exhortation to drink, not solid food.

“Therefore good and faithful shepherds never cease to feed their flock with good and choice examples – from their own lives rather than from other people's. If they offer those of other people and not their own, this is to their discredit, and their flock will not profit. I, for example, apparently carry the responsibility of being your shepherd. Now if I hold up to you as examples the compassion of Moses, the patience of Job, the mercy of Samuel, the holiness of David, and so on, but if I myself remain without compassion, impatient, and anything but holy, my exhortations would, I fear, be unpalatable and you would not be keen to listen. The good shepherd will also take care to have salt in himself, the salt of which the Gospel speaks, for he knows that a discourse seasoned with salt is both to the taste and profitable to salvation” (Sermon 76 on the Song of Songs, IV. 9).

For this reason, we are in a fairly good position to counsel: →