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## Icon # 659 = God Makes His Face Shining Upon Us

### Psalm 67 (66)

“May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us, that thy way may be known upon earth, thy saving power among all nations.”

In the book of Numbers Ch. 6: 22-26, we read: “The Lord said to Moses, ‘Say to Aaron and his sons, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you: The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you: The Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.’”

It is interesting to notice that this passage is read every year on January 1, Year A, B, and C of the Liturgical cycle, on the Solemnity of Mary “The Mother of God.” To the believer, it looks very obvious that in using this passage at the beginning of every year, God, through the Church, wanted to remind us, His people, that He utterly desires to “bless you and keep you;” to “make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;” and to “lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.”

To the believer who is devoted to the Blessed Virgin though he/she have only a modicum knowledge of God’s plan of salvation is inclined to believe that God, through the Church, wanted to bring to our consciousness, year after year, that the Blessed Virgin Mary is not only the mother of Christ, His only begotten Son, but also our mother; and that through her, as the Mediatrix of all graces, He graciously bestows His blessing upon us.

In other words, God desires to bring to our attention, hopefully, not just year after year or month after month or week after, but day after day, that we belong to a new family, that is, we have God as our Father and the Blessed Virgin Mary as our Mother, that we have access to either of them and find pasture for our souls, that is, receive graces and blessings.

Just as the sun never stop shining though we cannot always see its rays because sometimes the weather is not good, so God’s face is always shining upon us, that is, He is always shedding His graces and His healing power on each of us, but sometimes we fail to recognize it because the atmosphere of our heart is not good. Hence, all the clouds of bitterness and unforgiveness and licentiousness and wrath and anger and hullabaloo and slander be cleared away from us, with all malice. We have to be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave us.

If these things are ours and abound, then, the way of the Lord Jesus be known upon earth, His saving power among all nations. As a consequence, it is very likely that: →

## Icon # 660 = Universal Praise to God

"Let the peoples praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee!"

We don't have to be an acute scrutinizer to perceive to perceive that it is congenial to our human nature to praise someone, especially if that person is a member of our family or relatives or someone that we know personally, who have achieved a remarkable feat, such as: astronaut, or a physicist, or secretary of State, or a judge of the Supreme Court, or vice president, or governor, or perhaps a president; also if this person is really good.

Although we eagerly wish that all people will praise them, or at least many people will praise them, but we also observe that not all people praise them or even know them. This is a reality, so far, no one has crazily denied.

Many people do not know God or believe in His existence, and no one, so far, has insanely denied that not all people praise God here on earth. So long as the gate of hell is not yet closed; so long as the glamour of the world is still shining; godless celebrities still have their say; the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life are still active, it would be unrealistic to expect that all people will praise God here on earth. However, it is also absolutely certain, as clear as the noonday sun or stainless crystal, that God is praised by all the angels and saints in heaven, and all who loved Him here on earth, or at least believed in Him on earth.

Hence, to desire to let all the people praise God here on earth is the same desire to let His name be hallowed, His kingdom come, and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven. For us believers, even while still on earth, we have luminous inkling why God's name should be hallowed, primarily because it is a holy name. Since His name is holy, thus to show our reverence for His name we are asked to bend our knee, not only ours but also the citizens of heaven, and those who reside under the earth; and every tongue should confess and praise the Lord Jesus to the glory of God the Father.

This is not our own doing, but owing to God's grace working in our lives because "we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory;" for in the Lord Jesus we also 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."

Just as God's kingdom has come in the hearts of those who loved Him on earth and believed in His name and will still be fully revealed in His second coming, when He comes in glory with all the angels and saints, so God is praised by all the peoples who gathered in His name for the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist or any other liturgical assembly, and will still be fully perfected to its

optimum grandeur and splendor when all the redeemed will be caught up in glory to meet the Lord in the air and be united with Him for all eternity to praise His glorious majesty.

Thus it stands to reason that our desire to let the peoples praise God, to let all the peoples praise Him, at last, has been ultimately fulfilled. Inevitably, in its unpreventable salubrious contagion, it spread to all the nations on earth. It reverberated in the same appeal to: →

### **Icon # 661 = Let the nations be glad and sing for joy**

“Let the nations be glad and sing for joy, for thou dost judge the peoples with equity and guide the nations on earth.”

It's so amazing to hear why we desire that God “Let the nations be glad and sing for joy.” The obvious reason is that He “judges all the peoples with equity and guides the nations on earth.” Equity means: fairness, impartiality, uprightness, justice, fair-mindedness.

Hence, God is fair in His dealings with us, for we will be judged according to what we have done in our body, and He has all the information for He knows everything, sees and hears everything and knows the thoughts and intentions of the heart; He is impartial in His judgment for He shows no nepotism; upright in His ruling for He is veracious; just in His association with us for He is conscientious; and fair in His friendship with us for He has made known His will to us that we should be holy and blameless before Him till He comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead.

Thus the nations that heed the guidance of God, and by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, will be glad and sing for joy for all eternity. He guides us in this world, navigating in the tumultuous sea of life, till we reach the harbor of eternal glory, for He says: “Behold, I shall be with you until the end of time.”

To be sure that we will arrive at our final destination, God gives us His commandments as our guide, our compass, and our convoy. Keeping His commandments is the surest guarantee that we have love for Him, as He says: “He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.”

Accordingly, in conferring us His commandments, God supplies us a map and marks our destination. “The 10 commandments and other Biblical moral mandates,” says the servant of the servants of God, Pope Benedict XVI, meeting with the Pontifical Biblical Commission, “are not designed to limit human

freedom, but to help people behave in ways that will lead to their full freedom and happiness.”

It is also right and true to say that the Church is founded as a guide of the nations on earth, because the Church is “the pillar and bulwark of the truth.” Hence, if we remain inside the Church and abide in her teaching, there’s a high degree of likelihood that even along the way of our journey to our heavenly home we will experience sporadically, as a foretaste, gladness and singing for joy.

The rationale behind this assertion is not really so uncanny and remote because the ultimate source of all gladness and joy is God. God Himself is GLADNESS and JOY, so to stay inside the Church which is the Mystical Body of Christ, who Himself is God, is to participate in the gladness and joy of God Himself. Of course, this varies according to the holiness of each person. The more a person is holy, the more she/he experiences inner joy and gladness even if her/his outward nature is wasting away, for it is in the Lord that he/she rejoices just like the Blessed Virgin Mary.

To hope eternal life and to hope eternal happiness and gladness is not without happiness and gladness itself, because when by the grace of the Spirit we grow in holiness of 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 along the way, even as we are still journeying towards our final destination, something of the gladness and joy we will perfectly know in the Beatific Vision once we arrived and graciously heard the welcoming words of the Lord Jesus: “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world....”

So, what shall we do once we arrived at our final destination, when we will be filled with gladness and joy? Of course, in solidarity with our fellow human beings, we desire and pray that God in His mercy and love will: →

### **Icon # 662 = Let all the peoples praise Thee, O God!**

“Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the peoples praise thee.”

Just as it is good and acceptable in the sight of the Lord Jesus that “supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectable in every way,” so it is the embodiment of the noblest altruism, to begin in this present life and be perfected in the next, to join our desire and prayer with that of the saints in heaven in wishing: “Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee!”

Of course, our desire and prayer that all people will praise God is a participation in the desire of the Lord Jesus that all people be saved, so that all people will be happy with God forever. There is so much joy and happiness in the kingdom of heaven; it is infinitely abundant, for heaven itself is filled with all the fullness of the happiness of God, so much so, that even if the 6 billions people who are now on earth and the other billions in the past generations up to the first human beings on earth, will be saved, there are still plenty of rooms available, as the Lord Jesus said: "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

If we will not practice praising God while still in this present life on earth, we have to learn it, by necessity, in purgatory before we are admitted to heaven. However, it doesn't mean that God is "covetous" for our praise, or that we will be utterly destitute or will become dwarf in our dignity in the process of giving it. Rather, the expressing of our praise to God has the effectiveness of bringing about our union with God, to situate us in deeper intimacy with Him.

Many of us wonder how we can have the impetus to praise God when the memory of our past sins lingers and continues to cause our soul shame, anguish, and guilt? How can the hard drive of our memory be cleansed and purged of these painful recollections? Do we have to use "BleachBit" to wipe clean the memory of our past?

The Lord Jesus, who knows all our weaknesses, in His infinite mercy and love, instituted the Sacrament of Reconciliation that we may find forgiveness and healing of our wounded soul; that by His word which is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword," we may hear Him say: Your sins are forgiven."

The Lord in His tender mercy and endearing love effects this remission of our sins not by erasing the recollection of sin from our memory, but by purging that recollection of every trace of shame, anguish, fear, and guilt. Thus we may recall the fact of our past sins, but without any feeling of fear or condemnation. In other words, the memory of our sins is no longer an occasion for shame, guilt, and self-contempt, but an opportunity to praise the mercy and love of God in forgiving our sins.

Hence the full remission of our sins takes away fear and shame, guilt and condemnation, so that the memory of our past sins no longer hurt and trouble us, but even "work together for our good," as we offer heartfelt thanksgiving and ardent praise, with a clear conscience and a sincere faith, to Him who has forgiven us.

For this reason, it is truly right and just to beseech the Lord to: "Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee!" Even those people who are experiencing trials, tribulations, and tragedies, let them praise thee, O God, like the blessed Job who was struck down by the loss of his possessions and the death of his children, but turning his pain and sorrow into praise of thee saying: "God gave it and God took it back; God has done what He pleased; blessed be the name of God."

To be able to praise God not only in times of prosperity but also in times of adversity is already a form of blessing. It benefits not only ourselves but also the earth, as it is written: →

### **Icon # 663 = Alliance Between Virtue and the Flourishing of the Moral Life**

"The earth has yielded its increase; God our God, has blessed us."

God would never be outdone in generosity, for everyone who believes in Him, and loves Him in this present life, will be likened to a seed sown in good soil, that is, to a person who hears the word of God and understands it by putting it into practice; he/she indeed bears fruit and yielded its increase a thirtyfold or a sixtyfold or a hundredfold.

These are the people who lived a fruitful life, that is, a virtuous life, bearing the fruit of the Spirit such as: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and the like (cf. Gal. 5: 22-23); eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

These are the people who moved beyond the chaos and restlessness that agonize the human heart, and embraced a life of coherence, for God, our God, has blessed them.

Although we are not expert of Moral Theology, but we are confident to assert that there is an alliance between virtue and the flourishing of the moral life of an individual. The rationale behind this is that virtues are the tools God uses to make us what He wanted us to be. Hence, to grow in virtue is to improve as a person, that is, "yielded its increase."

In the words of our heavenly friend, St. Augustine, "virtue is the good use of our freedom to choose and an orderliness of love." Moreover, one of our forebears in monasticism, no other than Abba Charemon in his third conference: On God's Protection, pointed out that "it cannot be doubted that the seeds of virtue exist in every soul, having been placed there by the kindness of the Creator. But unless they have been germinated by the help of God they will not be able to increase in perfection, because, according to the blessed Apostle, 'neither is the one who plants anything, nor the one who waters, but only God

who gives the increase'" (John Cassian's Conferences, Thirteen Conference, The Third Conference of Abba Charemon).

Hence, if we have sown the seeds of virtue we should take care to water them with prayer and filial devotion, so that irrigated from the fountain of God's grace, the garden of our life may not wither but may yield its increase in a never fading bloom. We, then, are likened to a tree planted near a running stream of God's blessings that are not drained of faith and trust in divine providence when the heat of trials and sufferings comes our life.

We don't have to be a great and profound Moral Theologian or a sagacious psychologist to perceive that great trials and tragedies cause the mind to undergo greater pain, however, we can also bear witness that according to the riches of God's blessings He ennobled us to be strengthened with might through His Spirit working in our inner self that we may handle them constructively.

If we are blessed enough to yield an increase in the caliber of our heavenly friend, St. Teresa of Avila, and our good friend, St. Paul, we will likely be grateful that we are granted the blessing to share in Christ's sufferings because it would mean that the spirit of glory and of God rests upon us, for we know that the testing of our faith produces steadfastness. "More than that," says our good friend, St. Paul, "we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5: 3-5).

We have also to affirm that it is only in our union with the Lord Jesus that we will yield an increase in virtues, for He Himself says: "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15: 4-5).

Thus the need to be united with the Lord Jesus, to assiduously abide in His company is the ultimate source of our growth in the spiritual life. There are varieties of ways to attain to this union, such as: striving after silence and humility and keeping His commandments, so that God the Son and God the Father may be able to take their rest in us, as they make us, with our body and soul, their home. We have to worship God in our heart both in spirit and in truth, for such is the adoration that He desires.

If these gestures are ours and abound, God, in turn, will be so generous in blessing us and increase the harvest our righteousness, for He will grant us the grace of interior fecundity which will be such that living out our interior life we can go in and out and find pastures in the awareness of the presence of God, and be able to carry out our external duties with even greater solicitude.

Whereupon, dwelling with the Lord Jesus in our heart He will be our strength, our courage, and our righteousness. Since the Lord Jesus is the only begotten son of God and by rights possesses all the treasures of wisdom, knowledge, joy, and power his Father possesses, He obviously wants nothing more than to share these treasures with us by granting us a share in His very sonship. Isn't this stupendous and extraordinary blessing!? It truly and certainly is! Wherefore, we have to let the whole world know that: →

### **Icon # 664 = Signposts along the way to the kingdom of Heaven**

"God has blessed us; let all the ends of the earth fear him!"

There are many spiritual landmarks which indicate that "God has blessed us." We can notice them as we journey to our heavenly home, that is, the kingdom of heaven. We will mention some of them so that when you see them you will know that you are not far from the kingdom of God. Here are some of the signs: when our vices are decreasing, when we are willing to give and take forgiveness, when we strive to keep God's commandments in spite of our occasional failure, when prayer becomes part of our life, when evil or impure or negative thoughts are not given the same platform as we give to pious and wholesome thoughts, when we start receiving the sacraments of the Most Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation, when the consciousness of God's presence becomes customary, when we no longer desire to commit a deliberate sin even the venial ones, when our spirit blinks at indecent pictures just as our eyes blink at dust, when we become less fearful and anxious, when we become more patient with ourselves and other people, when we accept everything that had or may or will happen to us as coming from the hands of God for our good whether it is pleasant or unpleasant, when the general trend of our life is in good standing with God, and above all when the thoughts to be with God, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all the angels and saints in heaven for all eternity provide us consolation and strength to handle our trials and difficulties in this present life.

Of course, these are not comprehensive signposts along the way to the kingdom of heaven. You still notice many of them as we persevere in these journey.

These are blessings and provisions to help us arrive at our final destiny. We can also dub them "divine consolations." We know from our own experience that life in this present world is a matter of lights and shadows, joys and sorrows. It is impossible to find anyone who is without sorrows; impossible also to find anyone in whose life there is not, if only for a few brief instants, a spark of happiness. Undoubtedly, there are more sorrows in our spiritual life than in our physical, but there are also more consolations. A verse from the Psalms expresses it thus:

“When cares abound within me, your consolation gladdens my soul” (Ps. 93[94]: 19). Consolations are blessings from God, They nourish us, fortify us, and make us capable of performing all the sacrifices necessary to fulfill the holy will of God.

In the supernatural order God willed to give us a ray of happiness, a drop of consolation, that we might fulfill our duties with greater ease and peace. His knowledge of how to proportion and time our consolations and our desolations is marvelous. He measures out for our soul the precise quantity of each, at the moment when it is needed, so that in times of prosperity we will not be unmindful of adversity and in times of adversity we will not be forgetful of prosperity.

We can absolutely trust His understanding and His care for the health of our soul, because He is infinite wisdom, infinite love. He seeks only for our good. At times we feel repugnance for the trials we experienced, but they are pains that purify us, detach us, make our love more disinterested, open our eyes to the divine light and our heart to the inexpressible love of God.

It is like a pearl formed by a grain of sand getting into a mussel shell. It irritates and causes pain. The inner part of the mussel sends tears which congeal around the grain of sand and make a beautiful pearl. So our sufferings and tears and irritations make pearls, no wonder why the kingdom of God is likened to a pearl of great price because we have to pass through many trials and tribulations before we can enter into it. Isn't this a tremendous blessing?

Since “God has blessed us,” we need also to bless Him in return as an expression of our gratitude for all the blessings He has bestowed on us. Any experience we may have of the divine goodness, while it stirs up to gratitude, should, at the same time, strengthen our hopes of the future, and lead us confidently to expect that God will bring to perfection the graceful work He has begun in us.

For this reason, it is highly compelling to: “let all the ends of the earth fear him!” Thus if all the ends of the earth fear God, then it is very likely that many souls will go to heaven, because fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and wisdom is a fountain of life to everyone who has it. Moreover, “The beginning of wisdom is the most sincere desire for instruction, and concern for instruction is love of her, and love of her is the keeping of her laws, and giving heed to her laws is assurance of immortality, and immortality brings one near to God; so the desire for wisdom leads to a kingdom” (Wis. 6: 17-20).

Hence, fear of the Lord ushers us to the kingdom of heaven. However, what will be the consequence if we don't have any fear of the Lord and would rather say: “We don't want Him to rule over us!” Isn't this attitude indicates that we are making ourselves enemies of God? If we are making ourselves enemies of God, it be dreadful to hear: →

## Icon # 665 = The World's Hatred of God

### Psalm 68 (67)

"Let God arise, let his enemies be scattered; let those who hate him flee before him!"

It is truly right and just to say that the enemies of God and those who hate Him are the world and those who do not want Him to be the ruler of their lives, as the Lord Himself says: "As for these enemies of mine who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me;" also: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you."

The inevitability of this hatred is emphasized by the grammar of this opening verse. The sentence is a real condition, that is, "if the world hates you," not an unreal condition, that is, "if the world were to hate you."

The Lord does not follow this announcement with easy words of comfort, but instead exhorts us to a full understanding of the sources of this hatred. It is one thing to feel anger aimed at us because we have done something wrong, and it is quite another to realize that people will be angry with us only because we are connected to Christ. Thus we have to recognize what is at issue in our conflict with the world, because this knowledge will enable us to stand firm in the face of persecution.

If the world hates us, it is because it has hated the Lord Jesus. In other words, the world's hatred of the Lord Jesus extends to us His disciples because of our relationship with Him and our identification with Him.

At any one time in some part of the world, especially in non-Christian countries, there always seems to be a situation where our fellow Christians really feel a hatred for themselves and their belief, often government sponsored hate.

In some nominally Christian countries, the more affluent parts of the world where a pronounced secularism prevails, we are more confronted with an iron-like indifference which is also equally hard to face or tackle simply because it is not openly hostile or has no specific objections to Christian belief.

Whether we confront a profound hatred, general or individual, or simply a poignant indifference, we are all left with personal decisions about how to respond. What and how much do we say to the hostile or indifferent? Do we say anything? Do we take the initiative or simply react?

In this case, the cardinal virtue of prudence has to be exercised. The Lord Jesus gives us a prudent advice in situation like this when He said: "Do not give dogs

what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you.”

Although the “world” is sometimes used as neutral to indicate God’s created order, for instance, “God so loved the world...”, here it is clearly used to represent what is opposed to God’s work and presence in the Lord Jesus. Another source of the world’s hatred of Christ’s disciples is its fundamental ignorance of the identity of God as the One who sent His only begotten Son in the person of Christ, as the Lord Jesus said: “But all this they will do to you on my account, because they do not know him who sent me.”

Not to know the One who sent Christ is not to recognize the work and will of God in Christ’s works, not to recognize that to see and know the Lord Jesus is to see and know God. Therefore, the world hates the Lord Jesus, and by extension, His disciples, because the world does not know that the One who sent the Lord Jesus is “the only true God.”

If it is terrible not to know God, it is infinitely painful not to be known also by God, as the Lord said, “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’” No wonder, then, that “those who hate him flee before him!” And to aggravate their pain, while they are still fleeing before Him, they will hear another tormenting sentence: →

### **Icon # 666 = Which Do you Prefer?**

“As smoke is driven away, so drive them away; as wax melts before the fire, let the wicked perish before God!”

There are two noticeable ways that smoke disappears, which are interconnected by its very nature. The first, of course, is by a wind. The second is the nature of the smoke in the air, even without wind, if the source of the smoke is not provided. In this case, the smoke just dissipates by itself. For instance, if we do not put incense, for a second time, in a burning charcoal the smoke produced in the first imposition of the incense will just disappear by itself. Of course, this varies according to the number of charcoals burned and the amount of incense imposed. The lesser the number of charcoals burned and the lesser the amount of incense placed the quicker the smoke faded away; and the larger the number of charcoals burned and the enormous amount of incense put, especially in an enclosed area, the longer the smoke vanished. However, no matter what quantities of the charcoals and incense are, the smoke will eventually disappear.

The same is true of the nature of evil. It will be driven away by the wind of the Holy Spirit, or it will just go back to nothingness by itself when the “Son of Man,” that is, the Lord Jesus, “will send his angels, and they will gather out of his

kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers." That would be the time when the gate of hell will ultimately be closed, and the devil and his wicked angels could no longer roam around the world to supply the burning charcoal of wickedness and the incense of godlessness.

We can hope and pray that the men and women of this present world who sided with the devil and his wicked angels will change their allegiance to God so that they will not be driven away like smoke and melt like wax and perish before God, because it is a very painful thing to be driven away from God.

In this case, the devil and all his wicked angels and all the wicked men and women who made themselves enemies of God will perish before Him not in the sense, of course, that they will be out of existence because they are endowed with a never ending existence, but they will sink into eternal void, an emptiness of the soul where life has no meaning at all. We can dub this as an eternal depression where each individual damned soul felt that "when I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer." Not only God's hand was heavy upon them, but also His feet, because they will become as God's footstool for all eternity.

Since they could not rise, that is, find any meaning in life where their mind can rest even for a single moment so they long for death but death will eternally evade from them, as it is written: "And in those days men will seek death and will not find it; they will long to die, and death will fly from them" (Rev. 9: 6).

Since God is light, so to be driven away from Him is tantamount to be cast out into utter darkness, a pitch-dark, darker than a black India ink, where no slightest crack of light can find its way. It is for this reason that it makes easy to argue that sin is really a pronounced craziness, for who in their right mind will live in a place where there is no light at all, not just for 3 hours or 3 days or 3 trillion years, but for all eternity!

If we feel very uneasy if there is a power block out, for even 2 hours at night how much more if it will be eternally! The Egyptians had a sample of this pitch-black darkness, but at least it lasted only for 3 days. The Scripture tells us that "there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt three days; they did not see one another, nor did any rise from his place for three days.

This would mean that there was no cooking at all and no drinking. In all probability, they were also robbed of sleep! This really is a misery which we do not want if we are given the option to choose between light and darkness, sorrow and gladness, or pain and joy.

Of course, we can avert the unending misery of eternal darkness if we abide in the Lord and keep His words, for we will be counted among the converted

sinner, for God desires our conversion far more than our wish to return because He takes no delight in the death of the wicked, as it is written: "As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live..., and as for the wickedness of the wicked, he shall not fall by it when he turns from his wickedness..., and walks in the statutes of life, committing no iniquity; he shall surely live, he shall not die. None of the sins he has committed shall be remembered against him; he has done what is lawful and right, he shall surely live" (cf. Ezek. 33: 11-16). Hence, there's a very good benefit, out of this world!, if we, sinners return back to God, for we will be counted among the righteous.

Just as there was thick darkness in all the land of Egypt, but all the people of Israel had light where they dwelt, so the forgiven sinners who were once darkness have seen a great light. They are now counted among "a royal race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," that they may declare the wonderful deeds of Him who called them out of darkness into His marvelous light. Once they were no people because of their wickedness but now they are God's people because of their righteousness; once they had not received mercy on account of their impenitent heart but now they have received mercy on account of their conversion to new life.

Therefore, they will be in the presence of God for all eternity singing His praises, walking in the path of righteousness all the days of their lives without fear that wickedness will, once again, crane its head to see if there is anyone who does not seek the Lord, for all will be filled with the knowledge of God. They will be encouraged to: →

### **Icon # 667 = Let the Righteous be joyful**

"But let the righteous be joyful; let them exult before God; let them be jubilant with joy!"

True compunction is a precious treasure, an ineffable joy to the heart. Compunction is born of love, and begets more love; and the love of God is the unending source of the only genuine joy. Hence the righteous who are stable in their penitence are fairly happy people; they exult before God with ardent joy, because seeing the terrible punishment for sins which they avoided with God's help, they become all the more conscious of the eternal debt of gratitude they owe to God for the graces they received, for they see in God all the joys they experienced and see in the damned all the tortures they escaped. Thus they rejoice with an expressible joy.

Joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Since the Holy Spirit is the "Love of God" and is also God, no wonder, then He is the eternal fountainhead of unadulterated joy.

Not only that the Scripture encourages us to "rejoice in the Lord always," but it also tells us that God will rejoice in doing good to us, as it is written: "I will rejoice in doing them good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul" (Jer. 32: 41).

The joy of the righteous is founded on truth, since it is of faith that the essence of their supreme joy is but the tide of the very happiness of God ebbing and flowing into their souls, according to the capacity of their hearts and proportionally to their merits. When God pleases, He causes us to experience a tiny sample of this joy on earth to draw our souls to Himself by giving us a disinclination for everything else, for this is the positive outcome produced by these transitory impressions and why we are permitted to esteem and savor them with modesty and interior sobriety.

When the Love of God enters our soul or when we permit it to enter and have its abode in us, it refreshes our soul and penetrates it utterly. It energizes what is slow to act; it strengthens what is feeble; it warms what is cold in us and makes the carrying of our cross lighter, even a cause of thanksgiving and joy.

Our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux has this to say: "I would have you to be always joyous but, in this life, never secure; always rejoicing in the Holy Spirit, yet always fearful too, and guarding yourselves against a relapse" (Sermon on Psalm 90). This is a very sound advise so that we will not fall into a placid complacency.

When we start to rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God, then, we will notice that though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day. More than that, by the grace of God, we will be allowed, in some measure, to rejoice in the midst of our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison, because we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal (cf. Rom. 5: 2-5; 2 Cor. 4: 16-18).

Thus we have a good ground to exult before God and be jubilant with joy. As these things abound in us, then, we can rightly: →

## Icon # 668 = Sing Praises to God Who Rides Upon the Clouds

“Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds; his name is the Lord, exult before him!”

No doubt that in this world there are millions and millions of song composed by different kinds of people in all languages, either secular, religious, or spiritual hymns. There are also different kinds of concerts and orchestras for varieties of purposes either for fund raising or just for entertainment. If people will not die and the world will not end, the numbers and kinds of songs will also keep on increasing.

Even people who are not music lovers will be inclined to listen to music that somehow struck chord in their heart, because music is a language of the soul. Even if we do not understand the lyric of a song, yet we may like the melody. What would it be like if we can understand all the languages in the world and can grasp the meaning of the lyric of a song whose melody we like? What if we will not die and not only understand the meaning of a song, but also knows the song by heart, and not only one song but all songs? Isn't that amazing?

If this is possible and we are given the means to attain it, will we not be willing to pursue this even if it will entail some sacrifices on our part to achieve it? It is very likely that a good number of people will pursue it and also a good number of people will despise that idea.

The same case can be made of the issue of eternal happiness in heaven where souls participate in the wisdom, power, glory, and knowledge of God. Hence, the souls in heaven know by heart all the songs there; and there will be billions and billions of songs. Not only billions and billions of songs, but innumerable songs because all the people there do not die and don't need sleep; besides, all of them are genius. Therefore, they are all equipped to: “Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds; his name is the Lord, exult before him!”

Notice also that in this world many, many people, if given a chance and the means not only to ride but to own a Mercedes Benz or a Mustang or a Ferrari or a Porche or a BMW or any other luxurious car, will certainly get one or two or all of them because riding or owning one or two or all of these cars, in all probability, may boost and heighten their self-esteem. It is also very likely that while traveling in one of these cars they will be singing or humming a song, or at least, listen to music.

Truly, there's nothing wrong to own one or two of these cars if a person has the means and it is acquired honestly but to own half a dozen different cars if a person is single or a dozen if a person is married but have only one or two children, may rightly be dubbed as a chronic and severe vanity. But even if a

person does not consider this as vanity, yet it is absolutely clear and certain that none of these cars can fly. Hence, his cars are not really sophisticated. They are positively luxurious, beautiful, and comfortable, but not advance enough to fly.

On the other hand, God in His profound simplicity and adorable majesty uses a very simple vehicle to ride on, namely the clouds, as the Psalmist says, He "rides upon the clouds...."God, too, has plenty of clouds and rides upon them, yet no one, so far, is insane enough to accuse Him of vanity. On the contrary, we are even proud of Him for not only owning them but above all by creating them.

There is no need for us to contend that it is absolutely certain that none of those who owned any or all of those luxurious cars are the ones who made them.

We have heard also of "convertible cars." This may sounds a refine gallantry, but what it really does is simply open and close the top of the car to have some fresh air, especially during summer time, but surprisingly enough you cannot use convertible cars in "super hot day."

A convertible car might be excellent if you are a celebrity and participate in parades, but for all other uses, a convertible car is less safe, especially in a rollover accident; in all likelihood it begins to be uncomfortable at any speed over 30 miles per hr. unless you have a predilection of lots of noise and air blasting at you. A controvertible car is certainly attractive and excellent for showing off and attracting women, but in this case it is not good for the soul; it's even dangerous!

On the other hand, since God is very rich and very powerful and full of wisdom and insight, He uses His clouds not for a demonstrable vanity but for us universal charity because, from time to time, he converts them into rain to water the fields of both good and bad people alike. He also uses them to protect the earth from the heat of the sun which also benefits all people regardless of their moral standing.

And above all, when the Lord Jesus, the Son of Man, who is the owner and maker of these clouds, will come again in great glory and power He will mightily ride upon the clouds as He said in the presence of Caiaphas: "I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven." For this reason, we are bound to "exult before Him."

Not only that the Lord Jesus is the maker and owner of the clouds and rides upon them and converts them into rain for charitable purposes, but He is also the: →

## Icon # 669 = Father of the World to come

"Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation."

One of the titles of the Lord Jesus is "Father of the World to come." Even while still on earth He authoritatively exercised this title in good measure when He said to a paralytic who was brought to Him: "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven."

The fact that the Lord Jesus called the paralytic man His son even though, as we know, He is single and the paralytic man is not even related to Him by blood, rightly tells us that He has the same authority as His Father.

Since His Father is God and the Lord Jesus is also God, and the Father has given all authority to Him both in heaven and on earth, therefore the Father also entrusted to Him the Fatherhood of the redeemed humanity in the world to come.

Take another example that the Lord Jesus is really carrying out this Fatherhood when He said to the woman, who had suffered from a hemorrhage for twelve years and came up behind Him and touched the fringe of His garment; for she said to herself, "If I only touch his garment, I shall be made well;" He said to her: "Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well."

Both the paralytic man and the woman who suffered from a hemorrhage whom the Lord Jesus called son and daughter, thus represent the billions of men and women, of course, including children too, who will become His sons and daughters in the new world to come.

Many of these men and women while still in our present world are fatherless, hence the Lord Jesus has a rightful place in their hearts. He became to them their father in faith, their patron and benefactor whose fatherly providence and care are descending and ascending from heaven to earth to observe and help them in times of distress. He pours down His grace and mercy, His defense and protection upon them as they need His aid.

The Lord Jesus is not only the father of the fatherless, but He is also the protector of widows. He sees their troubles and sorrows, He notes them and takes them in His hands. Thus they entrust themselves to Him, for He truly cares for them, as it is written: "Leave your fatherless children, I will keep them alive; and let your widows trust in me" (Jer. 49: 11).

Certainly, it is a very intimate and solicitous title that could be attributed to the Lord, and conveys one of the most significant portrayal of His personality. Undoubtedly, His power, greatness, and majesty are very apparent in the things He has made and in the wonders of nature such as the storm, the tempest, and the rolling ocean, but it is in such expression as: "Leave your fatherless children, I

will keep them alive; and let your widows trust in me," that we grasp what we most desire to know that He is a Father.

Nothing denotes more conspicuously a condition of helplessness and reliance than the situation of orphan children and widows; hence, nothing reveals a more poignant portrait of God's attribute, of His condescension and loving-kindness, than to avow that He is a Father of the fatherless and protector of the widows. Not only that, but also: →

### **Icon # 670 = God as Our Home**

"God gives the desolate a home to dwell in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity; but the rebellious dwell in a parched land."

Would it not be an outstanding dignity if God Himself will be our home to dwell in? Is this impossible or probable? Would God allow Himself to become our home? If this is possible it would be like hitting a divine jackpot!

We certainly have a verifiable inkling that this is what God intended to be. Let us hear directly from Him to confirm this potentiality: "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

The very fact that we will be with Him is a luminous indication that He intends that He becomes our home to dwell in, just as He eagerly desires that we, too, will be His home, as He decisively said: "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

A home, certainly, is a place where we can take a rest for our tired bodies just as the heart of God is a place where we can take rest for our wearied souls, as the Lord Himself said: "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Of course, there is a difference between a house and a home. We likely have heard the saying, "A house is not a home if no one lives there." In other words a house refers to a building in which someone lives. On the other hand, a home can refer either to a building or to a place in our heart or mind where we feel at ease, relaxed, and comfortable.

We have heard a person referring to someone: He/she felt completely at home on the stage, or knowledgeable teachers are at home in their subject fields. Popular sayings include "there is no place like home," "home is where you hang your hat," "a man's home is his castle," "make yourself at home," "to be at home," "home away from home," "you can never go home again," "home sweet home," and "home is where the heart is."

This last saying reminds us of what the Lord Jesus says: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Therefore, God is really our treasure and our home if our heart is in Him. Hence, to lose God is tantamount to dire poverty and dismal homelessness.

Losing one's home can feel like losing one's self. Home foreclosure is certainly an avid courier of either mild or severe depression or stress-related medical conditions like hypertension. Those being foreclosed upon are likely to feel they have let down their families, that they have been disclosed as failures in the eyes of society and that the pathway back to solvency is too full of unimaginable complications to even try to imagine navigating it.

However, we are told by a psychiatrist that "conditions like major depression and panic disorder and symptoms like insomnia are among the most treatable in psychiatry" (Dr. Keith Ablow). He goes on to say: "If you are suffering in these ways, tell your family doctor or mental health care provider. Psychotherapy and medication (when indicated) work in over 90 percent of cases."

If this is true, and we have a fairly sound reason to believe that it is, because of his authority and experience in this field, it is also true that even if we are suffering from panic moral disorder and depressive guilt syndrome we certainly are very treatable if we avail the grace of repentance and consult our family doctor and moral health provider, no other than the Lord Jesus.

The sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist, supplemented by regular prayer and meditation work 100 percent of cases of those who truly repent. It means that God is restored in their lives and their morality is renovated. They no longer wander in the streets of immorality nor hang around in the alleys of infidelity and dishonesty, for they now have a home to dwell in.

Not only that they now have a home to dwell in, but in the gracious kindness of God their bodies which were once dens of sins now become a house of prayer, that is, the temple of the Holy Spirit. "Do you not know," asks our good friend, St. Paul, "that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"

We who were once prisoners of our unhealthy desires, imprisoned by our inordinate passions and the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, shackled by falsehoods and vanities, had been led out from our imprisonment by the Lord Jesus into the knowledge of truth and the prosperity of freedom of the children of God, for by the grace of repentance we abide in the Lord Jesus; and if we continue in His word, we are truly His disciples, and we will know the truth, and the truth will make us free; free to serve Him all the days of our lives, forever grateful for healing the blindness of our soul and liberating us from the darkness of sin, as it is written: "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as

a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (Is. 42: 6-7).

He leads us out to prosperity, for once we were no people, that is, nobody because we degraded ourselves by our sins, but now we are God's people, that is, somebody because our once lost dignity has been restored to us; for once we had not received mercy but now we have received mercy. Thus in gratitude for all the Lord Jesus had done in our world and in our lives we have to declare His wonderful deeds, and for calling us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

On the other hand, if in spite of all the Lord had done for us we still don't want Him to rule over us but would rather be proudly dubbed as "rebellious," then, we are consigning ourselves to dwell in a parched land, a land of sadness, despair, and confusion; a land of nothingness, incoherence, and absurdity. The reason for this is that, just as it is difficult to look at the eyes of someone whom we flagrantly offended, so it is burdensome to raise our minds and hearts to God if we are in rebellion against Him; not because He doesn't want to listen to us for He does listen to us because he has a preconceived liking for us, as He said: "I have come to call sinners, not the righteous," and also: "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance," but these are the sinners who threw up their towels and abandoned their rebellion against Him. If they had been so adamant in their rebellion, and would rather be called rebellious than pious, then, by a sadly contemplated choice they would have to dwell in a parched land devoid of the leadership of the Lord. If this had happened, we can only sigh and desire: →

### **Icon # 671 = God Walks with us through the Wilderness of Trials and Challenges**

"O God, when thou didst go forth before thy people, when thou didst march through the wilderness, the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, at the presence of God; yon Sinai quaked at the presence of God, the God of Israel."

When God walks with us through the wilderness of sadness and confusion of our disorderly life, our whole being vibrates and the rain of graces starts to pour down upon us to water our dried hearts. When the rain of grace starts pouring down upon us we commence to become the people that God wanted us to be. It elevates our natural abilities so that we can act in accordance with the way God wants us to act. It helps us to cope with life's difficulties; it helps us to get back on our feet when we fall and sustains our resistance against temptations; it emboldens our resolve to traverse through the wilderness of trials and challenges, for at its deepest level the rain of grace is not just "help" from God, it is God Himself living inside us.

When God is marching with us through the wilderness and the heavens poured down rain, that is to say, when grace is working in our souls, it does not just mean that God is assisting us to do certain things or to live in certain ways, but it actually means that He is doing these things Himself, of course, through the Holy Spirit, and that He is incorporating us in the process.

In other words, when the rain of grace is pouring down upon us, we are no longer the main actor of the work, but God. He, certainly, allows us to participate in that work in a concrete and meaningful way, yet it is still He who is the primary agent.

God never refuses the fundamental grace which gives us the courage and strength to overcome ourselves, for He is much desirous to march with us through the wilderness of life than our openness to let Him go before us. Every step we take under His auspices is a victory. God is nearer to us than the air we breathe and the people we see, if we are in the state of grace, because in Him we live and move and have our being.

The climate of our soul is God; we cannot flourish in another atmosphere. "The goodness of God," says our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "knows how to use our disordered wishes and actions, often lovingly turning them to our advantage while always preserving the beauty of His order."

It is the rain of God's graces that provides guidance as we march through the wilderness of life. Of course, the Holy Spirit resides inside each one of us who entrust ourselves to our Lord Jesus. In another sense we need to be continually re-filled and renewed by the Spirit of Christ and turn over more of ourselves to Him, more of our attention and affection, more of our dependence and devotion. If these things are ours and abound, we are in a fairly good ground to bear witness that: →

### **Icon # 672 = The Lord Jesus restores our Heavenly Heritage**

<p>"Rain in abundance, O God, thou didst shed abroad; thou didst restore thy heritage as it languished; thy flock found a dwelling in it; in thy goodness, O God, thou didst provide for the needy."</p>
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It is truly right and just to affirm that in the Incarnation of the Word of God, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, no other than the Lord Jesus, God "shed abroad," that is, into our world, "rain in abundance." The Lord Jesus came into our world as rain that waters the human heart, restoring to us the heritage of God's kingdom as it languished by our inordinate desires for the things of this world, as it is written: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes

forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it."

The Incarnation of the Lord Jesus, and the rain of blessings which accompany it, that is shed in our world is rightly accommodated to our specific need and is undertaken so as to restore our heritage as it languished by our attachments to our own will. It models for us in an authentic human manner, the way of humility and love by which we who follow Him in faith may return to our heavenly home and found our permanent dwelling in it.

In the infinite goodness of God He provides us a source and a model in our return to Him, no other than the Lord Jesus who Himself said: "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have I told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."

Truly, the Incarnation of the Lord Jesus shows us what God really looks like in human form, and at the same time, as the redeemer of the world, He shows us what the redeemed humanity really looks like in a deified form. Hence the Incarnation of the Lord is the axial point of our lives. In His Incarnation our pivotal search for the true God us satisfied by God Himself, and God's search for the astrayed humanity is fulfilled. God who comes in Person, in flesh and blood, speak to us of Himself and shows us the path by which He may be reached.

In order that our hearts may be in a fitting state to reach the Lord and participate in shedding abroad his rain of blessing, in abundance, we, certainly, need to prepare His way and make straight His paths that we may walk in the newness of life.

We have been led astray from the right path of life and squandered our baptismal heritage by going to a far country and living a sinful lifestyle. Consequently, our heavenly inheritance languished and faded away, but by the sheer goodness and generous grace of the Lord Jesus He restored to us our heritage, which was His in the beginning, from time immemorial but shared with us in the fullness of time. Thus the Lord Jesus is now our inheritance. What He is by nature we will be by grace. His dwelling becomes our dwelling because we are the flock of His pasture. In His goodness He provides all our needs.

Certainly, in God's goodness He is able to provide us with every blessing in abundance, so that we may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work. As it is written: "He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor; his righteousness endures for ever." It is unequivocal that it is the goodness and grace of God which always work good things in us, that when they are missing all our effort is worthless, that without His help no eagerly

pursued effort is able to restore our inheritance as it languished in sadness and distress.

Therefore the rain of God's goodness is ready at hand. It calls out and says to us and to everyone without discrimination: "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened" and languished, "and I will give you rest," because He desires that all may be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, that is, He desires to restore our heritage and dwell in the kingdom of heaven for all eternity where, in God's goodness, He will provide us with everything that satisfies the deepest needs of the human soul, that is, God Himself. Truly, this is a good tidings. Thus: →

### **Icon # 673 = Bearer of Good Tidings**

"The Lord gives the command; great is the host of those who bore the tidings: 'The kings of the armies, they flee, they flee!' The women at home divide the spoil, though they stay among the sheepfolds – the wings of a dove covered with silver, its pinions with green gold. When the Almighty scattered kings there, snow fell on Zalmon."

In the singing version of the Grail translation, it says: "The Lord gives the word to the bearers of good tidings: The Almighty has defeated a numberless army and kings and armies are in flight, in flight while you were at rest among the sheepfolds. At home the women already share the spoil. They are covered with silver as the wings of a dove, its feathers brilliant with shining gold and jewels flashing like snow on Mount Zalmon."

It is interesting to notice the nuance that the Grail translation shows. For instance, it says: "The Lord gives the word to the bearers of good tidings," instead of: "The Lord gives the command," and it also modifies the noun tidings by using the adjective good. This reminds us of the letter of our good friend, St. Paul, to the Romans where he said: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!" Hence it is not just an ordinary tidings, but good tidings!

What are these tidings? First and foremost, it is the good news of our salvation. The Almighty God has conquered death forever. Kings and armies of pride and vices are defeated, they are in flight, in flight. "At home the women already share the spoil," that is, those who are united with God and are "at home" with Him, and all people of good will, are already sharing the benefits of God's kingdom even while still on earth. They are covered with God's protection, for they entrust themselves to Him. They are like Mount Zion which cannot be moved, but abides for ever, for it is written: "As the mountains are round about Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about his people, from this time forth and for evermore. Accordingly: →

## Icon # 674 = Envy is detrimental

“O mighty mountain, mountain of Bashan! Why look you with envy, O many-peaked.”

It often happens that some people whose hearts are innocent seem weak in certain of their actions; on the other hand, there are some people who perform admirable acts in the eyes of onlookers, yet the latter when confronted with the good works of others just rot inside with the pestilence of envy. So it is right to say, “A healthy heart means the life of the flesh,” and it is also correct to say: “Envy means rotten bones.” Hence, in the eyes of God even courageous and praiseworthy acts are spoiled through vicious spite. The rotting of bones of envy certainly means that even commendable deeds, in certain circumstance, can be polluted.

Envy is sadness at another's good, as if that good is an affront to one's superiority. As the rich are avaricious, so the poor are sometimes envious. The envious person hates to see anyone else happy. The charm, the beauty, the knowledge, the wisdom, the peace, and the wealth of others are all regarded as having been purloined from him/her.

Envy induces ugly women to make nasty remarks about beautiful women, and makes stupid people malign the wise. Since the envious person cannot go up, he/she tries to achieve equality by pulling the other down. Envy is always a snob, is always jealous and possessive. Fundamentally, “through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that “Envy is a capital sin. It refers to the sadness at the sight of another's good and the immoderate desire to acquire them for oneself, even unjustly. When it wishes grave harm to a neighbor it is a mortal sin. From envy are born hatred, detraction, calumny, joy caused by the misfortune of a neighbor, and displeasure caused by his prosperity” (#2538). St. Augustine saw envy as “the diabolical sin.”

The devil is so envious of us because we are to inherit “the mount which God desired for his abode, yea, where the Lord will dwell for ever,” that is, the kingdom of heaven, which he lost by his pride. Envy often comes from pride. Hence, we should train ourselves to live in humility. “Would you like to see God glorified in you?,” asked our heavenly friend, St. John Chrysostom, “then rejoice in your brother's progress and you will immediately give glory to God. Because his servant could conquer envy by rejoicing in the merits of others. God will be praised.

Getting rid of envy is a serious condition in our path to the mountain of God, that is, to heaven. Envy was seen by our good friend, St. Paul, as a real danger even within the first Christian communities. “Some indeed preach Christ from

envy and rivalry,” he said, “but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of partisanship, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

Finally, envy should remain a sin of the past, conquered by our Lord's teaching, which, as in the tenth commandment, forbids us from coveting our neighbor's goods, wife, and servants; and urges us to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, and to love our brothers and sisters and our neighbors as ourselves, because brotherly and sisterly, Christian love, definitively banishes envy from our hearts. Moreover, →

### **Icon # 675 = The Chariots of God**

“With mighty chariotry, twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands, the Lord came from Sinai into the holy place.”

Of course, the chariots of God are thousands upon thousands, for He has all the angels of heaven, as His armies, ready to do battle and execute His commands.

God set many angels in our paths, but often we know them not; in fact, we may go through life never knowing that they were messengers or agents of God to lead us on to virtue, or to deter us from vice. Most importantly, they represent that constant and benign intervention of God in our world and in our lives, which hinders us on the path to destruction or leads us to success or happiness and virtue.

In his book *Angels: God's Secret Agents*, Billy Graham relates an amazing incident involving the Rev. John G. Paton, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish missionary in the remote Hebrides Islands in the South Pacific. Living on the Island of Tanna with his wife, the Rev. Paton did his best to minister to the needs of the natives – a task that proved both difficult and dangerous. Not only did the half-savage and often cruel inhabitants of the region resist the efforts of the missionaries, but they often made war on them.

One evening Rev. Paton and his wife discovered to their horror that their hut was surrounded by an armed, hostile tribe of warriors, shouting angry threats and beating their war drums. It was evident that they were getting ready to attack.

Realizing that their lives were at an end and that they would soon be slaughtered and eaten, the couple began praying fervently to God. An hour went by, then two hours, then three, then five, and no attack came. Rev. Paton and his wife continued to pray the entire night. Early the next morning they opened the door of their hut and looked outside, and all the natives were gone. Why had they left? It was a mystery. Over the next two years Rev. Paton and his

missionaries were left to do their work in peace. No more attacks were made on his little community. Soon his effort began to bear fruit, and within a short time most of the native population of New Hebrides was converted to Christianity.

It was after this conversion that Rev. Paton finally met face to face the chief of the cannibal warriors who had once been so hostile to him and his missionaries. With some trepidation Rev. Paton asked the chief about that terrifying night years earlier when the chief's tribe had disappeared ready to kill him and his wife. "Why didn't you attack?" He asked. The chief looked at Rev. Paton with deep respect and said that he had indeed intended to slaughter him and his wife, but that his men had stopped when they saw "a hundred soldiers with shining garments, armed with sharp swords, surrounding the hut."

These mysterious soldiers said nothing. They just stood there, motionless, illuminating the dark night with their glowing white garments. Rev. Paton questioned the chief intently, asking whether or not he could have been mistaken, but the chief was absolutely certain of what he had witnessed.

It was the sight of those ghostly, mighty soldiers guarding the hut that had petrified his men and caused them to flee in terror, resolving never to bother the missionaries again. Rev. Paton knew that God had answered his prayers that night and sent an army of angels to protect him and his wife so that his mission to convert the natives could be accomplished.

Finally, in the words of our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "Yet, my brethren, although we are but little ones, and although there is still a long road before us, aye, and a road beset with dangers innumerable, why should we be afraid under the protection of such powerful guardians?" Inevitably: →

### **Icon # 676 = Ascension**

"Thou didst ascend the high mount, leading captives in thy train, and receiving gifts among men, even among the rebellious, that the Lord God may dwell there."

In his letter to the Ephesians, our good friend, St. Paul, pointed out that "grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it is said, 'When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men....' And his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelist, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles."

When the Lord Jesus ascended to the high mount of heaven to prepare a permanent and eternal dwelling place for us, He is not removed from us but rather He made Himself universally available to all people in our world. His Ascension is the fulfillment of His devotedness to the Father. We, too, will ascend with the Lord Jesus if we do the will of the Father, and set our mind on the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father.

It is truly right and just to affirm that the seeking of the things that are above are graces that come from the grace of the Ascension. Christ's personal Resurrection and Ascension to God's indescribable glory and majesty is also our personal destiny and present identity as members of His mystical Body. We recognize the foretaste of the glorification of our humanity in Christ as we realize the real presence of His divinity within us, for us He humbled Himself to share our humanity, so also He exalts us by sharing His divinity.

In the humble descent of His Incarnation, the Lord Jesus, who did not count equality with God something to be grasped, emptied Himself to assume our human misery that He might bind us, His fallen human creatures, to Himself and lead us by His Ascension to a share in His own divine life and blessedness. He has descended and ascended in the flesh for the sake of our salvation and glorification and to reveal how we, human beings, might ascend to God after His example, for as creatures made in the image and likeness of God we possess an innate desire to ascend, and this inborn desire is worthy of all praise because this is why God has created us.

As our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux writes in his fourth sermon for the Ascension: "We all desire to ascend. We all long for exaltation. For we are noble creatures, possessing a certain greatness of soul, and so we long for the heights with a natural desire." For this reason, we could not help but proclaim: →

### **Icon # 677 = The God Who Daily Bears Us Up**

"Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears us up; God is our salvation. Our God is a God of salvation; and to God, the Lord, belongs escape from death."

Of course, "escape from death" here ultimately means the "second death" which the book of Revelation refers to as the lake of fire, as it is written: "Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and if any one's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20: 13-15). Hence, "escape from death" does not imply escape from natural death, that is, the death of our body because no one is exempted from the death of the body, not even the Lord Jesus Himself and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Perhaps, temporarily, many “escape from natural death;” as for instance, escape from fatal accident or had recovered from death-dealing illness. But, truly, only from the Lord “belongs escape from the second death” because He is the God of our salvation. This God of ours is a God who saves so long as we entrust ourselves to Him and persevere in fidelity till the end, as it is written: “Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death” (Rev. 2: 10-11).

“In order not to fear death,” says our heavenly friend, St. Peter of Alexandria, “it is needful to begin by dying to self, renouncing our will, and detaching ourselves from all things.” “Death in the state of grace,” added our other heavenly friend, St. Augustine, “is preeminent gift of God, even in the case of infants. In the case of adults this gift sustains their voluntary and meritorious choice, and hinders them from being cast down by adversity.”

St. Augustine notes that this gift is not given to us according to our merits, but according to the will of God, a will very secret, very wise, very beneficent. Only to God does it belong to give it, since He also determines the end of our life. But this gift, even if it cannot be merited, can be obtained by humble supplication. One thing is morally certain, that is, there is no better means of making the confidence of our salvation reliable than the ceaseless performance of God’s will in the present moment.

The manifold goodness of God dispenses the salvation, of us human beings, by numerous and unfathomable kindness and imparts His generous grace according to the capacity of each one of us, so that He desires to bear us up not according to the uniform power of His majesty but according to the degree of faith that He finds in each of us or that He Himself bestowed on each person.

God who is our salvation provides for our deliverance in countless different manners and in inconceivable ways, for oftentimes He bears us up in order to accomplish the things He sees we desire for our own good, and at other times He inspires the genesis of that holy desire and bestows both the commencement of a good work and perseverance in it.

Thus it is when we pray we proclaim that God is not only our supporter and savior but also our protector and helper “who daily bears us up,” for inasmuch as He supplies us with help in day to day struggle and supports and bears us up when we seek for help, He is called our supporter and the God of our salvation. On the other hand: →

## Icon # 678 = Shattering the Swelling Head of Pride

"But God will shatter the head of his enemies, the hairy crown of his who walks in his guilty ways."

It is not farfetched to assert that Lucifer and his wicked angels and all men and women living in sin, that is, chronic violators of the commandments of God, are God's enemies. Of course, the latter still have a chance, while still in this present life, to be friends of God if they are willing to be reconciled with Him.

It is only when, after so many admonitions, they doggedly hold on to their firm resistance of the kindness of God, which is meant to lead them to repentance, that their heads will be shattered, that is to say, God will ultimately humble their pride, for when God eventually reveals Himself they will clearly see, as in a bright mirror, that God is Everything and they are nothing.

Pride has an amazing power to make our heads swell, and at the same time make our hearts shrink. Hence, what we should primarily yield to God is our mind, our intelligence which is our highest faculty and the hardest to capitulate, precisely the assent to God's sovereignty which we boldly withhold from Him. In all sin there is an appalling pride, the swelling of one's head, because all sin is an appropriation to ourselves of the sovereignty and authority of God. Pride is the most common sin of the modern mind, and yet the one of which the modern mind is less conscious. We often heard people say: "I am an alcoholic anonymous," but we seldom or never heard of people say: "I am conceited."

Though faith is a gift of God, and though God will give it to those that ask it, there is one very human obstacle why more minds do not receive it, and that is pride. Thus if pride is the great obstacle to faith, it follows that, from the human side, the essential condition of receiving faith is humility. "Have this mind among yourselves," says our good friend, St. Paul, "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."

Hence, the humility of the Lord Jesus on the cross, and our faith in Him, is so potent that it shatters the swelling heads of pride and crushes worldly wisdom. "Where is the wise man? Where is the Scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (1Cor. 1: 20-25).

Thus the cross of the Lord Jesus is a solid proof that God has unbounded power to shatter the heads of our pride, for by an assiduous meditation on the cross, gazing upon the crucified Lord, we will truly learn humility and wisdom of heart.

Christ's death on the cross has given us an inspiring example of supreme humility and love. If we persevere in contemplating the work of Christ on the cross, the depth of His suffering, and His unwavering refusal to murmur against either His Father or the sinner He came to save, we will certainly discover a paradigm of unequalled patience; and if we consider how He bore the blasphemies and false accusations of His enemies, we will likewise uncover an unmatched illustration of the most profound humility, profound and strong enough to shatter the heads of pride. Moreover, →

### **Icon # 679 = The Unfathomable Depths of the Human Soul**

“The Lord said, ‘I will bring them back from Bashan, I will bring them back from the depths of the sea, that you may bathe your feet in blood, that the tongues of your dogs may have their portion from the foe.’”

It is feasible to uphold the idea that there may be, in the mind of the Psalmist, a reference here to the victory of God's people over Og, king of Bashan, in the time of Moses. Just as, at that time, a victory was attained over a formidable foe, so in times of similar danger God will deliver His people and save them from harm.

As God delivered His fledgling Church from Og, king of Bashan, and other tyrants and persecutors, and from the danger of the Red Sea, so He will still do as often as it is necessary. For instance, He delivered the Church from the tyranny of Nero, the ferocity of Domitian, the savagery of Trajan, the heartlessness of Septimus Severus, the inhumanity of Decius, the cruelty of Valerian, and the brutality of Diocletian, and above all the ruthlessness of Hell/Death, for He Himself had promised to be with His Church till the end of the world and that the powers of death or the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.

The unfathomable depths of the human soul manifest themselves in the unregulated and inordinate love for the self, which advances at times to mockery and hate of God. This malice is escorted by an animosity which is deep-rooted and inscrutable, even against the greatest and most benevolent benefactor of all, no other than God.

Moreover, certain horrifying perversities, for instance, as those of Nero and Diocletian and other persecutors, would not yield even to the constancy, gentleness, and goodness that radiated from the suffering martyrs. By contrast, this unbelievable degree of Malice reveals the grandeur and glory of God and

of the saints. The Lord permits malignity and persecution in order to let the sanctity of the martyrs shine forth the more radiantly.

The Lord will bring them back from the depths of the sea of suffering and pain to the heights of unimaginable joy and gladness in the heavenly paradise. There their happiness is founded on truth since it is of faith that the essence of their joy is but the tide of the very happiness of God ebbing and flowing into their souls, according to the capacity of their merits.

“Nevertheless,” says our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux, “just as the wicked shall see and shall be angry and shall gnash, he shall gnash his teeth and pine away, for the blessed shall be called up to heaven before the reprobate are cast down into the dungeons of everlasting fire, in order that the latter be more fiercely tormented by the sight of the glory they have lost, so ‘the just shall see and shall rejoice,’ beholding the misery from which they have escaped.” They will gladly bear witness, saying: →

### **Icon # 680 = Liturgical Celebration**

“Thy solemn processions are seen, O God, the procession of my God, my king, into the sanctuary – the singers in front, the minstrel last, between them maidens playing timbrels.”

Of all the images that surfaced in our minds upon reading this passage, no doubt, the prominent is that of celebration, hence, joy and gladness. “The musical tradition of the universal Church,” says the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as a combination of sacred music and words, it forms a necessary or integral part of solemn liturgy.

The composition and singing of inspired psalms, often accompanied by musical instruments, were already closely linked to the liturgical celebrations of the Old Covenant. The Church continues and develops this tradition. “Address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all your heart’” (Eph. 5:19).

The Catechism goes on to say: “Song and music fulfill their function as signs in a manner all the more significant when they are ‘more closely connected with the liturgical action’ (cf. SC 112), according to three principal criteria: beauty expressive of prayer, the unanimous participation of the assembly at the designated moments, and the solemn character of the celebration. In this way they participate in the purpose of the liturgical words and actions: the glory of God and the sanctification of the faithful” (#1157).

In the celebration of the liturgy of the Church, there is a constant contrast between joy and sacrifice, between fast and feast. Even during the season of Lent where there is penance and pain, the Church inserts a Laetare (rejoice) and a Gaudete (rejoice) Sunday, on which we are called to rejoice. She does this, first of all, to remind us that penance is not perennial; and secondly, to prevent us from getting into a psychological rut.

“Rejoice in the Lord always,” says our good friend, St. Paul, “again I will say Rejoice. Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Thus, if these things are ours and abound we will be in a fairly good condition to:  
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### **Icon # 681 = Bless God in the Great Congregation**

“‘Bless God in the great congregation, the Lord, O you who are Israel's fountain!’ There is Benjamin, the least of them, in the lead, the princes of Judah in their throng, the princes of Zebulun; the princes of Naphtali.”
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As creatures who owed one's existence from God, one of the noblest acts that we can render to Him, out of sheer gratitude, is to bless Him either privately in the recesses of our heart, by oneself, or in the assembly of our fellow believers. Of course, this is very natural to us who have faith because we believe and acknowledge that God is the fountain of life, the source of eternal blessing, and the wellspring of everlasting happiness.

Just as people naturally praise their benefactors and those who have done good to them, and speak about them as often as they can, so also we bless God for all He had done in our world, especially for our eternal salvation. Even in our difficulties and pains we should not be devoid of Blessing God, for this is a healthy indication that we highly value the loving-kindness of God more than life. His loving-kind is our spiritual life, and that is far better than temporal life.

The goodness and mercies of God, when called to mind in the nights of adversities will certainly support our souls and make the darkness less fearful. How blessed will that last hour be when that morning dawns we shall be satisfied with all the fullness of God, and bless Him in the great congregation of all the angels and saints, with the twelve tribes of Israel and the twelve Apostles of the Lamb.

Truly, to bless and worship God is the ultimate end of our existence, our supreme occupation throughout eternity, and the sovereign goal of our creation. Since God is "infinite Good," therefore, it stands to reason that our blessing Him is a sufficient argument as long as we exist. Hence, if none others bless God in this present life, yet we will, for we cannot help but bliss Him because in Him we live, and move, and have our being. We would rather die than live if we are to be deprived of blessing Him.

Any experience we may have of the divine goodness, while it impels us to bless God, should, at the same time, strengthen our hope for the fullness of the fountain of eternal life which God had promised to those who are to attain salvation.

It is not farfetched to assert that a readiness to bless God in the great congregation, that is, in the Church where believers gather together, is a very healthy symptom that we will likely share in the infinite blessed life of God, for, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son as Redeemer and Savior. In his Son and through him, he invites men to become, in the Holy Spirit, his adopted children and thus heir of his blessed life" (# 1). Whereupon, it is right and just to aver: →

### **Icon # 682 = The Strength and Might of God**

"Summon thy might, O God; show thy strength, O God, thou who has wrought for us."

Truly, truly, without the slightest shadow of any doubt, God shows the greatest strength of His might when He freely offered Himself to be crucified for our salvation and rose again for our justification, for He has absolute power to lay down His life for us and unhampered authority to take it back again.

Just as His creative might was sheerly shown by creating all things out of nothing, so His Redemptive strength is manifested in towing our souls from the grip of sin. Hence, we should not despair of the conversion of any soul, especially among our loved ones: family members, relatives, and friends, because to despair in the conversion of any soul is to judge the case in terms of human might and natural strength and omitting the greater factor of God's grace and salvific Power.

Our human nature tells us that self-sufficiency is the greatest goal we could achieve, but Christian wisdom tells us to be weak in pursuing vices, yet strong in

whatever is good, honest, virtuous, true, honorable, just, and pure. The world tells us to trust in our own talents and ability, but Christian prudence summons us not to lean on our own understanding, but to trust God to direct our paths. What the world sees as weakness, God sees as strength, for if we consider our calling we will realize that not many of us were wise according to worldly standard, not many were powerful, and not many of us were of noble birth, but God chose what is foolish in the eyes of the world to shame the worldly wise, God chose what is weak in the perception of the world to shame the strong, and God chose what is lowly and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God, for His power is made perfect in our weakness.

There is no question that the approval to be “great” in the eyes of the world is so pervasive, but God’s view of greatness is humility and dependence on Him. When we are at our weakest, we find the greatest strength in the power He provides.

Our good friend, St. Paul, mentioned this in his second letter to the Corinthians. He pleaded with God for healing and strength, and God said to him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Then with total resignation in the mighty power of God, St. Paul said: “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12: 9-10).

Hence, we have to strive to be content with our weaknesses and look to God for our strength, for when we no longer trust in our own powers, then we are made strong in the strength of God, because everyone who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Thus, →

### **Icon # 683 = The Body – Mobile Temple**

**“Because of thy temple at Jerusalem kings bear gifts to thee.”**

When the Lord Jesus knew that the Pharisees heard that He was making and baptizing more disciples than John the Baptist, although it was not He who baptizes, but his disciples, He left Judea and went back again to Galilee. He had to pass through Samaria. There He encountered a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well who came to draw water. Wearied and thirsty as He was from the journey He asked a drink from the woman. Of course, this is an act of profound humility and mystifying condescension because Jews have nothing to do with Samaritans.

It's so amazing that at the course of this short conversation they covered many important issues in life, especially human love and divine worship. The woman was so flabbergasted to realize that Christ knew her entire life as though it was an open book, so much so that she arrived to an intuitive conclusion that He must be a prophet.

The woman said to Him: "Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshiped on this mountain; and you say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." Let us hold our breath and listen attentively to the earth-shaking and heaven-rending divine revelation of Christ's answer: "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth."

In an unprecedented way, unheard of in the history of human-kind, Christ insinuated that our body is now a "mobile temple" where we can worship God in spirit and truth where ever we are. This entails that we should treat our body reverently; that it should not become a place where vices will flourish while virtues will languish, but a place where God is the number One in our life.

God is not only a spirit but He is also truth that is why we have to worship Him in spirit and truth. Moreover, we have to walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh, for the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other to prevent us from doing what we would.

We have also to practice humility and honesty, so that we may grow in truth. Of course, in the theological order the first truth is God the Omnipotent and Omnipresent Creator of all things, seen and unseen, who revealed to faith and in the experience of the faithful; 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 depends upon nothing outside of Himself; He has created us all that we 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 no longer worship Him in spirit and truth, but gratify the desires of the flesh and allowed ourselves to be tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles.

No one, to be sure, has rightly sought the truth who has not encountered at the terminal of this search – whether to accept Him or reject Him – our Lord Jesus Christ, "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," Truth that stands against the world and

is a reproach to all worldliness. "It is a very evident truth," says our heavenly friend, no other than St. Teresa of Avila, "that we love a person when we have a vivid remembrance of the kind actions he has done for us."

Undoubtedly, the ultimate "kind action" which the Lord Jesus has done for us was His sacrifice on the cross wherein He layed down His life for our salvation. For this reason, we need no longer live for ourselves but for Him, and glorify Him in our body, offering gifts of praise which is our spiritual worship.

Our body is extremely vital to our spiritual life because the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, no other than the Lord Jesus, had assumed a human body. As a result of this Divine indwelling these consequences follow: Our body by grace becomes a Temple of God. A temple is place for worship, a place where God dwells; a house of God, hence, a house of prayer.

Since God dwells in our soul by grace, thus our body is His Temple: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?," says our good friend, St. Paul. This is the primary reason why we endeavor to purify our thoughts and deeds because, conscious that our body is the temple of God, we will never pollute it by sin.

As humans, we are spiritual beings but we also have a body, and it is by bending both our body and soul to the service of God, the ultimate Good, that we fulfill ourselves. We, too, also have a "will," and since the will is always free, it is the one supreme gift we bear and can present to God. Such yielding of the center of our lives to God is the way of supreme happiness. Our happiness varies according to the center about which our lives revolve.

Even our pains and sufferings can become gifts we offer to God in the temple of our body. Of course, this demands the surrender of our intellect and will to God as a first condition. Our intellect must become docile to Divine Truth; our will also must see that all that happens come from the hands of an all-loving Father who could only desire the absolute happiness of His children in eternity, although not necessarily in time, for He said: "In the world you shall have tribulations, but be of good cheer for I have overcome the world."

If these things are ours and abound, then, we can humbly beseech the Lord saying: →

## Icon # 684 = Rebuking the Beasts of Vices Within us

“Rebuke the beasts that dwell among the reeds, the herd of bulls with the calves of the peoples.”

It is not beyond reason to assert that the beasts we are beseeching to be rebuked are rational beings, because if they are just ordinary animals there would be no compelling necessity to ask the Lord to rebuke them, for it is highly within our power, as humans, to do it ourselves since God has given us dominion over the works of His hands; and has put all things under our feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, and all other animals.

It is also correct to say that these beasts are not only rational beings, but also fierce and cruel beings. They are also very powerful. Undoubtedly, the Lord had already rebuked them, for we have a divine revelation of their ultimate destiny, as it is written: “the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rev. 20: 10).

Although these beasts had already met their just due, but we will beseech the Lord to rebuke them so that they will not be victorious in their attempts to tempt us to commit sin. These beasts can be dubbed also as demons, for they have power to possess human beings as in the case of the man of the country of the Garasenes who was possessed by Legion of unclean spirits, that is, demons. These beasts are also vices within us, which can be rightly considered as the demons within us, thus we entreat the Lord to rebuke them so that they will not cause havoc in our lives, because if we allow them to dominate us we will eventually become their slaves.

Hence, we should earnestly beseech the Lord to rebuke the beasts of vices within us and cast them out, for unless they have been rebuked and cut off while we are still in this present life they will remain with us after our death; and sad to say, we will look like them. For just as the virtues and love itself, which is their source, that have been pursued in this present life make the person who loves them beautiful or handsome and splendid even after the end of this present life, so also the beasts of vices bring to their eternal dwelling the countenance which has somehow been contorted and smudged by their repulsiveness.

The loveliness or repulsiveness of our soul increase in proportion to the condition of our virtues and vices. The appearance that we have picked up from these makes us either so splendid and attractive that we deserve to hear from the prophet: “The king will desire your beauty,” or so ugly and repugnant that we are compelled to acknowledge our own putrid wickedness and say: “My wounds stink and are festering because of my foolishness.”

On the other hand, once the beasts of vices within us have been rebuked and driven away, and our mind has been established in tranquility, it will be possible to enjoy unceasing prayer. Our prayerfulness enlightens and helps us to understand, by experience, that we cannot overcome the beasts of vices by our own strength or will power alone, but only with the support of God's help, that is, when He rebuked these beasts and cast them out from us. Hence we should be grateful to Him, and that we must attribute to Him this conquest.

This is evoked by the Lord through Moses, for instance, "Do not say in your heart, when the Lord your God has destroyed them in your sight: 'because of my righteousness the Lord has led me in to possess this land,' whereas those nations were wiped out because of their sins. For it was not because of your righteous deeds and the uprightness of your heart that you were led in to possess their land, but because they acted wickedly they were destroyed as you entered in "" (Dt. 9: 4-5).

Of course, this is to remind us that we should not be puffed up with the success of the struggle and ascribe to our own strength and goodness this victory, believing that we were able to obtain mastery over carnal vices through our own efforts and endeavor and free will, for there is no doubt that we would never have been able to prevail over them if the Lord had not rebuked them and had fortified and protected us.

If these things are ours and abound, then we can intensify our determination not only to drive them out from us, but also to: →

### **Icon # 685 = Laying in a Supply of Strength while Lusts are Dormant**

"Trample under foot those who lust after tribute; scatter the people who delight in war."

Lust, in whatever form, always indicates a vicious condition, such as: lust for power, lust for prestige, lust for honor, lust for women, and etc. I might be so naïve, but I never come across that it is use in reference to virtues, such as: lust for goodness, lust for kindness, lust for patience, lust for loyalty, lust for integrity and honesty, or lust for justice, or lust for courage. Of course, tribute, power, prestige, honor, or women, are good in itself, but the passion and over craving for them to the detriment of integrity, justice, and honesty are always wrong.

Lust is a concupiscence, that is, an inclination, a desire, and a craving for something. We have heard of the well known three-fold concupiscence, namely, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. However, so long as we don't act them out we are not culpable of apparent wrongdoing. Hence, we need a certain discipline to tone them down to be able to control them, because the lusts and the bad habits we refuse to tame today will be

harder to overcome tomorrow if we should leave the moments of today unimproved.

Truly, it is right and just to affirm that when we do not make friends with lusts by thinking about them, then since we allowed ourselves to be occupied with another concern, such as the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father, the power of lusts is unable to hold spiritual feeling in its grip.

Certainly, anything and everything that curbs the urgency of our lusts and keeps them in dormancy is a notable grace of God. However, it often happens that once our lusts slumber and become dormant, but if, while they are in this condition, we do not lay in a supply of strength to enable us to fight and resist them when they crane their heads again, we shall be worsted in the battle. What is also worse, and this would be a double tragedy, if we also take pleasure in them.

In this case, the only thing that can save us is the grace of repentance and beseech the Lord to disperse our gladness in them, saying: "Scatter the people who delight in war." Of course, this is a very legitimate petition, because we should instead take "delight in law of God" in our inmost selves, as pointed out by our good friend, St. Paul, not in war.

It is one thing to experience a war within our members, but another thing to take delight in them, instead of lamenting them, as St. Paul did. Moreover, "what causes wars, and what causes fightings among you?" asks St. James, "Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (James 4: 1-3). So, what shall we do? The Psalmist offers us this noteworthy counsel: →

### **Icon # 686 = Rulers and Princes of the World acknowledge God's Supremacy**

"Let bronze be brought from Egypt; let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out her hands to God."

It is interesting to see the translation of that first part of this verse in other versions of the Bible such as the singing version, "a new translation from the Hebrew arranged for singing to the psalmody of Joseph Gelineau," which says: "Princes will make their way from Egypt;" "Let nobles come from Egypt" (New Catholic Edition); "Ambassadors will come from Egypt" (The Jerusalem Bible); "Exact rich tribute from lower Egypt, from upper Egypt, gold and silver" (The New American Bible); "Force the Egyptians to bring gifts of bronze" (Contemporary English Version).

Undoubtedly, Egypt was one of the most prominent of the foreign nations in the ancient times. Thus it is gratifying to hear that the illustrious citizens of foreign countries, the rulers and princes of the world, would come and submit themselves to God, and be united with His people.

It sounded that a compelling and forceful invitation is extended to people of good will in other religions to join the people of God. Some will yield in awe, guided by their conscience and the maneuver of Divine Providence, to make peace with the people of God. Others will submit freely as it is written: "Because of thy temple at Jerusalem kings bear gifts to thee" (Ps. 68: 29)

It's gratifying to hear that Egypt and Ethiopia are linked together and are set as examples of the nations which come to do homage, the one as the typical enemy of Israel, the other as a remote nation of regal appearance and courageous reputation, as it is written: "Ah, land of whirring wings which is beyond the rivers of Ethiopia; which send ambassadors by the Nile, in vessels of papyrus upon the water....At that time gifts will be brought to the Lord of hosts from a people tall and smooth, from a people feared near and far, a nation mighty and conquering, whose land the rivers divide, to Mount Zion, the place of the name of the Lord of hosts" (Is. 18: 1-2, 7).

Thus the homage paid by Egypt and Ethiopia signifies that the most formidable enemies of God and His people, and the most remote and imperious of the people of the world, acknowledge His supremacy.

The Gospel is said to have been preached in Ethiopia by St. Matthew, and also by St. Matthias; hence, there is a reasonable ground to believe that some were converted. Thus we have an example of the illustrious Ethiopian eunuch, a minister of Candace the queen of the Ethiopians, in charge of all her treasure who was converted and baptized by St. Philip (See Acts 8: 26-38). So, it is very likely that he carried the Gospel into this country and spread it.

Though this event is so amazing, but it is not surprising because it has been predicted from of old. For instance, in Psalm 87: 4, it says: "Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon, behold, Philistia and Tyre, with Ethiopia. In terms of a state of nature and obstinacy, we are like Ethiopians; we are black with original sin and actual transgressions; by natural means, we cannot pull out this blackness than the Ethiopians can change their skins, as the prophet Jeremiah says: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? And you, can you do right, being so accustomed to wrong" (Jer.13: 23)?

Like the Ethiopians, we are idolaters serving divers lusts and sinful pleasures the idols of our own hearts; we are in a state of "Unlikeness," afar off from God and His people in words and deeds; we are enemies of the cross of Christ whose god is our belly and we glory in our shame – with our minds set only on earthly things

instead of the things in heaven where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father.

However, once we are converted as the Ethiopians did, and made sensible of our condition, we stretch out our hands to God in prayer and as a gesture of sorrow for sin. We look to Christ whom we have pierced and cry to Him for the grace of pardon and mercy, to be cleansed from our sins and to be received into His favor.

As a man in utmost danger stretches out his hand on anything that would save him, so sinners as we are and sensible to our danger, seeing the Lord Jesus and salvation in Him, stretch out our hands and lay hold on Him, and have Him and no other as our God and Savior. Moreover, as the gesture of one that vanquished, resigning himself/herself into the victor's hands, as a token of submission, so sinners as we are, in the day of Christ's power over us, are made willing to submit ourselves to Him, for His yoke is easy and His burden light, and besides, He is meek and humble of heart. For this reason, we can: →

### **Icon # 687 = Sing Praises to God – Joy riding with Him**

“Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth; sing praises to the Lord, to him who rides in the heavens, the ancient heavens; lo, he sends forth his voice, his mighty voice.”

In all honesty, God must be a lover of Music, because if He is not there would be no persuasive reason to sing to Him, let alone, “O kingdoms of the earth.” Besides, we will just be wasting our time singing to someone who do not love or even like music at all. He might be angry too. But, truly, God loves music, of course, godly music – not devilish Old Nick music.

All the “kingdoms of the earth” are invited to “sing to God” and “sing praises to the Lord.” Undoubtedly, the universal Catholic Church heeded to this invitation, for in every country in the world where the Church is present there is always singing to God and praising Him, especially in convents and other religious houses.

It is not farfetched to assert that to “sing to God” and “sing praises to the Lord” illustrate a fervent desire to be engaged in the worship and service of God, a desire to be with Him even while still in this present world, a confident hope that we would be permitted and counted worthy to enjoy His presence forever.

Through prayer, singing praises to God, and a devout life and through the Sacraments of the Church, we are changed, by the Grace of God, to become more like His only begotten Son our Lord Jesus and thus more worthy to

participate in the eternal kingdom He has prepared before the foundation of the world for all who truly and sincerely follow and abide in Him.

There is nothing on earth that is more really a foretaste of the world to come, the kingdom of heaven, than when a person praises God with ardent joy. There is nothing that invigorates our spirit, eases our suffering, or makes our sadness disappear as does "singing to God" and "singing praises to the Lord." God certainly deigns to let us ride with Him in the heaven, the ancient heaven.

Many people today, given the chance, and if they have the means, are willing to pay thousands and thousands of dollars to ride a space shuttle and tour in the space, and orbit around the earth. They are able to do this because they are very rich and can afford space tourism. Undoubtedly, they would be proud of themselves to be able to tour in the space just as the people who had reached the peak of Mt. Everest are ennobled to arrive at the top.

Categorically, both expeditions entail enormous amount of money, determination, physical health, and training, but the joy and the sense of accomplishment concomitant to this attainment are worth a life time of reminiscence. Much in the same way, to sing praises to God and ride with Him not only around our planetary system, but around the whole universe, both heaven and earth, also entails tremendous amount of faith, perseverance in hope, moral soundness, and basic ascetical exercises such as regularity in one's prayer life and reception of the Sacraments.

Just as it is next to impossible to ride a space shuttle and tour in the space if we don't have money, bodily strength, and sufficient interest in space travel, so it is also likely impossible to sing praises to God, ride with Him in the heaven, and enter the kingdom of God without faith, even modicum, because "without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb. 11:6).

Not only that we need faith to be able to sing praises to God and enjoy riding with Him in the heaven, we need also moral strength, as our good friend, St. Paul, has indicated: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals (*those engaging in homosexual activity*), nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God" (1Cor. 6: 9-10).

Moreover we need also sufficient interest to enter the kingdom of heaven and have a desire to live there for all eternity. Why should we need an interest to enter the kingdom of heaven and should have a desire to live there for all eternity? One of the most attractive answers is that Heaven is a place and a condition of supreme beatitude and infinite happiness. Had God created us,

human beings, without bodies, but only pure spirits, heaven would not need to be a place; it would merely signify the state of the angels who rejoice in the possession of God and singing His praises. But in fact heaven is also a place. There we find the glorified humanity of the Lord Jesus, the incomparable beauty of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and all the saints.

In that Blessed Place God dwells with us and we shall be His people. We will be united with Him without the slightest danger of separation; He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away (cf. Rev. 21: 3-4). If heaven is life with God, then we have it now, starting from this present life, if we want it because each human being has a capacity for God.

If we keep in mind what are the things which are promised us in heaven and how great they are, then everything which we have on earth faded in comparison. In heaven we will see God by direct intuition, clearly and distinctly. Here on earth we have no immediate perception of God; we see Him but indirectly in the mirror of creation. We get our first and direct knowledge from created things, and then by reasoning from these, we ascend to the knowledge of God according to the imperfect likeness which creatures bear to our Creator. However, in heaven, no creature will stand between God and our soul. God Himself will be the immediate object of our vision, and because this vision is immediate and direct, it is also exceedingly clear and distinct.

From the reasoning presented here, we have a reasonable ground why we should have a sufficient interest to enter the kingdom of heaven, and sing praises to His name. Hence, we could not help but: →

### **Icon # 688 = Ascribe Power to God**

<p>“Ascribe power to God, whose majesty is over Israel, and his power is in the skies. Terrible is God in his sanctuary, the God of Israel, he gives power and strength to his people. Blessed be God!”</p>
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The joint enterprise between common sense and lively faith demands that we should “ascribe power to God” not only because His “majesty is in the skies” but also because He is so powerful and infinitely Omnipotent.

For us human beings, there is a tremendous difference between doing and saying, but not so for God because His power is such that for Him it is the same thing to do as to say, and the same thing to say as to will. In the words of our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “With God there can be no discord between intention and promise, because He is truth; nor between promise and accomplishment, because he is Power; nor between accomplishment and mode, because He is wisdom.”

Sad to say, modern man is alienated from God. Alienation from self and from one's fellow men has its root in separation from God. Once the hub of the wheel, which is God, is lost, the spokes, which are men, fall apart. God seems very far away from the modern man. This is due, to a great extent, to man's godless behavior, never ascribing power to God, whose majesty is in the skies.

The organized atheism of the present age is thus a projection of self-hatred, for no person hates God, whose power is infinite, without first hating oneself. Persecution of religion is a sign of the indefensibility of the anti religious or atheistic attitude, for by the violence of hate it hopes to escape the irrationality of godlessness. The final form of this hatred of religion is a wish to defy God and to maintain one's own evil in the face of God's goodness and power.

Our wills operating under our own power may be busy about many things, but in the end they come to nothing. Under Divine Power, the nothingness of our wills becomes effective beyond our fondest dreams. For this reason, it is truly right and just to "Ascribe power to God...he gives power and strength to his people." Blessed be God!" who has power to: →

### **Icon # 689 = Patience in Suffering**

#### **Psalm 69 (68)**

"Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck. I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me."

Whether we like it or not, no one is exempted from trials and sufferings. For some these trials and sufferings are so acute that they may "come up to one's neck," and caused one to sink into a severe depression. The intensity of its pain is just so overwhelming. In view of all these, when good and bad people 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 may be the same, their virtue and vice are likely different.

For instance, 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 (cf. St. Augustine, City of God, Book I Christianity Did Not Cause the Fall of Rome, Ch. 8).

The Lord Jesus drank the cup of suffering offered Him by His heavenly Father. Do we have, then, the guts to demur the chalice of pain offered to us by the Lord in

participation of His passion? In all honesty, we can say with our heavenly friend, St. Elizabeth of the Blessed Trinity: "I cannot say that I love suffering in itself, but I love it because it renders me conformable to Him I am wedded and whom I love." Hence, trial and suffering become lovable and also less burdensome according to the degree of love each person has for the Lord Jesus. In order to suffer in peace, it is enough to truly will all that the Lord Jesus wills.

Patience in suffering is a living sacrifice. It is a sweet fragrance of precious balsam in the presence of God. Truly, it does not please God to see us suffer, but He wants to see in what way and how much we love Him in our trials and sufferings. He desires to see what love we develop in the face of difficulties, of our afflictions, and miseries. Even though: →

### **Icon # 690 = Crying - Waiting**

"I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched. My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God."

In the days of His flesh, the Lord Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to His heavenly Father who was able to save Him from death, and He was heard for His Godly fears (cf. Heb. 5: 7). He had prayed till He sweats great drops of blood; His throat is parched and dried up. Certainly, many of us have not followed our Lord in prayer and supplication so far as this. Dangerously, we are more likely to be parched and hoarse with gossips and frivolities to other people than by supplication with God. His prayers and supplications should incite us to fervor.

Many of us have experienced watching and waiting, and we know something of a weary eyes when hope is arbitrarily pigeonholed. Par excellence, the Lord Jesus knew both how to pray and to watch, and we would do well if we keep watch and pray with Him.

Blessed would that day be when we will pray with tears and watch for the coming of the Lord in our lives till our eyes grow dim; thus can we have fellowship with Him in His sufferings, for His eyes had grown dim and His flesh was faint and weary with His sufferings through the long passion of His life on earth and agony of the cross.

He had been waiting in poverty, humility, insult, treachery, scourging, pain, and crucifixion, until He cried out" "My God, unto your hands I commend my Spirit." It is truly right and just to allege that we human beings spend lots of our time on waiting. For instance, parents wait for their babies to be born, wait for their children to grow up and take responsibility; private and public officials, employees wait for their retirement, fiancées wait for their wedding day, we wait

for Mass to start, we wait for our meals in a restaurant, we wait for people who are late, and we wait for bus or train, etc..

As Christians, we wait for the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus which is quite clearly consisted of three propositions: First, that He will certainly return; Second, that we cannot possibly find out when; and third, therefore, we must always be ready for Him.

We are on the way both of duty and consolation when our souls wait upon God; when we willingly give up ourselves, and all our endeavors, to His will, His wisdom, and to His Divine Providence; when we leave ourselves to His solicitude and discretion, and patiently expect the event with full satisfaction in His goodness in the belief that all things work together for good with those who love Him. If God will save our souls, we may well leave everything else to His loving disposal, knowing that all shall turn to our salvation.

Undoubtedly, meditation and prayer are one of the blessed means of strengthening our faith, hope, and determination in waiting for our God; taking His whole armor that we may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand; having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod our feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which we can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one, such as: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life; and taking the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God (cf. Eph. 6: 13-17).

If these things are ours and abound we will be in a fairly solid position to safeguard ourselves from our infernal enemies who are outrightly bent to destroy us, and will prevent us also from being insidiously complacent, because: →

### **Icon # 691 = Many and Mighty are those who hate and would destroy us**

“More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause; mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me with lies.”

It is fair to say that the average number of the hairs of our head is over 100,000 to 200,000. It is also safe to say that the numbers of the fallen angels are more than 200,000. Since these fallen angels turned into demons and are incredibly cruel and devoid of truth, hence it is correct to affirm that “More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me without cause; mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me with lies.”

The Lord Jesus dubbed the devil as someone who has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies (cf. Jn. 8: 44). This means that he

was the first liar. All lies began with him, as all sin began with him. He first launched his deadly attack on our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the terrestrial paradise. He deceived the woman with a deceitful lie telling her that they would not die if they will eat "the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden." This, of course, is a flagrant lie, because God told them: "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die" (Gen. 3: 3).

This Lucifer, that is, the devil, striving to insinuate his sly seduction into the minds of our first parents whose fidelity he envied, since he himself had fallen, chose for his spokesman a serpent in the terrestrial Paradise, where all the animals of earth were living in harmless subjection to Adam and Eve. It was suited for the task because it was a slimy and slippery creature that could slither and twist on its tortuous ways.

So, subjecting it to his diabolical design by the powerful presence of his angelic nature and misusing it as his cunning instrument, he, at first, parleyed craftily with the woman – Eve, hoping gradually to gain the man – Adam. By accepting the serpent's word as true the woman – Eve was deceived. She prefers lie than truth, death than life, and pride than humility.

However, there is a significant difference between the case of Adam and Eve and the devil. Whereas the devil's pride emanated solely from within him, our first parents' pride sprung from without, from the devil's cunning. For this reason, we have ground to believe that there remains some hope of salvation for us human beings, a hope denied to the apostate angel and his asinine adherents.

As descendants of Adam and Eve we share in their pride when we too succumb to a lie, to the pleasurable but deceptive self-delusion that we are somehow equal to God. We do so when we usurp the knowledge that the Only Begotten Son of God, that is, the Lord Jesus, enjoys by right, when we falsely judge ourselves capable of grabbing such knowledge for ourselves, and when we perversely simulate Him by attempting to determine good and evil for ourselves through our own wills.

On the other hand, the *modus operandi* the Lord Jesus prefers to destroy our pride and attack falsehood is, of course, the way of His Incarnation, His humble descent into our fallen human misery. When we, fallen human beings, strive to imitate the humility of the Son of God, who emptied Himself to assume our misery, we are compelled to face the truth of our own misery, as our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux puts it: "If he who knew no misery made himself miserable that he might learn by experience [that mercy] he already knew, how much more should you not, I say, make yourself into what you are not, but attend to who you really are, for you are truly miserable."

Hence, the self-knowledge that we, fallen human beings, attain in contemplating and imitating the example of the self-abasement of the Lord Jesus puts the lie to our proud self-exaltation and exposes self-deception as false. Again, our father St. Bernard in his Advent sermon speaking in the person of Adam and in his own person, humbly prays: "I was seduced by lie, Lord! Let Truth himself come, that falsehood may be exposed, that I might know the Truth and Truth may set me free" (Jn. 8: 32); freedom to ask: →

### **Icon # 692 = What we did not steal are we going to restore?**

"What I did not steal must I now restore?"

This sounds a very difficult moral question. If we are going to restore something that we have never stolen, it would suggest that we are treated unfairly and regarded as a thief and a robber. Hence, we are constraint to surrender what we own as if we have no right to it, or as if we had obtained it by robbery. In this case, we can either go to court to defend ourselves or just acquiesce to this unjust demand for the sake of peace rather than to have a controversy or contention, heeding the counsel of our good friend, St. Paul: "To have lawsuits at all with one another is defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather defrauded" (1Cor. 6: 7)?

The Lord Jesus too though He was innocent had restored, by His obedience, what He had not taken away, that is, the divine image of God in each one of us. In His human nature He atoned the crime that we had committed against God. His innocence was apparent in His very sufferings which must be accomplished in order to manifest that He is truly our Savior.

When God created us, human beings, He bestowed all kinds of goods upon us that are necessary to make us live reasonably comfortable here on earth, and to make us eternally happy with Him in the life to come. However, the ingenuous and candid robber, that is, the devil who "comes only to steal and kill and destroy," was resolve to commit a robbery upon our human race and to strike at God's sovereignty over us.

Accordingly, he prevailed upon our first parents and beguiled them. Thus having entered into a mutiny against God with the devil, we justly forfeited all the spiritual and temporal goods that God lavished upon us, and likewise lost our title to a happy eternity, and became the devil's underling. Hence, the devil had robbed us of all the goods that God bestowed upon us.

On the other hand, the Lord Jesus , the eternal Son of God having a delight upon our human race, and beholding our miserable condition, also was utterly resolve to take upon our human nature, and that in human nature He will be avenged upon the devil, the robber, that had beguiled our human race and

robbed us of our patrimony. Therefore, in the fullness of time He comes, born of a woman, to destroy the works of the devil, and to restore all the stolen goods.

Since the devil sinned from the beginning, and if sin be such a robber, for the devil is the fountainhead of all sin, the beginning and the end of sin, robbing God and man, then it would not be difficult to understand how reasonable is the command to crucify sin in our flesh and to mortify the deeds of the body. However, since we, human beings, are so complex, hence, most often, we do not understand our own actions, for we do not do the good we want, but the evil we do not want is what we do. Now if we do what we do not want, it is no longer we that do it, but sin which dwells within us.

We may delight in the law of God in our inmost self, but there is also in our body another law at war with the law of our mind and making us captive to the law of sin which dwells in our body (cf. Rom. 7: 15-23). Of course, this is a lamentable reality. On our part, we can humbly admit: →

### **Icon # 693 = God knows Our Folly**

“O God, thou knowest my folly; the wrongs I have done are not hidden from thee.”

Two things are utterly worth mentioning: First, that God is Omniscience, that is, He knows everything by simply knowing Himself which He knows perfectly; nothing is hidden from Him for He is in all things both seen and unseen; He penetrates all things “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 creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb 4: 12-13).

Second, that sin and all wrong-doings are forms of unmistakable foolishness, for they separate us from the ultimate good which is God. In other words, they have inherent power to make us lost God which would be an incredible folly. Who in their right mind who could have 10 trillion dollars who would want to lose it? This is simply an utter folly, isn't it? But God is infinitely greater than 10 trillion dollars because he owns everything and is the Creator of all things. All earthly silver, gold, diamonds, and all other precious things are just like dirt in His eyes.

The poverty of our thoughts cannot fairly conceive how utterly rich God is. Have we ever heard, since the foundation of the world, that any king or ruler or president had streets of their cities made of gold? Never was it known that any of them had streets of their cities made of gold. But we certainly heard that the City of God, with all its streets, is made of pure heavenly gold! It is also decorated with stunningly glistening precious stones. Yet, even all these mind-

boggling riches are still as nothing compared to God Himself. Therefore, to lose God by our sins is quintessential folly!

A good number of people who disavow God do so not because their reason tells them there is no God. Their denial is rather because of “wishful thinking.” They feel they would be more happy if there were no God, for then they could do sinful things as they pleased. Disbelief is conceived in the womb of bad conscience, then born of sin, not of reason, for how could reason witness against Reason? Reason is on God’s side, not the Devil’s. Hence, it is right to say that there is no intellectual atheism, but there is a frequent atheism of the will, a deliberate rejection of God. No wonder that the Psalmist places atheism not in the mind but in the heart: “The fool has said in his heart, there is no God.”

We should never think that those who deny God and the Moral Law are outside the purview of Divine Justice. We can deny sin, but we can never escape the effects of sin. For instance, we can deny the law of gravitation, but if we throw ourselves off a very high building in defiance of the law, we nevertheless will feel the very lamentable and dreadful consequences of that denial.

So it is with denying God and violating the Moral Law, for if we consider the infinite riches and grandeur of God, we will come to understand that to lose Him by a deliberate sin is in some sort an infinite foolishness. However, we never lose hope of God’s mercy so long as we are still in this present world, because the insanity of losing God by a willful consent to sin can be cured by a sincere repentance for He will never despise a broken and contrite heart. Once our insanity is healed we will be confident to: →

### **Icon # 694 = Scandal**

“Let not those who hope in thee be put to shame through me, O Lord of hosts; let not those who seek thee be brought to dishonor through me, O God of Israel.”

To cause someone who hope in God be put to shame through us, by our bad example or scandalous life, is truly a very serious matter. The Lord Jesus had given us a very severe warning in this regard when He says: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea” (Mk. 9:42).

Of course, for us who professed religion, this is truly dreadful because to cause someone who believe in God to sin and if we ourselves committed wrongdoing, especially if it is known publicly, it is God and religion that bear the brunt of dishonor. The mockery and scorn are highly concentrated against God and religion. As a consequence, the people of God are put to shame through us.

Hence, it's a wholesome prayer to humbly ask God that we may not be cause of dishonor to Him and to religion, as a consequence of our wrong-doing. Our self-knowledge graciously tells us that left to ourselves we shall certainly fall into sin and shall dishonor God and religion. Therefore, we beseech God to keep us from acting out the depravity of our heart, so that those who hope in Him may not be put to shame through us.

If we have a healthy knowledge of ourselves and know that our heart is not totally devoid of evil, then we will learn to appreciate the uprightness of this prayer, because what had happened to those who fell into sin and disgraced their profession may happen also to us.

Thus we need a humble prayer and prevenient grace, so that when we go down into the grave we may have the consoling thought of not deliberately or knowingly brought shame and dishonor to God, to His people, and to religion. On the other hand, we have also to pray for the grace not to be scandalized by the scandal of those who brought dishonor to religion, especially the ministers of the Church and the professed religious, because evil is also lurking in the habit of taking scandal; it may imply a subdued pride which is altogether unconscious how proud it is.

The habit of taking scandal also implies dearth of charity deep down within us, which grace and interior mortification are finding it hard to influence. It is an act which, for the most part, is not accompanied by kindness. Thus, in retrospect, we observed that at the moment we took the offense an unadulterated and sympathetic sorrow for the person offending was not the first nor the predominant thoughts in our minds, because contemporaneous with the scandal we have taken, there may have been some wounded feeling or agitation within us, for when we are in good mood we normally do not take scandal.

Therefore, the habit of taking scandal, generally, is the remnant of an unkindly mood. This is what we have to guard. Doing this is a veritable sigh that we are mindful of God. Yet, in spite of this we are still reproach, then we have to admit that: →

### **Icon # 695 = Bearing Reproach**

“For it is for thy sake that I have borne reproach, that shame has covered my face.”

The first letter of Peter tells us that if we are reproached for the name of Christ, we are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon us (cf. 1Pt. 4:14). Of course, the Lord Jesus Himself is the ultimate standard of having borne

reproach not only for the glory of His heavenly Father, but also for our sake that we may be delivered from eternal shame and damnation.

Our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux has this to say: "Brethren, the tears of Christ overwhelm me with shame and fear and sorrow. I was playing out of doors in the streets, while sentence of death was being passed upon me in the privacy of the royal council-chamber. But the king's only begotten Son heard of it. And what did He do? He went forth from the palace, put off His diadem, covered Himself with sackcloth, strewed ashes on His head, bared His feet, and wept and lamented because His poor slave was condemned to death. I met Him unexpectedly in this sad condition. I am astonished at the woeful change in Him and acquire the cause. He tells me the whole story. What am I to do now? Shall I continue to play and make a mockery of His tears? Surely I have neither sense nor reason if I do not rather follow Him and unite my tears with His" (Sermon For Christmas Day).

See how far the Lord Jesus have borne reproach for our sake, that shame has covered His face! It will surely do well for us if we often contemplate His divine Face, covered with shame, besmeared with blood, defiled with spittle, swollen and bruised with blows. All this in atonement for our vanity, or love for flashy ostentation, and our penchant for admiration.

Do we have the gut to resist this heartbreaking and pitiable sight? Do we try to accept bitterness of speech with mildness? Do we pray for grace to forgive what we cannot forget? Do we make allowances for mistakes and misunderstandings, and strive to accommodate ourselves to those of different character to our own? Do we practice self-control when we feel hurt? Are we ready to make sacrifices for the sake of peace? Are we ready to find excuse for others as for ourselves? Are we too exacting? Do we check in ourselves the spirit of unhealthy criticism? Do we make others impatient by habitual contradiction?

The Lord Jesus asks us to take up our cross and follow Him. He may not want us to bear unbearable outrage, but He does want us to pass over little slights, to bear peacefully the annoyances of daily life, the failing and the inconsiderateness of those around us.

Can we dispense ourselves from following Him at least thus far and still call ourselves His disciples? How can we get the fortitude to follow Him closely, for it is fortitude that is wanting? Where can we obtain the royal strength of soul to bear at least the little pinpricks and trials of life as we ought? Of course, in the habitual meditation of His passion and death on the cross, how He has borne reproach, and shame has covered His face.

In His Incarnation the Lord Jesus came to His own, yet His own people receive Him not; He became like stranger to them. He lived among them, yet they knew Him not. For this reason, He can rightly make the sigh of the psalmist His own: →

### **Icon # 696 = Stranger to one's Family**

"I have become a stranger to my brethren, an alien to my mother's sons."

Exteriorly, the Lord Jesus while still on earth, differ in no way from His own people, whose city, language, and customs He shared. He is not someone without a country. He lived in His native place, but as though He was not really at home there, for His true home is in heaven.

However, He shares in all the duties of the citizens of His earthly home, yet suffers hardships like stranger in a foreign land. We, too, who believe in the Lord Jesus, can say with our good friend, St. Paul, live our lives here on earth, but our true citizenship is in heaven. In other words, we are in the world, but we are not of the world.

If such is our faith, then the more intense it is, the more it will necessarily gravitate us away from a love of this world. We will become stranger to our worldly brethren, an alien to our fellow earthly citizens whom we share the same country as though we have the same mother.

Our belief in the Lord Jesus will certainly provoke a conflict of tendencies between our other brethren, that is, our fellow earthly citizens, who devoted entirely their lives to our earthly home, and have no conception of anything beyond it and of all believers of Christ who considered ourselves as citizens of another country, that is, the heavenly one.

As Christians, we have dual citizenships. We are citizens of the earthly country as with our other earthly brethren. For this reason, we pay taxes to whom taxes are due; we observe the laws of the place where we live so long as those laws are not contrary to the laws of our sovereign King, that is, God; we honor public officials such as kings, presidents, governors, mayors, and those in lawful authority.

We will only become strangers to these public officials and to all our other earthly brethren if they will force us to obey laws that are oppose and hostile to God, if they will compel us to join with them in their wild profligacy. They may argue that the preaching and teaching of our God is in no way compatible with the duties and rights to the citizens of the earthly country, for the Lord Jesus teaches: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and

take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Mt. 5: 38-41).

Now, for our fellow brethren of the earthly country, it seems very obvious to them that such moral norms could not be put into practice without bringing a country into ruin; for who would suffer without retaliation the seizure of one's properties by an enemy? Would a man just look stoically when his wife and daughter are raped in his presence? These are arguments which sound familiar and which are constantly referred to by the conscientious objectors' of the earthly country.

It is true that "the divine precepts do assuredly run counter to our natural inclinations," says our heavenly friend, St. Therese of Lisieux, "and without the help of grace it would be impossible to understand them, far less put them in practice." Our other heavenly friend, St. Augustine, bolsters this assertion of St. Therese when he said: "God does not command impossible things, but, in commanding He counsels us both to do what we can and seek for help for what we cannot do, and He helps us that we may be able to do it."

If in doing so we will be insulted by our earthly brethren and become strangers and aliens to them, blessed will we be because it is an apparent indication that we have a fervent devotion to God. The reason is that: →

### **Icon # 697 = Zeal For Holiness**

"For zeal for thy house has consumed me, and the insults of those who insult thee have fallen on me."

When the Lord Jesus was cleansing the Temple and drove out those who were selling sheep and oxen and pigeons, and overturned the tables of the money-changers, His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for thy house will consume me" (Jn. 2:14).

Zeal is an ardent love which makes a person fearless in defense of God's honor, and earnest at all costs to make known the truth and holiness of God. If we are children of God we must be zealous for the faith and must strive to live a virtuous life, that is, a life of holiness. Our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux claims that "the sweetness of devotion engenders the love of justice, and the fervor of zeal a hatred of iniquity" (Sermon for Christmas Day).

It is right and just to say that holiness is a great good; it contains all blessings desirable upon earth, and begets everlasting happiness in heaven. It is the consummation of virtue, the guardian of sanctifying grace, the preserver of inward peace, the nurse of the heart's joy, and of ever – enduring beatitude. Holiness is true wisdom, real glory, and inexhaustible wealth.

“A holy life is the most trustworthy argument of the truth,” says our heavenly friend, the golden mouthed, St, John Chrysostom. “It has abundant power to stop the mouths of evil man. It needs no defender, it speaks for itself. If we are truly holy, we can convert the whole world even without miracles. Holiness glorifies God more than any visible work.”

Since our body is the “temple” of the Holy Spirit, hence, it can be rightly called the “house of God.” The Lord Jesus Himself has alluded to this when He stressed decidedly that “if a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.” It is no wonder then that the Lord had an ardent zeal for the holiness of our lives, that God may be glorified in our body. Again, this is not something esoteric because He had set this out very clearly and emphatically summon us to “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 5:16).

Many of us are apprehensive even to imagine how to scale the height of holiness. However, if we really want to it is not something very daunting, because it is sufficient for us to possess a reasonable fund of goodwill in order to attain an eminent sanctity. We need only to carry out the simple duties of our “Catholic faith” and of the state of life we are in; to accept with submission the crosses that go with these duties, and to accede with faith and love to the designs of Providence in everything that is constantly, day in and day out, being presented to us to do and endure, without squeezing our brain to search for anything themselves.

This is the unadorned spirituality that sanctified the patriarchs and prophets and many saints before myriad of diverse methods and guros of the spiritual life were introduced in the market of religion.

Truly, our body is very vital to our spiritual life because the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity had assumed a human body. As a result of this Divine indwelling these consequences follow: Our body by grace becomes a House of God, His Temple. A temple is a place where God dwells and since God dwells in our soul by grace, our body is His Temple. This is the primary reason why we as a Christian must strive to live a holy life. “Be holy as I am holy,” says the Lord.

Conscious that our body is the Temple of God, we will never pollute it by sins against purity or temperance, not allowing the oxen of pride, the sheep of duplicity, the money-changers of avarice, and the pigeons of perfidy, to do business in our body.

It is correct to say that it would be tantamount to insulting God if in spite of these admonitions we still defile our body with all these vices. However, we will still be lucky, while we are still on earth, even though we might learn the hard way, if

the Lord Jesus will overturn the vices of our life and drive out all iniquities with the whip of fatal illness or lamentable tragedy, for the wholesome reason that His zeal in seeing our body, as His house or temple, be purified, has consumed His entire being.

That is why he humbled Himself and became like us in all things except sin and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross, depriving Himself of His inexpressible majesty and glory, as though in His entire life on earth His soul was fasting. Of course, this was very humiliating. No wonder, then, that: →

### **Icon # 698 = Humbling One's Soul With Fasting**

"When I humbled my soul with fasting, it became my reproach."

In the days of His flesh the Lord Jesus humbled His soul with fasting for forty days and nights in the wilderness; and often, in the course of His public ministry was deprived of food for some time. In all credibility, He was without food on the day He suffered, when He made atonement for our sins, that is, the sins of humanity; thus alluding to the day of atonement when every person was to afflict his soul with fasting, as it is written: "for on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord" (Lev. 16: 30).

Hence, those responsible for His death derided Him and gave Him gall for His food and vinegar for His drink. Consequently, that was His reproach. Either way He was liable to reproach, for if He ate and drank He was charged with being a glutton and a winebibber; and if He wept and fasted, as St. John the Baptist did, He was reproached with madness and having a demon; and as they may reasonably supposed: "Can this carpenter who have never been to High school and College, who weeps and mourns and fasts, be thought to be the Son God, a divine Person, as He makes Himself to be, and His followers believe He is?"

Everything He did was a grist in the mill for a fresh reason for reviling. This is very distressing but not riley surprising, because nothing is more cruel than prejudice, its eyes are the lenses through which it looks and its tongue, like a sharpen razor, chastises everyone that come its way.

Fasting is a form of abstinence, which in turn is a practice of abstaining from something either food or drink. However, as moral persons, the excellent way of fasting is to "abstain from every form of evil" (1Thes. 5: 22). In other words, as aliens and exiles of this world to abstain from the passions of the flesh that wage war against our soul (cf. 1Pt. 2: 11), so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer by human passions but by the will of God.

Thus letting the time that is past suffice for doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless

idolatry. For this reason, they are surprised that we do not now join them in the same wild profligacy, and they abuse and reproach us (cf. 1Pt. 4: 2-4). Moreover: →

### **Icon # 699 = Religious People are the Subjects for Ridicule by the Ungodly**

“When I made sackcloth my clothing, I became a byword to them. I am the talk of those who sit in the gate, and the drunkards make songs about me.”

To make sackcloth for clothing is certainly an expression of sorrow and mourning. Take for example, when the sons of Jacob took their brother Joseph's robe, and killed a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood; and they sent the long robe with sleeves and brought it to Jacob, and said, “This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not.” And Jacob recognized it, and said: “It is my son's robe; a wild beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.” Then Jacob rent his garments, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son Joseph many days (cf. Gen. 37: 31-34).

Take another example, when king Ahasuerus, instigated by Haman, ordered the extermination of the Jews in his kingdom, from India to Ethiopia, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes, in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree came (cf. Esther Chs. 3 – 4). King David, too, and the elders clothed themselves in sackcloth when they saw the angels of the Lord standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem (cf. 1Chronicles 21: 14-17).

In a spiritual sense, we have no ground to doubt that the Lord Jesus was a wearer of sackcloth, for He was a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” This should have won Him compassion, but instead of being pitied He became a byword to His enemies and a subject of gossips to the talebearers, and the drunkards make songs about Him.

To this day night clubs and cabarets make fun of Churches and pastors. What a mind-boggling mockery that He whom angels adored, seraphs and cherubims worship with veiled faces, should become the subject of drunkards' songs! The depraved know no mirthful derision than that the name of God is maligned. The byword of the slanderers and the scoffing of tippler are pungent, and give enthusiasm to the drunkards' song.

The holiness of the Son of God was far beyond the imagination of the drunkards; it was so much beyond what they can perceive and understand that it is no wonder it seems to them incredibly absurd, and therefore well suited to elicit flouting over their bottles of wine.

To this day priests and nuns, and other religious people are still the choice subjects for ridicule; instead of commending their service and devotion to God and recommending them as a great model of piety, they made them the common subject of their bywords and songs. On the other hand: →

### **Icon # 700 = The Leverage of Prayer**

“But as for me, my prayer is to thee, O Lord. At an acceptable time, O God, in the abundance of thy steadfast love answer me.”

The ability and power to speak straightaway to God is one of the greatest privileges we, human beings have. Prayer should bring us to a profound personal relation with God. Actually, our words are superfluous, for we are in the presence of Him who knows everything, yet He does want them. They too should be modest.

When we pray we have to remind ourselves that God sees better than we what we really need, though He wants us to ask for it. And further, St. James says: “Let him ask God, who gives to all men abundantly, but let him ask in faith with no doubting” (cf. James 1: 5-6). And St. John states: “This is the confidence which we have in him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us” (1 Jn. 5: 14).

It is right to say, then, that God grants our petitions according to the degree of our confidence in asking. Prayer is not separable from our confidence and trust in God. We know and believe God loves us and wills what is best for us. When we pray we are expressing that trust and confidence.

To underpin what we allege, let us hear from one of the illustrious of the desert Fathers, no other than Abba Isaac, in his first Conference on Prayer: “When no hesitation distracts us as we pray and by a kind of hopelessness, make us lose confidence in our petition, but we think that we have obtained what we are looking for, thanks to our outpouring of prayer, we should not doubt that our prayers have made their way efficaciously to God.”

Abba Isaac pointed out the different causes of why prayer is being heard. He says: “The words of the Gospels and those of the prophets testify that prayers are heard for different reasons, which are based on the different and varied conditions of souls. You have it in the constant repetition of prayer, which the Lord called persistence because of its unwearied perseverance in petitioning: ‘Amen, I say to you, that he will get up and give him as much as he needs on account of his persistence, if not on account of friendship.’

“You have it in the fruits of almsgiving: ‘store up almsgiving in your treasury, and it will rescue you from all affliction; more than a mighty shield and more than a

heavy spear, it will fight on your behalf against your enemy.' Sometimes, indeed, the very magnitude of one's distress assures an answer, according to the text: 'I cried out to the Lord when I was distressed, and he heard me' (Ps. 120: 1). And again: 'Do not afflict the stranger, because if he cries out to me I will hear him, for I am merciful' (Ex. 22: 20-26). You see, then, in how many ways the grace of being heard is obtained, so that no one should be discouraged by a sense of his own hopelessness in asking for things that are beneficial and eternal."

With trust and confidence in active operation, we are convinced that: →

### **Icon # 701 = The Faithful Help of God**

"With thy faithful help rescue me from sinking in the mire; let me be delivered from my enemies and from the deep waters."

It is truly right and just to say that never was it known that anyone who fled to the Lord and asked His help was left unaided. As a matter of fact, He is the one encouraging us to invoke His name when we are sinking into depression and in deep trouble, as it is written: "Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me" (Ps. 49: 15).

If these things are ours and abound we will begin to enjoy a deliverance from sinking in the mire of sorrow and distress, and to temper with confidence the excess of our anxiety, lest at the thought of the greatness of our enemies we would be submerged in deep waters and swallowed up with overmuch troubles.

Hence, all of us who trust in the Lord are in a far better advantage than those who cast Him out of their lives, for what indeed could be heavier or more burdensome than to bear the troubles and sorrows of this world without any hope of deliverance to relieve the mind?

It is imperative to realize that our enemies wound us with as many darts as they attack us with manifold temptations. For we stand in the front line of battle every day, and every day we are assaulted with the darts of their temptations. However, we too throw darts at them when we are overwhelmed with sorrows and distress we bear them patiently and humbly.

Take, for example, the case of blessed Job who was sinking in the mire of tribulation and in the deep waters of tragedy by the loss of his possessions and the death of his children, but he turned his pain and suffering into praise of God, saying: "The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord.

Thus Job struck down the haughty enemy with sturdy humility; he laid the ferocious foe out flat with persevering patience. As a consequence, this is rightly to be expected as our heavenly friend, St. Gregory the Great, observed: "Since he is absolutely forbidden to press his attack to the final defeat of the heart, Satan wanders outside, excluded from the interior. He is outside precisely because even though he often troubles the virtues of the mind, he does not inflict any deadly wound on the hearts of good people, for God is against him. He is only allowed to attack them as far as it is necessary for them to learn from the temptations and be strengthened, lest they attribute their good deeds to their own powers, and lest they forsake their own selves in the lassitude of security, neglecting the vigilance of distrust. Indeed, let them stay awake all the more that they are always in the front line of battle against the enemy's temptations" (From the *Moralia*, Moral Reflections on the Book of Job).

Therefore, with confidence we beseech the Lord: →

### **Icon # 702 = Trials and Sufferings From God's Point of View**

"Let not the flood sweep over me, or the deep swallow me up, or the pit close its mouth over me."

Although it is absolutely necessary to confide our problems and difficulties to God because He cares for us, it is also highly beneficial to share our problems and difficulties to someone whom we trust in order to alleviate the pain of our suffering, as king St. Louis of France advised his son, saying: "If any troubles afflict your heart, make it known at once to some good friend, and the strength you will gain from this will enable you to bear your trouble easily."

Notice that king St. Louis did not infer that making known our trouble to someone we can trust will eliminate our troubles, but it will enable us to bear our trouble easily. In other words, the grace that we receive in doing so is meant to help us, not to escape trials and hardships, but to support us in our trials and sufferings with a stout heart, with a fortitude which gets its strength from faith, so that the flood of troubles will not sweep over us or the deep of pain swallow us up, or the pit of deep sadness close its mouth over us.

It is correct to say that no one is spared of trials and difficulties in this present life, but trials or sufferings take another meaning when it is seen from God's point of view, that is, acknowledged and concurred with faith in His infinite goodness and mercy for us.

The Lord Jesus has suffered so much, and we, too, have our fair share in human suffering whether we wish it or not, but we are confident that we will not be tested beyond our strength, that the flood of trials will not sweep over us, or the deeps of hardship swallow us up, or the pit of depression close its mouth over us,

as our good friend, St. Paul, attested: “We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (2Cor. 4: 8-10).

Truly, this is an anticipation of a prayer heard, as we go on to say: →

### **Icon # 703 = Answer me, O Lord**

“Answer me, O Lord, for thy steadfast love is good; according to thy abundant mercy, turn to me.”

Many people know how necessary prayer is; not that God's decrees can be changed, but, as our heavenly friend, St. Gregory the Great says: “that men by asking may merit to receive what Almighty God hath decreed from eternity to grant them” (from the *Dailogue*).

And in the words of our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “God wills that we should pray to Him even for what He has promised. Perhaps the reason why He first promises what He designs to bestow is in order that the promise may excite our devotion, and that thus what should be given gratuitously, may now be rendered as the reward of devout supplication.”

It is right to say that for us to cry out is to plead with God in humble prayer, for His steadfast love is good; for God to answer is to grant an effect to our prayers, for He turn to us according to His abundant mercy. If our prayer is in accordance with His will, and if we seek His glory in our supplication, the answer will come in a manner that surpasses our understanding and fills our hearts with praise and thanksgiving, for truly, the steadfast love of the Lord is good and His mercy is abundant.

Truly, He will never forsake us if we trustfully abandon ourselves to Him and utterly rely in His abundant mercy, for nothing will happen in our lives that is not guided by His divine providence which will turn all things to our advantage and surpassing benefit.

“Now let us compare something mortal to the incomparable mercy of our Creator,” points out one the prominent desert fathers, no other than Abba Chaeremon, “not because it is equally good but because there is some similarity as far as loving kindness is concerned. Imagine a good and careful nurse, who carries a small child in her bosom for a long while, so that eventually she might teach him to walk. First she lets him crawl, then holds him upright with her hand so that he will be supported at each step, then leaves him for a little while, only to grasp him at once when she sees that he is wavering, steadies him when he is tottering, picks him up when he has fallen down, and either prevents him from

falling or lets him fall lightly and lifts him up after a tumble. But when she has brought him to boyhood or to the strength of adolescence and young manhood, she lays upon him some burdens and hardships by which he will not be oppressed but exercised, and she lets him brave his peers. How much more does the heavenly Father of all know whom to carry in the bosom of his grace and whom to exercise in his sight for virtue's sake by a decision of free will, yet helping him as he struggles, hearing him when he calls, not abandoning him when he looks for him, and occasionally snatching him from danger even unbeknownst to him" (Thirteen Conference, The Third Conference of Abba Chaeremon: On God's Protection). Hence, in confidence we say: →

### **Icon # 704 = Draw near to me, redeem me, set me free**

"Hide not thy face from thy servant; for I am in distress, make haste to answer me. Draw near to me, redeem me, set me free because of my enemies!"

A story was told of a little child who was commanded by his mother not to walk the picket fence. He disobeyed and fell, maimed himself and was never able to walk again. Being told of his misfortune he said to his mother: "I know I will never walk again; I know it is my own fault; but if you will go on loving me I can stand anything."

Thus it is with our pains. If we can be assured that God still loves and cares, then we shall find peace and joy in participating His redemptive work by being redeemers with a small "r" as He is Redeemer with a capital "R". Then an insight will come to us of the distinction between distress and sacrifice. Distress is sacrifice without love. Sacrifice is distress with love.

The book of Lamentation has this to say: "I called on thy name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit; thou didst hear my plea, do not close thine ear to my cry for help! Thou didst come near when I called on thee, thou didst say, 'Do not fear'" (Lamentations Ch. 3: 55-57)!

Moreover, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man. He calls man to seek him, to know him, to love him with all his strength. He calls together all men, scattered and divided by sin, into the unity of his family, the Church. To accomplish this, when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son as Redeemer and Savior" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1).

If a father could die for his family, a woman or a man for his or her country, a friend for a friend, or a lover for his or beloved, then it would make sense that Christ Jesus the Lord died for the human race of which He is the head, "far

greater love than this that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn.15: 13). And if the deeper and greater the love the more poignant and acute the pain, then it would make sense that the Crucifixion should be born of that love.

The Lord Jesus could not have shown His perfect love for us had He not died for us. In His Passion and death He has displayed not only a patient charity which refuses to be overcome by evil, but a super-abundant love which overcomes evil with good, conquering sin and death, converting our hearts and leading us to repentance, setting us free from the dominion of our vices that waged war within us.

Of course, all our vices and sins, were it not of the Lord, could have brought us shame and dishonor, are laid open before Him, because: →

### **Icon # 705 = Reproach, Shame, and Dishonor**

"Thou knowest my reproach, and my shame and dishonor, my foes are known to thee."

Certainly, there are several things that can cause reproach, shame, and dishonor. Of course, the most obvious is when we have done something wrong and it is known by the public. The other is when we lived a disreputable life. The other also, which is quite subtle and hidden, is when we lived a double life and dishonest in our dealings with other people and ourselves.

Arguably, these kinds of reproach, shame, and dishonor are very unhealthy and even cancerous to our soul. Thus very dangerous if not treated right away by the surgery or potent medicine of conversion. On the other hand, there are also several things that can cause, in this case, a healthy reproach, shame, and dishonor. The most obvious, of course, is when we publicly bear witness to our Christian faith amidst a very hostile and secular society. The other is when we desire to live a godly life.

As of the former it is written: "If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker, yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God" (1Pt. 4: 14-16).

As of the latter it is written: "Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived" (2 Tim. 3: 12-13). Arguably, these kinds of reproach, shame, and dishonor, and persecution are very healthy to our soul, because they not only led us to heaven, but are also rewarded for them, as the Lord Jesus Himself said: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you

and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven..." (Mt. 5: 11-12). Hence, pain and suffering, persecution, reproach, shame, and dishonor, are like a double-edged sword which reveals the disposition of one's heart.

A person is very likely be able to withstand all these trials if he or she anchors his/her faith in Christ and keeps His commandments, for he/she will be liken to a very wise person who built his/her house on rock. Thus when the rain of adversity and reproach fell, and the flood of suffering and shame came, and the winds of tragedy and dishonor blew and beat upon his/her heart, he/she was not broken because he/she has been founded upon a rock, that is, on Christ.

On the other hand, if a person is not a believer of God and anchor himself/herself in Christ, it is very likely that when the rain of adversity and reproach fell, and the flood of suffering and shame came, and the winds of tragedy and dishonor blew and beat upon his/her heart, she/he will be likely be disheartened and would not be able to handle the derision and scorn of other people. Therefore, it would not be surprising to hear: →

### **Icon # 706 = When Insults broke one's heart - Despair**

"Insults have broken my heart, so that I am in despair."

Our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux pointed out that "with the saints and elect troubles make for endurance, endurance gives proof of their faith, and a proved faith gives ground for hope. With the damn and reprobate on the contrary troubles make for faint-heartedness, faint-heartedness for worry, worry for despair, and that is the finish."

It is truly right and just to say that when deep despair settles on a sinful soul which had no outlet, either because it denies God or because it refuses to have recourse to His mercy, then it is very likely that tragedy, pain and sorrow, calamity, dishonor and insults may reach a point where one takes her/his own life, as Judas did. On the other hand, saints are happy in situations where others are in despair; they are freely emancipated from life's accidentals, so rooted in God, that, like the ocean, they remain calm in the depths of their soul, although the waves of sufferings, shame, and insults may roar at the surface.

To bolster our argument, let us listen to what the 1<sup>st</sup> letter of Peter says: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed" (Ch. 4: 12-13). In addition, our good friend, St. Paul, asserted: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships,

persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2Cor. 12: 9-10).

To fall into despair and have our heart broken just because we are insulted, is very likely an acute symptom of pride and ignorance of God, because just as the fear of the Lord is the beginning of all wisdom (Sit. 1: 16), so pride is the beginning of all sin (Sir. 10: 15); and just as the love of God is the perfection of wisdom, so despair is the consummation of all malice. And just as the fear of God arises in us from knowledge of ourselves, and love of God from knowledge of God, so conversely, pride arises from ignorance of ourselves, and despair from ignorance of God.

"There is indeed much comfort to be had in time of trial," avowed our heavenly friend, Pope St. Gregory the Great, "if when we suffer reverses we call to mind what our Creator has given us. Pain and contradiction do not injure us if we quickly remember his gifts and kindness. That is why we read, 'on good days do not forget the bad, and on bad days do not forget the good.'

The person who receives a gift and does not also expect trouble at the very moment of receiving it falls into the sin of pride and frivolity. On the other hand, the person who is laid low by sufferings and who is not comforted at the very moment of sufferings by the thought of the gifts he has been granted becomes depressed by all manner of despair." No wonder that the soul cries out, then: →

### **Icon # 707 = The Comforter**

**"I looked for pity, but there was none; and for comforters, but I found none."**

What shall we do if we had looked for pity from other people, but there was none; and for comforters, but found none? In this case, the most essential thing that we should do is to have recourse to the Lord Jesus. Never was it known that anyone who fled to Him for pity was left dejected, or for comfort was left unconsolated, for just as He was strengthened by an angel at the garden of Gethsemane, He is also ready to pity and strengthen anyone who come to Him for sympathy and for consolation.

Thus with our good friend, St. Paul, we cannot help but express our gratitude and praise to God, saying: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts 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" (2Cor. 1: 3-4).

Comfort is a happiness that carries pain with it. It springs from the very heart of grief, that is why the Holy Spirit is called "The Paraclete," the "Comforter", because He gives us in our exile a comfort which is not incompatible with grief.

When the Lord Jesus came into our world, when He consummated His works and transformed all existence, He did not eliminate pain. The Christian life does not suppress suffering. That implies the purification of our hearts, and the heart is not purified completely except by suffering and sacrifice. We know from our own experience that life is a matter of lights and shadows, joys and sorrows. It is impossible, while still on earth, to find anyone who is without sorrows; impossible also to find anyone in whose life there is not, even for a few brief instants, a spark of happiness.

Unequivocally, there are more sorrows in our spiritual life than in our material, but there are also more consolations. A verse from the Psalms expresses it thus: "When cares abound within me, Your comfort gladdens my soul" (Ps. 94(93): 19). These two things, comfort and sorrow, are indispensable. They have their respective purposes to accomplish and their fruits to bring forth. The spiritual life demands comfort, for comfort expands the heart, and when the heart is expanded it runs in the way of the Lord.

Consolations nourish us, fortify us, and make us capable of performing all the sacrifices necessary to fulfill the holy will of God. In the supernatural order God willed to give us a ray of happiness, a drop of comfort, that we might fulfill our duties and responsibilities with reasonable ease. God's insight of how to proportion and time our comfort and sorrow, consolation and desolation, is amazingly marvelous. He measures out for our soul the precise quantity of each, at the moment when it is needed, so that in times of prosperity we will not be unmindful of adversity and times of adversity we will not be forgetful of prosperity.

Undoubtedly, without comfort and consolation the times of our sorrow and pain would be tantamount to: →

### **Icon # 708 = Gall for Food, Vinegar for Drink**

"They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink."

In some other versions of the Bible such as: New Catholic Edition, Saint Joseph Edition (confraternity version), King James Version, and the New American Bible, they use "gall" instead of "poison". Thus it reads: "Instead they put gall in my food; for my thirst they gave me vinegar." The word here rendered "gall" is the same "in form" which is commonly rendered "head", and occurs in this sense very often in the Scriptures. It is also used to denote a "poisonous plant", perhaps from the idea that the plant referred to was distinguished for, remarkable for its "head" – as the poppy, and then the name may have been given also to some other similar plants.

The word then comes to denote poison; venom; anything poisonous; and then, anything very bad-tasted, "bitter". For instance, in Dt. 29: 18 it says: "Beware lest there be among you a man or a woman or family or tribe, whose heart turns away this day from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations; lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit, one who, when he hears the words of the sworn covenant, blesses himself in his heart, saying, 'I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart.'"

In the book of Lamentations we also hear: "Remember my affliction and my bitterness, the wormwood and the gall" (3: 19)! Then the Psalmist goes on to say, "and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." Hence, gall and vinegar are here put together to denote the most unpalatable forms of food and drink. These things were metaphorically fulfilled in David, but properly and precisely in Christ, the description of whose sufferings shed lights in the divine plan of salvation, a direct foreshadowing of the sufferings of Christ (cf. Mt. 27: 34, 48; Jn 19: 29).

In the case of the Lord Jesus, they first gave Him vinegar mingled with gall, a usual custom in regard to those who were crucified for the purpose of tranquilizing the pain, or stupefying the sufferer. At a subsequent part of the crucifixion they gave Him vinegar, extended to Him in a sponge affixed to a reed. This was for a different purpose. It was to assuage His thirst, and it seems, as the former may have been, to have been an act of kindness or compassion on the part of those who were appointed to crucify Him. The former He refused to take, because He came to suffer; the latter He just tasted as He died (cf. Jn. 19: 30).

Since the life of sin first began in tasting, as in the case of Adam and Eve, contrary to the command of God, the Lord Jesus the Savior of the human race willed to be obedient unto death even death on the cross, and to end His life, in fulfillment of the prophecy with the bitter taste of gall and vinegar, that, in this manner, we, seeing the beginning of our perdition and the consummation of our salvation, might feel grateful and appreciative to be most sufficiently redeemed and most perfectly healed of the fatal wound of sin.

Of course, one of the many moral lessons that we can learn from the "gall for food" and "vinegar to drink" is that we should be fastidious of our choice of food and drink, and to be modest in our lifestyle, realizing how much the Lord has to endure for our redemption. It also serves as a warning to those who, through extravagance and affluence, are inclined to slight and despise God's benevolence. They have to bear in mind that gall was given to Christ for food, and vinegar for drink.

This may also serve as an encouragement to poor Christians that although their living condition is pitiable, and have but a dinner of herbs, or bread and water, it

is far better than the Lord's; it is not gall and vinegar. Moreover, it is also dangerous to be rich and affluent in material things but destitute in the things of God, for they might be recipient of Christ's malediction of the rich in worldly things but very poor in the things of God: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger" (Lk. 6: 24-25). Thus it is reasonable to hear: →

### **Icon # 709 = The Danger of Living in Luxury**

"Let their own table before them become a snare; let their sacrificial feasts be a trap."

Our good friend, St. Paul, quoted this passage in his letter to the Romans which says: "Let their feast become a snare and a trap, a pitfall and a retribution for them..." (Rom. 11: 9). Of course one's table and sacrificial feasts become a snare and a trap when a person has the means or lives in luxury, and feasted sumptuously, not even every day, but most often, and yet refuses to give a hungry person begging at his/her gate, as in the case of the rich man and Lazarus in St. Luke's Gospel (Ch. 16: 19-31), because Mercy is merciless to those who have not shown any mercy.

The Lord Himself said: "For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink..." (Mt. 25: 42), and also, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me. And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt. 25: 45-46).

The word "trap" usually denotes a device for capturing undomesticated animals. Those who live in luxury and frequently feasted sumptuously, whose minds are mainly set on the things of this world and not on the things above, may feel they are at peace and are secure, that there's no danger at all; and may say: "'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them as travail comes upon a woman with child, and there will be no escape" (1Thes. 5: 3).

To add misery upon tragedy, it would not be surprising to hear: →

## Icon # 710 = Consequence of Spiritual Blindness

“Let their eyes be darkened, so that they cannot see; and make their loins tremble continually. Pour out thy indignation upon them, and let thy burning anger overtake them. May their camp be a desolation, let no one dwell in their tents.”

In the Gospel of St. Matthew, the Lord Jesus is so emphatic in stressing the importance of the inner eyes. He says: “The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness” (Mt. 6: 22-23).

It is right, fair, and fitting to say that spiritual blindness is the inability to see what is good and evil. The Lord Jesus came as light into our world, so that those who follow Him, that is, abide in His teaching, sincerely and truthfully will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life. However, it is so mind boggling that people opted to walk in darkness rather than light. We are told by our heavenly friend, St. John the evangelist, that the reason for this is that their deeds are evil, “for every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God” (Jn. 3: 19-23).

Most of us would rather have our feet and hands cut off than to become blind. However, spiritual blindness is even far worse than physical blindness because it will last for all eternity. It could no longer see what is good, what is right, and what is true. It could no longer see the value of human life, of honesty, and of integrity. It calls good evil, and evil good. It is not willing to give and receive forgiveness. Of course, the eyes of their body are wide open, but the eyes of the soul are blind. There are several factors which give rise to the blindness of the soul; and it is not implausible to say that pride has its lion's share.

At the end of the story of the man physically blind whom the Lord Jesus healed, the Lord strikingly says: “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.” Some of the Pharisees near Him heard this, and they said to Him: “Are we also blind?” The Lord said to them: “If you were blind, you have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘we see,’ your guilt remains” (cf. Jn. 9: 39-41).

Just as the physically blind cannot hide her blindness from other people, and that we don't have to concoct a sophisticated argument to prove his/her blindness, so no human being can hide its spiritual blindness from God who knows the finest fiber of our being and sees the thoughts and intentions of our heart, just as we see the face of another person.

John Newton wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace," as a musical autobiography. At the end of the first verse, the hymn includes the line, "I once was blind, but now I see." Before John Newton said "Yes" to a life of faith, he had been a slave trader. He was blind to the needs of others and to the basic humanity of the people he bought and sold as slaves.

Our good friend, St. Paul, too, knows of spiritual blindness. He once wrote to our other heavenly friend, St. Timothy, saying: "I once was a blasphemer and a persecutor, and an arrogant man and acted out of ignorance in my unbelief" (1Tim. 1: 13). He was metaphorically blind to the work of God among the early Christians until his conversion, when God physically blinded him and then later restored his sight

Just as there are color-blind people who are dead to art and tone-deaf people who are dead to music, so it is fair to say that the atheists and God-hater are Deity-blind, that is, dead to the vision of God. They say in their hearts, "There is no God," for their self-centeredness has blinded them. Of course, God is not angry with them just because they do not believe in Him, but they are really in a very dangerous condition if they hold on to their unbelief till their death, because it is very likely that the verdict of the Lord Jesus will be upon them, as He says: "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).

Thus the words of the Psalmist are realized: "Pour out thy indignation upon them, and let thy burning anger overtake them." If God's displeasure is so terrible that it keeps the guilty awake, then imagine what misery it would be to be under His indignation. To bolster our frame of reference, let us listen to the testimony of our heavenly friend, St. John the evangelist: "The Father loves the Son, and has given all things into his hand. He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (Jn. 3: 35).

One of the many factors why this is so, is this: →

### **Icon # 711 = Persecution**

"For they persecute him whom thou hast smitten, and him whom thou hast wounded, they afflict still more."

There was incident in the life of our good friend, St. Paul, before he was converted to Christianity which tells us that whatever is done to the least member of the Mystical Body of Christ is also done to Him. This happened after the death of St. Stephen when a great persecution arose against the Church in Jerusalem, and the followers of Christ were all scattered throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles (cf. Acts 8: 1).

Saul, his former name, in his misguided zeal, as he confessed later, was sniffing out fury and breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found anyone who followed the Lord Jesus, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

As he approached Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed about him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" And he said: "Who are you Lord?" The Lord said to him: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." It is clear as a noonday sun that Christ identified Himself with His followers (cf. Act 9: 1-6). Certainly, this is a confirmation of what He said: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt. 25: 40).

Truly, truly, it is noteworthy to mention that the followers of Christ were persecuted since the beginning of Christianity, and it is absolutely correct to say that it will continue until the end of the world. Of course, this persecution will vary in form and intensity. It will be as simple, subtle, and unbloody as the removal of crosses from atop Christian steeples carried out by the Chinese government in the province of Zhejiang, China, or it would be as bloody, brutal, and cruel as the persecution and genocide of Christians in the Middle East, especially in Iraq and Syria carried out by ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), whose ferocious intent is to utterly eradicate and destroy Christianity under their control.

Moreover, there's another form of persecution which is not necessarily carried by non-Christian actors. For instance, even in a Christian country, attempts are made by the government to constrain religious institutions, civil servants, and health professionals to behave in ways inimical to their religious belief or even to fulfill the law contrary to their conscience.

Of course, this is very distressing but not surprising, because "all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2Tim. 3: 12). In cases where a purported Christian government is the one harassing their citizens, especially the Catholics who, they think, are so stubborn and would not acquiesce to their demands, then these citizens has to go to court in order to find relief, for it is an abuse on the part of the government to force their citizens to act contrary to their conscience and religious belief.

Even now, many of our Christian brethren, both Catholics and non-Catholics, are suffering persecution in non-Christian countries. A good number of these Christians died for their faith; they preferred to die rather than renounce their faith. Hence, they are the modern day martyrs. Their pains and agonies can be better imagine than described. God alone knows to the full extent their sufferings. We poor mortals can only feebly imagine and less accurately portray them. They died as the outcasts of the world, being smitten, wounded, and

afflicted, but now are crowned by God with immortal honor, the laurel of everlasting life.

They are blessed because they had endured their trials. Since they had stood the test they received the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him. How powerfully do they cry out to us by their example, exhorting us to despise a false and deceptive world, for the glory of the world is fake and ephemeral, and an empty bubble or shadow, but that of virtue is true, solid, and permanent, even in the eyes of men.

According to a new study from the Turin-base Center for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR), there were about 90,000 Christians killed for their faith around the world during the year 2016. Certainly, this figure is mind boggling. Compare with this, the persecutors of the early Christians, such as Nero, Domitian, Trajan, etc., sound like kindergarten.

While in the past century, that is, 20<sup>th</sup> century, atheistic communist regimes were the greatest persecutors of Christians, the geopolitical landscape has changed considerably since then and the actors have changed as well. While communism is still responsible for some ill-treatment of Christians, we read reports that "Islamic Fundamentalism" has taken its place as the top-notch agent of persecution.

For instance, according to the 2016 "World Watch List", published by the Open Door Organization, "nine out of the top ten countries where Christians suffer 'extreme persecution' had populations that are at least 50 percent Muslims." The 2016 report discovered that "Islamic extremism is by far the most significant persecution engine" of Christians in the world today and that "40 of the 50 countries on the World Watch List are affected by this kind of persecution."

For instance, in Nigeria, over the last 12 years, that is, from 2004, to 2016, the most reliable estimates assesses at more than 10,000 Christians killed by the Islamic ultra-fundamentalist organization Nigeria's Boko Haram.

Boko Haram, for sure, is a private terror organization like many others, yet what is profoundly disturbing is that in many cases persecution of Christians is actually promoted by several Muslim countries which still have laws punishing apostasy, that is, converting from Islam to another religion. Other countries have laws against blasphemy and some tend to consider any criticism of Islam as blasphemy.

It has been indicated that while tens of thousands of Christians are killed for their faith, they are just the "tip of the iceberg" and much persecution takes place on a daily basis that never makes news. The Center for Studies on New Religion (CESNUR) indicates that 500 and 600 million Christians were in some way persecuted and prevented from freely practicing their faith.

Of course, this is a very grave injustice. St. Pope John Paul II in his meeting with Muslim leaders, March 22, 1998, emphatically pointed out that “Christians and Muslims agree that in religious matters there can be no coercion. We are committed to teaching attitudes of openness and respect towards the followers of other religions. But religion can be misused, and it is surely the duty of religious leaders to guard against this. Above all, whenever violence is done in the name of religion, we must make it clear to everyone that in such instances we are not dealing with true religion. For the Almighty cannot tolerate the destruction of his own image in his children.”

Truly, justice necessitates safeguarding the right of every human person to religious freedom also in the external dimension, that is, the freedom to practice one’s religion in social life. One of the documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis humanae*, has this to say: “Injury therefore is done to the human person and to the very order established by God for human life, if the free exercise of religion is denied in society, provided just public order is observed.”

For this reason, it is right to assert that not only hostility, but also complete indifference of the State toward religion is unconscionable. Of course, terrorist organizations and countries that supported terrorism put themselves in a very dangerous position, because if they will not change their course at the moment of death, they might hear these words: →

### **Icon # 712 = Is Punishment Unending or Not?**

“Add to them punishment upon punishment; may they have no acquittal from thee. Let them be blotted out of the book of the living; let them not be enrolled among the righteous.”

This is a very serious indictment meted out on those who will go across the threshold of death without repenting. In other words, they passed over the border of life and death with their baggage of mortal sin.

Of course, God alone can rightly execute perfect judgment because He sees all things, knows all things, and hears all things. Nothing is hidden from Him, for He penetrates the deepest depths of our being, discerning the thoughts and intentions of every heart.

Everyone will be judged according to one’s deeds when the Lord Jesus will come from heaven to judge the living and the dead. This will be a day of absolute judgment in the precise sense that there will be no slightest room to wag one’ tongue for any uncomprehending complaint that this unrepentant sinner has been blessed or that graciously good man has been punished.

On that awesome day, everyone shall plainly see, clear as crystal, the true fullness of happiness of the redeemed and only the redeemed, as we shall see the ultimate and deserved punishment of the condemned and of the condemned alone, as the Lord says: "Do not marvel at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (Jn 5: 28-29).

To bolster our contention that punishment upon punishment are piled up on the condemned, and that they will have no acquittal from God, let us hear from our heavenly friend, no other than the illustrious doctor of the Church, St. Augustine of Hippo: "A first question to be asked and answered, 'why has the Church been so intolerant with those who defend the view that, however greatly and however long the Devil is to be punished, he can be promised ultimately that all will be purged or pardoned?' Certainly, it is not because so many of the Church's saints and Biblical Scholars have begrudged the Devil and his angels in a final cleansing and the beatitude of the kingdom of heaven. Nor is it because of any lack of feeling for so many and such high angels that must suffer great and enduring pain. This is not a matter of feeling, but of fact. The fact is that there is no way of waiving or weakening the words which the Lord has told us that He will pronounce in the last judgment: 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels' (Mt. 25: 41).

"In this way He showed plainly that it is an eternal fire in which the devil and his angels are to burn. Then we have the words of the Apocalypse: 'And the devil who deceived them was cast into the pool of fire and brimstone, where also are the beast and the false prophet; and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever' (Rev. 20: 10).

"In the one text we have 'everlasting', in the other 'for ever and ever.'" These are words which have a single meaning in the divine Scripture, namely, of unending duration. Thus, it is Scripture, infallible Scripture, which declares God has not spared them. This is the only reason why it is held as a fixed and unchanging religious truth that the Devil and his angels are never to return to the life and holiness of the saints; nor could any more valid or cogent reason be discovered.

"And since this is true of the Devil, how can men – whether all or some – be promised an escape, after some indefinitely long period, from this eternity of pain, without at once weakening our faith in the unending torment of the devils? For it is to men that the words will be said: 'Depart from me, accursed ones, into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels.'

"Now, if some of these men or all of them are not always to remain in everlasting fire, what ground have we for believing that the Devil and his angels are always

to remain there? God's sentence will be pronounced on the wicked, both angels and men. Can we suppose that it will hold for angels but not for men? Yes; but, only if men's imaginings have more weight than God's words! Since this is quite impossible, all those who desire to escape eternal punishment should desist from arguing against God and should rather bow in obedience, while yet there is time, to the command of God.

“Christ spoke of both as eternal in the same place and in one and the same sentence: ‘And these will go to everlasting punishment, but the just into everlasting life.’ For the everlastingness of the punishment and the everlastingness of the life are related as equal to equal. It is highly absurd to say in one and the same sense: ‘Life everlasting will be endless, but everlasting punishment will come to an end.’ Therefore, since the eternal life of the saints is to be endless, there can be no doubt that the eternal punishment for those who are to endure it will have no end” (cf. St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XXI End and Punishment of the Earthly City, Ch. 23, pp.504-506, Abridged Edition).

What more can we say!!! However, since we are still in this present world where, from time to time, we experience affliction and vexation, then we have to acknowledge: →

### **Icon # 713 = Be Afflicted and in Pain Provided God is Our Companion**

“But I am afflicted and in pain; let thy salvation, O God, set me on high!”

If we are given a choice, which one do you prefer: to be in tribulation provided that we have God as our companion and helper, or to be in luxury without God, or without God to be renowned and honored?

Certainly, there will be consequences in whatever we will choose. If we will choose tribulation provided we have God as our companion and helper, of course, we could not say that we love tribulation or pain in itself, but it can become lovable because of our hope in the happiness of the world to come where there will be no more tribulation nor pain nor sorrow anymore.

Also, pain, sorrow, and affliction will be less burdensome according to the degree of our love for God. Of course, pain or affliction, in appearance, is very repulsive, but it can become fruitful and beautiful by the grace of Christ whose love for us rendered sufferings in Calvary infinitely fruitful. It teaches us to make a clear distinction between illusory goods which are ephemeral from authentic goods which last eternally – where no moth devours, no rust consumes, and where no thieves break in and steal.

It also makes us desire God who alone can heal certain wounds of the heart, and who alone can fortify and transform our soul. It is truly right and just to affirm

that every sacrifice has its effect. Thus, affliction, pain, and any kind of suffering no matter how trivial it might be is as active as any other act.

Patience in tribulation is certainly a living sacrifice. It makes a noble soul flourish as beautiful roses do in the wholesome dew of May. It conveys true wisdom and makes us a tested person, for "there is much wisdom acquired from patiently bearing suffering than there is from books. No one is ever consoled by having a moral theology flung at their head." Thus what grace is meant to do is to help us, not to evade from affliction, sorrow, or pain, but to support our sorrow or pain or affliction with a stalwart heart and with a fortitude which derives its strength from a lively faith, ardent hope, and a sincere love.

Our Lord Jesus never even suggested that affliction and pain will be banished from the world, but with customary realism He looks at pain and affliction straight in the eye; He never run out of courage, never discouraged. His sympathetic, all comprehending heart is stronger than pain and affliction. On this ground, we are in a good position to: →

### **Icon # 714 = Praise, Song, and Thanksgiving are Pleasing to God**

"I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving. This will please the Lord more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs."
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Our good friend, St. Paul, in his letter to the Colossians encourages them, and all of us to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts to which indeed we were called in the one body. He goes on to say: "And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col. 3: 15-16). Of course, without any shadow of a doubt, carrying this out "will please the Lord more than an ox or a bull with horns and hoofs."

The obvious reason why to praise the name of God with a song and to magnify Him with thanksgiving is pleasing to Him more that ox or a bull is that thanksgiving in itself is already an act of sacrifice, as it is written: "I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving and call upon the name of the Lord" (Ps. 116: 17).

Also it is written: "Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous! Praise befits the upright" (Ps. 33: 1). In other version, the singing version to the Psalmody of Joseph Gelineau, it says: "Ring out your joy to the Lord, O you just; for praise is fitting for loyal hearts."

Therefore, since an ox or a bull could never praise God with a song, or even just a simple phrase as: "Thank you, Lord," and since the human person is made in the image and likeness of God and who alone in the material universe can

explicitly render praise to God, hence the song of praise and thanksgiving offered by a human person to God is far more pleasing to Him than an ox or a bull.

God is our Maker; by His light alone can we be truly happy if we are not ungrateful for His grace. "When there is no evil in man," says our heavenly friend, St. Anthony the Great, "then even thanksgiving alone is more pleasing to God than costly sacrifice." Again, in terms of praising God with a song, we are told by musicologists that birds, too, can sing, that is, their chirping is musical and is a form of communication among their species.

This assertion is very reasonable. Listening to chirping of birds is quite fascinating. We have 3,400 acres of land, mainly forest. We are surrounded by trees and have varieties of birds. Eavesdropping at them in the early morning is like listening to a choral wherein one species of bird chirps one kind of tone, and another species chirp another kind of tone, and so on. No two species chirp the same tone. Each one has its own rhythm. Thus it is very amazing!

However, with all these marvelous and wondrous spectacle, we are absolutely correct to say that none of these birds can give explanation to what they are doing! With the exception of the mocking bird which has an uncanny ability to imitate the tone of other birds, we can strongly assert that the other species of birds only know their own specific tone! They just keep on repeating it all year round! For this reason, all these species of birds combined together are a trillion leagues apart from a single human musician who know hundreds and hundreds of songs and can give explanation of those songs!

In conclusion, let us listen to our heavenly friend, the brilliant St. Augustine: "If there is any loveliness discerned in the lineaments of the body, or beauty in the movement of music and song, it is the mind that makes this judgment. This means that there must be within the mind a superior form, one that is immaterial and independent of sound and space and time" (St. Augustine, City of God, Book VIII, Abridged Edition, Classical Philosophy and Refined Paganism, Ch. 6, p. 153). Therefore, it is truly right and just to: →

### **Icon # 715 = Heart's Revival With those Who Seek God**

"Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. For the Lord hears the needy and does not despise his own that are in bonds."

Many times in our lives when we felt sad and oppressed by various trials, problems, and difficulties, then we happened to be in Church and heard the singing of praises and spiritual songs to God, or even at times when we are just by ourselves alone in silence at Church, there is a mysterious feeling of revival in our hearts, a sentience of consolation and an awareness of gladness.

We can rightly call this experience a moment of Grace, a working of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. The Holy Spirit is the Consoler because He is infinite love. Knowledge is precious, but it does not console; art delights us, but its object is not to console; the only thing that consoles us is love.

When our heart is oppressed and torn to pieces, when great sadness and bitterness fill our soul, nothing but divine reality can assuage our pain, that is, love: love that knows how to bind divinely both pain and sadness; sadness that alone possesses the heavenly secret of drawing forth gladness from profound sorrow and pain.

We know from our own experience that life is a matter of lights and shadows, gladness and sadness. It is impossible to find anyone who is without sorrows, not even the Blessed Virgin Mary and our Lord Jesus, as it is written of the experience of the Blessed Virgin when she lost her Son, though eventually found Him: "Son, why hast thou done so to us? Behold, in sorrow thy father and I have been seeking thee" (St. Luke Ch. 2: 48, St. Joseph Textbook Edition, Confraternity Version).

It is also written of the Lord Jesus at Gethsemane when He took with Him Peter, James, and John, and began to be greatly in distressed and troubled; and He said to them: "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here and watch" (Mk. 14: 34).

It is also impossible to find anyone, even Nero and Hitler, in whose life there is not, if only a few brief instants, a flicker of gladness. Undoubtedly, there are more sorrows in our spiritual life than in our material, but there are also many consolations, "for the Lord hears the needy and does not despise his own that are in bonds." A verse from the Psalms expresses it thus: "When cares abound within me, your consolation gladdens my soul" (Ps. 94 (93): 19).

God's knowledge of how to proportion and time our consolations and our desolations is so marvelous. He measures out for our soul the precise quantity of each, at the moment when it is needed, so that in times of prosperity we will not be unmindful of adversity and in times of adversity we will not be forgetful of prosperity. For this reason, we could not help but: →

## Icon # 716 = Heaven and Earth Praise God

“Let heaven and earth praise him, the seas and everything that moves therein. For God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah; and his servants shall dwell there and possess it; the children of his servants shall inherit it, and those who love his name shall dwell in it.”

It really blew up our mind to realize the infinite Majesty, Glory, and Power of God so much so that heaven and earth, the seas and everything that moves therein, in other words, the whole universe, has to praise Him!

For us believers this is very natural and also very fitting, right, and just because we are fairly giving God His due. Since He is our Creator and we are His creatures, hence it is truly our duty to render Him praise. It doesn't mean that He is “beggarly” for our praise or that we will be destitute or outclassed in dignity in the act of giving it. Rather, the rendering of praise to God has the effectiveness to actuate our union with Him and put us back in right relationship with Him. Praise is always rendered in response to God's goodness, or God's majesty in creation, or God's faithfulness, or God's peace-making in the hearts of us sinners, or God's face seen in our Lord Jesus.

In his letter to the Ephesians our good friend, St. Paul, tells them and us that “God destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him, according to the purpose of him, who accomplishes all things according to the counsel of his will, we who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, who have heard the word of truth, the gospel of your 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” (Eph. 1: 5-14).

What, then, is the praise of Glory? Let us listen to our other heavenly friend, no other than St. Elizabeth of the Blessed Trinity, to open up the eyes of our mind to grasp what a praise of Glory is. “A praise of glory,” she said, “is a soul that dwells in God, loves Him with a love that is pure and disinterested, without seeking itself in the sweetness of this love; that loves Him above all gifts, and would do so even if it had received nothing from Him, and desires the good of the object thus loved. A praise of Glory is a soul that gazes steadfastly upon God in faith and simplicity. A praise of Glory is a silent soul, which remains like a lyre beneath the mysterious touch of the Holy Spirit, so that He may call forth divine harmonies from it.”

Truly, this is already a foretaste of the heavenly realm; it is undoubtedly correct because wherever God is heaven, too, is there. Thus if God is in our heart His kingdom is also there, as He Himself says: "The kingdom of God is within you." Of course, at the present moment we experience God's kingdom as in a dim mirror, but later we shall see Him as He is. Hence we who thus hope in Him need to purify ourselves as He is pure, and the more we purify ourselves the clearer the vision of God becomes, for blessedness is attached to purity of heart, as it is written: "Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God" (Mt. 5: 8).

Certainly, there is nothing in our present world that is more really a foretaste of dwelling in heaven than when one praises God with a lively faith, ardent hope, and a joyful love. God is unequivocally, with such people, they are in intimate terms with angels, and they benefit themselves.

The contemplation of God is arrived at in numerous ways. For God is not only known 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 He has created, things in heaven and things on earth, and in the assistance provided by His daily providence, especially in rebuilding His kingdom within us so that we may dwell therein and possess it.

It is true that it is the grace and mercy of God which always work good things in us, that when we are devoid of them our labor in the spiritual life is likely in vain, that is, without God's help our pursuit in the cultivation of virtues is in vain, as it is written: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Ps. 127: 1).

Finally, let us hearken again to our heavenly friend, the illustrious St. Augustine: "Who can measure the happiness of heaven, where no evil at all can touch us, no good will be out of reach; where life is to be one long laud extolling God, who will be all in all; where there will be no weariness to call for rest, no need to call for toil, no place for any energy but praise. Of this I am assured whenever I read or hear the sacred song: 'Blessed are they that dwell in thy house, O Lord: they shall praise thee for ever and ever.' Every fiber and organ of our imperishable body will play its part in the praising of God. On earth these varied organs have each a special function, but in heaven, function will be swallowed up in felicity, in the perfect certainty of an untroubled everlastingness of joy...will swell into a great hymn of praise to the supreme Artist who has fashioned us, within and without, in every fiber, and who, by this and every other element of a magnificent and marvelous order, will ravish our minds with spiritual beauty. These movements of our bodies will be of such unimaginable beauty that I dare not say more than this: There will be such poise, such grace, such beauty as become a place where nothing unbecoming can be found. Wherever the spirit wills, there, in a flash, will the body be. Nor will the spirit ever wills anything unbecoming whether to itself or to the body.

“In heaven, all glory will be true glory, since no one could ever err in praising too little or too much. True honor will never be denied where due, never given where undeserved, and, since none but the worthy are permitted there, no one will unworthily ambition glory. Perfect peace will reign, since nothing in ourselves or in any others could disturb this peace. 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.’

“God will be the source of every satisfaction, more than any heart can rightly crave, more than life and health, food and wealth, glory and honor, peace and every good – so that God, as St. Paul said, ‘may be all in all.’ He will be the consummation of all our desiring – the object of our unending vision, of our unlesening love, of our unwearying praise. And in this gift of vision, this response of love, this paean of praise, all alike will share, as all will share in everlasting life” (St. Augustine, City of God, Book XXII, The Eternal Bliss of the City of God, Ch. 30, Abridged Edition).

Truly, truly, the redeemed shall dwell in the City of God, “and his servants shall dwell there and possess it, the children of his servants shall inherit it, and those who love his name shall dwell in it.” Hence, in humble supplication we pray: →

### **Icon # 717 = Be Pleased, O God, to deliver me! O Lord make haste to help me!**

#### **Psalm 70 (69)**

“Be pleased, O God, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me!”

Monastic spirituality is, in fact, a spirituality of the heart; it is entirely directed to helping us discover our own inner source of spiritual vitality and living in substantial accord with it.

A short prayer from Scripture, or perhaps a small selection of such texts, for instance, “Be pleased, O God, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me! Or “O God, come to my assistance, O Lord, make haste to help me,” or other similar text, may serve as sufficient to sustain us in being aware of God’s presence throughout the day.

Our father St. Benedict is aware that the awareness of God’s presence will be eroded during the day unless it is specifically cultivated on a fairly regular basis. Far from asserting that “work is prayer,” St. Benedict realized that the prayerfulness of work is largely dependent on the continual refocusing of our life in God.

The ability to derive our prayer from the word of God is a simple indication of our cooperation with grace. We nourish ourselves daily with the Scriptures to strengthen our souls. Our internalization of the Scriptures is the bond which unites our life and our prayer.

Precipitate and unreflective self-expression is far more likely to be responsive to the urgings of instinct than the promptings of the Holy Spirit. One of the fundamental questions which the majority of us face is whether we pray. Time for prayer is not given us on a golden plate: we have to find the time or make the time. There is always a range of alternatives.

Even if we are lucky enough to succeed in allocating a modest period for prayer, we may still find that we have expended a lamentable disproportionate amount of effort simply to get started. The energies we could have used in quieting our minds and opening our hearts to God are sometimes squandered in organizing our chaotic lives.

This is one difficulty that was less rampant in a fervent monasticism where prayer was built into the way of life. It was not a question of finding time for prayer but of making good use of the time already made available for this purpose. Drowsiness and distractions are always possible, especially if our heart is elsewhere but, in general, with good will it is always possible to pray with minimum worriness.

Perhaps people in the outside world can learn from monks and nuns the importance of incorporating prayer into one's ordinary lifestyle that, without very much thought or effort, the practice of prayer becomes a constant element in one's daily program.

Certainly, this is not really something hard to do because from time to time, during the day, either at home or at work or whatever one is doing the soul can likely lift up to God, and say: "Be pleased, O God, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me!" If we are tempted or sad or in any difficulty, we can always cry out: "Be pleased, O God, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me!"

If depression and pain and suffering and the feeling of uselessness are seeking our life, we have to cry out: "Be pleased, O God, to deliver me! O Lord, make haste to help me!" It is also legitimate to add: →

## Icon # 718 = Shame, Confusion, and Dishonor

"Let them be put to shame and confusion who seek my life! Let them be turned back and brought to dishonor who desire my hurt!"

Undoubtedly, many of us know who are seeking our life and who desire to hurt us, not just momentarily but also eternally. However, we have to strongly assert that they cannot do us spiritual harm except by inducing us to hurt ourselves. When they enter into a person, it cannot be by forcing an entry; a person has to open the door to make them welcome.

In the words of our heavenly friend, a woman doctor of the Church, no other than St. Teresa of Avila, "They are enemies who can make a direct attack only upon those whom they see giving in to them...." She goes on to say: they "keep us in terror because we make ourselves liable to be terrorized by contracting other attachments – to honor, for example, and to possessions and pleasures. When this happens, they join forces with us – since by loving and desiring what we ought to hate, we become our own enemies – and they will do us much harm."

Moreover, she also said: "We make them fight against us with our own weapons, which we put into their hands when we ought to be using them in our own defense. This is the great pity of it. If only we will hate everything for God's sake and embrace the cross and try to serve Him in truth, the devil will fly from these truths as from the plague. He is a lover of lies and a lie himself. He will have no track with anyone who walks in truth."

In the Gospels Christ's assailant is referred to as "the Devil," "the tempter," and "Satan." The name Satan is derived from the Hebrew verb meaning "to oppose," and has therefore the general meaning of adversary. Adversary describes the chief of the fallen angels in his relationship to the kingdom of God and to ourselves: he is the leader of the host of spirits who work to seduce us from our allegiance to God; hence, seeking our life and desiring us hurt.

The Scriptures always present him as a real being, a mighty spirit, a great intelligence, inflexibly given over to evil. He is God's creature, originally the highest of angels, called like all the angels to eternal joy in God. However, the joy was not forced on him; it was to be won by the exercise, under grace, of his own freedom; it was his to choose, and, in fact, he opted otherwise.

Instead of standing in the truth in which he had been created, he deliberately abandoned it, impelled, it would seem, by pride; thus with him there fell away a great number of the angels. Hence, by their own volition they were "put to shame and confusion," "turned back and brought to dishonor," were eternally excluded from the heavenly bliss and bound forever to the evil they had chosen.

Their rebellion stripped them of all their supernatural life and power, but their natural powers and activities remained to them and these are henceforth devoted to expressing their pride and their enmity, seeking the ruins of human souls and desiring to hurt the human race who are made in the image and likeness of God.

It is the intention of these warped but still mighty superhuman spirits to hurt us and hunt our lives by desiring to hijack us of our humanity so as to make it impossible for us to know divinity. In the creation of the human race, Satan the ringleader of these warped spirits saw an opportunity of advancing his kingdom, and he would seem to have been spurred on by a special diabolic hatred, born of envy and jealousy, for the human race.

So he set out to subjugate humanity; he swindled and attacked our first parents in the garden of Eden, and his attack succeeded. He established a sort of sovereignty over humankind, the reality of which our Lord Jesus Himself recognized. Satan held the human race in bondage and could therefore with truth be called the Prince of this world.

In his moronic pride, he also revealed his false self-knowledge and contempt for his fellow rational creatures, both angelic and human, because in desiring to equal God's sovereignty and to usurp for himself the creaturely adoration rightly owed to God alone, he came to regard his fellow foolish angels, and likewise future human beings, as creatures made to serve and worship him rather than God – their Creator.

In persuading some to associate with his conceited dissent, he swayed them to turn their hearts and minds to himself, and to share in his own eternity of proud misery. He could not see his fellow creatures as equal in the kingdom of heaven, but only as subservient vassals to be valued only insofar as they would mouth his accolade and so nourish his delusional self-understanding as the cunning emulator of the Most High God.

Our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux hits the nail on the head when he says that Satan preferred to “reign over others in misery rather than to be subject with others to God in happiness” and “to rule over the sons of darkness rather than to share the lot of the sons of light.”

It was the Lord Jesus' mission to dispossess the Devil, to establish the kingdom of God in place of the kingdom of darkness and evil, as it is written: “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil” (1Jn 3: 8). It is correct to say that the two are contrasting realities, and unless we really recognize the horror of Satan's yoke, how it leads to “shame and confusion” and to “dishonor,” we will never appreciate and be grateful, and have a proper understanding of the deliverance which came to us through the Lord Jesus.

Once we recognized the horror of Satan's yoke, how it led to "shame and confusion" and to "dishonor," then we can say to him and his adherents who want to hurt us: →

### **Icon # 719 = Be Appalled Because of Shame**

"Let them be appalled because of their shame who say, 'Aha, Aha!' May all who seek thee rejoice and be glad in thee! May those who love thy salvation say evermore, 'God is great!'"

We are commanded by the Lord to love our enemies. Since Satan and his followers are our enemies, are we then to love them? By no means, of course. On the contrary, we have to beseech the Lord that He "let them be appalled because of their shame." They are a disgrace in the kingdom of heaven. They preferred the enjoyment to their own power. They would rather "reign over others in misery rather than to be subject with others to God in happiness," "to rule over the sons of darkness rather than to share the lot of the sons of light."

They departed from the higher good and common blessedness for all and turned to "goods" of their own choosing; preferring the pageantry of pride to the sublimity of humility, the craftiness of vanity to the simplicity of modesty, and the turmoil of dissension to the union of love, thus they became proud, deceitful and envious. No wonder that we have to "let them be appalled because of their shame."

Since the genuine happiness of all created intelligence, both angels and human beings, consists in union with God, it follows that the unhappiness and shame of the Devil and his devotees must be found in the very contrary, that is, in not adhering to God.

To the question: why are the good angels and good people happy? Certainly, the correct answer is: Because they adhere to God. To the question: why are the others unhappy? The right answer, of course, is: Because they do not adhere to God. As a matter of fact, there is no other "good" which can make any rational or intellectual creatures truly happy except God. Not every creature has the potentialities for happiness. For instance, ticks, chiggers, skunk, trees, whales, stones, and such things neither acquire nor have the capacity for this marvelous gift.

However, every creature which has this amazing capacity, that is, angels and human beings, especially the saner ones, know that they receive it not from themselves, since they have been created out of nothing, but from our Supreme Creator. Without any shadow of a doubt, to possess Him is to be eternally happy, beginning from this present life and be perfected in the next; to lose Him is to be in an unutterable misery and in an unfathomable shame.

Of course, all who seek God sincerely “rejoice and be glad” in Him for they unite themselves to Him, because God whose happiness absolutely depends upon Himself as His “own good” and not on any other good can never be unhappy since He can never lose Himself. Therefore, all rational creatures, both angels and human beings, that abandoned God are/shall “be appalled because of their shame,” but “all who seek Him rejoice and be glad in Him,” and “those who love His salvation say evermore, ‘God is great!,’” God is great, God is truly Great!

Moreover, to keep us from being too elated because of the abundance of God’s kindness shown to us, we have to admit who we are and have to acknowledge that He is our helper and deliverer. Thus in humility and sincerity we affirm: →

### **Icon # 720 = Thou are my Help and my Deliverer**

“But I am poor and needy; hasten to me, O God! Thou art my help and my deliverer; O Lord do not tarry!”

It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to declare that God, who is compassionate and merciful, does not disdain to be the hope of the poor and the needy; He does not refuse to show Himself the Helper and the Deliverer of them that trust Him.

If we are poised on the brink of misery and despair, we have to raise the voice of our soul and cry out: “Hasten to me, O God! Thou art my help and my deliverer; O Lord do not tarry!” We have to confess our poverty and necessity in humility, and learn to seek help and deliverance not from ourselves but from God, so that having acknowledged our poverty and necessity He will convey His consoling mercy to our soul.

Hence, if we only realized how comparatively small what we have in this present life and how easy they would be lost unless He who gave them helps us to keep them. These are worthy considerations which should render us all very circumspect and very docile to God, so that we will not be counted among those who do not need the help and deliverance of God, because they consider His aid as unnecessary to them.

It is correct to affirm that without the help of God we will not be able to preserve and guard what He bestows on us, because our minds often become proud when we succeed in upholding our prosperity, thinking that we ourselves are responsible for the good thing we have.

God created us in His own image and likeness; hence, we are intrinsically good. Therefore in our struggle against temptation and sin, if we will rely on the help of

God we would be able to overcome them; whereas we are bound to be overcome by them if we proudly rely on our own will and strength in preference to the wisdom and help of our Maker.

We are destined to a merited reward if our will remain firm, with the help of God, and to an equally deserved doom if our will waver because of our desertion from Him. Notice here that the reliance on the help and deliverance from God is a positive act that is only possible by the help of God, the reliance on our own will and strength is a negative falling away from favors of divine grace, and this is a possibility of our own choice.

Thus we have the free will to choose whether we consider God as our help and deliverer or not; but as for me I resolve to: →

### **Icon # 721 = In Thy Righteousness Deliver me and Rescue me**

#### **Psalm 71 (70)**

“In thee, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame! In thy righteousness deliver me and rescue me: incline thy ear to me, and save me!”

Of course, it is only when we take refuge in the Lord that we will never be put to shame, that is, eternal shame. Never was it heard since the foundation of the world that anyone who takes refuge in the Lord was put to shame.

In His righteousness, He is more desirous to deliver and rescue us, incline His ear to save us, if we take refuge and entrust ourselves to Him, for by His death on the cross the Lord Jesus has delivered us from death and eternal shame. In His death, He has given us His own righteousness, delivering us from the yoke of our captivity. He saves us because He loves us. We have been saved without merit on our part, but not without suffering on His.

Hence, does our affection for the Lord still slumber? It must be dead than slumber if it does not reciprocate to such a great benefit, if it does not pour itself out unreservedly in praise and thanksgiving. All of us who have wandered away from the right path of life should take courage, because the Lord Jesus, in His righteousness, came to deliver and rescue us; inclined His ear to us and save us! He comes every moment of our life to seek and to save that which was lost.

The Lord's condescension to our fallen misery, even to the point of death on the cross, reveals the truth about God that in His righteousness He will never put us to shame if we take refuge in Him, for He came into our world not to judge the world, but to deliver and rescue us, and to save us from our sins.

If we contemplate the agony of Christ on the cross, the depth of His sufferings, and His unwavering refusal to grumble against the will of His heavenly Father or the sinners He came to rescue, deliver, and to save, then we will discover a model of unparalleled patience.

If, in turn, we consider how the Lord Jesus endured the blasphemies and false accusations of His inveterate enemies, we will likewise find an unsurpassed paradigm of humility. For when He voluntarily remained silent in the face of His allegators, suffered their taunts, and submitted to such a shameful death, He freely chooses to identify Himself with those He came to save and to rescue from eternal shame, and be happy with Him in paradise.

On the other hand, neither our salvation nor our happiness is in this present world, but “we wait for it” in the future, and we wait with patience precisely because we are surrounded by evils which patience must endure until we come to where all good things are sources of inexpressible happiness and where there will be no longer anything to endure. Such is to be our salvation and deliverance in the hereafter because we took refuge in God while still in this present life. Thus we will never be put to eternal shame.

Therefore, let us maintain our allegiance in Him and never get out of this strong fortress, for the Lord is really a strong fortress where we can take refuge. For this reason, we continually uphold God as our: →

### **Icon # 722 = A Rock of Refuge, a strong Fortress**

“Be thou to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for thou art my rock and my fortress!”

We have to reiterate, from time to time, the basic fundamental truth that none of us is exempted from trials and difficulties or from sorrow and distress. However, it makes a tremendous difference if we have someone to go to in these times of pain in which we feel we are being protected.

We have heard of people who recourse to alcohol or drugs when confronted with overwhelming difficulties in their lives, but instead of solving the problem, it became worse. On the other hand, we also heard of people who recourse to God in prayer when faced with almost insurmountable trial, but instead of being cast down they were able to handle their trial constructively with their heads above the waters. From time immemorial God is well known to be a stronghold in the day of trouble, “a rock of refuge, a strong fortress” to those who recourse to Him, for never was it known that anyone who took refuge in Him was left unaided.

Christ is known to be the "Rock" which the builders, that is, the leaders of the people rejected, but has become the corner stone. He is the rock of our salvation, a strong fortress to save us; He assures us that He will not cast us out if we come to Him and take refuge, for He came down from heaven not to do His own will but the will of His heavenly Father; and the will of His heavenly Father is that He will not lose the ones who took refuge in Him, for as the hen spread out her wings in order that her chicks may enter and take refuge under them and there find a safe and strong fortress, so does the infinite and inexpressible loving-kindness of the Lord Jesus prepare itself to shelter us under His protection, opening His Sacred Heart, as it were, to save us.

Hence, when consider well our necessities, our need for help in our troubles and problems, our need for amendment of our life, our realization of the dangers which surrounds us; if we want to be saved, then, we have to take refuge in the Lord, and say: →

### **Icon # 723 = God Rescue Us From the Wicked**

"Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man."

To beseech God to "rescue" us from the hand of the wicked indicates that we are being held hostage by sin, that is, we are living a sinful life. However, it also manifests a certain openness to repentance on our part by the very fact that we are asking God to rescue us from this kind of life, because by ourselves we cannot hope to be delivered from it.

Sin is very unjust and cruel because it separates us from God who is the ultimate Good. Sin is also very addictive; its "grasp" is wicked and cruel, for it will not release us until we are converted by the grace of God. We need a higher power to rescue us from sin, for its impulse is often stronger than we expect. Who can deliver us from the wicked slavery of sin? Thanks be to God through Our Lord Jesus Christ, because "For our sake he made himself to be sin who knew no sins, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2Cor. 5: 21).

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of his grace which lavished upon us" (Eph. 1: 7-8). Truly, God's redemptive work in Christ Jesus Our Lord is His free decision to rescue us from the hand of the wicked, from the "grip" of sin and to offer us a share in His own divine life.

By graciously condescending to assume our human condition, Christ the Lord has, in effect, compelled us to ponder our own need of redemption. All God's works are magnificent indeed because He is Himself so great. However, three of His works, in particular, proclaim loudly how greatly He has dealt with us, namely:

the work of our first creation, the work of our present redemption, that is, our being “rescued” from the “grip” of sin, and the work of our future glorification.

Who is there who has been taught the truth who would not know that all those who live an evil life are being held captive by the devil? Certainly, Pilate was held hostage by the hand of the devil when he did not know the Lord’s coming for our deliverance. The chief priests, too, were under the “grasp” of the unjust and cruel demon when they exerted themselves to obliterate the world’s Redeemer- Rescuer, going so far in their persecution of Him as to crucify Him.

Given that the Lord gave Himself up for our “deliverance” into the “grasp” of Satan’s cronies, what else did He do but allow the same “grasp of the unjust and cruel men” to do its worst against Him? His intention was that, even as He was killed externally, He might free us and rescue us both externally and internally.

There is never a person in the present life, led by the elect, who has not felt the cruelty and injustice of Satan and his cruel cronies. There have been members of our “Redeemer’s Body,” that is, His Mystical Body, ever since the foundation of the world, who suffered cruelly and unjustly “from the hand of the wicked” even though they lived holy lives. Was not Abel one of His members? Did he not, by his acceptable sacrifice as well as by his silence before death, prefigure the death of our “Rescuer” Christ Jesus the Lord – the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, of which it is written: “like a lamb that is led to the slaughter and like a sheep that before its shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth” (Is. 53: 7)?

Ever since the world began, Satan the wicked guy has tried to inflict cruelty and injury and injustice to our “Rescuer’s” body. From the soles of His feet to the crown of His head he has wounded Him, beginning with the first human beings, until in his wicked and cruel wrath he even attacked and assaulted the very Head of the Church Himself.

Every day, indeed, our Rescuer suffers from all the cruelty and injustice His chosen ones suffers from the wicked, unjust, and cruel people. He still feels the wounds inflicted on His body by lawless, wicked, unjust, and cruel people. However, by His death and resurrection He has sealed His assurance of our deliverance “from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel men.” Therefore, we have to cling to Him always and acknowledge that:

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## Icon # 724 = God is Our Hope and Trust

“For thou, O Lord, art my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon thee I have leaned from my birth, thou art he who took me from my mother’s womb. My praise is continually of thee.”

To have God as our “hope” and “trust” is really the deepest depths of all our longings and desires, of course, with the expectation that one day we will see Him as He is without any intermediary, no longer as in a dim mirror as we have now in this present life.

Hope is the twin sister of Trust; wherever Hope is Trust is also there. It is noticeable that our “trust” in the Lord’s promise to inherit the kingdom which He has prepared for us since the foundation of the world makes us “hope” with eager expectation for the fulfillment of this promise.

Hope makes us gravitate toward God, toward life of eternity and happiness without end nor diminishment nor interruption. Although it does not give us absolute certitude of salvation, which would require a special revelation, as in the case of the children of Fatima and St. Bernadette, it has high certitude of tendency toward that goal. By hope we tend firmly and steadily to our ultimate destiny, just as the swallow tend to its home.

In the natural order, hope is one of the noblest sentiments God has placed in the human heart. Hope is recommencing “going on towards” the good which we want but which we do not yet possess. God desired and intended a perfect happiness for us and placed in our heart the desire and the hope of achieving it. Hence, we need to “trust” in the Lord with all our hearts, believing He is able and wise to do what is best for us.

Who do we know that is trustworthy? Really trustworthy? Do we know of anyone that we could “trust” with our life? If we do, then we know there is a special bond between us and that person. Rightly, one of the reasons we are able to “trust” another so much is because of the character of that person. We cannot trust a thief or a liar. But we can trust someone who has a track record of integrity, honesty, faithfulness, truthfulness, etc. Since this is the case, how much more of someone who absolutely said: “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life!” I am the Good Shepherd!” I am the Light of the World!”

Truly, God is trustworthy. The Scripture tells us to trust God, as it is written: “It is better to trust in the Lord than to trust in princes” (cf. Ps. 117 (118): 9). Though we cannot see the path ahead of us with its consoling blessings and challenging troubles, the Lord sees it and guides us through it with His solicitude, wisdom, and love.

These are truths we need to hear. Has not the Lord been ruling the whole universe before we were born? Most assuredly Yes! Will He not rule in the future,

He who says: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me?" Of course He will! Since these are all true, then should not all of us be trusting the Lord to rule not only this world but also our lives in the present, and "hope" with eager expectation for the fulfillment of His promise to inherit the kingdom He has prepared for us since the foundation of the world?

Since we serve the true and awesome God of the universe, our "hope" and our "trust" will not be wasted! Hence, with confidence we affirm: →

### **Icon # 725 = Leaning on God**

"Upon thee I have leaned from my birth; thou art he who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of thee."

To lean on someone is tantamount to rely on someone or to depend on someone or to count on someone or to gravitate onto someone. Since we are made in the image and likeness of God, therefore, it is intrinsic in our being that we should rely on Him, gravitate toward Him, depend on Him in order to preserve the integrity of our nature, and count on Him to help us persevere in all that is good, right, and true.

Like the angels we are also offered by God to inherit His kingdom and be happy for all eternity. However, though God has reserved to Himself the right and power of acting in our soul, of soliciting us to virtue and distracting us from evil, nevertheless He has left us a choice between welcoming and leaning upon Him or ordering Him out and be totally independent.

Regardless of how much a person likes ice cream or chocolate, he/she would not enjoy it if it were rammed down in his/her throat. We will never be happy doing things if they are forced upon us. Thus God gave us a free will with which we might choose the things we like, rather than be compelled to accept them. As freedom implies choice, so choice implies alternatives. So, God put into our being, from our birth, a "free will" to choose either to lean upon Him or to lean on ourselves or something else.

As inducement to choose what is best, God gave us human faculties which are, in essence, participation in God's faculties, namely, intelligence, reason, and will. If we use our freedom in the direction of what is best for us, that is, for our perfection, then ultimately we will permanently partake in the supernatural gift of God's Divine Nature, that is, to be a child of God and heir of heaven. What is God by nature, we will be by grace.

Probably, the majority of the human race has not heard the word "supernatural"; and of those who have heard, it is very likely that only few comprehend what it means. However, we can give an example. Notice, for

instance, a guitar and its function and what it is made for, that is, to produce music. It is not intended to speak; that is simply not its nature. But, suppose, if the guitar suddenly began to walk and dance or write a commentary on Psalms and quote other passages of Scriptures or utter rhetorical discourses, we would likely say, in spite of our bewilderment, that it is possessed of “supernatural” powers. It had done something which belongs neither to the powers or capacities or the nature of a guitar.

Consider another illustration. Let us take our case: as human beings. By “nature,” that is, naturally, we are just creatures of God, one of His innumerable craftsmanship. But suppose God gave us the power to be His children, of sharing His “Divine Life,” of being a member of the family of the Blessed Trinity, of being heirs of Heaven – that would be “supernatural” for us, more supernatural for a guitar to speak or walk or dance!

How can this be? We might ask. This is a hard saying! How can this be possible? Of course, this impossible for human beings, but not for God because nothing is impossible for Him. We can accept this based solely on the authority of God who is “Truth” Himself. Since God became a human being, like us in all things, except sin, and took and unite our “human nature” to His “Divine Nature,” therefore, it is possible for us to share in the divinity of God who humbles Himself to share our humanity.

God Himself ratified this when He said in the person of His “Incarnate Word,” Christ Jesus the Lord: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God” (Jn. 1: 12-13). Thus we are given a “super” dignity. However, we should not be complacent, because while we are still in this present life we are liable to forfeit it if we do not lean on God.

To persevere on this stupendous dignity, of course, we are given a very reasonable and doable condition: We are merely to love God Who is our perfection and to lean upon Him instead on ourselves. In other words we have to adhere to Him.

This condition is not tantamount to saying to a child: “If you eat candy, I will give you a dollar,” because candy is not the perfection of a child. Rather, it is like saying to the child: “If you drink milk and take vitamins, and sleep well, you will be healthy.”

As obeying the law of health is the perfection of the child, so, too, obeying the will of God is our perfection. How do we know that someone loves us? Just because he/she tells us? Not necessarily, because love proves itself less by words than by deeds and by an act of choice.

Human love is not love unless it is free; it is only because of the possibility of saying "NO" that there is so much charm in the saying of "YES." Love is not only an affirmation; it is also a negation. For example, when a husband chooses a wife, he not only accepts one woman, he excludes as wife every other woman in the world.

Hence, if he chooses to moonlight with other woman while his wife is still alive he is no longer living up to the perfection of marriage. Of course, the exception is on the ground of unchastity, as the Lord said: "It was also said, 'whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (Mt. 5: 31-312).

Therefore, when we accept God as our God, we not only accept One God, but we also exclude other gods. Thus if we choose to moonlight with other gods, such as: Power, wealth, prestige, the self, etc, while praising the One God, living and true, with our lips, we are no longer living up to our perfection, that is, obeying His will. In this case, we are leaning upon ourselves and something else instead of God who is our perfection. We are no longer "adhering" to Him, the uncreated Good. As a consequence, we will no longer find true happiness.

Let us go back to the case of the angels, because like them we were also offered to inherit God's kingdom and be happy with Him for all eternity. Since the happiness of all the angels consists in union with God, it follows that their unhappiness must be found in the very contrary, that is, in not leaning upon Him and adhering to Him. Thus to the question: 'Why are the good angels happy?' The correct answer is certainly: 'Because they lean upon God and adhere to Him.' To the question: 'Why are the other angels unhappy?' The answer is: 'Because they do not lean on God and adhere to him.'

In fact, there is no other good which can make any rational or intellectual creatures truly happy except God. Not every creature has the capacities and potentialities for happiness. Animals, trees, stones, minerals, and such things neither have the potential nor have the capacity for this gift.

However, every creature which has this capacity and potentiality received it, not from itself, since it is not self-existent but has been created out of nothing, but from its Creator. To possess God, therefore, is to be truly happy; to lose Him is to be in agonizing misery; and of course, God whose happiness depends solely upon Himself as His own good and not on any other good can never be unhappy since He can never lose Himself.

Hence, there can be no unchangeable good except the One, True, and Blessed God. All things which He has graciously created are good because they

are made by Him, but they are subject to change because they were made, not out of Him, but out of nothing.

Although they are not supremely good, since God is a greater good than they, these mutable beings are, none the less, highly good by reason of their potentiality and capacity for union with and, therefore, beatitude in the immutable Good which is absolutely their good that, without this good, agonizing misery is inevitable.

There is no reason to doubt that the contrary dispositions which have developed among the good and bad angels are due, not to different natures and origins, because God the Author and Creator of all substances has created them both, but to the dissimilar choices and desires of these angels themselves.

Some, remaining faithful to God and leaning upon Him, the common good of all, have lived in the happiness of His eternal beatitude, truth, and love; while others, preferring the enjoyment of their own will and their own power, leaning on themselves, instead of God, as though they were their own good, departed from the higher good and common blessedness for all and turned to goods of their own choosing.

Preferring the pomp of pride to this sublimity of eternal joy, the craftiness of vanity to the certainty of truth, and the turmoil of dissension to the union of love, they became proud, deceitful, and cunning. The very failure of the bad angels to cling to God and lean on Him, a desertion that damaged their nature like an incurable disease, is itself proof enough that their nature God gave them was good, so good that not to be one with God was for them a disaster (cf. St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XII Created Wills and the Distinction of Good and Evil, Ch. 1, p. 246).

In other words, they preferred to lean upon themselves, rely on their own strength, and depend on their self-will, rather than to lean upon God who is the source of their own existence and well-being. They chose to “reign over others in misery than to be subject with others to God in happiness” and “to rule over the sons of darkness rather than to share the lot of the sons of light.”

This is really mind boggling! How did this “Dark Power” go wrong? Undoubtedly, we are asking here a question to which our human race cannot give unequivocal answer. However, a traditional and reasonable guess, based on our own experiences of going wrong, can be offered.

The moment we have a “self” at all, there is a possibility of “putting ourselves first,” wanting to be the center – our own master, wanting to be God. As a matter of fact that was the sin of Lucifer who said in his heart: “I will go up to heaven, I will set my throne above the stars of God, I will sit on the mountain of

the covenant, in the sides of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will be like the Most High" (Is. 14: 12-14).

This is the sin he taught our human race. He puts into the heads of our remote ancestors the idea that they could "be like gods," could set up on their own as if they had created themselves, be their own rulers, invent some sort of happiness for themselves outside God – apart from God.

And out of that hopeless attempt has come nearly all that we call human history: money, poverty, ambition, vanity, war, human trafficking, prostitution, racism, drugs smuggling, empires, slavery, and the like, the long terrible story of human beings trying to find something other than God which makes us happy.

The reason why it can never ever succeed is this: God made us, invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on gasoline, and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the "human machine" to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, or the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other.

That is why it is just no good asking God to make us happy in our own way without bothering about religion and cultivating our prayer life, doing religious readings and churchgoing, for they are necessary parts to make us running in the Highway of life. We have to be continually reminded of what we believe. Neither this belief nor any other will automatically remain alive in the mind. It must be fed to keep us going in the life of God, leaning upon Him, just as an engine is fed by gas to keep it running.

As a matter of fact, if we examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in God, no longer leaning upon Him, we wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift away?

Certainly, God cannot give us a true happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing. That is the key to human history. Terrific energy is expended, civilizations are built up, excellent institutions devised, but each time something goes wrong. Some fatal flaw always brings the selfish, greedy, and cruel people to the top and it all slides back into misery and ruin. In fact, the machine conks. It seems to start up all right and runs a few yards, and then it breaks down. They are trying to run in on wrong fluid. That is what Satan has done to us human beings (cf. C.S. Lewis, *What Christians Believe, The Shocking Alternative, The Best of C.S. Lewis*, p. 438).

Undoubtedly, in a world dominated by the "Prince of Darkness" and his cronies, anyone who would not go along with them and dance with their music, will be branded as "out of touch with reality" and "against progress." If we are one of those who "resist" and have nothing to do with the "Prince of Darkness" and all

his works and what he stands for, but consider God as our strong refuge, then we have to expect: →

### **Icon # 726 = Participants in the Prophetic Role of Christ in Society**

“I have been as a portent to many; but thou art my strong refuge. My mouth is filled with thy praise, and with thy glory all the day.”

To be a portent to many rightly indicates our prophetic role in society. This is so, because we share in the three-fold titles of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ one of which is a prophet. The word prophet is ordinarily understood as meaning one who “foretells” future events. At the time our English Bible was translated, the word prophet meant also “a preacher” – and prophesying meant preaching.

A meaning of the word prophet less often recognized, but really as common, is one who tells – a forth-teller – who speaks for another, most usually for God. It is in this sense that many Bible characters are called prophets, as for instance, Aaron, Moses, and Christ (cf. Cruden's Complete Concordance to the Old Testament, by Alexander Cruden).

In referring to Christ, Moses had foretold that one day God will raise up a prophet like him, as it is written: “The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren – him you shall heed...’ ‘And the Lord said to me: ...I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren; and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not give heed to my words which he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him” (Dt. 18: 15-19).

The prophet Jeremiah, too, “have been a portent to many;” but the Lord was his strong refuge, as it is written: “But you, gird up your loins; arise, and say to them everything that I command you. Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze wall, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princess, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the Lord, to deliver you” (Jer. 1: 17-19). “See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer. 1: 10).

As participants in the prophetic role of the Lord Jesus, we, too, like Jeremiah and the other prophets have a function to pluck up and to break down, to destroy, to overthrow, to build, and to plant. To pluck up and to break down is simply to bring down what is high or which is high. Hence, as a portent to many we have the capacity to pluck up and break down what is not Godly, first in ourselves,

then also in others as though we have removed the beam in our eyes first, and then took out the mote in the other's eye, pride, vices, sin, evil, etc.

To pluck up and break down also mean to depress unhealthy energy or unwholesome spirits. Depressing is lowering or reducing the activity of these spirits, first and foremost in ourselves, because charity begins at home, then in others. For instance, the prophet Elijah plucked up and broke down the prophets of Baal and their god in the presence of the people of Israel (cf. 1 Kings 18: 26-27).

To destroy is to demolish, to exterminate, to make useless. Thus after plucking up and breaking down, a prophet destroys. Hence, we are given by Christ a capability to destroy the power of Satan and make his works useless, as it is written: "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 Jn. 3:8).

Notice the case of the prophet Elijah: after pulling down Baal and his prophets, Elijah destroyed – killed them all (cf. 1 Kings 18: 40). To overthrow is to cause something one is holding to drop. For example, the people of Israel and the prophets of Baal were holding the opinion that Baal was a true god, but Elijah overthrew that opinion and proved that Baal is an idol and the true God is the God of Abraham.

To build is to raise, to construct, to set up or cause to increase. Thus after plucking up and breaking down, destroying, and overthrowing, a prophet builds. Hence, after Elijah slew all the prophets of Baal he not only set up that the God of Abraham is the true God and Baal is an idol, but he brought rain causing the land of Israel to increase.

Accordingly, after we had plucked up and broke down, destroyed, and overthrew the vices in our lives and all our false beliefs and ideologies, we have to build up a virtuous life and increase our engagement in our role in the Church.

Finally, to plant. To plant is to establish, to embed, to sow, or to instill. For instance, Elijah established not only that the God of Abraham is the true God, but also instilled in the people of Israel an awesome reverence for God, and planting His word in them.

We, too, as monks or religious or Christians or Catholics or as workers in the Vineyard of the Lord, has to sow the word of God to people and call them to respond. We have a role, in whatever state of life we are in, to admonish, to warn, to intercede, to teach, to counsel, to encourage, and to direct people to God, so that, one day, we will be together with Him in His eternal kingdom where each one of us will be filled with infinite glory and happiness; and in

indescribable rupture will say: “My mouth is filled with thy praise, and with the glory all the day.”

However, since we are still in this present life and are subject to aging, no matter how we meticulously care for our health, so we have to persevere in praying: →

### **Icon # 727 = God is Equally Solicitous with the Elderly as He is with the Unborn Children**

“Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent.”

Pope Francis in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: *Amoris Laetitia* – The Joy of the Gospel, has this to say about the elderly: “The Church cannot and does not want to conform to a mentality of impatience, and much less of indifference and contempt, towards old age. We must reawaken the collective sense of gratitude, of appreciation; of hospitality, which makes the elderly feel like a living part of the community. Our elderly are men and women, fathers and mothers, who came before us on our own road, in our own house, in our daily battle for a worthy life” (#191).

“Saint John Paul II asked us to be attentive to the role of the elderly in our families, because there are cultures which, ‘especially in the wake of disordered industrial and urban development, have both in the past and in the present set the elderly aside in unacceptable ways.’ The elderly help us to appreciate ‘the continuity of the generations,’ by their ‘charism of bridging the gap.’ Very often it is grandparents who ensure that the most important values are passed down to their grandchildren, and ‘many people can testify that they owe their initiation into the Christian life to their grandparents.’ Attention to the elderly makes the difference in society. Does a society show concern for the elderly? Does it make room for the elderly? Such society will move forward if it respects the wisdom of the elderly” (#192).

“The lack of historical memory is a serious shortcoming in our society. A mentality that can only say, ‘Then was then, now is now,’ is ultimately immature. Knowing and judging past events is the only way to build a meaningful future. Memory is necessary for growth: ‘Recall the former days’ (Heb. 10: 32). Listening to the elderly tell their stories is good for children and young people; it makes them feel connected to the living history of their families, their neighborhoods and their country. A family that fails to respect and cherish its grandparents, who are its living memory, is already in decline, whereas a family that remembers has a future. A society that has no room for the elderly or discards them because they create problems, has a deadly virus, it is from its roots” (Pope Francis, *The Joy of Love*, #193).

Of course, on the part of God, He will never cast us off and the elderly in time of old age, because He is equally solicitous with the elderly as He is with the unborn children. As He says through the prophet Isaiah: "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 never forget you" (Is. 49: 15). Hence, it is right to assert: Can family members cast off their sickly and elderly parents that, instead of showing them true compassion by caring for them and administering palliative care, they blindly prefer false compassion by having them euthanized? Even these may cast off their sickly and elderly parent, yet God will never cast them off.

On the other hand, what if the sickly and elderly person themselves freely and deliberately opted to be euthanized to end their suffering? In this case, we will leave to God to decide their eternal destiny, because we don't have a mandate to judge them. However, we have a role, in whatever state of life we are in, to admonish, to warn, to intercede, to teach, to counsel, to encourage, and to direct the people of God, so that, one day, we will be together with Him in His eternal kingdom.

For this reason, we have to expose the nature of Euthanasia and suicide. The Catechism of the Catholic Church emphatically says: "Those whose lives are diminished or weakened deserve special respect. Sick or handicapped persons should be helped to lead lives as normal as possible. Whatever its motives and means direct euthanasia consists in putting an end to lives of handicapped, sick, or dying persons. It is morally unacceptable. Thus an act or omission which, of itself or by intention, causes death in order to eliminate suffering constitute a murder gravely contrary to the dignity of the human person and to the respect due to the living God, his Creator. The error of judgment into which one can fall in good faith does not change the nature of this murderous act, which must always be forbidden and excluded.

"Discontinuing medical procedure that are burdensome, dangerous, extraordinary, or disproportionate to the expected outcome can be legitimate; it is the refusal of 'over - zealous' treatment. Here one does not will to cause death; one's inability to impede it is merely accepted. The decisions should be made by the patient if he is competent and able or, if not, by those legally entitled to act for the patient, whose reasonable will and legitimate interests must always be respected.

"Even if death is thought imminent, the ordinary care owed to a sick person cannot be legitimately interrupted. The use of painkillers to alleviate the sufferings of the dying, even at the risk of shortening their days, can be morally in conformity with human dignity if death is not willed as either an end or a means, but only foreseen and tolerated as inevitable. Palliative care is a special form of disinterested charity. As such it should be encouraged" (#'s 2276 – 2279).

In the issue of taking one's own life, the Catholic Church teaches: "Everyone is responsible for his life before God who has given it to him. It is God who remains the sovereign Master of life. We are obliged to accept life gratefully and preserve it for his honor and the salvation of our souls. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. It is not ours to dispose of.

"Suicide contradicts the natural inclination of the human being to preserve and perpetuate his life. It is gravely contrary to the just love of self. It likewise offends love of neighbor because it unjustly breaks the ties of solidarity with family, nation, and other human societies to which we continue to have obligations. Suicide is contrary to love for the living God.

"If suicide is committed with the intention of setting an example, especially to the young, it also takes on the gravity of scandal. Voluntary cooperation in suicide is contrary to the moral law. Grave psychological disturbances, anguish, or grave fear of hardship, suffering, or torture can diminish the responsibility of the one committing suicide. We should not despair of the eternal salvation of persons who have taken their own lives. By ways known to him alone, God can provide the opportunity for salutary repentance. The Church prays for persons who have taken their own lives" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, #'s 2280 – 2283).

Let us go back to our claim that God will not cast us and the elderly off in time of old age because He is equally caring with the elderly as He is with the unborn children. God who cared for us when we were still in our mother's womb and in our younger days when we had more strength, will help us even more in our old age and weakness. It is natural and proper for us who see old age looming on the horizon to pray for special grace and special strength to enable us to accept what we cannot ward off, and what we cannot but dread.

For who can look upon the infirmities of old age as coming upon herself or himself, but with sad and pensive feeling? Who would wish and long for to be an old person? Who can gaze upon a person tottering with years and broken down with illnesses; a person whose sight and hearing are gone; a person who is alone amidst the grave of all the friends and neighbors he or she had in early life; a person who is a burden to himself or herself or to the world; a person who has reached the scene of "second childhood" and mere oblivion, without teeth, without eyes, without taste, without everything; that scene when one can say: "I have lived long enough; my way of life is fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf; and that which should accompany old age, as honor, love, obedience, troops of friends, I must not look to have."

Who can imagine all this and not pray for special grace for himself or herself, should he or she live to see those days of infirmity and weakness? And who, in

view of such infirmities, can fail to see the appropriateness of seeking the grace of God in early years?

The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes has this wholesome advice for all of us: “Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come; and the years draw nigh, when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them;’ before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain; in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those that look through the windows are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut; when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the voice of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because man goes to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the street....” (Ecc. 12: 1-5).

It is truly right and just to affirm that a person can lay up nothing better for the infirmities and weaknesses of old age than the favor of God, sought by earnest prayer, in the days of our youth and our mature years. By doing this we equipped ourselves against frustration and disappointment of old age; as a consequence, we will be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might, and be able to stand against the wiles of the devil, because: →

### **Icon # 728 = The Danger of Being Forsaken by God**

“For my enemies speak concerning me, those who watch for my life consult together, and say, ‘God has forsaken him; pursue and seize him, for there is none to deliver him.’”

If it is true that God has forsaken us, as our enemies purported, therefore, they can pursue and seize us because there is none to deliver us, then, we are certainly in trouble. The cogent reason for this is that we, as human beings – relying on ourselves alone and will power, without the help of God, in no way can conquer our enemies, “For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6: 12).

It is for this reason that it is very dangerous to be forsaken by God. It is far better to be forsaken by men, that is, by friends or colleagues or by family than to be forsaken by God, especially as we cross the border between our present world and the other world. We have to keep on reiterating that God will not abandon us against our will. We have to choose. His mercy is infinite, but His justice is also infinite.

It is only when we arrived at the shore that we will be sorted out either to be with God forever or separated from Him forever. Therefore, how we live our life in this present world is determinative whether we will be forsaken by God or not.

On the other hand, we have to firmly assert that so long as we are really determined to adhere to God and do His will, there is a tremendous benefit to be forsaken sometimes by God. The compelling reason for this is that constantly assaulted by the harassment of our enemies, how they watch for our life, we would never feel that we do not need the help of God. Thus we would always meditate on Him and cry out to Him, and we would neither sink into sluggish inactivity nor lose our ability to fight and training in virtues.

For oftentimes security and prosperity have cast down those whom adversities cannot overcome; complacency is dangerous! Hence, by being forsaken by God for a short while and humbly seeing the weakness of our flesh, we may not become proud because of any previous purity of heart which has been granted us by His visitations; and so that, by confirming to us that we are abandoned by Him we cannot regain that condition by any groans and effort of our own, we may understand that even our previous consolations were conferred on us not by our own doing but by His gracious condescension.

The other reason for this trial, that is, to be forsaken sometimes by God, is to put to the proof our perseverance and steadfastness of mind and our desires, and also to manifest in us with what yearning of heart and earnestness of prayer we must look for the solace of God when He has forsaken us. Hence, when we realize how much effort it takes to seek out that consolation and gladness of heart once it has departed, we may earnestly strive to guard it more carefully and to hold on to it more attentively once it has been recovered.

We will only be secure in this present life when we will never cease to cry out: →

### **Icon # 729 = The Importance of God's Help**

"O God, be not far from me; O my God, make haste to help me."

To be absolutely honest, we have to maintain our conviction that without the help of God we are not able even to preserve and guard what He bestows upon us. Truly, we are better off if we really know how comparatively miniscule what we have, and how easily it will be lost unless the Lord who gave it helps us to keep it! These are reasons which should make us very careful and very obedient to God, so that we will not be counted among those who do not rely on the help of God, because they consider His help as redundant to them.

When God created us in His own image and likeness we had been so constituted that if, as a good person in virtue of being created by Him, we will

doggedly rely on His help, we can truly forestall the assaults of “our enemies.” Whereas we are likely bound to be overcome if we proudly rely on our own will in preference to the wisdom and assistance of God. Of course, we are given a free will. We are destined to a merited reward if we will remain steadfast with the help of God and to an equally deserved condemnation if we careen toward “our enemies” because of our desertion from God. In other words, we freely abandoned God and did not adhere to His will.

Pay attention here that, whereas reliance on the “help of God” is a positive act that is only possible by the “help of God,” the reliance on our “own will” is a negative falling away from favors of divine grace, which is a possibility of our own choice.

Our heavenly friend, no other than the illustrious doctor of the Church, St. Augustine, pointed out that “when the will turns from the good and does evil, it does so by the freedom of its own choice, but when it turns from evil and does good, it does so only with the help of God” (St. Augustine, City of God, Book XV The Two Cities in Early Biblical History, Ch. 21).

What more can we say!? It is this: →

### **Icon # 730 = The Accuser**

“May my accusers be put to shame and consumed; with scorn and disgrace may they be covered who seek my hurt.”

It is truly right and just to attest that we have already a fulfillment of this request. Here's a testimony in the book of Revelation: “And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, ‘Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God’ (Rev. 12: 10).

Our Accuser, who accuses us before God, day and night even while we are asleep and probably dreaming controversial dreams, hence, for him, we are committing sin, yet he forgot that he failed in his class in moral theology that for sin to be a sin has to have these three elements, namely, 1<sup>st</sup>, it is done with full knowledge, 2<sup>nd</sup>, it is done with full consent without any pressure, and 3<sup>rd</sup>, the action itself is sinful; none of these three elements are in a dream because we are sleeping; yet he accuses us even at night, is really very cunning!

When he could not find evil to charge us with, however, he tries to twist goodness into evil. When defeated on the field of works, he scrutinizes our words in order to find grounds for accusation. When he does not even find anything to indict us with in our words, he tries to topple us by the intentions of our hearts, as

though our good deeds were not done with a good intention in mind, and on that account God should not count them as good; and he goes so far to accuse us even while sleeping!

For this reason we are rightly and justly told in the book of Revelation by the voice of an angel: "The accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God" (Rev. 12: 10). Now the Sacred Scriptures often substitute the word "day" for prosperity and the word "night" for adversity. Hence, our Accuser never stops accusing us day and night, because he struggles to prove us blameworthy both in prosperity and in adversity. He accuses us by day when he insinuates that we used our prosperity wrongly; he accuses us at night when he shows how impatient we are in adversity.

One hundred percent of those who are tracking our exposition from Psalm 1 up to now absolutely know who this Accuser is, but for the sake of those who just encounter this explication now we will expose him. He is no other than the Devil. The appellation "devil" is derived from the way in which the evil spirit goes about his work. It comes from the Greek noun diabolos which is, in turn, derived from the verb diabollo meaning to twist awry, to accuse, and to calumniate.

It is usually reserved for the prince of calumniators, who speaks evil of men to God and of God to men. Thus we have to be extremely careful of speaking evil or accusing other people to God or accusing God of being unjust if something wrong happen to us, for if we grumble against God if some tragedy befall on us, are we not accusing Him of injustice? We evaluate ourselves, therefore, as more righteous than Him if we prepare a plea against our misfortune.

Without any doubt, we also make Him subordinate to ourselves when we accuse Him of injustice because of our affliction. Therefore, in order that we might not presume so far as to reproach Him with a fault, we should humbly think of Him as the Creator of nature, because He who made us and all humankind in a wonderful way out of nothing is no wicked persecutor of the works of His hands. On our part: →

### **Icon # 731 = Hope Keeps us Fighting Fearlessly every Obstacle**

"But I will hope continually, and I will praise thee yet more and more. My mouth will tell of thy righteous acts, of thy deeds of salvation all the day, for their number is past my knowledge."

When we fight for a lofty ideal, we do not give up or allow ourselves to be intimidated by failures or reverses; we get the tools or the weapons or whatever means necessary to overcome the obstacles to our victory.

Even when we are drenched by rain and battered by gales and met thorns and tangles briars along the way, we pushed resolutely forward without giving up, because we put our whole heart and mind and strength into reaching our goal. Truly, it is hope that keeps us fighting fearlessly every obstacle.

Of course, hope is one of the three theological virtues. In the natural order, hope is one of the noblest sentiments God has placed in the human heart. Hope is relaunching, "going on towards" the "good" which we desire but which we do not yet obtain. Christian hope goads us on without fear of setbacks to an ever more penetration of the nitty-gritty furrow of everyday reality. If God is with us, who is against us?!

"The object of hope" says our heavenly friend, no other than the angelic doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas, "has two aspects. First, it must be with regards to a good; otherwise, one does not hope – one fears. In the second place, it has to be concerned with an arduous, difficult, but attainable good. The higher the good to be gained, the higher should be the wish and hope to reach it. And if the good to be reached is a supernatural one (God), adequate supernatural means are required to reach it. Such requisite holy desires are propelled by the theological virtue of hope."

Hence, if we must strive to attain the Kingdom of Heaven, to be with God for all eternity without the slightest separation, with an expenditure of effort which can be discouraging for those who suffer and struggle, we must strain every nerve and sinew, applying especially our will, which is strengthened enormously by the virtue of hope. We put our faith to work, assisted by hope, when we live in charity.

If these things are ours and abound we will be in a fairly good position to praise God more and more, and at the utmost top of our voice proclaim: "You are great, O Lord, and greatly to be praised: great is your power and your wisdom is without measure. And man, so small a part of your creation, wants to praise you: this man, though clothed with mortality and bearing the evidence of sin and the proof that you withstand the proud. Despite everything, man, though but a small part of your creation, wants to praise you. You yourself encourage him to delight in your praise, for you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 30).

Certainly, we cannot do full justice to tell all the righteous acts of God and His works of salvation which He did through His only begotten Son, no other than Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, because they are more than we can tell; as it is written: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn. 21: 25).

Even the enemies of Christ Himself had acknowledged that He has “performs many signs” to the utmost extent that it worried them to death that all the people will believe in Him. In His controversy with them the Lord Jesus always invoke His deeds as His credential that His works are the works of the Father Himself and that the Father is in Him and He is in the Father.

In one of their many controversies the Lord was accused of blasphemy because being a man He makes Himself God. The Lord answered them, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods’? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (and Scripture cannot be broken), do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’? If I am not doing the work 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: 34-38). He also told them: “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).

In other words, all the works of the Lord Jesus are the works of the Father and all the works of the Father are the work of the Lord Jesus. Of course, done in, by, with, and through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the mind-boggling work of our salvation is the work of the Most Blessed Trinity. Hence, the constant meditation upon the deeds of the Lord Jesus is genuine wisdom, authentic philosophy, the science of salvation, and the guarantee of our impending and future eternal happiness.

If we are asked how we can be happy before we are finally saved, we have a potent response from our good friend, St. Paul: “For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Rom. 8: 24-25).

Of course, St. Paul was not speaking of people devoid of the four cardinal virtues: prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice, but of people whose virtues are true virtues because they are people living by faith. Thus, as ‘we are saved by hope,’ so we are made happy by hope. Neither our salvation nor our eternal happiness is in this present world, but ‘we wait for it’ in the next world, and we wait ‘with patience,’ precisely because we are surrounded by evils which patience must endure until we arrived at our destination where all good things are sources of inexpressible joy and where there will be no longer anything to endure. Such is to be our salvation in the hereafter, such is our final beatitude which is past beyond our knowledge and understanding.

Since this is our hope, grounded on faith, and activated by love, we can: →

## Icon # 732 = One Alone is Good and Righteous

"With the mighty deeds of the Lord God I will come. I will praise thy righteousness, thine alone."

In one of His preaching tours, someone came up to Our Lord Jesus, saying: "Teacher, what good deed must I do, to have eternal life?" The Lord answered him: "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is one alone who is good...." (Mt. 19: 16-17).

Without any shadow of a doubt, this answer is so amazing! The Lord equates 'what is good' to a "person" instead of an action, such as "keeping the commandments," or virtuous deeds, or righteous conduct. In other words, God is alone is good.

Of course, we can admire other "good" with the knowledge that it is a participation in the goodness of God. Since God alone is good, it follows that He alone is righteous. Although we can praise other righteous deeds for the reason that they are a sharing in the righteousness of God, we are absolutely free to "praise thy righteousness, thine alone." The primary reason for this is that God's righteousness never change or is subject to change because He is "immutable," as it is written: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever" (Heb. 13: 8).

Whereas, our own righteousness or other people's righteousness changes and is subject to change, because we are not immutable. There is no absolute guarantee that any righteous people yesterday or today will remain righteous tomorrow or in the future. Even Lucifer himself was not able to remain righteous. The other reason why it is correct to solely praise God's righteousness is that mere human beings' righteousness put side by side with God's righteousness is just like a polluted garment.

To bolster our contention, let us give a hearing to one of the illustrious desert fathers, no other than Abba Theonas: "Just as our goodness becomes wickedness in the light of the heavenly goodness, so also our righteousness, is considered like the cloth of a menstruous woman, as the prophet Isaiah says: 'All of our righteous deeds are the cloth of a menstruous woman' [Is. 64: 6] (John Cassian's Conferences, Twenty Third Conference, The Third Conference of Abba Theonas: On Sinlessness, p. 793).

Once we are convinced of our own sinfulness, weaknesses, and imperfection, we would be hardly convinced of our own righteousness; and once we are convinced that the Lord Jesus has saved us from sin, and died for us, then we would be convinced that He alone is our righteousness.

If these things are ours and abound, they keep us from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of Our Lord Jesus Christ. For those who lack these things are blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that they were cleansed from their old sins (cf. 2 Pt. 1: 8-9).

The last, but not the least, here is what our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux, asserted: "The righteous man never considers himself to have arrived, he never says, 'it is enough,' but he always hungers and thirsts for righteousness, so that even if he should never die he would always try as hard as he could to be even more righteous, always try with all his strength to go from good to better."

Of course, this is not our own doing, but owing to God's grace. Therefore, it is right and fitting to confess: →

### **Icon # 733 = Challenges of Young People**

"O God, from my youth thou hast taught me, and I still proclaim thy wondrous deeds."

It is truly a blessing, even though our parents are not religious or only nominal Christian or Catholic, if they sent us to a Catholic or Christian school for our elementary or secondary education, for even if we did not get much from it, at least, in our later years the little that we learned from it, such as saying a prayer or receiving the sacrament of reconciliation or going to Mass, if we are Catholics, will contribute to our own-going conversion and growth in self-knowledge and knowledge of God. Thus we will still be able to proclaim the wondrous deeds of God in our own personal life.

Whether we like it or not we have to accept that we are all going to face problems. Youth of today are terribly surrounded by them. Many of these problems have always been in our society but are now visible in the public square, especially in the advent of television and the internet, and the movies. Much of the media is aligned against Christian values, and youth are deeply impacted by what they absorb in the media. In a set of Kaiser Family Foundation studies, it shows that 76% of teens said that one reason young people have sex is because TV shows and movies "make it seem normal."

Christian values are also heavily attacked in the public school system. Take for instance, in California comprehensive sexual health and HIV/AIDS instruction requires schools to teach students how to have "safe sex." "Abstinence only" education is not permitted in California public schools. More than that, California schools cannot inform parents if their children leave campus to receive certain confidential medical services, including abortions. Classic

Christian values related to sexuality and marriage are under a serious attack in the public school system.

Another problem that faces young people, especially young Christians, is once they get to college. They are likely to encounter professors who are even more aggressive and hostile in their opposition to Christianity and Christian values. According to the Institute for Jewish and Community research, a survey of 1,200 college faculty members revealed that 1 in 4 professors (25%) is an atheist or agnostic (compared with 4-5% in the general population). In addition, only 6% of university professors say the Bible is "the actual word of God." Instead, 51% say the Bible is "an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts."

They are also challenged by other university students. The attitude and influence of hostile and pugnacious professors is often accepted by university students happy to reject the moral teaching of the Christian worldview. Atheist student groups are dramatically increasing in universities across the United States. For instance, the Secular Student Alliance increased from 80 student clubs in 2007 to more than 250 clubs in 2011.

The impact of these cultural forces aligning against the Christian worldview is certainly palpable among young people today. Of course, there are still other issues that young people have to deal with to a certain degree at some time or another, such as: Absent father figures, divorce and family issues, identity and self-image issues, drugs and alcohol abuse, violence in schools, materialism, etc.

The bad news is that these issues won't go away. As long as we live in this fallen world, these problems or challenges will always be there. The good news is that God has given us ammunition in battling them, as our good friend, St. Paul, writes: "Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray at all times in the Spirit with all prayer and supplication" (Eph. 6: 10-18).

Certainly, if these things are ours and abound they prevent us from being ineffective and unfruitful in the knowledge of Our Lord Jesus Christ. There will be a richly provided for us a contingency to declare: "O God, from my youth thou hast taught me, and I still proclaim thy wondrous deeds." We can also add: →

## Icon # 734 = God is With Us even unto Old Age and Grey Hairs

"So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, till I proclaim thy might to all the generations to come."

We have to repeat, from time to time, that we really need to adhere to God till we grow old, because there is no absolute guarantee that we are able to continue doing good indefinitely.

Consider the case of the angels who were not subject to any limitation deriving from the flesh. A good number of them dislodged themselves from God. How much more we, poor human beings, in which the weaknesses of our flesh weigh us down and impede us; thus carrying with us the vice of corruption, the source of aging, by which we lose our interior youth.

It is correct to say that old age and grey hairs are not indicative of wisdom and goodness of life. This is equally true especially if a person was not living uprightly in his or her younger days, for it is written: "How will you find in your old age what you have not gathered in your youth?" Of course old age is honorable not because of long duration, nor it is measured in terms of a number of years, for a "person's understanding is grey hair, and a spotless life is old age."

One thing is certain: God will never forsake us in our old age if we do not deliberately forsake Him, for we are on His heart and are engraven on the palms of His hands; and we shall never be removed from His heart's love, nor out of His arms, for who can separate us from the love of Christ?

I am sure, as well as the other friends and good friends of St. Paul, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation," of course, including old age, "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord" (cf. Rom. 8: 35-39). Why? Because we are His sheep and hear His voice, that is, obey His teaching, and He knows us and we follow Him; and he gives us eternal life, and we shall never perish and no one shall snatch us out of His hand. Moreover, His heavenly Father who has given us to Him is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch, that is, to separate, us out of the Father's hand. Why? Because the Lord Jesus and the Father are one (cf. Jn 10: 22-30). Of course, there is only one thing that can separate us from God – and that is "deliberate mortal sin." As St. Francis of Assisi, our angelic heavenly friend, said: "Woe to the man who died in mortal sin."

If we consider the infinite might and majesty of God that is offended, and the infinite meanness of the one offending, we will understand that sin is in some sort an infinite evil.

In the old days people considered the might, the grandeur, and the wisdom of God by gazing on the immensity of the universe who created and sustained it. Unfortunately, nowadays people are blocked from that procedure by several roadblocks: people nowadays are less occupied with the "order of nature" than they are with the "disorder of their lives." The order of nature is too impersonal for the self-centered person.

However, this does not mean that people nowadays has absolutely given up the search of God, but only it has forsaken the more rational and even more normal way of finding Him. Nowadays, the "starting point" of peoples' returned to God are no longer in the order of nature, in the vastness of the universe, but in the "disorder" in themselves; no longer in the visible things of the world, but in the invisible frustrations, disappointments, agonies, pains, complexes, and anxieties of their own personalities.

The human person itself may not be certain when the Divine intervention has occurred. We might almost say that God enters into the life of a person like a thief in the night, we have the free-will to choose whether to welcome Him or to reject Him, but we cannot prevent Him from penetrating our souls whom He has made.

Just as the sun rises without asking permission of the night, so God penetrates us without parleying with the darkness of hearts, for He is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the divisions of our souls and spirits, of joints and marrows, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of our hearts. All that we are and the deepest depths of our being are all open and laid bare to His eyes with whom we have to do.

He penetrates us as an instantaneous thought shoots into our mind, an intense desire that moves our will. His entrance is imperceptible, we do not suspect that it is He. We might 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 aware that our eyes are relying on the sun. It is only in retrospect that we understand that the initiative was from God.

If these things are ours and abound, then, we will be in a fairly good position to "proclaim the might of God to all the generations to come. We may also add:

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## Icon # 735 = Who is like God?!

"Thy power and thy righteousness, O God reach the high heavens. Thou hast done great things, O God, who is like thee?"

The famous battle cry of the archangel Michael is: "Who is like God?!" Of course, even if we live a 10,000 yrs and have a brilliant intelligence and encyclopedic knowledge we still could not fully comprehend the "power," the "righteousness," and the intrinsic being of God.

Even in the beatific Vision were we are to see God face to face as in a crystal clear mirror without the medium of any creature, to see Him better than we see those whom we speak on earth because God, being spiritual, will be most intimately present in our intelligence which He fortifies with "power" to see Him, yet this vision though it is intuitive and without medium, is still not comprehensive, because God alone can know Himself to the full extent of His knowableness.

Of course, this limitation involves no contradiction. For example, our experience here on earth tells us that many persons may see the "same truth" more or less profoundly; many intellects see one of the same truth more or less sagaciously. Thus in heaven all the blessed see God without medium, but with a penetration that varies in proportion to their merits, to their capacity, but none as profoundly as God knows Himself, all that He is, all that He can do, and all that He will do. For this reason, His power, His righteousness, and all that He is reach the high heavens; and no one and nothing is like Him, because He surpasses anything and everything we can ever imagine even if we live 10 trillion years or even eternally.

So far remote it is from being true that God first learned that everything He created were good after they were made that, had He not known this already, not a single one of the things He made would have been created. Therefore, what He sees are good would not have been made unless He had seen that they were good before He made them.

God rejoiced in His finished product, just as, like an artist, he had been pleased in designing it. Discovery in Science tells us that there are, at least, 10 million known species in our world. Therefore, we are very proud of Our God "who hast done great things." Be it known also that these do not include the things in the moon or Mars or Jupiter or Pluto or within our solar system or our own galaxy. Far be it from it! For if we include them and the other galaxies we might spent our eternity recounting them and still not able to fully recount them. Why? Because He is utterly "Great" and exceeds anything and everything we can ever think of.

Even on this ground alone, it is truly right and just to shout at the top of our lung: "O God, who is like thee?" More than this, let us also consider His "foreknowledge." Truly, truly, not in our way does God look forward to the future,

see the present, and look back upon the past, but in a manner far remotely and profoundly unlike our way of thinking. His mind does not pass from one thought to another. His vision is utterly unchangeable. Hence, He comprehends everything 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: past, present, and future. With Him and in 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 con-tuition. His knowledge of what happens in time, like His movement of what changes in times, is completely independent of time. That is why it is one and the same to God to see that what He had made, the great things He had done, is good to see that it is good to make it.

When He saw the great things He had done, His knowledge, His righteousness, and His power were neither doubled nor in any way increased as though that they could have been less before He made what He saw. His power and His righteousness could not have reached the high heavens, and He could not have been so perfect a Creator without so perfect a knowledge that nothing could be added to them by seeing the great things He had done.

For this reason, we can see that even if the only truth Scripture needed to tell us was "who created the light,?" it would have sufficed to answer: "God made the light." And if there was also a reason for telling us how God made it, it would be enough to report: "God said, let there be light, and there was light." Hence, we would know not only that God created the light, the heaven and the earth and all that is in it, and the other great things He had done, but that He did so by means of His Word who was with Him from the beginning – without of whom nothing that exist would come to be.

However, since there are three truths concerning the things God had done which we needed to know, namely: Who made it? How did He make it? and why did He make it? – the 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 said, let it be. And it was done." If we ask, why He make it? The answer is, "Because it is good."

Therefore, let us cry out full throttle: "Thy power and thy righteousness, O God, reach the high heavens. Thou who had done great things, O God, who is like thee?" Thus there is no Creator higher and powerful and righteous than God, nor more efficacious than the Word of God – no other than the Lord Jesus, no better reason why something good should be created than that the God who

created everything and has done great things, is Good (cf. St. Augustine, City of God, Book XI, Creation and the Two Societies of Angels, Ch. 12).

On the other hand, while we are still in this present life where nobody is exempted from troubles, thus we can humbly accept: →

### **Icon # 736 = Sore Troubles, but then Happiness**

“Thou who hast made me see many sore troubles wilt revive me gain; from the depths of the earth thou wilt bring me up again.”

For God to become a human being, like us in all things, except sin, is really mind boggling, because He made Himself very vulnerable and subject to “many sore troubles.” This is what happened to Our Lord Jesus while on earth. He subjected Himself to the limitation of the human condition; not only that, He also suffered a sorrowful and painful death even though He was completely innocent. Yet, His death is the ultimate sign of mercy and of His willingness to suffer and endure “sore troubles with us and for us.

His death gives hope that meaning can exist in suffering and in “many sore troubles.” His resurrection also teaches us that there is life after tragedy; that “from the depths of the earth God will bring us up again.” Christ’s own glorious destiny is ours, too, a truth that climaxes liturgically in the Feast of the Assumption and Glorification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, His Mother and ours, too.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus has already worked its full effect in the Blessed Virgin Mary who bore Him in faith and love, and this, too, is our own path and destiny if we want it to be and if we are willing to live accordingly, that is, to live a life worthy of our calling. Christ’s personal Resurrection and Ascension to God’s glory is also our personal destiny and present identity as members of His Mystical Body, because we are found in Him our God and Savior: “from the depths of the earth thou wilt bring me up again.”

By His death and many sore troubles the Lord Jesus has delivered us from sin and enables us to participate in His own humility and love as we strive to follow in His footsteps. In His death He has given us His righteousness, shattering the yoke of our captivity. By His Resurrection and Ascension He has directed our faith and love to their proper destination, that is, to His glorified presence with His Father in heaven. For once He has done all these things, that is, enduring many sore troubles and death, for our sake, He returned to the house from which He came from and turned His face to those sheep who have remained upon the mountains, whom He once left for our sake to search for us, that He might not so much lead us as carry us back in His shoulder.

The many sore troubles that we will experience or had experienced while on earth, if rightly use, become greatly diminished and proportionately profitable, because worthy endurance of them is a great sacrifice comparable to that of those noble Christians of old and the million of Christians in our own century who confessed their faith at the point of death, since life's sufferings and the sorrows of day to day affair provided the martyrdoms of Divine Providence, even as the tortures of tyrants provided martyrdoms for faith and religion.

For us who have not yet resisted evil to the point of death and may not too strong enough to endure our "sore troubles" with patience and equanimity may find some comfort in the words of our heavenly friend the valiant St. Teresa of Avila, who says: "However numerous may be our troubles and persecutions, if we endure them without offending the Lord, but rejoice to suffer for His sake, they all work together for our greater gain though I do not myself bear them as they should be borne, but in a way which is most imperfect."

On the other hand, the atheists and agnostics and all haters of God have no faith at all in the resurrection that from the depths of the earth God will bring them up again. What indeed could be heavier or more burdensome than to bear troubles of a passing world without any hope of reward to relieve the mind?

Our other heavenly friend the illustrious Job is also a good example of bearing one's troubles in life. Let us do eavesdropping to what he says to refute his skeptical wife's taunting words: "Do you still hold fast your integrity? Curse God, and die," how he keenly ponders, and says: "If we accept good things from God, shall we not accept evil" (cf. Job. 2: 10)?

Truly, truly, there is indeed much consolation that we can have in times of troubles if when we suffer reverses we call to mind what God has given us. Pain and tribulation do not do us harm if we quickly call to mind His gifts and kindness. Hence, the Scripture says: "In times of prosperity do not be forgetful of adversity, and time of adversity do not be unmindful of prosperity" (cf. Eccles. 7: 14).

Our other heavenly friend the eminent Pope St. Gregory the Great, says: "The reason of who receive a gift and does not also expect trouble at the very moment of receiving it falls into the sin of pride and frivolity. On the hand, the person who is laid low by sufferings and who is not comforted at the very moment of suffering by the thought of the gifts he has been granted becomes depressed by all manner of despair.

To bolster our claim let us enlist the support of our allies in this spiritual warfare, one of them, of course, is our heavenly friend, St. Augustine who says: "On earth we are happy, after a fashion, when we enjoy peace, little as it is, which a good

life brings; but such happiness compared with the beatitude which is our end in eternity is, in point of fact, misery. When we mortal men, living amid the realities of earth, enjoy the utmost peace which life can give us, then it is the part of virtue, if we are living rightly, to make a right use of the goods we are enjoying" (St. Augustine, City of God, Book XIX Philosophy and Christianity On Man's End, Ch. 10).

If these things are ours and abound, then we are in a fairly good position to proclaim: →

### **Icon # 737 = True Honor and Genuine Comfort**

"Thou wilt increase my honor, and comfort me again. I will also praise thee with the harp for thy faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praises to thee with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel."

It is truly right and just to say that if we are looking for honor in something else we are really deviating from God, because our honor comes only from Him. To seek honor for ourselves apart from or in defiance of God's will is not to honor but to dishonor Him.

Without any slightest shadow of a doubt, aside from the Lord Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary is the best paradigm of genuine honor. We are told that Divine grace is always found in intimate union with the virtue of humility, because "God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble."

Truly, truly, how sublime is the humility manifested by the Blessed Virgin Mary, which knows not how to yield to honor or to be elated with glory! She is refinely chosen to be the Mother of God and she calls herself her handmaid! Assuredly it is a sign of a more than common humility not to forget humility in the presence of glory.

Our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux really hit the nail on the head when he says: "To be humble in abjection is nothing very great; but it is great virtue indeed, and as rare as great, to be humble in the midst of honors." Our other heavenly friend, no other than St. Isaac of Syria, has this also to say: "In proportion to his humility a man is given patience in afflictions; in proportion to his patience the burden of afflictions is made lighter and he receives comfort; in proportion to the comfort he receives, the love of God increases in him and in proportion to this love, his joy in the Holy Spirit."

Of course, if these things are ours and abound, then we can joyfully acclaim: "I will also praise thee with the harp for thy faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praises to thee with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel." Certainly, if we don't have a harp or a lyre to use in singing praises to God, then we will just sing praises to Him without

musical instrument or we can even just say it silently in our heart. The important thing is that we will express our homage and devotion to God either interiorly or exteriorly.

On the altar of our heart, we offer to Him a sacrifice of humility and praise, aglow with the fire of charity. Certainly, praise is fitting for loyal hearts. There cannot be such thing as true life without praise, for only where God is praised is there life. Hence, in heaven infants and little children join with the other saints and angels in singing God's praise forever.

In that blessed Place every fiber and organ of our imperishable body will play its part in the praising of God; all glory will be true glory, comfort and consolation will be unending. True honor will never be denied where honor is due, never given where undeserved, and since none but the worthy are permitted there, hence, no one will unworthily ambition glory and honor.

In that blessed Place God will be the consummation of all our desires, the object of our unending beatific vision, of our undiminishing love, and of our unwearying praise. Truly, all the redeemed will share in this gift of vision, this response of love, and this paean of praise, as all will share in everlasting life. Therefore, we could not help but: →

### **Icon # 738 = Lips Shouting for Joy – Soul rescued**

“My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to thee; my soul also, which thou hast rescued.”

In his sermon on Psalm 90, our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux offers us this very wholesome advice while we are still in this present life; He says: “I would have you to be always joyous but – in this life – never secure, always rejoicing in the Holy Spirit, yet always fearful too, and guarding yourselves against a relapse.”

It is truly right and just to uphold that to hope eternal life and to hope eternal joy is not without joy itself, because 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 of ever growing hope of eternal salvation, and enables us to savor even now something of the joy we will know perfectly in the beatific vision to come where our lips “will shout for joy, when we “sing praises” to God.

Moreover, we will discover this confidence, hope, and joy through our progress in self-knowledge as being renewed and sanctified in the Spirit. Those of us who now experience the Spirit at work within us know what the Spirit teaches, for His teaching never contradicts His works, as it is written: “I write this to you about those who would deceive you; but 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" (1Jn. 2: 26-27). For this reason, we understand what the Spirit teaches, because what we hear from without we experience within.

We may ask how the minds of those being "rescued," that is, the "redeemed" can be perfect in joy in that blessed Place if the memory of their guilt influences their joy in that state? How will the perfect light of glory illuminate them, if there is a shadow of remembered guilt? To answer these questions we need to keep in mind that just as in this life we remember sorrow in joy, so in that blessed state we remember the sins we have committed without detriment to happiness. We often remember past troubles in times of safety without any feeling of sorrow. Moreover, because we remember our sickness, we rejoice the more in our health.

Therefore, there will be a memory of our guilt in that blessed Place, but it will not hurt the soul; instead, it will make our joy and happiness more intense, for when the soul remembers pain without pain, it both realizes more clearly what it owes the Physician and for that very reason appreciates the health it has received all the more, because it remembers the uneasiness it has escaped.

Hence, we are in a fairly good position to proclaim: "My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to thee; my soul also, which thou hast rescued." Of course, we can also add: →

### **Icon # 739 = What do we mean when we talk of God helping us?**

"And my tongue will talk of thy righteous help all the day long, for they have been put to shame and disgraced who sought to do me hurt."

Our experience will tell us that when we are in a very difficult situation and someone helps us it is almost impossible not to talk about it. Take for example the case of the two blind men who followed the Lord Jesus, crying aloud: "Have mercy on us, Son of David." The Lord said to them: "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" They said to Him: "Yes, Lord." Then the Lord touched their eyes, saying: "According to your faith be it done to you." And their eyes were opened. And the Lord sternly charged them: "See that no one knows it." But they went away and spread His fame through all that district (cf. Mt. 9: 27-31). In other words, nothing covered that will not be revealed!

What do we mean when we talk of God helping us? We mean God putting into us a bit of Himself, so to speak. For instance, He lends us a little of His reasoning powers and that is how we think; He puts a little love into us and that is how we love one another.

Take another example, when you teach a child how to write, you hold its hand while it forms the letter, that is, it forms the letters because you are forming them. In other words, we love and reason because God loves and reasons and holds our hand while we do it. Now if we had not fallen, that would be all plain sailing. But unfortunately, we now need God's help in order to do something which God, in His own nature, never does at all, such as: to surrender, to suffer, to submit, and to die. Nothing in God's nature corresponds to this process at all. Thus the one road for which we now need God's leadership most of all is a road God, in His own nature, has never walked.

However, supposing God became a human being, like us in all things, of course, except sin, suppose our human nature which can suffer and die was amalgamated with God's nature in one person, then that person could "help" us. Of course, that person is no other than Our Lord Jesus. He could surrender His will, and suffer and die, because He is man; and He could do it perfectly well because He is God. You and I can go through this process only if God does it in us, but God can do it only if He becomes man.

Our attempts at this dying will succeed only if we, human beings, share in God's dying, just as our thinking can succeed only because it is a drop out of the ocean of His intelligence; but we cannot share God's dying unless God dies, and He cannot die except by being a human being.

This is the sense in which He "helps" us pay our debts, and suffers for us what He Himself need not suffer at all. In other words, to what will we look for "help" if we will not look to that which is stronger than ourselves (cf. C.S. Lewis, *The Best of C.S. Lewis, What Christians Believe, The Perfect Penitent*)?

On the other hand, "they have been put to shame and disgraced who sought to do me hurt." Even in our modicum knowledge of theology we certainly have an idea who sought to do us hurt, but for the sake of those who might just have come across this exposition for the first time we will expose those who sought to do us harm, they are, no other than, our inveterate foes, our infernal enemies, that is, the devil and his minions. They are like roaring lions seeking someone to devour; but they are put to shame for they have been already judged and indicted, as the Judge Himself said (cf. Jn. 16: 1-11).

Not only that they are put to shame and disgrace those who are seeking to harm us, but they are also in utter agony as it is written: "If any one worships the beast and its image, and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he 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: 9-10).

That same Scripture also says: “and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rev. 20: 10). Of course, there are some who “honestly” argue that there will come “a time” or “a moment” that eventually the Devil and his minions will be forgiven after “serving” their time in hell. In this case, hell will eventually come to an end; in other words, it will eventually be phased out. However, it is very clear that their argument is utterly contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church and its Fathers and Doctors.

To prove our point let us cite the Catechism of the Church itself, for it says: “The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishment of hell, ‘eternal fire.’ The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs” (#1035).

Let us add two more witnesses to our case to bolster our position. The first is no other than our heavenly friend the brilliant St. Augustine, a father and doctor of the Church. We will let him speak; this is his testimony: “A first question to be asked and answered is: Why has the Church been so intolerant with those who defend the view that, however greatly and however long the Devil is to be punished, he can be promised ultimately that all will be purged or pardoned? Certainly, it is not because so many of the Church’s saints and Biblical scholars have begrudged the Devil and his angels in a final cleansing and the beatitude of heaven. Nor is it because of any lack of feeling for so many and such high angels that must suffer great and enduring pain. This is not a matter of feeling, but of fact. The fact is that there is no way of waiving or weakening the words which the Lord has told us that He will pronounce in the last judgment: ‘Depart from me accursed ones, into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels. ‘In this way He showed plainly that it is an eternal fire in which the Devil and his angels are to burn. Then we have the words of the Apocalypse: ‘And the devil who deceived them was cast into the pool of fire and brimstone, where also are the beast and the false prophet; and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.’ In the one text we have ‘everlasting.’ In the other, ‘for ever and ever.’ These are words which have a single meaning in the divine Scripture, namely, of unending duration.

“Thus, it is Scripture, infallible Scripture, which declares that God has not spared them. This is the only reason why it is held as fixed and unchanging religious truth that the Devil and his angels are never to return to the life and holiness of the saints; nor could any more valid or cogent reason be discovered.

“And since this is true of the Devil, how can men – whether all or some – be promised an escape, after some indefinitely long period, from this eternity of

pain, without at once weakening our faith in the unending torment of the devils? For it is to men that the word will be said: 'Depart from me accursed ones, into the everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels.' Now, if some of these men or all of them are not always to remain in everlasting fire, what ground have we for believing that the Devil and his angels are always to remain there? God's sentence will be pronounced on the wicked, both angels and men. Can we suppose that it will hold for angels but not for men? Yes; but, only if men's imaginings have more weight than God's words!

"Since this is quite impossible, all those who desire to escape eternal punishment should desist from arguing against God and should rather bow in obedience, while yet there is time, to the command of God.

"Christ spoke of both eternal in the same place and in one and the same sentence: 'And these will go into everlasting punishment, but the just into everlasting life. For the everlastingness of the punishment and the everlastingness of the life are related as equal to equal. It is highly absurd to say in one and the same sense: 'Life everlasting will be endless, but everlasting punishment will come to an end.' Therefore, since the eternal life of the saints is to be endless, there can be no doubt that eternal punishment for those who are to endure it will have no end" (cf. St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book XXI, End and Punishment of the earthly City, Ch. 23).

Now, our second witness is also our other heavenly friend who is not only a father and doctor of the Church, but also a pope, and not just an ordinary pope but "a great" pope no other than the eminent pope St. Gregory the Great. In his uncanny creativity he presented it in a form of dialogue. A man named Peter put forward to St. Gregory the argument about the everlastingness of the punishment which the damned have to endure.

Peter: I should like to know whether it is just to inflict an everlasting punishment for a fault which is finite.

St. Gregory: Your objection would be valid if the Supreme Judge were to consider only the deed men perform without looking into their hearts. To be sure, the sin that a wicked man commits comes to an end when he dies. But, would he not willing to live on endlessly, if that were possible, in order to continue sinning? By not leaving off sinning during his lifetime, he shows his desire to continue to sin forever. The full justice of the Judge, therefore, demands that the wicked, who never wished to be rid of sinning during life, should never be without punishment in eternity.

Peter: What if someone should say: God has merely threatened sinners with eternal punishment to keep them from committing sins?

St. Gregory: If He makes use of empty threats to keep us from justice, then the promises He makes to lead us to justice are likewise worthless. But no one in his right mind would entertain such a thought. If God threatened us without ever intending to fulfill His threat, we should have to call Him deceitful instead of merciful.

Peter: To what purpose, then, do they burn in hell forever?

St. Gregory: Almighty God, being a God of love, does not gratify His anger by torturing wretched sinners. However, since He is a God of justice, the punishment of the wicked cannot satisfy Him even if it continues eternally. All the wicked condemned to hell are being punished for their wickedness, to be sure. Yet there is another reason why they burn, namely, that the elect may see in God all the joys they experience and may see in the damned all the tortures they escaped. Seeing the terrible punishment for sins which they avoided with God's help, they become all the more conscious of the eternal debt of gratitude they owe to God for the graces they received (St. Gregory the Great, *The Dialogue*, Book 4).

What more can we say!? Only this: →