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## **Icon # 335 = Praising God**

### **Psalm 34 (33)**

**"I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth."**

It is true to say that some people only praise God with exquisite words while the heart is far from Him. It is not an exaggeration to say that this kind of praising means nothing to God who looks more at the heart. Some praise God well so

long as things go as they wish, but when things begin to go bad for them their praise ceases. It is not an overstatement either to affirm that such praise does not please God.

This is valuable praise in God's divine eyes: when we praise Him with our heart, words, and actions as earnestly in sorrow as in joy, in all adversity as much as when things are going well for us. Then God truly is our goal, and not ourselves. There is nothing on this tiny earth that is more really a foretaste of dwelling in heaven than when we praise God with spirited gladness. There is nothing that exhilarates one's spirit, eases suffering, subdues boredom, drives out evil spirits, or makes sadness disappear as does praising joyfully.

God is at home with such people, they are on intimate terms with angels, and they benefit themselves. Praising God sincerely gives tranquility to the heart, brings peace to the mind by mastering surging thoughts, and fires the will to what is good, right, and true. It is a foretaste of the life in heaven where all the angels and saints are glorifying and praising the Lord continually. Therefore, in praising the Lord here on earth we are already rehearsing what we will be doing for all eternity.

To bless the Lord at all times and having His praise continually in our lips brings to mind the injunction of St. Paul to pray continually, without ceasing. Thus in prayer we continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise both in our personal and communal prayer trying always to harmonize what we are saying and what we are thinking, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all our heart.

This, of course, is just a preview of the grand reunion of all the children of God who will sing forever the praises of God, for He destined us in love to be His children through Our Lord Jesus according to the purpose of His will to the praise of His glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. Since this is the case, we can joyfully boast in the Lord, as St. Paul says. Therefore, →

### **Icon # 336 = Boast in the Lord**

**"My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the afflicted hear and be glad."**

We have a very wholesome potent reason why our soul has to make its boast in the Lord. Notice, for instance, a child whose father is only a doctor, or a teacher, or a lawyer, or a mechanic, or an engineer, with modest savings in his bank account and a relatively good person and devoted to his family.

In school, when the kids gathered together for relaxation or for informal conversation, if someone begins to talk about his father – how good he is, and so on, you will perceive that the other kids will also start recounting the deeds and character of their dad as though they don't have a second thought to boast about their father. The only exemption is the kid whose father is so mean to him that he could hardly speak about him.

From this observation, we can rightly say that to become children of God, that is, all who received the Lord Jesus, who believed in His name... "Who were born, not of blood nor of the will of man, but of God" is prerequisite for someone to be able to boast in the Lord. The other fundamental condition is, of course, experiential which inescapably varies in degree and intensity according to the positive and negative experience one has in life.

It is very likely that people who had a very excruciating experience with their father will find it tremendously difficult to talk about God, and much more to boast about Him as a good and loving father who guided all creation with His providential care. People, too, who are being tossed to and fro by litanies of tragedies, are plausibly to be tongue tied to boast in the Lord.

This is usually what happened, but there's always an exemption. An example of someone who still boast in the Lord in spite of the litanies of sufferings he experienced, of course, is one of our heavenly friends namely St. Paul.

It might make your hairs stand if you hear him reciting his litanies of afflictions which he graciously endured for the Lord without stammering and without blinking his eyes: "I am talking like a madman," he says, "with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods; once I was stoned. Three times I have been shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brethren; in toil and hardship, through many sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches."

These, certainly, would be enough to strip one's skeleton bare, yet in spite of these he boasts in the Lord to the top of his lung: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, 'For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure 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, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord."

Who among the afflicted when they hear this will not be glad? Of course, only those who are not of the Lord. This kind of boasting is exasperating to their hearing and aggravating to their afflictions, but to those who anchored themselves to the Lord this holy boasting is pleasing to their hearing, a balm to their pain, a comfort to their afflictions, a salve to their anguish, and an emollient to their distress. No wonder the psalmist says: "let the afflicted hear and be glad."

Since "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, therefore, we can gratefully say: →

### **Icon # 337 = Magnify the Lord**

"O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together."

Although we can always magnify the Lord by ourselves alone yet it is very commendable to do so with someone else or with a group, so that together we will exalt His name. No doubt that to light one candle is good enough, but to light many candles in a big dark room is even far better.

Isn't it a very wholesome gesture to magnify the Lord with a congregation, if it is in our power to do so, when we consider the fact that many people in our world today are very allergic of God and don't have any place for Him in their thoughts?

It is true to say that it is the voice of the Church who is inviting us to join with her in magnifying the Lord and exalting His name together. It is also correct to assert that it is the voice of the Blessed Virgin Mary who extends this invitation to unite with her, so that together with her we will magnify and exalt the name of Our Lord Jesus.

In doing so, we are drinking from the primary and indispensable source from which we are to derive the true Christian spirit. This is so, because the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary is the mother of the Lord Jesus. Thus she is also called the mother of the Church. Therefore, in magnifying the Lord with her we exalt together the name of our heavenly Father through

Christ, with Christ, and in Christ. This, of course, we do by the power of the Holy Spirit who bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

Consequently, we are already taking part in the fruitful fecundity of the life of the Blessed Trinity: Magnifying and exalting the Father through and with the Son by and in the Holy Spirit. Whereupon, "Jesus Christ, High Priest of the New and Eternal Covenant, taking human nature, introduced into this earthly exile that hymn which is sung throughout all ages in the halls of heaven. He attaches to himself the entire community of mankind and has them join him in singing his divine song of praise. For he continues his priestly work through his Church."

Accordingly, the Church desires earnestly that when we attend divine services that we should not be there as strangers or silent spectators, but should take part in the sacred action – conscious of what we are doing, with devotion and full collaboration. That is why she says to us: "O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together!" Our proper and fitting response, then, is yes: →

### **Icon # 338 = Healthy Fear**

"I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears."

It is not hard to notice that the dynamics of our relationship with the Lord is reciprocal: we sought Him – He answered us, we magnify and exalt His name – He delivers us from all our fears.

One of the fears that will besiege people in their initial seeking of the Lord is the "thought" what other people might think of them – that their "fair weather friends" might mock them if it is the Lord that they are now seeking and no longer the world. The other fear is the fear of the unknown future. These are just sample of the fears that Our Lord Jesus delivered us when we commenced seeking Him.

Really, there are still many fears that are lurking within us which surface from time to time when we are in a certain situation. Of course, these vary from person to person in duration and intensity. But little by little, through constant practice of prayer and growth in trust in God, these fears considerably lessen their grip in us.

So long as it does not paralyze us, fear has its own advantage, namely, it helps to forestall self-complacency and being too cocky. It's a healthy ground to launch our trust and confidence in God and not too much in ourselves. As long as we are still in this present life, the "feeling" of fear will not be completely eradicated in us. However, constant contact with Our Lord Jesus will move Him to deliver us from all unhealthy and paralyzing fears.

Just as there is a good cholesterol and bad cholesterol, so there is also a good fear and a bad fear. All unhealthy and paralyzing fear is a bad kind of fear, but filial and reverential fear of God is really a very healthy kind of fear which we don't want to be delivered from. It certainly sustains us in our seeking of the Lord. It is like a gas that keeps us going. →

### **Icon # 339 = Soul's Face**

"Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed."

Our seeking the Lord in this present life is already a foretaste of looking at Him for all eternity even though in this present life it is as if looking in a dim mirror but bright enough to make our face radiant and be happy because we bear certain resemblance of Him.

In other words, His image in us is gradually restored. Sin, undoubtedly will make a person ashamed to look at the unspeakable beauty of God because sin is a distortion of the image of God in our soul. When we sinned we no longer look like God – and the deformation of God's image in us will be in proportion to the seriousness of our sin.

It will be like having a serious car accident where a person's face is really unimaginably contorted in such a way that it will be, honestly, counted as a heroic act for that person to look at his face on a mirror. We don't have to be a psychologist to suggest, for even the most illiterate person has, at least, a little inkling, that, in the case above, the "feeling of shame" has its lion's share. This feeling of shame, for some people, is so wide and deep that it really devours whole and entire, their self-esteem without leaving slight trace of toleration even just to think to attempt looking at their face on a mirror, so much so, that they will end up in committing suicide. This sounds mind boggling, but it is really true.

There was a young actor in the Philippines in the early 70's who was really very handsome. I speak here in a purely human terms, for all the beauty in this world, as one of our heavenly friends, St. John of the Cross says compared to the infinite beauty of God is supreme ugliness. This young handsome actor got a "slight accident" which cut his face. It would not be an exaggeration to say that in spite of the cut on his face there will still be hundreds and hundreds of women who will be both sexually and physically attracted to him and that there will also be hundreds and hundreds of men, especially the womanizer and those who are not peacefully contented with their faces to swap face with that young actor.

However, that young actor brooked no thought in persuading himself that in spite of the slice on his face he is still a good looking person, but instead he ended up in committing suicide. Here's the mind boggling comes in, because the cut on his face can easily be repaired by a plastic surgeon – leaving a negligible vestige of its scar.

The same is true of people living in sin. The only hope of the restoration of the soul's likeness to God is true repentance, never despairing in God's mercy so long as we still have breath. Because God's mercy is infinite, therefore, chances are high of never losing hope in His mercy so long as the glimmer of humility in one's soul is not totally extinguished.

It is only when a person is completely devoid of humility to such an extent that he will brook no thought in asking for forgiveness that the ugliness of his/her soul's face will remain forever without any slightest hope, even a flicker of a thought, that it will become handsome – beautiful again. Infinite shame will be theirs for all eternity, and it will be compounded when they see their faces in the light of God's **inexpressible** beauty and majesty, and that of all the angels and saints, especially that of the Blessed Virgin Mary, for everyone will see his/her own face – self in the light of God's glory as though looking at a very bright and very clear mirror.

The three little children of Fatima: Lucia, St. Francisco, and St. Jacinta; St. Teresa of Avila bore witness to this. Here's an account of St. Teresa of Avila when she saw the extreme beauty of the glorified body of the humanity of Our Lord Jesus: "There is such beauty about glorified bodies that the glory which illumines them throw all who look upon such supernatural loveliness into confusion....I will only say that, if there were nothing else in Heaven to delight the eyes but the extreme beauty of the glorified bodies there, that alone would be the greatest bliss. A most especial bliss, then, will it be to us when we see the Humanity of Jesus Christ; for if it is so even on earth, where His Majesty reveals Himself according to what our wretchedness can bear, what will it be where the fruition of the that joy is complete?"

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

“It is as if we are to look at a very clear stream, in a bed of crystal, reflecting the sun’s rays, and then to see a very muddy stream, in an earthly bed and overshadowed by clouds. Not that the sun, or any other such light, enters onto the vision: on the contrary, it is like a natural light and all other kinds of light seem artificial. It is a light which never gives place to night, and being always light, is disturbed by nothing.

“It is of such a kind, indeed, that no one, however powerful his intellect could, in the whole course of his life, imagine it as it is....Here is a clear picture of what the Day of Judgment will be, when we shall behold the Majesty of this king and see the rigor of His judgment upon the wicked. Here we find true humility, giving the soul power to behold its own wretchedness, of which it cannot be ignorant. Here is shame and genuine repentance for sin; for though it sees God revealing His love to it, the soul can find no place to hide itself and thus is utterly confounded.”

This is the testimony of St. Teresa of Avila who lived in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Now let listen to the testimony of the little three children of Fatima who lived in the 20<sup>th</sup>/21<sup>st</sup> century (Sr. Lucia) whether their testimony is in harmony with that of St. Teresa of Avila or whether they contradict each other as those who bore witness against Christ at His trial.

Notice that the case we are presenting here is the beauty of the glorified bodies: that of Christ, the saints, and the Blessed Virgin Mary. At the vision of Fatima there stood “the most beautiful Lady” they had ever seen. In Lucia’s own words, “She was a Lady dressed in all white, more brilliant than the sun, shedding rays of light clearer and stronger than a crystal glass filled with crystalline water pierced by the burning rays of the sun.”

“She opened her hands out of which came beams of such a strong light, that it dug into the deepest depths of our souls. In this way she showed us ourselves in God, Who is this Light. We saw ourselves in God more clearly in that light than in the best of mirrors.”

Again, we don’t have to be a lawyer or a judge to admit that the testimony of two witnesses who are describing the fact of what they have seen and were cross-examined separately yet never contradicted each other is sufficient enough to tilt the scale to the verity of their claim. Much more if there will still be two or three witnesses, who are also cross-examined separately, who will come forward telling the facts in the same vein.

For this reason, we will let three more witnesses to come forward. Let us listen first to St. Bernadette when she saw the Blessed Virgin Mary, “She is so beautiful that once you saw Her even once you are willing to die to see Her again.” Now, let us set aside St. Bernadette and let another witness testify to the authenticity of

what she saw. This is no other than St. Therese of the child Jesus. This is concerning her vision of Blessed Marie of the Incarnation. Blessed Marie was the one, together with few sisters, who brought the first Carmelites to France from Spain. St. Therese was so sucked up by the breathtaking beauty of Blessed Marie which she could hardly hold, so she exclaimed: "She is so beautiful!" Now, the last but not the least, the pride of Poland, namely St. Faustina Kowalska. This is what she said when she saw St. Barbara: "She is so beautiful that if I have not seen the Blessed Virgin Mary I could have mistaken her to be the Blessed Virgin."

See the consistency of their testimony? If you boil down to one word the veracity of their declaration that one word is no other than the word "beautiful." So, can you imagine if someone is so ugly and completely lost its self-esteem to be in company with all those extremely beautiful people? It would be an intolerable torment for that person to be in such a company. He would rather let the mountains covered him and the rocks fall upon him than to gaze at the beauty and grandeur of those people whose countenance are so clear and bright like the best of all mirrors for they themselves had been counted worthy to participate in the beauty and grandeur of God who is the eternal source of that beauty.

On this account, it would not be difficult to contemplate the reason why Lucifer and his demons and all human beings who rallied with them might have longed for a thousand deeper hells in order to flee from such exquisite beauty and stupendous majesty. They will be calling out to the mountains and rocks: "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb."

Since sin is the distortion of God's image in one's soul, so it is not hard to perceive how contorted the appearance of Lucifer is and the other demons just by the facts of the innumerable sins they have committed. In every sin committed by man they are always behind it.

When the three children of Fatima saw the vision of hell, they described the demons as a "horrible unknown animals," so much so that if the vision had been prolonged and if the Blessed Virgin Mary had not promised them that they will be in heaven, they would have died out of horror and fear. In other words, Lucifer and the other demons degraded themselves so much that they became so "horrible unknown animals."

We have to remember that they were formerly "beautiful" beings. Thus, we can imagine how excruciating for them to look at the incomparable beauty of God, and how infinitely painful for the human souls who will be forever with Lucifer and the demons just to see their horrible appearance, which engenders hatred.

Of course, the demons hated them too, but they are too strong for them. This dynamics will be forever, too. St. Paul rightly says: "There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil... but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good...." Glory, because they will inexhaustibly behold the resplendence and majesty of God; honor, because everyone who serves Christ truthfully here on earth will be honored by His Father; and peace, because Christ's own peace, that is, His own person will be given to them, for Christ Himself is our peace.

Christ's presence in our heart becomes our guarantee that we shall never be ashamed when His inexpressible glory will be fully revealed to us. What would that glory be? It is impossible for us even to imagine, as St. Teresa of Avila says that if she were to spend years and years imagining how to invent anything so beautiful she could not do it, and she doesn't even know how she should try.

The brightness of God's glory transcends everything we could ever – even attempt to conceive. Try to imagine this and see how far your imagination can go: in 2002, the hubble telescope captured what they call "echo of light." This light was from a star which is being dubbed as V838 Mon. Before this star went into oblivion it emitted a light 600,000 brighter than our sun!

When you have time try to glance at the sun, of course sideway, at about 8:00 in the morning, then multiply that brightness by two. Then imagine what it would be like four more times brighter. Ninety nine you will probably say it's already beyond your conception. So, what would be hundred times more or five hundred or one thousand or fifty thousand or hundred thousand more? If that's the case, what would 600,000 times brighter than our beloved sun be like?

It doesn't register to our poor little mind anymore. Now, let's go a little bit further and stretch more our imagination. You have to hold your breath on this. More than 150 years ago there appeared in the Constellation Carina a star which is being tagged as Eta Carinae. This star erupted and emitted a light 4 million times brighter than our sun! Is there a flicker of idea that would dare to enter even the periphery of the screen of our conception?

Yet, all these lights are just like shadows when put side by side with the light of God's glory, because the former are all created lights whereas the latter is Uncreated Light! No wonder, then, that St. Teresa of Avila would exclaim: "If I were to spend years and years imagining how to invent anything so beautiful, I could not do it, and I do not even know how I should try...."

Since this is the case, how beautiful and radiant then is God's kingdom, and how bright it is, as the book of Revelation says: "And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the

Lamb." It also says, "And night shall be no more; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they shall reign for ever and ever."

If an aurora borealis is already stunningly magnificent with its astoundingly beautiful lights and varieties of resplendent colors, these again are all created lights, what would it be like God's own uncreated splendid light and transcendent majesty? The closest answer that dares to touch this mysterious reality is what St. Paul says, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

Prayer, too, has an effect of reflecting the echo of God's transcendent glory and majesty in the lives of people who are willing to be friends of God. We have an example of this in the life of Moses.

We are told in the book of Exodus that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of stone of God's commandments, the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. Down to our own generation we can modestly perceive that people who are prayerful and has just come out fresh from prayer are likely to have a calmer face and a happier appearance with their eyes sparkling in contentment, for they were in contact with the divine.

This reached to a maximum degree possible here on earth in the transfiguration of Our Lord Jesus. He too was in deep prayer when it happened. His face shone like the sun, and His garments became white as light. It has to be asserted that it was still a flicker of His full majesty and glory which is longingly reserve for all the chosen ones at the **irrevocable** beatific vision.

Our **heavenly** friend, St, John Chrysostom says that "nothing reflects the glory of God than to see in a person who is praying well. It is a sight more noble and glorious than a king in his throne." So, when we look to Our Lord Jesus in prayer – having the eyes of our hearts enlightened, our faces shall never be ashamed for it is a healthy sign of a good conscience, serenity of mind arising from confidence in Him and submission to His will.

Prayer is an unmistakable indication that there is still a glimmer of humility within us for it is a way of acknowledging our creatureliness. Thus when we pray we acknowledge that we are poor, hence sharing in the grace of our Lord Jesus that though He was rich, yet for our sake He became poor so that by His poverty we might become rich. Wherefore, the psalmist can say about us: →

## Icon # 340 = Deliverance

"This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles."

There are lots of testimonies in the Scripture which corroborate the facts that the Lord hears the cries of the poor who are His people. For instance, the book of Exodus tells us of the mission of Moses in liberating the poor Israelites who were in slavery in Egypt. The Lord said to him in the burning bush, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey...."

It is amusing to note that in hearing the cry of His people and in intending to save them out of that land of troubles the Lord was also aiming to bring them "to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey." The same is true too in how God is dealing with us. He saw the affliction of our souls in this world because of our own passions and because of the devil who is enslaving us; so, He sent His only begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus, to deliver us and bring us "to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey," that is to say, to the kingdom of heaven.

This is to show how powerful the cry of repentance is; its sound is louder than a thunder for it is being uttered in the depths of the human heart which God condescended to be His dwelling place – the temple of the Holy Spirit, a house of prayer. With Solomon we too can cry out: "have regard to the prayer of thy servant and to his supplication, O Lord my God, hearkening to the cry and to the prayer which thy servant prays before thee this day; that thy eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which thou hast said, 'My name shall be there,' that thou mayest hearken to the prayer which thy servant offers toward this place. And hearken thou to the supplication of thy servant and of thy people Israel, when they pray toward this place; yea, hear thou in heaven thy dwelling place; and when thou hearest, forgive."

For some of us who had been imprisoned in sin at some points in our lives knew by experience that a good number of our troubles were the consequences of our preferential option for unrighteousness. These kinds of troubles are, of course, unwholesome. These are the kinds of troubles which our Lord earnestly desired to save us because their ends are very detrimental to our well-being, to our souls.

They even lead to death, of course, spiritual death, as it is pointed out by St. Paul when he says: "When you were slaves to sin, you were free in regard to

righteousness. But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death.”

However, it has to be asserted that there are troubles which the Lord will not save us even when we cried out to be delivered from them, but will let us pass through them for in this way it will be clearly seen whether we are really determined to be humble enough to bow down to whatever the will of God is even though at present they seem to be very painful and discouraging.

We have a crystal clear example of this in the agony of Our Lord Jesus in the garden. He Himself cried out plural times to be delivered from the unimaginable troubles that He has to undergo, that is, the cup of suffering that is waiting to be drunk, but the Father did not deliver Him on account of the expediency of the salvation of our souls. In doing so, Our Lord gave us an example that we may be able to follow in His steps, that is to say, it is licitly legitimate to pray and cry out to be saved from our troubles; for instance, a serious physical illness, lost of loved ones, or an embarrassing circumstances.

The bottom line, however, is that we may have the grace to also cry out: “If this cannot pass unless I drink it, not as I will but thy will be done.” We don’t have to earn a doctorate in theology to know that any suffering, big or small, united with the suffering of the Lord Jesus has in itself an intrinsic value. God will use it for the conversion of sinners – thus opening the door of salvation to them.

It can also be seen as a privilege of participating in the passion of Christ which engenders the strengthening of our faith; it nourishes our love and fuels our hope, for in so doing we may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed, hence, saving us out of all our troubles in this present life and be with God and all the saints in heaven for all eternity. But even though we are still in this present world Our Lord Jesus assures us that: →

## Icon # 341 = Guardian Angels

"The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them."

We have an example of this in the story of Elisha. When his servant rose early in the morning and went out, behold, he saw an army with horses and chariot was around about the place they were staying. This army was sent by the king of Syria to arrest Elisha for thwarting his plan against Israel. So, the servant said to him: "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" Elisha said to him, "Fear not, for those who are with us are more than those are with them." Then Elisha prayed, and said, "O Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.

It is our Catholic belief that God deigns to be called Our Father, thus we are 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. Our Lord Jesus definitively ratified this when He says: "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." Therefore, it is both an article of faith and common sense that God provided us an angel to guide us in all our ways and protect us on our journey back to our true fatherland, that is, the kingdom of heaven, because the word angel literally means messenger while we human beings are raised to the dignity of sonship.

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." Isn't this a mind boggling dignity, we who were at one point were nothing and now lifted up to the lofty heights of grandeur and honor to be called children of God the Most High, the Most Powerful, etc, of whom nothing greater we can think of? Wherefore, since we are God's children and He loves us very much, hence He sends angels to minister to us. Each one of us has our own angel as our bodyguard.

However, since we are beings endowed with irrevocable free will, God absolutely desires that we freely serve and love Him in return. This is the demarcation line where our own angel stands. Hence, it is very clear that angels will not encamp around those who do not serve and love God, and have no respect and filial fear of God. They will even deliver them to their own devices and self-will. In other words, angels are very eager to deliver from all worries and anxieties and useless fear those who freely and sincerely serve and love God in this present life, but will deliver to their dishonorable passions, lusts of their hearts, and to impurity, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge people to ruin and destruction those who despised God and do not gave Him the honor that is His due, as it is written: "So they are without excuse; for although they

knew God they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened." It also says: "And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, malignity, they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them."

On the other hand, the Lord who is compassionate and merciful does not disdain to have angels encamp around us and deliver us from all inordinate attachment to the things of this world, from unhealthy craving of the desires of the flesh; He does not refuse to show Himself through our angel the Deliverer and the Protector of all who trust in Him.

Therefore, we have to make our angel as our familiar friend; in general, we have to frequent the society of angels by constant remembrance and fervent prayer, for they are always near to us with their unswerving comfort and protection. God has given His angels around us not to withdraw us from His ways, but rather to keep us in them, and through the help and guidance of the angel entrusted to us our ways will be directed into His ways.

Wherefore, it is not surprising that the holy angels do not disdain to admit us with themselves and to draw us into the ways of the Lord, since they even humble themselves to encamp around us.

Once, we gave ourselves entirely to God without reserve, our own angel is far determined to guard us and bring us safe and sound, in spite of all the trials and challenges along the way, to our heavenly home – that is, the kingdom of heaven, as it is written: "Behold, I send an angel before you, to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place which I have prepared."

At the entrance of this place our whole being will indescribably rejoice to hear the heartwarming voice of the King of heaven – no other than the Lord Jesus: "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Even in this present life Our Lord granted us a foretaste of this kingdom through the Holy Spirit "who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory." Therefore, we can cordially invite other people, too, saying: →

## Icon # 342 = Taste and See

"O taste and see that the Lord is good! Happy is the man who takes refuge in Him!"

Hunger and thirst are two basic appetites that recur every now and then. For instance, soon after we were born we let the whole universe know we are hungry. Our cry for food is a vivid expression of our human need for nourishment. But food do more than sustain the body. When our mother holds us to her breast, she satisfies not only the need for food but also the need for intimacy and love.

As Catholics Christians, it is our belief that through baptism Christ gives us a share in God's life. This life requires spiritual food which Christ Our Lord provides at the Eucharist. He spoke of the Eucharist as food and drink: "My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink."

Christ wants us to draw a parallel between what food and drink do for us and what the Eucharist does for us. Food and drink nourish our body and become our body. The Eucharist nourishes us, but in this case we become what we receive. We are transformed into Christ! The object then of the Eucharist is our own divinization. What God is by nature we will be by grace.

Now the flesh of Our Lord Jesus was His complete humanity. St. John in his first letter lays it down almost passionately: "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God." St. John insisted that we must grasp and never let go the full humanity of Christ, that He was bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh.

What does this mean? Christ Jesus was the mind of God became a human person. This means that in Christ Jesus we see God taking human life, facing our human situation, struggling with our human problem, battling with our human temptations, working out our human relationships. Therefore it is as if Christ said: "Feed your heart, feed your mind, and feed your soul with my divinity and humanity. When you're discouraged and in despair, when you are beaten to your knees and disgusted with the life and living, remember I took that life of yours and these struggles of yours on me." In other words, "I tasted and saw with my own eyes how good is your humanity. Now I want you to taste and see how good is my divinity by partaking in my own life, for it is only in participation with my own life that you will be truly happy – you will experience an inner joy which no one can take away from you. I will be your refuge in times of distress, so that you will not be depressed when you are stressed for you nourished yourself with the Eucharist."

To taste and see are two experiential activities that are meaningful only to beings endowed with reason, intelligence, and understanding. For instance, mere seeing with concomitant glimmer of understanding is mere gaping; and mere gaping by itself devoid of reason or intelligence or understanding has no meaning at all. It looks amazing though and even wonderful, for example – an eagle gazing at the sun, but it could not give meaning to what it is doing, that is, gazing.

Only we, human being, of course, angels too, can give a certain significance of the eagle's staring at the sun because we are endowed with reason, intelligence, and understanding. If we are a high caliber mystical theonauts, we will be inclined to see it as an image of the soul's capacity to gaze at God face to face in the Beatific Vision, as the Scripture says: "It does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. And every one who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure." Again, it is also written: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

The same is true in the realm of tasting. Mere tasting without reason, intelligence, and understanding is mere eating which even a mice is fond of doing; but only we, human beings, of course, angels too in the spiritual realm for they, too, have their own bread, can say: "It's so delicious," or "it's so nutritious," or "it's so salubrious." Of course, the bread of angels is He which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world who unequivocally says: "I am the bread of life....This is the bread which comes down from heaven that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of his bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh."

Since reason, intelligence, and understanding distinguish human beings from animals and give meaning to the common acts of tasting and seeing, so faith, hope, and love distinguish believers from non-believers and give meaning to the common acts of tasting and seeing the goodness of the Lord. Both believers and non-believers may see the same thing and may experience the same thing, but both tasted and saw it differently, that is, "to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life."

This is true in tragic events that may happen to people which normally will bring pain, sorrow, and suffering. Those who have faith in God, who hope in His mercy, and trust in His love, will still be able to taste and see the goodness of the Lord in spite of these tragedies.

The following story might contribute to the shedding of light to the meaning we wish to convey: "Two men set out on a journey together. One of the men was

deeply religious; the other one was a skeptic. They took a donkey to carry their baggage, a torch to light their way at night, and a roaster, who was a friend of the donkey. The roaster sat on donkey's head during the entire journey.

"On the journey they frequently spoke about the Lord. 'In all things God is good,' said the believer. 'Well, we will see if your opinion bears out on the trip,' replied the unbeliever. Shortly before dusk, they arrived in a small village where they sought a place to sleep, but no one offered them a night's lodging. Reluctantly, they traveled a mile outside of town, where they decided to sleep.

"'I thought you said God is good,' the skeptic sarcastically said. 'Yes, God is good. God has decided this is the best place for us to sleep tonight,' said the believer.

"They fixed their beds under a huge tree, just off the main road that led to the village, tethering the donkey about 30 yards away. Just as they were about to light the torch, they heard a horrible noise. A lion had killed the donkey and carried it off to eat it, away from the two men. Quickly the companion climbed the tree to stay away from danger.

"'You still say God is good?' the skeptic asked with anger. 'Yes, God is good,' avowed the believer, 'if the lion had not eaten the donkey, he would have attacked and eaten us.' Moments later a cry from the roaster sent them further up the tree. From this vantage point they saw a wildcat carrying the roaster away in his teeth.

"Before the unbeliever could utter a word, the man of faith declared: 'God is really so good!' 'The cry of the roaster has once again saved us.' A few minutes later a strong wind arose and blew the torch, the only comfort of the men in the black night. Again the scoffer taunted the believer. 'It appears that the goodness of God is working overtime this evening,' he said. This time the man of faith was silent.

"The next morning the two men walked back into the village for food. They soon discovered that a large band of brigands has swept into the town the previous night and robbed the entire village of all its possessions.

"With this news the believer turned to his companion. 'Finally it has become clear,' he said. 'Had we been given a room in the village last night, we would have been robbed along with all of the villagers. If the wind had not blown out our torch, the bandits who traveled the road near the place where we slept, would have discovered us and taken all our good. It is clear, therefore, that in all things, God is really so good'" (A Jewish Folktale).

Because God is really so good and desires profoundly what is good for us in spite of all the ordeals, hardships, and tribulations that come our way, so we can joyfully and peacefully join with the psalmist and who trust in the Lord in proclaiming this added beatitude: "Happy is the man who takes refuge in him!

→

### **Icon # 343 = Filial Fear 2**

"O fear the Lord, you his saints, for those who fear him have no want! The young lions suffer want and go hungry; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing."

It is so marvelous how happiness in taking refuge in God is intertwined with a healthy, or we shall say "a filial" fear of the Lord, for if this blissful integration is ours and abound we will have no want because the Lord Himself becomes our everything.

The lion is known as the king of the forest, and yet they still suffer want and go hungry but those who sincerely seek the Lord lack no blessing. This is so, because when they took refuge in the Lord they found Him whom their soul loves, the hidden treasure, the pearl of great price. In finding Him they found everything that is good; no wonder, then, that they lack no good thing; they found too their true self, their once lost dignity, that is, children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

Thus in seeking and finding the Lord the eyes of our hearts are enlightened which gives knowledge to a vibrant hope to which God has called us and what are the riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints....No wonder that God's saints have no want of any good thing.

Fear of the Lord is like a centripetal force that draws us toward the center, that is, towards God who is really the center of our being because it is filial; it is like a little child who gravitates naturally towards its mother and is filled with awe and reverence although it could not articulate its feelings. The same is true with this filial fear of the Lord which the saints, and all of us who are striving to be one of them, had cultivated in their lifetime on earth.

This filial fear becomes so natural to those who live under the Divine influence of the Holy Spirit for it is filled with holy reverence for God. It will increase in intensity in proportion as our love for God increases, because it is intrinsic to love not to deliberately offend the beloved.

Sin, of course, is like a centrifugal force that moves us away from God who is the ultimate source of all good things. Therefore, even the kings and Queens, and the prince and princess of this world if they are living a sinful lives and are devoid of the fear of the Lord will be like lions who suffer want and hunger, of course, not physical hunger for they can certainly afford to live sumptuously, but spiritual hunger which is the worst kind of hunger because it has power to dig to the deepest depths of one's being; for they moved away from the quintessence of the real fountain of true good things, which is God.

This filial fear of the Lord is so fertile in its fecundity that it grows and develops into maturity, into having a parental affection. Thus we now can say: →

### **Icon # 344 = Family of Virtues**

**“Come, O sons, listen to me, I will teach you the fear of the Lord.”**

The prologue of the rule of our Father St. Benedict begins with this admonition: “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instruction, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice.”

Although the verses that follow this admonition speak of the “labor of obedience” as a means to bring us back to God from whom we “had drifted through the sloth of disobedience,” it is not hard to see that this filial fear of the Lord is actively operative in the labor of obedience. Again, in Ch. 5 of his rule St. Benedict says, “The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all.”

We are also told by Scripture that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. When the eyes of our hearts are enlightened it becomes clearer that obedience, humility, and fear of the Lord are so inter-connected and inseparable so much so that where obedience is humility is also there, and of course, fear of the Lord too. They are like children in the family of virtues that although they are distinct yet they came from the same source which is God, just as children in the natural family are distinct from each other yet they are from the same parents.

Some children look alike, for instance, the twins yet people who are familiar with them, say, their family or close friends can notice peculiarities in their features. The same is true in the family of virtues. For example, kindness and goodness, humility and obedience, patience and gentleness, look alike and are closely related, yet you can perceive a certain nuance in their operations in a given circumstance.

They all issue from the same origin, that is, the Holy Spirit who is God Himself.

The more a person is united with the Lord the more that person will be fruitful, as the Lord said: "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." And the more a person loves the Lord the more that person fear of willfully doing anything, or saying anything, or thinking anything that offends Him.

This fear of the Lord is so rooted in our love for God that the thought of offending Him fills us with dread. We could not bear the thought to hurt God in any way. Prayer is absolutely necessary in maintaining this filial fear of the Lord, just as water is necessary to prevent trees from withering.

Our Lord Jesus Himself, while still on earth, teaches us a lesson of the importance of prayer in sustaining this filial, godly fear of God and learning obedience to the will of the heavenly Father through whatever comes our way either it be pain and sorrow, or suffering, as the Scripture says: "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him...."

Surely, this fear of the Lord or this godly fear is one of our greatest safeguards against evil. Knowing ourselves and being familiar with the movements of our heart and its evil inclinations, we certainly need a filial fear of the Lord, a holy reverence for God and His holy will and His Word, because we will only reap in full measure what we will sow. If we sow in our own flesh the seeds of wickedness and evil desires, then, from our own flesh we will harvest corruption. A holy reverence for this fundamental principle will have a tendency to safeguard us from doing evil, as the Scripture says: "The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil." It also says, "The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, that one may avoid the snares of death."

Like a good cholesterol that needs to increase, so when this filial fear of the Lord abounds in us, then, we will be in a healthy condition to live out peacefully in pursuing the answer to this decisive question: →

## Icon # 345 = The Tongue: Silence

“What man is there who desires life, and covets many days, that he may enjoy good? Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.”

It is noticeable that the question itself provides the answer. What we really have to do is to put it into practice. If we are really serious of our spiritual life and of our eternal salvation, then, we have to be very careful with our tongue for it is a carriage of life and death. Our Lord Jesus Himself said that even an idle word will give account on the Day of Judgment.

Wise, therefore, is the Psalmist who said: “I have resolved to keep watch over my ways that I may never sin with my tongue. I have put a guard on my mouth. I was silent and was humble, and I refrained from good words.”

Again, St. Benedict elucidated clearly the paramount importance of silence and the value of controlling one’s tongue when he said: “Here the Prophet indicated that there are times when good words are to be left unsaid out of esteem for silence. For all the more reason, then, should evil speech be curbed so that punishment for sin may be avoided. Indeed, so important is silence that permission to speak should seldom be granted even to mature disciples, no matter how good or holy or constructive their talk, because it is written: ‘In a flood of words you will not avoid sin; and elsewhere, the tongue holds the key to life and death.’”

If we are not satiated with this explanation, let us go to St. James and listen what he says so that there will be no excuse out of ignorance: “If any one thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this man’s religion is vain.” He also says, “If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Look at the ships also; though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, but no human being can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish?”

Since this is the case, how important silence is. It is a fertile ground where wisdom grows and the desire for life flourishes. When we know how to be silent we will also know how to speak. When we gained and learned silence our soul can easily notice passions and unhealthy desires, then the inner man within us who is roused to spiritual work develops the strength to overcome them and, from day to day, will lift our soul nearer to purity. God is expert in taming the tongue.

If we do not know how to close the door of our heart by silence we will be like a furnace which never burns bright, despite the aid of the sacraments and prayer and pious reading, because its mouth remains open; or to a reservoir which is never filled, because the tongue is an instrument that very readily empties the heart.

We keep silence not only to keep our tongue from evil and our lips from speaking deceit, but most importantly to keep our thoughts on God which, more than all else, can restore us to our original purity and bring us closer to the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Even in family relationships there is so much gain and benefits in controlling our tongue. The following story may help to illumine what we are trying to convey: "One day, a woman came to St. Vincent Ferrer and complained bitterly that her husband was always short-tempered and out of sorts and it was impossible to have an intelligent word with him. The woman asked St. Vincent if he could suggest some way by which peace could come back to their household. So he told her, 'Go to the Brother at the entrance to the monastery and ask him to give you some water from the monastery well. Take it along and as soon as your husband comes back in the evening, take a drink of this water and hold it in your mouth as long as you can. You must keep it in your mouth a long time; otherwise, it won't work.' The woman followed the advice. As soon as her husband got in the door that evening, he was again full of his usual ill-humor and impatience. Immediately the woman took a big swallow of the monastery water and kept it in her mouth a long time so it would not lose its effectiveness. Pretty soon her husband saw that he was talking to the air and stopped. The woman used the same miraculous remedy over and over again. Her husband changed completely, and even praised his wife's patience.

"All smiles, the woman returned to St. Vincent to thank him for the miraculous water. But St. Vincent assured her with a smile, 'It was not the water but your patiently holding your tongue that worked the wonder in your husband'"

(Wolfgang Oberraeder).

We can hear a similar modus operandi in the story of one of the desert fathers who used to swallow a pebble and keep it in his mouth as a way of learning silence.

Another really good way of learning to keep our tongue is to practice the awareness of God's presence. Suppose we, who have not read the entire New Testament – much more the whole Bible, cover to cover, from Genesis to the Book of Revelation, will be in the presence of a Raymond Brown, and a Joseph Fitzmyer, and a Peter Ellis, and an Irene Nowell, and a Robert Karris, and a Daniel Harrington, and a Carroll Stuhlmueller, almost absolutely, by instinct and common sense, be very circumspect even to breath a useless and incoherent exegesis of Scripture otherwise it will only reveal the profundity of our own ignorance. How much more of God who is infinite Wisdom and knowledge itself!

Take another example, suppose we, who have just dropped out from college and just barely read the first page of the code of Canon Law – for whatever reason found ourselves in the presence of a James Coriden, and a Thomas Green, and a John Beal, again by common sense and natural proclivity will be very careful to utter even useful words concerning the laws of the Church. How much more of God who is the infinite sun of Justice who came to our world not to abolish the law and prophets but to fulfill them!

As one of our heavenly friends, St. Ignatius of Antioch, says: "It is better for a man to be silent and be a Christian than to say he is a Christian and not be a Christian."

It is in silence that God is known, and through mysteries that He declares Himself. Everyone who forbids his lips to gossip, which is another way of speaking deceit, or to speak too much, is a landmark of a wise person because he is protecting his heart from passions. Everyone who preserves his heart from passions is likely to see God every moment and will experience peace, a peace not as the world gives but the peace of the Lord Himself which He leaves as His farewell gift to us. The peace which the Lord Jesus brings is not a thing, or a practice, or a technique. It is God Himself in us. It is the Holy Spirit.

Our heavenly friend, St. John of Damascus, says: "Peace is only possible if you pursue an upright way of life, if you are pleaser of God than men." If this is the case, then, we will be considered righteous. On His part: →

### **Icon # 346 = Righteousness**

"The eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and his ears toward their cry. The face of the Lord is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth."

We have to be very clear that even if we are considered to be righteous, and the eyes of the Lord are upon us – this doesn't mean that we will no longer

commit faults or stumble and fall, from time to time, in keeping God's commandments, especially the precept of the perfection of love.

Whether we like it or not it is inevitable that we will stumble and fall from time to time just by the very fact that while we are still in this present life our goodness, virtues, holiness, sanctity, saintliness, or whatever you call them, are not in a perfect and permanent state; otherwise, a St. Teresa of Avila or a St. Therese of the child Jesus or a St. Francis of Assisi could not cry out: "I am the greatest of sinners!", as though vying who is the magna or summa cum Laude of sinners. However, this does not diminish their righteousness before God nor God's predilection towards them.

Take an example your room, even though you are very regular in cleaning it and even meticulous in dusting the hidden corners, yet you will notice that after a while dusts are starting to accumulate again. You will also notice that no matter how punctilious you are, unless you are psychologically sick, you can still live with it; and that you don't spend your waking hours thinking about the dust.

The same is true with the saints and those who are in the process of becoming one. They are very aware of their sinfulness and imperfection, for they saw themselves in the light of God's infinite holiness and perfection; yet they do not fall into despair for they do not spend all their waking hours, and sleeping hours too, thinking about their sins and imperfection, but they also dwell in the remembrance of the loving kindness of the heart of God.

These are the people who can live with their imperfection but at the same time do not make it an excuse for not striving anymore toward perfection. They know how to live with this honorable tension, that is, knowledge of themselves as they are and knowledge of God as He truly is.

"Like the eyes of a servant on the hand of her mistress," so their eyes are on God, for in reality they are servants of the Most High God whom the Father honors because they serve the Lord Jesus here on earth. On the other hand, the Lord's eyes are also upon them, so much so, that no one of their hairs falls off without His notice. Of them the Lord says: "I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not uproot them. I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with whole heart."

Not only that the eyes of the Lord are zero in on them but His ears, too, are toward their cry, either it be a cry of repentance, a cry of thanksgiving, a cry of joy, a cry of sorrow, a cry for help, or a cry of adoration, as the Scripture says: "We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if any one is a worshipper of

God and does His will, God listens to him." It also says: "In my distress I called upon the Lord; to my God I cried for help. From His temple he heard my voice and my cry to him reached his ears."

Consequently, we have a fairly good reason to express the deepest depths of our being and say: "I love the Lord for he has heard the cry of my appeal; for he turned his ear to me in the day I called him."

Absolutely, the Lord knows better than us what we need, yet He wants us to cry out to Him for it. When we cry out to Him, He hears us before the words are uttered, for He looks at our heart – everything in us stands open before Him – even our innermost thoughts; yet He still wants us to cry for help, so that when we received the needed help we will know that it is not our own doing but owing to God's grace. Hence, we become grateful and humble.

If we no longer cry to God for help, and just rely on our own human effort, eventually, we will lose the stamina to keep God's commandments and very likely to fall into serious offenses. This may sound threatening, but it is very true considering the principle in the spiritual life that if we do not progress we will regress; in other words, if we do not do good we will end up in doing evil.

If we have an ear to hear, let us listen to one of the most prominent moral theologians that the Catholic Church produced, no other than St. Alphonsus Liguori, who says: "He who at other times, neglect prayer for a month, or at most for two months, cannot be excused from mortal sin; because, without prayer we cannot procure the help necessary for the observance of the law of God."

It would be a terrible thing that instead of being doer of good we will be a doer of evil, because in this case the face of the Lord will be against us. Instead of hearing, "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord uncover His face to you and give you peace," we will hear: "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers."

Obviously, the reason for this unbearable sentence is that "the face of the Lord is against evildoers, to cut off the remembrance of them from the earth." Doing evil is a form of despising the Lord and breaking His commandment. By doing so, the evildoer cut himself/herself off from the assembly of the righteous and could not bear their company. If we consider the infinite majesty of the Lord who is offended, and the infinite meanness of the one offending, we will understand that sin is in some sort an infinite evil.

On the other hand, if we do not cease to cry for God's grace to be able to do what is good, right, and true; and to be able to avoid evil in all its form, once we are aware of it, then, whatever may happen to us will turn out to be to our own

advantage. Little by little, of course, by God's grace, we will be amazed to realize that Our Lord deigns to consider us among the righteous; and it will be really consoling to hear: →

### **Icon # 347 = Appeal for Help**

“When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles.”

Experience tells us that if there is something that really bothers our heart, although its intensity fluctuates, but once we shared it to someone either a spiritual director or confessor or a trusted friend we noticed that a tremendous relief pervades our whole being. The sinews of our soul regain its vigor.

Rich and poor alike, kings and paupers will gladly tell us that this is so. If we have ears to hear let us bend them to the advice of king St. Louis of France to his son: “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.”

Whether we like it or not, so long as we are still in this world, we are bound to bump with troubles from time to time because we have to pass through many trials and tribulations before we can enter the kingdom of heaven but, by the inscrutable solicitude and wisdom and mercy of the Lord, ways are also provided that we might be delivered from these troubles.

As a result, therefore, our gratitude and trust in the Lord are always activated, and our inordinate reliance on ourselves is being curbed. St. Paul speaks loudly and distinctly about this in his second letter to the Corinthians, saying: “For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia; for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself. Why, we felt that we had received the sentence of death; but that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead; he delivered us from so deadly a peril, and he will deliver us; on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.”

It is not improbable to say that this is part of God's pedagogy in teaching us the art of trusting and praying. Our life on earth is like a school wherein we are subjected to a regular, and at other times a sporadic examination. When we study our lesson, that is to say, cry out for help to God in prayer, we are likely to pass the examination, that is to say, we are able to handle constructively our trials and difficulties because the strength of the human spirit and its successful effort to rise above difficulties is an indication of superior divine favor.

Prayer is a good indicator of the acknowledgment of our dependence on God. To pray is to ajar the portal of our heart unto Our Lord and welcome Him into our troubles. Our trials and tribulations are the very things which open wide the gateway unto Him and give access to all our needs. In this way, in times of prosperity we will not be unmindful of adversity and in times adversity we will not be forgetful of prosperity. In other words even if we will be assaulted by troubles in every way we will not be crushed to the point of despair for the Lord graciously listen to our cry for help. Besides, →

### **Icon # 348 = Relief to the Broken-hearted**

**“The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit.”**

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, because the brokenness of the broken-hearted becomes prayer the moment that we approach to the Lord and speak candidly and confidently with Him about our condition, for the Lord Himself said: “Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

Suffering and pain can break the human heart if we don't have the shock absorber of prayer, but if we have prayer as our shock absorber anything that can break and crush the human heart will become opportunity for positive growth and channels to the gateway of eternal life.

On the other hand, the inveterate atheist who distances himself from the Lord, having no practical knowledge of God, no trust in His loving providence, no assurance of His love will be pinched when hard times come. Such person's mind is caught within the pincer of a past he regrets or resents and a future he is afraid he cannot control. Being thus compressed, his nature is in pain; but those who accept God's will in all things and does not give up prayer will be able to escape such frustration by piercing the disguise of outwards events to penetrate to their real character as harbingers of the God they love. With king David they confidently pray: “Make me hear rejoicing and gladness that the bones you have crushed may thrill.”

Our Lord Jesus is near to the broken-hearted who trust in Him and saves the crushed in spirit, for He Himself has experienced being broken-hearted and crushed in spirit at the garden of Gethsemane; and began to be greatly distressed and troubled, and said to His disciples: “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death....” Thus He knows how to sympathize with us when we are broken-hearted and crushed in spirit.

Since He takes the initiative to be near us when we are grief-stricken and devastated in spirit, we too can gain confidence to draw near to Him – to His throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in this moment of need.

No one is spare of suffering in this present life – in whatever form it might take, but suffering or being broken-hearted takes another meaning when it is seen in the eyes of God, that is, taken and accepted with faith in His goodness and mercy for us. Often when the first punch was heavy, the following is bearable and we can roll with the punches; then, by God's grace, it will bring calm and peace and loving gratitude.

God has suffered, broken-hearted, and crushed in spirit, so we too, have our share in human suffering whether we wish it or not. If we are broken-hearted and crushed in spirit, but endure it in union with God we will suffer less and will gain merit. On the other hand, if we reject the trial we will suffer more without gaining any merit.

There are souls, then, who win peace and sanctity from the same trials and suffering that make others rebels and nervous wrecks. So, we pray for the grace not to run away from sorrow and hardship so as to enter at last into the repose of the Lord's consolation, and to obtain the tranquility of life immortality for all eternity. →

### **Icon # 349 = God's Comfort**

"Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all."

The story of the patriarch Joseph who was sold by his brothers into Egypt is one of the many instances in the history of God's people that although "Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all." This is what happened to Joseph when He was sold into Egypt; but God was with him and rescued him out of all his afflictions, and gave him favor and wisdom before the king of Egypt and made him governor of Egypt and over all his household.

If the Lord had not been with him he could have been easily crushed by his afflictions, for he will be devoid of the inner comfort of the Lord's consolation. So long as the Lord is with us all our afflictions will be bearable, for it is not we alone who suffer but the Lord suffers with us too.

Since the Lord is meek and humble of heart He bears His afflictions patiently, so that we too might learn from Him humility in handling our afflictions. Accordingly,

in proportion to our humility we will grow in patience in our afflictions, and in proportion to our patience the burden of afflictions is made lighter and we will receive comfort; and in proportion to the comfort we will receive, the love of God increases in us; and in proportion to this love, our joy in the Holy Spirit abounds all the more.

Of course, all this is for the glory of God the Father through Our Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus St. Paul hit the nail on the head when he says: "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."

"For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too. If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation; and if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which you experience when you patiently endure the same sufferings that we suffer. Our hope for you is unshaken; for we know that as you share in our sufferings, you will also share in our comfort."

We have to reiterate every now and then that deliverance from all our afflictions does not mean that we will no longer have any affliction at all or be spared from it, for this can lead to a tricky complacency. What it really means is that in all our afflictions and misfortunes we will still be able to find peace because of the comfort with which we are comforted by God.

"Do you wish to be free of afflictions and not to be burdened by them?," asked two of our heavenly friends from the fathers of the Philokalia, Sts. Barsanuphius and John, then, they said, "expect greater ones, and you will find peace."

Of course, this is a hard pill to swallow for those who don't have the stamina to carry one's cross, for the paradox of the cross is that the more we accept and willingly carry it, it becomes lighter and bearable and will lead to contentment and peace, but if we reject it the more it becomes distasteful and annoying, and burdensome too.

When we are in sorrow, or struggling under difficulties, humiliation, sickness, temptation, desolation, disappointment, repugnance to duties, Christ Himself draws near and goes with us as He did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. That is the privilege of the cross: "Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the Lord delivers him out of them all." Provided we seek no other comfort, the Lord is sure to draw near and comfort us Himself. Moreover, →

## Icon # 350 = Bones Intact: Trust in the Lord

**“He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken.”**

This is very indicative of those who put all their trust in the Lord in spite of all the trials, tragedies, and tribulations that they encountered in life. Their bones are all intact; “not one of them is broken.” No doubt they have a good dosage of Vitamin C which neutralizes the devastating elements in the body. It makes the bones strong, solid, and healthy.

Just as the bones make up the skeleton of the body and hold the body together, so trust in the Lord is the skeleton of the soul. If the bones are solid, healthy, and strong they are likely to have a fairly good contribution to the well being of the body; they will sustain the body in walking, jogging, running, or climbing hills or mountains.

The same is true, too, if our trust in the Lord is strong, solid, and healthy. It will sustain us in walking in the path of God's commandments; or jogging in the practice of controlling our passions and desires; or running with perseverance the race that is set before us – looking to the Lord Jesus who is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross despising the shame; or climbing the hills of beatitudes or the mountains of contemplation and transfiguration into the image and likeness of the Lord Jesus.

Notice also that Vitamin C is a very powerful antioxidant that helps support the immune system and support cardiovascular function. It can be found in raw cabbage, young carrots, orange juice, celery, lettuce, onions, tomatoes, and radishes, rich in citrus fruits, apples, pears, apricots, plums, peaches, and pineapples. Thus it accessible to all the inhabitants of the earth, for one or two or three of these foods – fruits or its equivalent are available in the town or city or province where one lives.

The same is true, too, of trust in the Lord. It is a very powerful antioxidant that helps support the immune system of the soul to neutralize the harmful elements in our spiritual life such as: despair, bitterness, pessimism, hopelessness, depression, and discouragement. It also supports cardiovascular function, that is to say, it is good for the heart in sustaining its function in loving God in spite of all the troubles and trials that come our way.

It keeps the heart always grateful to God in all circumstances either it be a consolation or a desolation – thus it forestalls hopelessness and despair, because giving thanks to God at all times, especially in a most excruciating experience is a guaranteed antidote for depression. Just say: Thank you Lord, for everything!

Trust in the Lord can be found in prayer, reading Holy Scripture; it is abundant in hope, overflowing in charity, and copious in Faith. Since trust in the Lord is so copious in Faith, therefore, it is already an act of righteousness. In other words, we are acting in righteousness when we trust in the Lord. Hence we share in the faith of Abraham.

Unequivocally, just as the food of the Lord Jesus is to do the will of the Heavenly Father, so the food of Abraham is to trust in the Lord, so much so, that "No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness." Again, since trust in the Lord is abundant in hope, Abraham "believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations."

And what about in charity? Undoubtedly, the stone will cry out if St. Paul will not say: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us."

Thus we see how potent trust in the Lord is, so much so, that even though St. Paul was pummeled by series of punches he was not knocked down, as he himself testified: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed."

Trust in the Lord in times of distress and sufferings can even produce a nutritious melody in one's soul as the following story indicates: "There is a legend about a German nobleman who had a castle in the hills along the Rhine. Being a music lover, he stretched out some wires between the towers of his castle with the hope that the winds might vibrate them and make music. But the gentle Rhineland breezes produced no sounds. Then one night a great thunderstorm swept up the valley. Furious winds beat against the castle. Even the mountains roundabout seemed to shake. The baron opened a sheltered window to watch the progress of the storm and, to his astonishment, he heard the strains of beautiful music. Now those wires were humming like guitar strings. It had required a windstorm to bring out the music! Is it not often with us? In the day of calm prosperity, little spiritual beauty is seen in us. But when God sends the tempest, he can make music out of it which we never expected to come out of a storm of trouble" (Leonard Greenway).

David's bones were crushed because of his sins, but its forgiveness makes him hear rejoicing and gladness. Sin weakens his bones, but his contrition and humility of heart restore back its strength.

Therefore, so long as there is still a flicker of repentance in our soul and if we will never despair in God's mercy our bones, too, will be made intact. If it has been broken before, now it is made whole. We trust that the Lord will always strengthen our bones by His grace, so that even the power of death can no longer break them. →

### **Icon # 351 = Evil vs. Wicked**

"Evil shall slay the wicked; and those who hate the righteous will be condemned."

Even if we don't have a degree in moral theology, it would not be hard to imagine the consequences when Evil and Wicked live together in one house. Knowing Evil and Wicked how they behave, it is very likely that a high frequency of argument will surely occur. When this happens chances are high that not only Evil shall slay Wicked, but Wicked will even preempt to slay Evil.

Of course, they don't even have to use knife to do this, for knife, in this case, is a very outdated instrument because they have to be so close to thrust it at each other, whereas they can slay each other by their look which has a speed of light, that is, it travels straight to their heart; by their words which sound like a thunder, and by their tongue which act like a sharpen razor. St. Paul warns us to be extra careful so as not to be entangled in this pernicious kind of behavior when he says: "But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another."

In order that there will be no excuse out of ignorance, we are also notified that "those who hate the righteous will be condemned." This is not an esoteric caveat, for it has already been foretold that those who deliberately and adamantly do not believe in the Righteous One is already condemned, because they had "not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed."

Accordingly, people in the ancient days, even though they had not an elementary education or even entered a kindergarten school, were not devoid of the ingrained knowledge that judgment was meted out to anyone guilty of murder, as the Lord said to His would-be followers: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.'"

Christ the Lord who came not to destroy the law but to perfect it, and raised morality to such a dignity that makes the carefree tongue feels giddy, goes on to say: "But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire."

Although none of these offenses have recourse to knife to carry out their crimes, yet they are placed on equal seriousness as murder so as to merit judgment and condemnation. If Evil slays whoever is wicked, and so incurs judgment, and those who harbor hatred in their heart and inflict it without any discrimination even against those who are also wicked and so deserves condemnation, how much more if this hatred is vehemently directed against the righteous without the slightest trace of mercy! If they do this when the wood is green, how much more when it is dry. In other words, if righteous people are scarcely saved, where will the impious and sinners appear? No wonder, then, that "those who hate the righteous will be condemned." →

### **Icon # 352 = Redemption: refuge**

"The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned."

The first letter of Peter reminds the early Christians, and us too, "that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot."

This reminder is extremely important because constant remembrance of what Our Lord Jesus has done for us makes us grateful and appreciative of His Redeeming Action in our lives, for while we were yet sinners Christ died for us so as to live our newfound life no longer for ourselves but for Him who loves us so much that He laid down His life for us. He teaches us to bear all things, hope all things, endure all things, and trust in His kindness when He sends us difficult moments.

A sick person, for instance, takes medicine without interrogating the physician to justify its bitter taste, because the patient trusts the doctor's knowledge; in the same way, the soul that has sufficient faith accepts all the events of life as largesse from God, in the serene assurance that the Lord knows best what is good for us.

The things that happen to us are not always susceptible to our mind's comprehension or our will's conquering, but they are always within the capacity of our faith to accept and our will's submission.

See, how dearly Our Lord Jesus loves us for while we were yet servants and does not know the will of our master, yet He redeems our life from all kinds of slavery such as the slavery of a compulsive demeanor; patterns of self-destructive behavior; addiction to exterior or interior gossip or both; attachment to vainglory or fury; affinity to vanity and pride; and predilection to prestige and vices. Yet now, He no longer calls us servants but friends for He made known to us what He heard from the Father.

This is what He heard from the Father: that we should be holy as He is holy. Our sanctification, then, is God's will for us, because by it He is glorified in us, for in it we grow into a mature manhood, in the fullness of the stature of Christ.

Redeeming the life of one's servants is, undoubtedly, a supreme witness of love and benevolence, for normally, parents will ransom their son or daughter only. It is very unlikely that they will take pain to redeem their servants. In that case, it was for the sake of the son or daughter that the servants were delivered too. But the Lord shows His transcendent love by redeeming the life of His servants. Some masters, of course, cherish their slaves like the Centurion who had a slave who was dear to him, who was at the point of death; but they cannot give them life. They can only intercede for the life of their servants as the Centurion did when he went to the Lord Jesus begged Him to save the life of his slave.

Our Lord Jesus has said that everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. It is also true to say that sin can really be addictive. Therefore, those people who are living in sin can rightly be called sin addict, "for whatever overcomes a man to that he is enslaved." Of course, it begins always with little things: perhaps, little flirtation, or little dishonesty, little breach in modesty, little infringement in propriety, little transgression in purity, and little encroachment in virtue.

They are like bait which a person nibbles a little and got hooked in it. It is not abstruse to say that in the early stage of this addiction to sin there was mix feelings of inexpensive gratification and a pang of conscience, but once a person keeps on doing it the conscience becomes dull and deaf, and blind too.

The conscience losses its intrinsic ability to discern between right and wrong, its natural sensitivity to good and evil. Pope Pius XI hits the nail on the head when he says that "the sin of this century is the lost of the sense of sin." Accordingly, sin is also considered as a leprosy, of course, of the soul.

In the leprosy of the body the hand, for instance, could no longer feel anything even if a boiling water is poured into it, so in the leprosy of the soul the conscience could no longer apprehend anything even if it listens to a fine sermon. Here the sayings of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah hold true: "Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive. Make the heart of this people fat, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

Dangerous, therefore, are the corollaries of sin: it blinds, it dulls, it muffles, it petrifies, it weakens, it hardens both the heart and the mind, and also the will. Who can save the life of our soul from this hazardous subjugation of sin? Thanks be to God through Our Lord Jesus who redeems us by His precious blood, by His suffering and death on the cross.

Through Him and by Him we have forgiveness of our sins according to the riches of His grace which He lavished upon us. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the flesh," that is, living just for this world and the unrestrained pleasures of the body is a form of slavery.

Therefore, there's a need to be ransomed; and "to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace" is a form of taking refuge in the Lord and will not be condemned, for all that the Father gives to Our Lord Jesus will come to Him; and all who comes to Him He will not cast out. Never since the foundation of the world has it been heard that anyone who takes refuge in the Lord has been condemned, for He even invited every one to come to Him to, at least, experience a certain relief from the drudgery of life: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

It is easy and light because it is Love; as one of our heavenly friends, St. Jerome, said: "Love, finds nothing hard; no task is difficult to the eager." It is love, then, that lightens burdens. Things that are impossible become easy where love is at work. Since it is love which unites the soul to God, the more intense this love is the more deeply the soul enters into God and is centered in Him.

Now that we entered into God and are centered in Him, so no one can snatch us from Him. In truth, He is our surest place of refuge. Does anyone decline or plummet into sin? Does his unbearable depression even poke him to commit suicide? Let him take refuge in the Lord Jesus, and we will add: the Blessed Virgin Mary too who is the Mother of Mercy and refuge of sinners, then he will know by his own experience that his/her will to live will be immediately renewed.

And where is the person, who, terrified and trembling in the presence of impending peril, has not been suddenly filled with courage and hope and rid of fear by taking refuge in the Lord Jesus? Where is the person who, tossed to and fro on the rolling waves of doubts, dangers, and difficulties, did not quickly find certitude and consolation by taking refuge in the Lord Jesus? For this reason, we can assuredly say with the Psalmist: "None of those who take refuge in him will be condemned." →

### **Icon # 353 = Continual Warfare**

#### **Psalm 35 (34)**

"Contend, O Lord, with those who contend with me, fight against those who fight against me! Take hold of shield and buckler, and rise for my help! Draw the spear and javelin against my pursuers! Say to my soul, 'I am your deliverance!'"

Whether we like it or not, whether we are a lionhearted or faint-hearted or not, whether we are belligerent or nonviolent or not, whether we are pugnacious or pacifistic or not we have to be aware that our life in this present world is a continual warfare. In other words, we are engaged in a spiritual combat where the human heart is the battleground.

St. Paul gives us a hint of this kind of combat when he speaks of the struggle between the desires of the flesh and the aspirations of the spirit, between the works of the flesh and the fruits of the spirit. He prefaced it by saying: "We know that the law is spiritual; but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right but I cannot do it." He goes on to say, "For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members."

Not only St. Paul alludes to this type of war but also the letter of James when it says: "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you? Is 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."

Thus we have two veritable witnesses who have dug deeply the psychology of the human heart – whose testimony is undeniable. To add more evidence to his testimony, St. Paul identifies clearly the works of the flesh and named them without equivocation: "Immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like."

All these, of course, come from the heart. Although they are called "works of the flesh" because they are done in the body, it is not hard to see that they are really spiritual activities because they tell something of the state of mind, or we would say the soul of the person involved in these activities. They are manifestation of what is within a person. Since they are contrary to the fruits of the Spirit such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, and the like, so it can be truly affirmed that the former are pernicious vices which ruthlessly contend with primordial righteousness of our soul, which is made in the image and likeness of God, in order to gain possession of it.

Even though we have a very limited knowledge of theology, and most of us do not even have a master – licentiate or doctorate of this divine science, yet if we accustom ourselves to prayer and be attentive to the movements of our heart we will not be ignorant to detect who the "superpower" is behind those pernicious vices, for this guy is really bent to destroy us because he is unimaginably jealous and envious of us for we are destined to inherit the indescribable beauty, majesty, and splendor of the kingdom of Heaven, which was also prepared for him and the other foolish angels who were deceived by him, but they lost forever without the tiniest shadow of inheriting it.

The Lord Jesus indicates this when He says: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven." Of course, the Lord is speaking of the fall of all the foolish angels. In other words, "there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him."

So, you can imagine the relief and joy of all the wise angels, and all people who are to inherit the kingdom where peace and love pervade its atmosphere and where no one can ever take that joy from them. But since the Devil and his foolish angels were thrown down to the earth, where we live now, and knowing that their days are counted, so, they are pursuing us with inconceivable fury like lions seeking someone to devour.

Woe really to us if we are denuded of God's help and are too proud even to think that we need His help to withstand our fiendish foes: "But woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short! Knowing our human weakness too and that we humans are prone to pride, God humbles Himself by becoming a human being like us in the person of Christ Jesus to teach us the art of humility, for by humility we will be able to bind and conquer the strong One, that is – the devil.

So, instead of plundering us and pursuing us we are the one who plunders him and subjugates him because of Christ who strengthens us. In other words, by anchoring ourselves in Christ we can have an enormous power to overcome the wiles of the devil – manifested in all works of darkness, for "the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil," that is, everything in the world which are not of God such as the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. These, of course, are not of God.

Our experience tells us that by ourselves we cannot hope to conquer all these lusts, for they are deeply rooted in our wounded fallen nature. It is by God's grace alone, not will power, are we able to master them. One of our heavenly allies in this spiritual combat, St. Maximus the Confessor, tells of the five reasons why God allows temptation, we may say struggle of spiritual warfare. First, "so that from attack and counter-attack we may become skilled in discerning good from evil;" Second, "so that our virtue may be maintained in the heat of the struggle and so be confirmed in an impregnable positions;" third, "so that as we advance in virtue we may avoid presumption and learn humility;" fourth, "to inspire in us an unreserved hatred for evil through the experience we thus have of it;" fifth, "so that we may attain inner freedom and remain convinced both of our own weakness and of the strength of Him who has come to our aid."

It's so amazing how the devil and the other evil spirits are utterly humiliated when they are subdued by us humans, because, even though they are now wicked spirits their nature is still angelic; and by its essence angelic nature is far, far above human nature – which is ours. We have also to assert that there's an infinite distance between the angelic nature and the divine nature. Thus we can only feebly imagine the infinite humility of God for preferring to take our human nature by becoming a human being like us; "though He was by nature God, He did not count equality with God a thing to be clung to, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

With Christ, then, as the commander-in-chief of this spiritual warfare and with St. Paul as the general of one of the battalions of Christ we are now ready to engage in this meaningful and decisive combat which determines our eternal

destiny: infinite and inexpressible glory, honor, peace, happiness or infinite tribulation, distress, humiliation, and suffering.

For this reason St. Paul emboldens all the soldiers of Christ saying: "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand 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 armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand."

To make it clear that this warfare is really spiritual and is being waged in the battleground of our heart, in the region of our mind, in the chamber of our will, in the abode of our beliefs, and in the mall of our dispositions, St. Paul goes on to say: "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."

Thus it is very evident how the inner man has to prepare himself in undertaking this spiritual combat. He is armed to the teeth!: loins with truth, breastplate of righteousness, gospel of peace, shield of faith, helmet of salvation, sword of the spirit – Word of God! So, we have to gird our loins with truth, because to cling to truth, to serve its interests alone without thought or fear of consequences, to follow blindly its steady gleam, in no way influenced by personal advantage or professions of friendship or loyalty even to a failing cause, to attack falsehood even when it is an inaccurate statement by one's side, end surely, by the very essence of the courage which it requires, in true freedom of the soul.

Then, we have to put on the breastplate of righteousness, because righteousness is a safeguard of the person who has it in his heart, it feeds the will to pursue virtues. The soul that puts on the breastplate of righteousness will progress in sanctity. In modern military parlance, it is a bulletproof of the soul against corruption and wickedness.

Then, we have to wear the footgear of the gospel of peace – the peace that the Lord Jesus gives to His disciples – His own peace. It is God Himself in us, it is the Holy Spirit. The feet that wear the gospel of peace is, undoubtedly, very beautiful, as it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news! Peace, of course, is not something diplomatically contrived, but the effort

of self-surrender to God from our heart – if we are pleaser of God rather than pleaser of men.

We have also to take the shield of faith. It is a bulwark against skepticism, a buckler against doubt; with it we can move mountains of difficulties, face our trials with courage, and impel us to march forward with confidence in God. In addition, we have to wear the helmet of salvation. It is a safeguard against perdition, that is to say, whether we live or die we belong to the Lord because everyone who believes in Him, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever believes in Him shall never die.

Even if our infernal enemy will pound our head to distrust the Lord, so long as we are wearing this helmet, he cannot hurt us, for the Lord is our salvation in times of troubles. If we stumble and fall and hit our head on the ground, so long as we have this helmet we will not be harmed, that is to say, if we fall into sin and hit our head on the ground of discouragement this helmet will protect us from despair. It also preserves us from false assurance which makes us think we have a license to sin – anyhow this helmet guards us from despair. What this helmet really does is securing us from deceitful self-complacency and pernicious despondency.

Moreover, we have to take the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. It is sharper than any two edged sword, for it has an enormous power to dig into the deepest depths of our being and reveals to us who we really are and who God is. When it pierces our hearts it opens to us a wholesome knowledge of self and an adorable knowledge of God. It cuts us into two to discern whether we belong to God or to the devil, whether we love the world and the deny the Lord or be crucified to the world and be with the Lord, so that He will say to our soul: “I am your deliverance!”

With all these paraphernalia for spiritual combat we have to “pray at all times with all prayer and supplication,” for prayer is food and strength for the soul, a protection against danger of all kinds, and a bulwark in time of temptation, as the Lord said: Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

With prayer, then, we have inherent power to contend with our eternal foe who doggedly contends with us and to fight against the other demons of lust, avarice, pride, anger, vainglory, and so on, who fights against us. Prayer will become a power which can overcome problems and makes us able to deal with any difficulty. This sounds very simple, but it involves two things. First, that we should be willing to take our problems and difficulties to God. One of the greatest test of any problem is simply to say, “can I take it to God and can I ask His help;” second, it involves that we should be ready to accept God’s

guidance when He gives it, for if we do take our problems and difficulties to God, and are humble enough and brave enough to accept His guidance – there does come a power which can conquer difficulties of thought and action.

Prayer is that power which opens our faculties to the influence of divinity; if God is for us, who is against us? Thus He will say to our soul: "I am your deliverance!" Since this is a warfare without truce, and evil desires, passions, and vices are still lurking in the recesses of our heart seeking after our life and devising evil against us, so, we should never cease to beseech the Lord until our last breath, saying humbly but vehemently: →

### **Icon # 354 = Imitators**

"Let them be put to shame and dishonor who seek after my life! Let them be turned back and confounded who devise evil against me! Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the Lord driving them on! Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the Lord pursuing them!"

Even in our little knowledge of Scripture, some of us may still remember in the story of the book of Tobit how a certain demon fell in love with Sarah the daughter of Raguel. This demon, in his inconceivable jealousy liquidated every man given to Sarah in marriage.

Sarah has been given to seven husbands and each one died in the bridal chamber when the marriage was about to be consummated. This demon, in the serene cruelty of his jealousy harms no one except those who approach her. This is what makes Tobias, son of Tobit, fearful to marry her lest he will die and bring the lives of his father and mother to the grave in sorrow on his account; and they have no other son to bury them.

But the angel Raphael told Tobias not to worry about the demon. He gave Tobias the instruction that when he enters the bridal chamber he shall take live ashes of incense and lay upon them some of the heart and liver of the fish they caught so as to make a smoke. Then the demon will smell it and flee away, and will never again return.

That was exactly what happened. On the night Tobias and Sarah were married, Tobias took the live ashes of incense and put the heart and liver of the fish upon them and made a smoke. And when the demon smelled the odor he fled to the remotest part of Egypt, and the angel Raphael bound him.

From this story, it is obvious that is very dangerous when a demon fell in love with us! It is also transparent that we need someone to help us and give us instruction

in our Christian life. This someone can be the Church whose teaching is odious to any kind of demon, or a trusted friend whose advice is upright, or our guardian angel or any saint or all the saints who inspire us by their holy lives, for they are the ones who follow Christ more closely and have a greater portion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit in knowing the mind and heart of God, as St. Paul says: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ."

He also says: "And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God." Moreover, "the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God."

On top of it all, his mind soars to the unconceivable heights of heaven and said: "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ." Hence, if we have the mind of Christ and live a virtuous life – that would be an odious odor to any kind of demon or all the demons.

Does the demon of avarice, for instance, can ever withstand in the presence of Christ Jesus who owns the whole universe and in whose incomparable riches all gold and silver and precious metals are just like dirt under His feet? Does the demon of lust can ever gaze at His face whose purity even the Seraphims and Cherubims humbly cover their faces? Does the demon of pride dare to raise its head at Christ Jesus who, though He was by nature God, did not count equality with God – a thing to be clung to, but infinitely humble Himself by becoming a human being like us in all things except sin, and freely gave Himself for us on the cross to draw us to Himself that we may, at least, be soaked in His humility so as to remove the ingrained egotism which soiled the original innocence of our soul? Or, does the demon of acedia would dare to dance with Christ Jesus who is joy and happiness itself?

These are all examples of how important it is to have someone to teach us inwardly and give us instruction outwardly, as St. Paul encourages us to do when he says: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." He also says: "Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things."

It is not difficult to see the deleterious consequences if our minds are set only on earthly things for, inevitably, all kinds of demons will be flocking around –

enamored by the impending ruin of our soul, making the temple of our heart their den.

However, just as the Lord Jesus casts out seven devils, which are representations of the seven capital sins, from Mary Magdalene, so He is more than willing to drive out the different kinds of demons who are busy doing their trades in our heart. Once He will do so we should be immeasurably grateful to Him rather than defensively questioning His authority for doing so, otherwise, it will be shamefully revealed where our allegiance is.

Therefore, are we willing to give Christ a chance by allowing Him, through His Spirit, to put to shame and dishonor all our love for vanity and vainglory, to turn back and confound all the other vices which devise evil against us? Are we also willing to make an appeal to our guardian angel to scatter all the chaff of our unclean desires so that, instead of our way being dark and slippery, it will be bright and grippy? If our answer is yes to these questions, then, we are morally and spiritually in the right direction. →

### **Icon # 355 = Intercessor**

“For without cause they hid their net for me; without cause they dug a pit for my life. Let ruin come upon them unawares! And let the net which they hid ensnare them; let them fall therein to ruin!”

In the book of Esther we are told that Haman was rabidly determined to exterminate all the Jews living in the kingdom of king Ahasuerus. He cunningly persuaded the king to issue an edict for the destruction of God's people in such and such a place and such and such a time.

This of course, triggered a tormenting distress and all chaotic feelings among the people of God, especially for Mordecai who served in the king's court and for Queen Esther. Mordecai pleaded Queen Esther to make supplication to the king and entreat him for their people because, he said, “Haman, who is next to the king, spoke against us for our destruction. Beseech the Lord and speaks to the king concerning us and deliver us from death.”

It is understandable how queen Esther feel when she heard these words because she knew that all the members of the king's household and all the people of the king's provinces were aware that if any person goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law; all alike are to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter. Queen Esther was so worried because she has not been called to come in to the king for the past whole month.

This boggles our mind, in a certain way, because it is hard to imagine that even a queen has to be summoned by the king to the inside of the inner court. It also suggests that the king and queen does not sleep together because if they did queen Esther could have brought this matter to the king without much anxiety.

Mordecai sent a message to queen Esther, saying: "Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

If you have read this story you will notice that it was not a quick fix deliverance, for Queen Esther sent a message to Mordecai instructing him to gather all the Jews to be found in Susa and they have to hold a fast on her behalf – neither eating nor drinking for three days, night and day.

Queen Esther and her maids, too, will do the same. Then she will go to the king though it is against the law. She concluded by saying: "If I perish, I perish." In other words, the people has to have their part too.

It is hard to miss the obvious parallel of the story of Esther and the story of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Both of them were poor and lowly in the eyes of the world, but both of them found favor in the eyes of their respective lords: one is the ruler from India to Ethiopia, the other the ruler of heaven and earth and all things visible and invisible.

Both of them were exalted to the dignity and honor as queens; both of them too were solicitous for the welfare of their people: Queen Esther – for the people of her own blood, while the Blessed Virgin Mary – for all the adopted children of God all over the earth who are her spiritual children, too, in faith.

Queen Esther urges her people to abstain from food and drink for three nights and days; the Blessed Virgin, too, in her various apparitions to different people in different countries at different times urges all people to fast, do penance, and to pray. People have to abstain from sin because God is already been offended so much.

One crystal clear difference between the married life of queen Esther and that of the Blessed Virgin Mary is that queen Esther has a limited access to her husband – king Ahasuerus, and apparently they are not always together; whereas, the Blessed Virgin Mary has an unlimited access to her beloved spouse – the Holy Spirit. They are perfectly united and inseparable, so much so, that it would be far easier to separate the light from the sun than to separate the

Blessed Virgin from the Holy Spirit. Wherever the Blessed Virgin is there, too, is the Holy Spirit.

Notice also that although Esther was a queen, yet she has no conjugal right whatsoever of the king's kingdom because when she approached the king, he said to her: "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom." The implication of this statement is that Queen Esther could never have the kingdom of king Ahasuerus, even the half of it, because Queen Esther did not ask for a kingdom but for the deliverance of her people.

Whereas, when the Blessed Virgin Mary consented to become the mother of the Incarnate Son of God, God gave to her all His kingdom, dominion, and power, so much so, that at the wedding feast at Cana although it was not yet the hour for the Son of God to reveal His glory, yet He humbly submitted to her request as though saying, "Not my will but your will be done."

Following this line of thought, we can say that Haman represents all the wicked machinations of Lucifer who is bent to destroy all God's people in this present world because the truly God's people will not bend down to Lucifer and pay him homage as Mordecai refuses to bend down to Haman.

In his arrogance Lucifer even usurped what is due to God alone by commanding the only begotten Son of God – king of the universe, to worship him. This he did by taking the Lord Jesus to a very high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them, and he said to Him: "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Can you imagine that! A mere creature will say this to his Creator!

Let us go back again to the request of Queen Esther and see what happened to Haman. Queen Esther said to king Ahasuerus: "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come this day to a dinner that I have prepared for the king." Then the king gave an order: "Bring Haman quickly, that we may do as Esther desires." So the king and Haman came to the dinner that Queen Esther had prepared.

The king reiterated his promise to Queen Esther to give her what she will ask for. To make it really titillating for Haman and make his heart ravished with excitement, Queen Esther said: "If I have found favour in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the dinner which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said."

As the account of this story says: "Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. Nevertheless Haman restrained himself, and went home; and he sent and fetched his friends and his wife Zeresh.

"And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honoured him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and the servants of the king. And Haman added, 'Even Queen Esther let no one come with the king to the banquet prepared but myself. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. Yet all this does me no good, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate.'

"Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, 'Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it; then go merrily with the king to the dinner.' This counsel pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made."

From this stance we can hear the clear echo of the Psalmist's words: "For without cause they hid their net for me; without cause they dug a pit for my life. Let ruin come upon them unawares! And let the net which they hid ensnare them; let them fall therein to ruin!"

This precisely what had happened to Haman. The night before the banquet the king, for whatever reason, was not able to sleep, so he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds – the chronicles, and they were read in the presence of the king. And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuch, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands upon king Ahasuerus.

So, the king inquired what honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this. The servants who attended the king told him that nothing has been done to Mordecai for this. The king then said: "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he prepared for him.

So the king's servants told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in." So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What shall be done to the man whom the king delights to honour?" Of course, Haman so flattered himself in his mind that he knows not his guilt; and he said to himself: "Whom would the king delight to honour more than me?"

It's really giddily dangerous when we clambered the height of having a high opinion of ourselves, for the Scripture says: "Whoever exalts himself shall be

humbled." It shows that every exaltation is a kind of pride which the Psalmist pointed out that he has avoided when he says: "Lord, my heart is not exalted; my eyes are not lifted up and I have not walked in the ways of the great nor gone after marvels beyond me."

It is not hard to imagine the unimaginable humiliation, chagrin, frustration, mental anguish, broken-hearted, and the like when Haman was being fried by his own oil when he said to the king: "For the man whom the king delights to honour, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse which the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set; and let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble princes; let him array the man whom the king delights to honour, and let him conduct the man on horseback through the open square of the city, proclaiming before him: "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour.'"

Then the king said to Haman, "Make haste, take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned."

It must be like hearing a thunder and being struck by lightning when Haman heard these words. Who could ever fathom the bottomless depths of his embarrassment and disgrace? It could have been less painful and humiliating if someone other than Haman was commissioned by the king to do all these things to Mordecai, but it was Haman who was asked to do these!

So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he arrayed Mordecai and made him ride through the open square of the city, proclaiming, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honour."

Haman was so devastated that he hurried to his house mourning with his head covered. He told his wife and all his friends everything that had befallen him. To put more salt into his wounds, the king's eunuchs arrived and brought him to the banquet that Queen Esther had prepared.

It is still titillating to imagine that Haman could have wish that the mountains would cover him and the rocks fall on him than to be in the presence of the king and Queen Esther.

The feelings of anxiety, nervousness, fear, distress, apprehension, dread, sorrow, and despair might have been boiling in the cauldron of his whole being as he drags his feet, with heavy a heart and a tormented mind, before king Ahasuerus and Queen Esther.

The climax of Haman's ignominy came when the king, once again, asked Queen Esther what was her request. Then Queen Esther, finally answered: "If I

have found favour in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given at my petition, and my people at my request. For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have held my peace; for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king."

Then king Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, that would presume to do this?" We have to hold our breath and listen to the heartbeats of the heart of Haman just to hear this question from the king. Who could ever endure such words!

Undoubtedly, it cuts through the whole being of Haman, piercing the division of his soul and spirit, of all his joints and marrows, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of his heart. If Haman's life style suggests that his cholesterol level is very high, and that his blood pressure is also very high, it would be enough for him to have a heart attack upon hearing those words; but he has a good fighting spirit that fight till the end just like Lucifer who though already been judged and cast out from God's kingdom, still fight against God's people till the end.

Then Queen Esther said, "A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!" Haman was so terrified before the king and the queen. It must be like the Day of Judgment.

And the king rose from the feast in wrath and went into the palace garden; but Haman stayed to beg his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that evil was determined against him by the king.

To add insult to injury, when the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Queen Esther was – the king's eyes must have protruded when he saw it, he said: "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" The attendants of the king were certainly acquainted with his disposition, for as soon as the words left the mouth of the king they covered Haman's face, a gesture which means ready to be executed.

One of the Eunuchs in attendance on the king, said: "Moreover, the gallows which Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing in Haman's house, fifty cubits high." And the king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai.

Then the anger of the king abated.

The lesson we can learn from this story is that the measure we give will be the measure we get back or what we sow is what we will reap. Whatever good or evil we contrive will, in some ways, boomerang to us.

We clear ourselves of all responsibility for another's evil deeds by disowning them in our hearts and rebuking them with our lips.

The other lesson we can learn from the case of Haman is that pride and inordinate ambition are very dangerous. If we read carefully what Haman suggested to the king for the man whom the king wishes to honor we can peep into Haman's inner motivation and perceived his misguided desire to be a king lurking in his heart, for when he says: "For the man whom the king delights to honour, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse which the king has ridden, and whose head a royal crown is set; and let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble princes; let him array the man whom the king delights to honour, and let him conduct the man on horseback through the open square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall be it done to the man whom the king delights to honour,'" this is precisely the gesture done to Solomon when David made him king in his place. David said to his attendants: "Take with you the servants of your lord, and cause Solomon my son to ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon, and let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet there anoint him king over Israel; then blow the trumpet, and say, 'Long live king Solomon!' You shall then come up after him, and he shall come and sit upon my throne; for he shall be king in my stead; and I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and over Judah."

It is not surprising to see that the desire to be a king was lurking in Haman's heart, for even Lucifer wanted to make himself like God, as the Scripture says: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds, I will make myself like the Most High.'"

Not only that, he even told God to fall down and worship him. Pride is a trustworthy harbinger of one's eternal downfall. "I will not serve God," is the indomitable battle cry of the proud person. Then, "I will serve you and die for you," is the unflagging shibboleth of the humble person. "By this all people shall know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another, and greater love has no one than this that a man lays down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you – by so doing I will no longer call you servants for the servant does not know what his master is up to, but I will call you friends for I will make known to you what I have heard from my Father. And this is what I heard from my Father that I will snatch you from the hands of the fowler, for the reason why the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil who dug a pit for you planning your ruin all the day long." Since this is what

the Lord Jesus has done for us, so, with infinite gratitude we can humbly cry out:  
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### **Icon # 356 = Internal Happiness**

“Then my soul shall rejoice in the Lord, exulting in his deliverance. All my bones shall say, ‘O Lord, who is like thee, thou who deliverest the weak from him who is too strong for him, the weak and needy from him who despoils him?’”

Certainly, there are many events in human life which carried with them an internal happiness that penetrates one’s whole being such as: the night of the wedding when the bride and the bridegroom, who deeply loved each other, gave their body and soul to each other in love; the birth of a longed for child; the founding of a loved one who had been lost; the passing of an exam after one has taken it for three times; the graduation in college; the winning of a game – especially a championship game either football, basketball, volleyball, baseball, hockey, running, cycling, etc.

Of course, you can add to these lists as many as you can. If you are perceptive enough, you will also notice that the intensity of the concomitant happiness which these events bring could not be sustained steadily within an hour – not even half an hour. Of course, the afterglow of it will linger several days. After that the experience has to be repeated again.

What would be like if such happiness and joy will be sustained forever without the slightest diminishment of its intensity but will even expand more and more without end, too!? Undoubtedly, there will be people who will resolutely pursue such happiness even if it entails a drudging toil on their part to remove all the debris that obstruct their path to attain such a goal. They will also be willing to let go of any other kinds of joy and happiness that are tenaciously competing with the one’s they have tasted, for the ones they have tasted are far sweeter – beyond comparison than any other joy and happiness of this world because this joy and happiness is no other than the Lord Himself.

We are all invited, but not forced, to taste and see: to taste His sweetness and see His goodness. In this present life even a little tasting of this sweetness and a dimly seeing of this goodness is more than enough to sustain us until that most awaited and glorious day when we will know limpidly that the Lord Jesus is perfectly One with His Father, and we are totally one in Him and He in us: When we will think as He thinks, know as He knows, love as He loves. Then, we will perfectly fulfill His commandments: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

Our hearts will indescribably rejoice and no one will take that joy from us. Each one of us will rejoice in each other as the Lord rejoices in us and as He rejoices in His Father, as the Scripture says: "I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men." Not only that, what would it be like once we see the infinite – out of this world beauty of the Blessed Virgin Mary whose beauty, in the words of St. Bernadette who saw her at Lourdes, "you are willing to die to see her again!" Not only that, she loves us too as God loves us with limitless and unstinting love. Even though she is a woman and she is so beautiful yet she never induces lust in us but, on the contrary, will remove it.

In this present life, for whatever reason: either by Providence, or by chance, or by accident, you meet a very beautiful woman, and of course, naturally, your heart is drawn towards her, it is very likely that at the end of that meeting you will arrive at a conclusion that you'll only have to admire her because she is so beyond your reach, unless you too is a handsome and rich person; in that case, there's an initial equally good match.

On the other hand, it would be a torment to you and to her if you are so ugly because you will notice her difficulty in looking at you. In this case, the probability of having her as your most intimate companion in life – till death parts you, is obviously below zero.

Of course, there are several factors that can help change this situation or will even lead you to have her as your wife if you truly loved her. One crucial factor is the frequency of your meeting. The other most important absolute factor is you live a virtuous life, because goodness of life removes from ugliness something of its repulsiveness. In some indefinable and powerful way the inward grace of the soul shines through the outward show of human appearance. Who knows that this woman is interested in the inner beauty of a person than the ephemeral external beauty like that of an exquisite flower which today blossoms but on the morrow withers away?!

If this observation is true in the external level – natural level, it is equally true in the inward – spiritual level, because by its very essence the human soul is very beautiful for it is made in the image and likeness of God who is infinitely beautiful and is the source and fountain of all beauty. In this case, there's an initial equally good match.

The soul becomes ugly only when it is in a state of sin. The soul no longer looks like God to whom it is patterned. Lucifer and the fallen angels were very beautiful in the beginning, but because of their heinous sin they became an unknown horrible creatures that the mere seeing of them brings with it horror and solid pain.

But for all the souls who did not ultimately reject the grace of repentance, which is offered 24 hours a day, seven days a week – all year round, there will be interminable rejoicing in the Lord for delivering them from such an eternal destiny. Their hearts are ravaged with joy and their whole beings are filled with peace upon hearing the voice of the Lord saying: “Truly, today you will be with me in paradise.” All their bones, too, shall say: ‘O, Lord who is like thee, thou who deliverest the weak from him who is too strong for him, the weak and needy from him who despoils him?’”

This is the lot of all who put their trust in the Lord. Their souls will rejoice forever in God's deliverance and will gratefully join with the other redeemed of the Lord, as it is written: “And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

In this present life, sorrow and sighing are often too strong for us. There were moments when we were overcome by them. They take advantage of our weakness – when we were too weak and vulnerable; they despoiled us of the little strength we have. But thanks to the Lord Jesus who came to our rescue and delivered us from so deadly a peril by giving us the grace to invoke His Most Holy Name and allowing us to come to Him to find rest of our minds.

With the Blessed Virgin Mary our souls shall magnify the Lord and our spirits shall rejoice in God our Savior; and with Zechariah we will exult in God's deliverance “that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life.”

Even though we have to walk from time to time in the dark valleys of trials and sufferings we will no longer be fearful as before, because the Lord Jesus is with us and His unfailing support is our indomitable strength for His grace is sufficient for us.

So long as we abide in Our Lord Jesus and He in us our weakness will eventually become our strength, because His power is made perfect when it graciously and assiduously sustains our weakness, for this area in our lives which seem to be weaker will turn out to be indispensable to stabilize our humility so that we can boast of nothing else except in the Lord Jesus. If these things are ours and abound, all our negative fears will be greatly diminished to such a degree that even if we have to face: →

## Icon # 357 = Interior Teacher

"Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I know not. They requite me evil for good; my soul is forlorn."

During the trial of Our Lord Jesus there were malicious witnesses who rose up and accused Him of things that He never did. On the other hand, there were many good things that He did in the sight of all, yet they requited Him evil for good by trying to stone Him, as the Lord said to them: "I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of these do you stone me?"

It so mind boggling that the creatures will stone their Creator and using the material the Creator has made, for in Him, through Him, with him, and by Him all things were created; and nothing that exist came to be without Him. Moreover, he who eats His bread has lifted up his heel against Him and handed Him over to be crucified.

This requital, of course, is very painful because it was done by His bosom friend, one of His chosen ones, instead of an enemy. He even said to him: "My friend will you do this with a kiss?" No wonder, then, that he inspires His other friend, no other than St. Paul, to write "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

In His solicitous divine Providence, God has limitless power to draw something good out of a mischievous apparent evil as in the case of Joseph when He was betrayed by his own brothers: "As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."

If we are requited evil for good and bear it patiently, of course, by the grace of God, we are blessed because it is an obvious landmark that the spirit of glory and of God rests upon us. It strengthens, too, the muscles of our soul for it keeps us from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our God. But if we are the one who repays evil for good, that would be highly dangerous, for it will certainly prick our conscience; and with king David we will groan all the day long, saying: "My sin is always before me." This sin will like a worm that will never die until it is forgiven.

For this reason, it is really "a must" that we repent while still in this present life, otherwise, it will gnaw our conscience without hope of relief for all eternity; unless, by the mercy of God we will be quarantined in purgatory so as to purify our soul and eventually see the beauty of God with an unimaginable joy and not in hell where God's beauty, goodness, and love are more piercing than any

other pain, because the sorrow which takes hold of the heart that has sinned against love is more painful than any other pain.

God really gives us something that is good and necessary for our salvation, but He also gives us the freedom to accept it or not. If we are receptive to this goodness it is likely that we will be able to find goodness, even a flicker, in the most unlikely situation. Divine goodness is incarnated in the person who opens his heart to it, it radiates from him. The will that advances in virtue, the soul that progresses in sanctity is a dynamic force that stirs also the recipient of good, and encourages him.

Just as the light of the sun enters the house whose windows are open, so this divine goodness enters the soul of the person whose heart is responsive to wisdom and revelation of the knowledge of God. The eyes of their hearts are enlightened to know what is the hope to which they are called, that is, the unsurpassing riches of God's glorious and luminous inheritance in the saints and the immeasurable greatness of His power at work in all who believed in His name, for He gave them power to become children of God; if children, then heir with Christ Jesus the only begotten Son of the Father. No doubt, this is certainly a good endowment and come from God Himself, because "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change."

Even in the physical realm God gives us thousands of good endowments such as, to name a few: oxygen we breathe, iron in our blood, and calcium in our bones. These elements are in a star. Even if we have zero knowledge of astronomy we will know that stars emit light, though they vary in brightness. We also know that light travels in a straight line. No wonder, then, that those who live a virtuous life will shine like a star for all eternity in God's kingdom.

They travel in straight line for they walk in the way of the Lord Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. They are the true followers of this Way for they worship the Father in spirit and in truth; they are all taught by God, because every one who has heard and learned from the Father comes to Our Lord Jesus. In other words, the Spirit of the Father and the Son teaches them inwardly and helps them to remember the words of the Lord so as to give them strength to put them into practice, as the Lord Jesus said: "These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."

The Holy Spirit whom the Lord Jesus gives is our inner teacher who helps us to double check the outward teachers that we hear in sermons, homilies, and in our readings whether they are in accord with the truth of the words of God, "For

he whom God has sent utters the words of God, for it is not by measure that he gives the Spirit.”

And in cases where there will be no external teachers who teach the truth of the Faith that comes to us from the apostles, this anointing of the Holy Spirit will be our guide to discern those who would deceive us, as it is written: “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.”

We certainly abide in Him if we keep His commandments which is the most authentic sign that we love Him and is admitted into the inner circle of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – three persons in One God, as the Lord Jesus Himself said: “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.” “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.” This, undoubtedly, is a supreme good.

When a person deliberately with full knowledge and consent and without being pressured to violate any of God’s commandments, truly it is tantamount to requiting evil for good – biting the hands that fed us.

Thus advocating abortion is requiting the Lord evil for good, for God is the author of life. Tell this to the founder of “Planned Parenthood” and their workers and to the author of the book “Abortion is a Blessing” and to all who advocate abortion. Ask them this question: “If the woman is guilty, of course, either adultery or fornication, why kill the innocent child?” It is likely that they will describe to you a scenario, and with a seemingly polite and gentle way they will tell you of the environment to which the child will grow, and how abusive the relationship between the man and the woman; so, if the child will be born in this environment it will just screw up the life of the child.

It is a very attractive argument advocated even by some professors who claimed themselves Catholics and teach in Catholic schools. Of course, there is truth in this argument but is being carried too far, by giving leeway to kill the innocent child, that it becomes a pernicious lie because it is a subtle attempt to tie the hands of God in such a way that He will be powerless to direct the ultimate destiny of the child.

In other words, they are the ones deciding the final end of the child. Their battle cry is: “We will be like the Most High!” In that case they are their own magisterium. Whereas the true magisterium says: “Human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception. From the first

moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person – among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life.”

It goes on to say with full force of moral authority down to the early Church: “Since the first century the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law: ‘You shall not kill the embryo by abortion and shall cause the newborn to perish.’”

If it is the environment and the abusive relationship that they are worried about, why spent millions and millions and millions of dollars to help procure abortion and not spent millions and millions and millions of dollars to support those programs that help to create a healthy environment and a wholesome relationship?

Gently, without any qualm of conscience, they will say to you that really our world is too over populated. This sounds very appealing and persuasive reasoning, but it is couched in lie because studies show that the problem is its opposite, as a truthful and reliable source – no other than Mary Ann Glendon – says: “The chief demographic facing most countries today is not over population but its opposite. All over the world, even in developing countries, populations are aging. In the wealthier nations, declining birth rates and increased longevity mean that our population now include a much smaller proportion of children and much larger proportion of disabled and elderly persons than ever before.”

For whatever reason they will always find ways to reason out in order to ram their contention down to your throat by saying: “Well, there are too much mouths to be fed and many children, especially in third world countries are dying of hunger because of lack of food.” This gives the impression of a more potent case, for it touches one’s conscience: imagine to see someone dying of hunger!

However, it is also unequivocal that the military budget of the United States alone is more than sufficient to feed all the children throughout the world. So, many mouths to feed is not really the problem. The problem is pride and greediness which come from within the human heart that expresses itself in an open defiant against the goodness of the Lord who even feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field, and would not want to send away the crowd, who were with Him, without taking some food lest they will collapse on the way.

Accordingly, to commit a deliberate sin is the ultimate requital that a person requites the Lord for all the good He has done for us and for our redemption. This is what causes Him grief – thus His soul is forlorn, because He does not desire the death of a sinner but he may be converted and live. →

### **Icon # 358 = Sympathy**

“But I, when they were sick – I wore sackcloth, I afflicted myself with fasting. I prayed with head bowed on my bosom, as though I grieved for my friend or my brother; I went about as one who laments his mother bowed down and in mourning.”

Sackcloth is made of Camel's and goat's hair. It was used for making the rough garments worn by mourners. It is a symbol for sorrow and mourning. In other words, it is an expression of sympathy toward another person – feeling how the other person feels.

Nowadays, we don't have to wear sackcloth to express our sympathy, as this following simple story shows: A boy was holding a little sparrow with a broken leg. A kindly lady came along and asked, “Sonny, would you like me to take this sparrow home and nurse it back to health? I promise that I will bring it back to you when it is healed and let it fly free again.” The little boy thought for a moment. Then he said: “If you don't mind, I will take care of this bird myself.” He paused and added, “Because, you see, I understand this bird.” The woman could not quite get what the boy meant until he stood up. Then she saw his left leg was in cast.

Thus the boy understood the sparrow because he, too, experienced having a broken leg. In the same way, the Lord Jesus understood us so well because He became like us in everything except sin. He, too, experienced our pain and sorrow. The Blessed Virgin, too, understood us so well because of her experience of suffering, especially at the foot of the cross – looking at her innocent Son tormented in agony.

There is much wisdom acquire from patiently bearing suffering than there is from books. No one is ever consoled by having a moral theology flung at their head! Suffering may be sent to us because we have been too narrow and selfish in our view of it, and also to prepare us for our work in helping others in trouble.

The widow can sympathize with the widow; the poor show most kindness to the poor. The experience of the frustration of a great illness enables a person to understand and help sick people. Sorrow can thus become a talent to be used for the good of others by being invested in sympathy. Thus Our Lord Jesus in

experiencing our human condition and its concomitant distress and weaknesses sympathize with us, "For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Notice, too, the Psalmist not only says: "But I, when they were sick – I wore sackcloth," but he also added: "I afflicted myself with fasting." Fasting, then, is a form of affliction because of the hunger one feels when fasting. It is an expression, too, of solidarity with those who are suffering of hunger throughout the world, especially the poor.

In the higher realm, the best form of fasting is, of course, to abstain from every form of evil. To fast from sin is also a form of affliction, but it is a holy kind of affliction because of the hunger one feels for God. When we abstain from sin we will notice that our longing and desire for God increases. We, too, will be in solidarity with those poor in spirit throughout the world who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

The psalmist also stresses the importance of prayer: "I prayed with head bowed on my bosom...." One translation says: "My prayer was ever on my lips...." Prayer, fasting, and sympathy then are very necessary in our relationship with God and our fellow human being. This is extended to those "Malicious witnesses" who rose up – "they requite me evil for good...." It resounded sonorously in the injunctions of the Lord Jesus: "Pray for your enemies... Bless those who curse you... Pray for those who persecute you." Prayer is basically an act of love. Praying for one's enemy, those we have dislike or difficulty, those who have hurt us, is a wholesome antidote for resentment because it dulls the edge of bitterness and huffiness.

If these people are not devoid of religion, that is – they also pray to God, so we can pray: "Lord, help my brother/sister and me for the sake of his/her prayers." If they are devoid of religion, then, we will just leave the judgment to God who knows what is in the mind and heart of every human person.

The most effective disposition for prayer is a hunger and thirst after holiness, a lively desire to profit by our prayer in order to advance in the way of perfection: "Be holy and I the Lord and holy." Without this desire, the evening preparation will be languid, the morning waking without ardor, the prayer almost always fruitless.

The person who has learned the need of God's help will be assiduous in prayer, for without prayer the heart will eventually lose its capacity to grieve and to mourn. We, in turn, will become vindictive as the psalmist pointed out: →

## Icon # 359 = Noble Character

"But at my stumbling they gathered in glee, they gathered together against me; cripples whom I knew not slandered me without ceasing; they impiously mocked more and more, gnashing at me with their teeth."

It always requires grace when someone whom we feel a certain dislike of have difficulty in dealing with stumbles and not to rejoice in his stumbling. To be able to do so consistently is a sterling quality of a noble character and of a mature conduct.

When we were still young we were probably taught at least by one of our teachers: "Do not laugh at the mistake of others." With this injunction, however, even if we went to a Catholic School where religious instruction was taught, we will still remember that in our elementary and high school days there were instances that kids and adolescent girls and boys, we included, could not help but chuckle, and some of the girls and boys did not withheld the second thought to control their audible laughter at the mistake of others.

If this is true in a Catholic School, and probably even in families with religious upbringing, it is highly possible that the intensity of this laughter is louder in public schools and in families where good manners and right conduct are in the bottom chart of ethical behaviors. The malice of this deed was certainly modest among children in both categories mentioned above because they were still unsophisticated in their speech, ingenious in their thoughts, and naïve in their reasoning.

In high school girls and boys "laughter at the mistake of others" is seemingly tainted by a certain degree of mockery because of the gradual lost of childhood simplicity. They are getting aware of the sprouting pressure among themselves. College is a sort of hiatus of this attitude. Good number of student are getting independent, doing things by themselves – minding their own affairs; some are working to pay off their tuition fees, so they have no more time to socialize where mistakes are not in destitute.

Students who joined clubs or fraternities, of course, will certainly notice the mistakes of their fellow members but it is no longer out of mockery but in spirit of camaraderie because they can easily joke about it and laugh together about it.

"Laughter at the mistakes of others" takes another shape in companies and in any work establishments, religious houses included, where the spirit of rivalry, jealousy, and envy craned its neck to be sure that it does not miss the gratification of their hidden contempt toward the person whom they dislike.

Without any shadow of a doubt, it makes them feel better than the other person. If we are truly wise, of course by God's grace, we have to be in constant guard of the inner movement of our spirit because it is a simple principle in the spiritual life that a person will certainly fall in the same mistake that he harshly condemned in others. The Scripture, too, warns us saying: "Therefore let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall."

When the Lord Jesus was crucified on the cross the rulers of the people who, in many sense, were really cripples in their knowledge of God slandered Him and impiously mocked Him more and more – gnashing their teeth at Him, as it is written: "So also the chief priests, with the Scribes and elders mocked him, saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the king of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him; for he said, 'I am the Son of God.'"

We are told by St. Matthew that Pilate "knew that it was out of envy" that the rulers of the people delivered up the Lord Jesus. Accordingly, acting truly as the Son of God, the Lord Jesus pleaded for them to the Father, for His kindness is meant that all, we included, may reach repentance – "not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance," He cried out, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

If we have sufficient self-knowledge and are honest to ourselves, we will truly notice that we make many mistakes in various ways in our thoughts, words, and actions. Therefore, we will only be truly considered righteous if we will not allow ourselves to lose sight for our need of repentance: renewal of mind and heart – an ongoing transformation into the image and likeness of the Lord Jesus, to assiduously grow into a mature manhood in the fullness of the stature of Him who laid down His life for us that we may also lay down our life for one another by our patient with one another both in the deficiency of bodily health and character, for it is in our bearing one another patiently that we share in the suffering of the Lord Jesus that we may also share in His infinite and inexpressible joy when His majestic glory will be revealed.

We really have to pray for the grace of inner enlightenment that we may see where we stand in God's presence, because we too are also cripples in our knowledge of God when we persist in wrong doing and living a life of sin for this, too, is a form of slandering God without ceasing.

When vices, passions, and evil desires dominate in our life, then, Lucifer and his myrmidons will, unequivocally, mocked us impiously more and more, gnashing and grinding at us with their teeth. In this case, our only hope for deliverance is the grace of humility to be able to cry out for help and say: →

## Icon # 360 = Theonauts

"How long, O Lord, will thou look on? Rescue me from their ravages, my life from the lions! Then I will thank thee in the great congregation; in the mighty throng I will praise thee."

There's a famous story, at least in the monastic world, about St. Anthony the Great when he went into one of the tombs [cave], closed the door and remained inside alone. He was beaten black and blue by mobs of demons and was left lying on the ground unable to speak because of the torturous blows. The next day Anthony's friend came to bring him some bread and saw Anthony lying on the ground as though dead.

He carried him to the village where many of Anthony's relatives sat around him as though he were dead. However, at midnight Anthony regained consciousness and saw all of them asleep except his friend who was keeping watch. St. Anthony requested his friend to bring him back to the tomb without waking anyone.

Of course, Lucifer/Devil was amazed that after these blows Anthony was still vigorous in heart and had returned to that place. He was really very angry that he gathered his myrmidons and said to them: "You see that neither with the spirit of fornication nor with beatings have we been able to stop this person! Even worse, he has stubbornly opposed us! Let us, then approach him using some other forms."

Commentators tell us that "these forms of the Devil are evil things." According to this story, "that night, then, the Devil worked such deceit that the whole place was shaken as by an earthquake that seemed to tear everything apart. The demons came inside, taking the shape of wild beasts and reptiles in a nightmare. Suddenly the place was filled with illusory shapes of lions and bears and leopards and bulls and male and female serpents and wolves, and each one came toward him with a loud roar and hissing, according to its kind.

The roaring lions wanted to leap on him; the bull acted as though it would gore him; the snake struck, but did not reach him; and the wolf stalked toward him. All of these appeared together, and the sound of their roars and hissings was very fearful." Anthony, wounded by them, suffered terribly in his body, but in his soul he was even more vigilant and lay on the ground, strong and unafraid. He groaned because of the pain in his body, but he was in control of his thoughts and, as though he were mocking the demons, said to them, "If you had any power over me, just one of you would be enough against me, but because the Lord has destroyed your power; you attempt to terrify me with a mob. But you show your weakness because you imitate the forms of animals."

Again Anthony was really very courageous and said, "If you are able and have authority over me, do not stop but attack right now. If you are not able, why do you bother me in vain? For our seal and purity and wall of protection is our faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ."

So they tried to do many things to him and they gnashed their teeth against him, yet they only mocked themselves all the more, not him. On the other hand, the Lord who sees everything and knows everything that is going on in the hearts and minds of every human person, did not forget the struggle of St. Anthony at that time, but came to his help. Looking up, St. Anthony saw the relieved from his suffering. He entreated the one who had appeared to him, saying: "Where are you? And why did you not appear to me from the beginning so you could heal me?" A voice then came to him, saying: "I was here but I waited to see your struggle. And now, since you persevered and were not defeated, I will be a helper to you forever and I will make you famous everywhere." When St. Anthony heard these things, he stood and prayed, and he was so strengthened that he felt the strength returned to his body.

One of the many moral lessons we can learn from this story is that: so long as we do not yield to the temptations of the Devil/Lucifer and the other demons they cannot do harm to us, that is, destroy our soul. Their bark is worst than their bite. They can only bite when we deliberately acquiesce to their insinuation, but if we do not give in to their suggestion the more our will to resist becomes stronger.

On the other hand, if we will not offer resistance to their temptation we will be easily held captive by them and our will to resist diminishes and eventually be completely a slave to them as the Scripture says: "for whatever overcomes a man, to that he is enslaved."

It also says: "Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness."

Unequivocally, "slaves of righteousness" is a healthy form of slavery because it leads to peaceful conscience and to a sober rest for our soul. Our Lord Jesus gives us a hint of this salubrious kind of slavery when He says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

His yoke will become even more easier, and His burden will even become lighter when we freely give ourselves to Him through the Blessed Virgin Mary, for she will graciously help us “do whatever He tells you.”

Slavery to sin and to inordinate desires is extremely burdensome and dangerous because it leads to the death of our soul, as our good friend – St. Paul says: “When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But then what return did you get from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death.” On the other hand, our slavery to Our Lord Jesus ultimately ushered us to eternal life by living a life of sanctity while still in this world: tasting and enjoying this “free gift” of eternal life in Lord Jesus, as St. Paul continues to say, “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus Our Lord.”

Just as the most authentic sign that we love God is to keep His commandments, so, the most genuine indication that we do God’s will is to live a life of sanctity, as it is written: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” Thus when we are in a state of grace, anything that happens to us works together for our good.

This is precisely what happened to St. Anthony. Undoubtedly, most of us do not have the caliber of St. Anthony, but we all have a share in the struggle against all kinds of evil spirits lurking in the cave of our heart, either it be the spirit of pride, the spirit of vainglory, the spirit of fornication, the spirit of anger, etc.

With grace in us we, too, like St. Anthony, can offer resistance against them by controlling our thoughts, to have the presence of Our Lord Jesus fixed in our mind. Hence, when the spirit of vainglory or the spirit of fornication comes to our thoughts we have to direct it to Our Lord Jesus. This is a good way to rescue us from their ravages, our life from the roaring lions seeking someone to devour, as the Scripture says: “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world. After you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you.”

Consequently, since this is the case, we could not help but give thanks to God for all He has done to us: strengthening us in our trials, grounding us in His providential care, and restoring the health of our soul.

Our heart will rejoice and we will praise Him day and night in the great congregation all the days of our life. For us monks and nuns, this is both a privilege and a luxury because we are entrusted by the Church to sing the

praises of God night and day, and our way of life is geared toward the encounter of the living God. We are the theonauts who explore the mansions of Our Father's house. We travel not so much by a speed of light but by the speed of faith in Our Lord Jesus who prepares a place for us, and will come again to take us to Himself and be with Him for all eternity to behold His inexpressible glory which was His since the foundation of the world – which will be ours too.

Let us then conduct ourselves becomingly and be extra careful of complacency because Lucifer and his minions are demanding that we be handed over to them. Therefore, we have to humbly pray: →

### **Icon #361 = Hate**

“Let not those rejoice over me who are wrongfully my foes, and let not those wink the eye who hate me without cause.”

Christians in the early centuries were the most hated people in the Roman Empire. A good number of emperors and governors of provinces within the empire were not just allergic of Christians but really have repugnance for them. This repugnance shows itself in the law of the whole empire: “It is forbidden to be a Christian.” This sounds horrible in our modern world, especially to us who reside in a democratic country, but it is not surprising because Our Lord Jesus had already forewarned, in advance, His disciples and us of the likely attitude of the world towards those who do not belong to it which ultimately originates from the fountainhead of its hatred toward the Lord, as the Lord Jesus says: “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.”

Hence, the hatred of the world – the world that is under the dominion of Lucifer, is an existential hatred, that is, mainly because we belong to Christ who came to this world to destroy the works of Lucifer, and to bring healing to those who are wounded by sin, as the Lord says: “If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. It is to fulfill the word that it is written in their law, ‘They hated me without cause.’”

Of course, one of the many works that the Lord Jesus did which no one else did was to forgive sin. It never cross in the imagination of the people in Christ's time, especially among the Scribes and the Pharisees, and among the chief priests and the high priest, that someone aside from God could ever forgive sin and would not blink His eyes to say boldly: “Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven.”

It's so amazing to notice that a 30 or 31 yr. old would call the paralytic man who is probably older than He, "my son." Thus in saying, "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven," the Lord Jesus reveals two things, namely: that He is both a Father and God. One of the titles of Our Lord Jesus is: "Father of the world to come." The Lord Jesus says and had indicated many times that He and the Father are one; that He does only what the Father is doing; that whatever the Father does the Son does likewise; that He can do nothing of His own accord, but only what He sees the Father doing; that as the Father has life in Himself – so also the Father has granted the Son to have life in Himself and has given Him authority to execute judgment because He is the Son of Man; that whoever sees Him sees the Father also.

In other words, He is the image of the invisible God. Hence, hating the Lord Jesus is tantamount to hating His Father as well. Wherefore, it is a form of incomprehensible craziness to hate without reserve an all Powerful and loving God who would not even break a bruised reed nor quench a dimly burning wick, but is infinitely willing to forgive us of our sins so long as there is still a glimmer of repentance in our heart.

Can you imagine repaying Him evil for good, hatred for love? Our Lord Jesus says that whatever we do to the least of our brethren we do it to Him; so, if yesterday or in some other days we regarded a man as a spiritual brother and virtuous, we should not consider him today to be vicious and viperous through hatred for him, which was cunningly injected to us by the insinuation of the evil One; but through long suffering love and patience by which we share in the suffering of Our Lord Jesus and thinking of the yesterdays' goodness of that brother or sister cast out today's hatred from our soul, because everyone who sees in his heart a trace of hatred towards another for some fault of his/her is a stranger to love of God, for God is love.

Of course, we have to hate the sin but we have to love the sinner. In other words, we should not do the things which the brother or sister are doing that we dislike or are doing too, because if we are doing the same things we will be convicted as sinners also, as the Scripture says: "...If you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth – you then who teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?"

Hatred is nothing but sentimental stupidity. It is very self-destructive, for it eats out the heart; robs the person who harbors it one's peace of mind. It is a lineament of sinners and a landmark that we are not yet a saint. We don't have to live long on earth to notice that sinners hate sinners for their defect. Sinners hate saints for

their holiness. Holy people hate no one. So, God forbid, if we find ourselves hating someone, it could be because he is a sinner or because he is a saint. In either case, it is because we are not a saint. Because good people don't hate.

As a consequence, we no longer speak the language of peace but contrive lexicons of treachery. In this case, it will be said of us: →

### **Icon # 362 = The Quiet in the land**

“For they do not speak peace, but against those who are quiet in the land they conceive words of deceit.”

There is an undeniable maxim which avows that no one can give what he does not have. For this reason, it is no wonder that those who do not have peace in their hearts, and conscience too, do not speak peace, for peace is the language spoken by the “quiet in the land,” the anawim – the meek and humble of heart, those who have heard and learned from the Father.

They have serenity in their heart for they have a peaceful conscience. They have great peace for they are lovers of the Lord's commandments and meditate on His laws day and night – exploring what pleases the Lord. Stillness in their dwelling place where they hear the soft – still voice of the Lord speaking gently, saying: This is only the Lord asks of you: to act justly, to love tenderly, and to walk humbly with your God.

So, if the evil ones are conceiving words of deceit against the quiet in the land – the sheep of the Lord's pasture, to let them abandon their dwelling place – the Lord Himself will come to their aid and will say: “No one can snatch them out of my hands...The Father who has given to me is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.”

However, so long as we are still in this present life, this will not impede the evil ones to conceive words of deceit against the quiet in the land but the evil ones will always be met by a vigor resistance from the quiet in the land by means of assiduous prayer – dashing their words of deceit against the rock which is the Lord Jesus the rock of our salvation, because prayer, in a strict sense, means recourse to God.

Prayer will draw down into our soul the Omnipotence of God – it is stronger than all the demons combined together. Prayer is a light that reveals the deceitful wiles of the evil ones. Prayer is predicated on the belief that by ourselves nothing is possible, while with God nothing is impossible. It is a protection against dangers of all kinds – against deceit, and a bulwark in time of temptation. Thus

when we become one with prayer we will have a portion of the wisdom of the quiet in the land in discerning the deceitful scheming of those who are conceiving words of deceit against them.

Truly, the area where these deceitful words are being launched is in the realm of happiness. Sin promises us a life of happiness, satisfaction, and excitement but in the end all we get out of it is misery, wretchedness, dissatisfaction, depression, and a loss of the sense of personal dignity that belongs to us as God's children. The trouble is that most people think that happiness consists in the fulfillment of their wants and desires, or at the very least in freedom from pain and suffering. Actually, it consists in the serenity that comes from conforming our own will to the will of God. It does not consist in possessing much, but in having few needs and satisfying them at small expense.

Sensual happiness, when we lack them, arouses in us an all-consuming desire for them, but as soon as we possess and devour them our satisfaction turns into distaste. On the other hand, spiritual happiness seems distasteful when we do not have them, but once they begin to be ours, our desire awakens. The more we seek them when we have begun to enjoy them, the more we enjoy them as we hunger for them. Spiritual happiness increases our inner longing since the more we savor it, the more we perceive that there is something more to long for, because God Himself who shares this happiness to us is Himself unfathomable ocean of true happiness which we often called as Beatitude – the happiness which springs from the pure of heart because they shall see God.

We should be happy, then, not because everything is going well with us right now, not because our health is in good shape, but simply because the Lord Jesus is sufficient for us. We should be happy not because of what we have seen in the past or what we see today but because of what we shall see tomorrow.

It is a happiness that springs from the faith and the hope that the Lord Jesus is coming again to wipe away the tears from all eyes, no more death, no more mourning nor crying nor pain anymore.

It is a happiness that issues from putting off our old nature which belongs to our former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and from not hardening our heart by the deceitfulness of sin.

Humanity's profoundest craziness is the deceitful wiles that we can find lasting happiness apart from the will of God. A good number of people who run away from God's designs, many of these have enormous riches, by pursuing a salacious happiness and living lascivious lifestyle never found true happiness in their own plans. It was not until they turned a new leaf and turned back to God and said: "Here I am Lord, I come to do your will," that they experienced the wholeness and true happiness they had been eagerly yearning for all along.

So, we have to watch and pray that we may not lead into temptation. It's one thing to be tempted and another thing not to be led into temptation. Whether we like it or not we will all be tempted for it is part of our probation while still in this present world, but if we are vigilant and pray humbly to God for help we will not be led into temptation. We will be subject, though, to mockery by Lucifer and his allies – people who connived with him, for seeing us pray. →

### **Icon # 363 = Disciples**

"They open wide their mouths against me; they say, 'Aha, Aha! Our eyes have seen it!'"

History is not devoid of people who sarcastically mocked those who believed in God and those who openly confessed that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the Father. Some of these kinds of people are so bold even to say that teaching religion to children is a form of child abuse. With their mouths wide open and their eyes without blinking, they say, "Aha, Aha! Our eyes have seen it!"

Well, in this case, we can sincerely, honestly, and humbly say to them: why not pray, too, and be converted to God so that we will all be together, as happy thieves, be admitted to the kingdom of God and behold His inexpressible glory, beauty, and goodness? Knowing that these kinds of people are dyed in the wool atheist and they perceived us too as dyed in the wool theist, it is very likely that they will say to us: "You are disciples of your so called God, we are disciples of reason. We know that we think, therefore, we are; but your God is a pure imagination inoculated in you by religious leaders to control you that you may do whatever they want."

Since we are told by the Scripture to have no fear of them, but in our hearts reverence Christ as Lord and be always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls us to account for the hope that is in us, yet to do it with gentleness and reverence; and keep our conscience clear, so that, when we are abused, those who revile our good behavior in Christ may be put to shame; so, that is what we will do.

With gentleness and reverence, we will just ask them a simple question: "If you think, therefore, you are, what are you when you were not yet able to think?" On our side, we believe that we are, therefore, we think. We believe too that we are made in the image and likeness of God who already existed even before all things were created, otherwise, there will be no creation if He did not already existed. We believe also that God endowed us with reason that we may think, and to use our reason to explore what is pleasing to Him that we may truly know

Him, love Him, and serve Him in this present life and be happy eternally with Him in the next.

We know that the human heart longs for happiness, and God wants us to be happy. But we only experience happiness, and the fulfillment that accompanies it when we are changing, growing, becoming more and more like the Lord Jesus through Him becoming what God wanted us to be.

So, do you want also to be His disciples and be happy with Him, and the Blessed Virgin Mary too who is really good and beautiful, beginning in this present life and be perfected in the next?

Probably they will mock us and say, "You are simpleton, and are you going to instruct us?" Of course, they will cast us out from their hearts. In this case, our sole recourse is the Lord who knows the thoughts and intentions of the heart and to whom nothing is hidden, for in Him darkness is as clear as the day. So, with steady confidence we trustfully cry out to Him, saying: →

### **Icon # 364 = Martyrdom: Vindication**

"Thou hast seen, O Lord; be not silent! O Lord, be not far from me! Bestir thyself, and awake for my right, for my cause, my God and my Lord! Vindicate me, O Lord, my God, according to thy righteousness; and let them not rejoice over me!"

In the book of Revelation, when John opened the fifth seal he saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne; they cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before thou wilt judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell upon the earth?" Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.

Unequivocally, martyrdom is always part of the story of the Church right from its beginning. Its origin is from the side of the Lord Jesus who Himself is a Martyr – bearing witness to the kingdom of God on earth. His apostles too were martyrs – following His footsteps; though that of John was a white martyrdom, that is, not shedding his blood but his love.

Either it be red or white martyrdom both colors formed beads of witness which reaches to the throne of the Father Almighty Himself the fountain of love and mercy. Thus martyrdom will continue from age to age until the end of time.

According to the "Status of Global Mission" report which is published by the International Bulletin Missionary Research there were, on average, 270 new Christian martyrs every 24 hours over the past ten years, that is, from 2000-2010, such that the number was approximately 1 million. This report defines "martyrs" as "believers in Christ who have lost their lives, prematurely, in situations of witness, as a result of human hostility." Christian martyrs in 1900 were estimated to be 34,000.

It is mind boggling that the red martyrdom produces, this past decade, a surplus of martyrs more than the past 2,000 years of Christian history combined together. Of course, the white martyrdom too are certainly not devoid of its hidden martyrs who bear witness to Christ Jesus by the simplicity, sincerity, and holiness of their lives. Their numbers, of course, are known only to God who sees in secret. All these are clouds of witnesses of our Christian faith. If an unjust judge vindicates a widow who kept coming to him, will not God vindicates His martyrs whose blood, like that of Abel, are crying night and day under the altar of God? Certainly, He will.

For the time being, though, His patience is negotiating with His justice. In order that those who are responsible for the shedding of the blood of martyrs, at least some of them, may reach repentance – not wishing that any of them should perish but may be converted and live. It is only when they adamantly persist in their wrong-doings until the hour of their death, not loving their lives even unto death, that God will destroy them.

The reason for this is that the body of the martyrs and ours too, is God's temple as St. Paul says: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy and that temple you are." Of course, it is not out malice that God will destroy those who destroyed His temple but out of sheer justice; because even though He is infinitely kind and merciful – He is also infinitely just and holy.

The Lord Jesus is the paradigm of someone being vindicated after being tormented and crucified. He was referring to His own Body when He said to those responsible for the shedding of His blood: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." Thus when the Lord Jesus rose from the dead His disciples remembered that He had said this; they believed in the word which the Lord had spoken.

The vindication of those who died in the Lord and for the Lord in "situations of witness," certainly, is not sleeping. From of old the condemnation of those who shed the blood of martyrs, that is, who destroyed God's temple, has not been idle and their destruction has not been asleep; for just as the souls of those who

had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne are under the altar of God waiting for the final judgment when the king of kings and the Lord of Lords will come again in His full majesty – as the supreme judge, rendering to each person according to what she/he has done in the body, so, the souls too of those responsible for the shedding of the blood of martyrs have been kept in the neither gloom until the judgment of the great day.

That is the day when the goats will be eternally separated from the sheep and the weeds from the wheat where the wheat will be happily placed in the everlasting granary, that is, the just will be with God forever in the new and everlasting Jerusalem coming down from above with its unspeakable glory and splendor.

Of course, this will be on the day when there will be no more space and time. But even when we are still within space and time a good number of God's people have already tasted the consoling fruit of being vindicated. Take for example Joseph who was sold by his brothers to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver and was taken to Egypt. There he was again sold to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh, the captain of the guard. While faithfully serving Potiphar, he was unjustly accused by the wife of Potiphar for refusing to cater to her lust – and he was thrown into prison. But the Lord was always with Joseph though He allowed those bad things to happen to him, yet, eventually, He vindicated Joseph by means of the series of natural events while at prison such as interpreting dreams, which nowadays a psychologist can also do, that led to his release.

Daniel, too, was unjustly put into the lion's den just because he did not give up his prayer life and still continue to worship the God of heaven. He, too, was vindicated by the Lord for when the king noticed that the lions did not even dare to roar at Daniel as though being grateful to the king for providing them a "fresh and crunchy" food, but instead they peacefully received him in their midst as if one of their species, the king released Daniel and even commanded the people to worship the God of Daniel.

And how about the three young men who were thrown into the fiery furnace? Of course, they too were vindicated for they came out from the fiery furnace unscathed. This led to the avowal of the king that there is no other god but the God of the three young men.

By celebrating the memory of the saints year after year after year, either their witness is in the form of red or white martyrdom, the Church loudly proclaims their vindication for they are now participating fully in the eternal and undiminishable happiness of the Lord. They are now enjoying happily in the unspeakable peace of God.

With rigor discipline in their moral and Christian life, they passed through their probatory life on earth with sterling dignity for they were found worthy of God even though those who have no slightest interest in God may think that their death is an utter destruction and a form of punishment, as it is written: "But the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them. In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be an affliction, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of men they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself...."

Within the Church too some of its leaders who were extremely cautious of any intrusion of new ideas which, they think, are not in accord with sound doctrine – of course, it is very likely that they are mindful of the "red flag" that the Scripture had cautioned by saying: "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies..." have forbidden some of its members to teach and write anymore. One example of this is St. Thomas Aquinas. We are told that on Dec. 10, 1270 the bishop of Paris, Etienne Tempier, drew up a list of 18 errors and condemnable propositions in the writings of St. Thomas that contained the essence of Averroistic teaching. St. Thomas died in 1274. Obviously, he did not see the light of his vindication in his life time.

But certainly he was vindicated, for right after his death at our Cistercian monastery at Fossanuova miracles began to happen at his tomb where many cures were reported which soon led to his being venerated as a saint in the monastery and its vicinity. And in 1325, 2 yrs after the canonization of St. Thomas, the bishop of Paris – Stephen Bourret, formally revoked bishop Tempier's condemnation, so far as it "touched or seemed to touch the teaching of Blessed Thomas."

Then, some 2 centuries later, St. Thomas was elevated to the dignity of a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius V. Finally, the culmination of his vindication came in 1918 when St. Thomas became an institution in the Church with his being mentioned in the Code of Canon Law – this is the only name in the Code – with the injunction that the priests of the Catholic Church should receive their philosophical and theological instruction "according to the method, doctrine, and principles of the Angelic Doctor" (CIC c. 1366.2; cf c. 589.1).

And what can we say about Henry de Lubac or Yves Congar? They too were muzzled, but were also vindicated. Henry de Lubac even became a cardinal.

These are just examples of how the Lord is not far from those who trust in Him and that He is wide awake of the right and cause of those who anchor themselves to Him although its effect is not like a red hot pepper that becomes hot immediately.

If we put our trust in the Lord we would have a fairly good advantage than the widow because the widow can have access to the judge only at an office hour; besides, the judge has to sleep, too, to stabilize his sanity. In our case, we have access to the Lord 24 hrs a day, seven days a week – all year round by means of prayer and even just by a simple remembrance of Him or awareness of His presence; besides, our God does not sleep nor slumber. He is wide awake for all eternity! He has a perfect knowledge of Himself, and in knowing Himself perfectly He knows all the nature of things He created, He knows all the thoughts and intentions of every intelligent beings: men, angels, and demons. Nothing whatsoever is hidden from Him.

Since the Lord is the supreme Judge and is infinitely just, He vindicates us according to His righteousness. The ultimate vindication is when all the dead will hear the voice of the son of God and comes forth: those who used the members of their bodies as instruments of righteousness to the resurrection of life, and those who used the members of their bodies as instruments of wickedness to the resurrection of judgment: their desire to devour the sons and daughters of God – to destroy God's temple on earth, will be no more. Wherefore, with the psalmist we can safely say: →

### **Icon # 365 = Desires**

“Let them not say to themselves, ‘Aha, we have our heart’s desire!’ Let them not say, ‘We have swallowed him up.’”

How can they swallow us up when they are locked up in the bottomless pit where they could no longer pass from their side to our side! This is certainly a consolation of the sons and daughters of God that not even an atom of evil can approach the portals of heaven, for “the unclean shall not pass over it, and fools shall not err therein. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Truly, many are the desires of the heart of those who open wide their mouths against those who serve God in this present life. If all of them would be written down, it is likely that the whole world would be too small to contain all the writings about these desires because they can be traced to the one whom the

Lord Jesus identified as the “father of lies,” the “murderer from the beginning,” and the “deceiver of the world,” as the Lord said: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

How many are deceived by the desires of prestige, power, or riches, or honor, or worldly wisdom? How about lust or greed? If we are truly honest with ourselves and assiduously monitor the orbit of our thoughts and the movement of our hearts, we will be dumbfounded to notice that the remnants of these desires are still lurking in the nook and cranny of our wounded and fallen human nature. It certainly requires the humility of grace to be able to trim the horns of these desires once they start to grow.

Even if we think we have pulled them out by its roots but if we don’t till the soil of our hearts by regular prayer and meditation these unhealthy desires will blossom again. Therefore, if we are really serious in our spiritual life, there is an absolute need to visit often the garden of our hearts and removed from it the weeds once they start to appear – while they are still young and while the soil is still soft because it had been watered by assiduous prayer. Otherwise, if we neglect our prayer life and no longer examine the quality of our life, the soil of our hearts will be so hardened and the weeds of harmful desires will become big and strong, so much so, that it would entail a tremendous effort and a time consuming labor to uproot them.

Whereas, if the soil of our hearts is still soft and the unclean desires are still small we can easily pull them out even by a toothpick of simple awareness of God’s presence. In other words, our will to resist evil desires becomes strong and the evil desires itself become weak. Our father St. Benedict alluded to this when he said that while the temptation is still young we have to dash it against the rock, which of course is Christ.

Insidious desires have a persuasive and cunning power to infiltrate our thoughts because they present themselves with a wholesome credential and accepted by the will as good.

Little by little, they held us hostage. Thus we become their slaves, for whatever overcomes a man that he is a slave. Our only hope that they could not waggle their tongue and say: “we have swallowed him up,” is to sincerely and humbly cry out to the Lord for help. It has to be the Lord who would deliver us from bondage because no one can buy his own ransom. This is what the Lord Jesus did on the cross when He died for us. He ransomed us from the futile ways we

inherited from our ancestors, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but His precious blood like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

In place of insidious desires, the Lord puts in us another kind of desire, that is, the desire for heaven – to be with the Lord forever. Desire for God indicates that we appreciate highly the value of what He has done for us: His passion, death, and resurrection.

If this desire for God is in us and abound it prevents us from being ungrateful and insouciant for all the things the Lord has done for our redemption, and it also escorts us to the portals of heaven itself, because whoever desires God with all his heart, mind, and will already possesses the object of his love. Since it is love which unites the soul to God, the more intense this love is the more deeply the soul enters into God and is centered in Him.

To the extent that a person allows himself to be governed by this desire for heaven he/she is already in heaven – a fellow citizen of the angels and saints. Desire itself is a first step of love; it is the specific form which love takes while we are yet on pilgrimage. Love is the energy that gives strength to desire, and is already a sort of knowledge and possession of the beloved.

To the extent that we doggedly refuse to be dominated by the other kind of desires – the desires that lead to the slavery of sin, we come under the sway of this fundamental movement of our being. We are led to regret the power of sin holds over us and to desire salvation with great ardor. As such love grows in our hearts, it begins to find expression in the way we live, in the priorities we establish, in the way we act and in the manner in which we resist temptation. It becomes a shaping force in our lives, ordering everything toward heaven and toward the God who graciously draws us to Himself.

It is the love for the heavenly homeland which ought to dominate our attitudes. Our thoughts should tend toward it each day, and firmly fix the anchor of our hope there. If we are animated by this prospect then our progress will be steadily faster and more fearless and we will be less dismayed by the hardships experienced in fighting for the Lord Jesus – the heavenly king.

If heaven is life with God, then we have it now – if we want it. Even though we have to pass through the valley of calamity and cross the mountain of tribulation we fear no evil but be of good cheer because the Lord Jesus has overcome the world. Since this is the case, Lucifer and his allies will scratch their heads and retire in confusion. Thus we can licitly cry out: →

## Icon # 366 = Comparison

"Let them be put to shame and confusion altogether who rejoice at my calamity! Let them be clothed with shame and dishonor who magnify themselves against me!"

When we consider the truth that the distance of the intellect of human beings from that of angels is fall short of infinite and the distance of the intellect of all angels combine together from that of God is still infinite; and that the riches and splendor of this present world put side by side with the riches and glory of the world to come – the new heaven and the new earth, is supreme poverty and grubby; and the beauty of the miss universes and the miss internationals combine together when set abreast of the beauty even with just one of the saints in heaven, say Margaret of Costello, is paramount repulsiveness, then, we can broadly peep into the confusion, shame, and dishonor of Lucifer and his angels in amplifying their struggle against God and all the people of God, as it is written: "There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil..., but glory and honour and peace for every one who does good....For God shows no partiality." "For he will render to every man according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are factious and do not obey the truth, but obey wickedness, there will be wrath and fury." The prophet Daniel, too, has spoken about this from of old when he says: "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Do we still need another evidence to ratify the veracity of this reality? If there is still an iota of doubt that lingers in the niche of heart, in the alcove of our mind, and in the crevice of our will, here's an ultimate testimony of the Son of God who came to our world to bear witness to the Truth and whom the Father has given authority to execute judgment: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God...those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment."

The devil and his angels are resolved to tear us down by hook and by crook in whatever means they could unbelievably conceive out of their diabolic jealousy of us because we are to possess the eternal happiness of God's which they have willfully forfeited. As in any case of jealousy to jubilate in the misfortune of the one she/he is jealous of, so Satan and his followers rejoice at our calamity, exult at our catastrophe, and exhilarate in our tragedy, but they could not destroy the souls of those who riveted their trust in the Lord as in the case of Job who was battered by litanies of calamities. In spite of all disasters Job was not devoid of the power to move his tongue in blessing the Lord, saying: "naked I

came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

To be able to bless God when bad things happened to us is, undoubtedly, an exquisite emblem of sanctity for it is a token of charity founded on faith and rooted in hope. It loves the Giver more than anything else, it follows the Lamb wherever He goes even though in so doing it staggers, stumbles, and falls. However, it rises again for the Lord upholds him by the hand.

It is given the wings of prayer and trust, too, to fly to the patronage of the Blessed Virgin Mary the Mother of Mercy, so much so, that in dangers, doubts, and difficulties it confidently oscillate its orbit to this solicitous Mother who would not blink her eyes to intercede for us when the wine of our fervency in living out the Gospel values is veering to depletion. She is far desirous to help us far beyond our desire to ask for help. With all the angels and saints in heaven, she is greatly happy that we be in their company forever. For this reason, we can freely unbridle our tongue in exclaiming: →

### **Icon # 367 = Vindication: Repentance**

"Let those who desire my vindication shout for joy and be glad, and say evermore, 'Great is the Lord, who delights in the welfare of his servant!' Then my tongue shall tell of thy righteousness and of thy praise all the day long."

Divine testimony bears witness that "there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." It is right to say that not only the angels rejoice over one miscreant who turned a new leaf but also the saints too who are now perpetually in the presence of God rejoice greatly in the conversion of a sinner, as the Lord Jesus Himself testifies: "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

We are cast down by our sins but vindicated by repentance. Therefore, so long as it is called "today" when we hear the voice of the Lord calling us to repent for the kingdom of heaven, we should not harden our hearts but humbly pray for the grace to have an open ear.

Even when already advance in age, the expression "today" has still to be uttered because repentance is not judged by the quantity of time, but by the disposition of our hearts. The Ninivites, for instance, did not need many days to blot out their sin, but the short span of one day availed to efface all their iniquities.

The good thief too did not take a long time to effect his entrance into Paradise, but in such a brief moment as one might occupy in uttering a single word, did he wash off all the sins which he had committed in his whole life, and receive the crown of glory bestowed by the divine approval even before it was bestowed to the Apostles. He was the wisest of all thieves in the history of humankind, because in his unique ingenuity he was able to steal the matchless Pearl of infinite value, that is, the kingdom of heaven with its indefinable delight.

We, too, once vindicated by repentance will be considered as a wise sinner and a good malefactor, because we will, one day, join the ranks of all the angels and saints – a good number of whom were like us who were cast down by sins, but are now shouting for joy and gladness in our own vindication.

Even an ounce of suffering and pain in this present life endured for the sake of the kingdom of heaven and for the glory of God will not go unvindicated because those who have passed through many tribulations on account of the Lord Jesus will receive the crown of life which God has promised to everyone who perseveres to the end in loving Him. In this we rejoice, though now for a little while we may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of our faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at revelation of Jesus Christ. Without having seen Him we love Him; though we do not now see Him we believe in Him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of our faith we obtain the salvation of our souls. Who would not shout for joy and be glad to hear the pronouncement of this happy vindication? Truly, all the angels and saints in heaven are crying out with undiminished fervor: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just...."

Really, "Great is the Lord, who delights in the welfare of his servants! This welfare is such that the Lord condescends to confer on His servant/s a proliferation of dignity upon dignity, because the hour has come when He no longer call them servants but friends; not only that, He raises them up to a grandeur far beyond that of the angels by bestowing on them the power to become sons and daughters of God, as the Lord Jesus Himself said to one of His servants who was formerly enslaved by sin but vindicated by repentance: "...go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

Do we need an evidence of this? Well, if that is the case, listen to the testimony of the faithful servant of the Lord – St. Paul: "it is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him."

Even in this present life we already have a foretaste of this glorification with the Lord Jesus when our tongue is employed in telling His righteousness, in expressing our unceasing gratitude for all He has done for our redemption; However, we have to admit that this glorification is still like a dim mirror or like a sporadic of intuition which appear in the horizon of our thoughts when we are struck by the beauty of creation, the truthfulness and goodness of people, the innocence of the little children, and the virtues practiced by the just.

Once we saw the flashes of this intuition we cannot help but say to ourselves: if this flower or this aurora borealis, with its display of lights, is so beautiful what would heaven be like! What would its Creator be like! We cannot help, too, but impelled to raise its ratio to infinity.

The same is true with the goodness and all the virtues activated by the remnants of righteous people in this world. Again, we cannot help but cry out in the stillness of our hearts: What would be the goodness, kindness, the gentleness, the humility, the glory, the wisdom, the knowledge, the honor, the power, and the prestige, and the blessings of all the saints in heaven who are now participating, according to each one's capacity, in all the attributes of God!

In other words, what God is by nature they are now participating by grace. The Lord Jesus Himself bears witness to this when He said: "In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." Since this is the case, everything that belongs to Our Lord Jesus belongs to us too, just as everything that belongs to the Father belongs to Him, as He Himself said: "I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom thou hast given me, for they are thine; all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I am glorified in them."

The National Geographic made a Video of the study of the human brain. It says that the human brain has a capacity to digest 2 millions volumes of books when fully utilized to its potential! Can we imagine that! In this present life what is being utilized is only about 10-15% of its potential. It's like a hard drive which has lots of capacity but not fully used. You can imagine if you live for a million year and your intelligence is such that when you read a book you remember everything that is written in it without forgetting, that is, you really able to understand and digest its contents. Your interest too is so broad that you explore all the fields of knowledge such as theology; philosophy; astronomy; Geology; quantum physics; biology; all branches of engineering such as: Civil, mechanical, electrical, Chemical, Industrial, computer, aerospace, etc; accounting; law – both civil and canon; and etc. Say, for instance, there are 1,000 known branches of knowledge in this world, this includes, of course, from horticulture to culinary, and hair dressing – and you read, and really digested, even just a 1,000 book in each field, you will certainly be the brightest and the most brilliant person in the history of humankind even though only half of your potential have

been utilized, that is, you initially read 1,000,000 books.

Even at this stage you will be almost fall short of all knowing. What if the other half of your capacity is utilized?! But know this for certain that in spite of all your knowledge if you sit side by side with the angels you are still a 1<sup>st</sup> grader or a tyro, because the angels don't have to read books to know what you have known. Much more if you juxtapose it with the knowledge of God!

Yet God who delights in our ultimate welfare and desires the vindication of our repentance is reserving for us in the life to come the full capacity of that knowledge, because we will participate in His own knowledge. God has a perfect knowledge of Himself, and in knowing Himself perfectly He know everything! That is why there will be an infinite – inexpressible joy and happiness for the redeemed and interminable – indescribable pain and suffering for all the damned, because on the Final Day of Judgment God will reveal Himself fully to each one and each one will see himself/herself in God as in a very clear and unstained mirror.

The Lord Jesus, in His majesty and glory, will be a fragrance from life to life to those who are saved from the corruption of this world, and an aroma from death to death to those who are perishing – those who has had the choice between good and evil and with complete deliberation has chosen evil and died persisting in that choice, those who cast out God from their hearts and have no reverential fear of Him whatsoever, but flatter themselves in their minds to such an extent that it deprives them the recognition of their guilt. In so doing they will rightly hear this pronouncement: →

### **Icon # 368 = Self-Justification**

#### **Psalm 36 (35)**

“Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before His eyes. For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated.”

Pope Pius IX once said – referring to the sin of the century he lived, which is absolutely heightened in our own century: “The sin of this century is the lost of the sense of sin.” In this case it really resembles leprosy in which the leper lost the sensation, for example, in his hand even if it is dipped into a hot water. No wonder that one of the images of sin is leprosy.

Sin, truly, has many side effects in the soul. It numbed the conscience, weakened the will, darkened the mind, and blinded the inner eyes. Of course, in the beginning there was always a sensation of the wrongness of the deed but

once it is repeated plural times it, consequently, led to justifying the action. At last, he arrived at the city of self-justification where he easily finds 101 reasons why he doesn't have to give up his wrong-doing. He so flatters himself in his mind, so much so, that he no longer knows his guilt. There is no more fear of God in his eyes.

In this stage, he makes sin his dwelling place, a residence. Right reason tells us that, on the other hand, this is highly dangerous place to dwell because the souls that live here are already morally dead. Of course, there is always hope of resurrection while there's still life in the body, that is to say, there's still a chance of repentance while we are still in this world but it should not be delayed nor to keep on presuming God's mercy by adding sin unto sin, because deathbed conversion is very rare in cases of ossified sinners.

It is true to say that the reason why mortal sinners need to defend and justify the error of their iniquities is that if they do not defend and justify it, the constant knowledge of their dire predicament of imminently falling into Hell should they die would be more than they could bear. But in so doing it debilitates the voice of conscience.

The sin of the sinner blunts or dulls his understanding of the truth, giving him moral view of his actions which does not properly reveal the depravity of his deeds, due to his conscience being "covered with the salve of sin," if we might coin a phrase to describe how sin tranquilizes the "prick" of conscience. "Hardened" is precisely the word needed to express what happens to the sinner's conscience: it becomes hard like a callous, because it has been abused and misused.

Scripture tells us that "to fear the Lord is the first stage of wisdom; all who do so prove themselves wise," hence to commit sin is acting foolishly and will not be able to attain true wisdom – a wisdom from above, from God, because "there is no fear of God before his eyes."

The fear of the Lord is one of the greatest palladiums against evil. We need to become acquainted and know our own hearts and the evil inclinations we have. Then we need the "fear of the Lord," a filial fear, a holy reverence for God and His holy will and His Word, because He says that if we sow in wickedness, the same will return to plague us; we will reap in full measure what we sow. A holy reverence for that principle will have a tendency to safeguard us from doing evil.

Though we have to love the sinner, yet we have to hate the sin because it shows that we align ourselves with God. If we recognize the sin within us and admit it, then we open ourselves to the truth and light of God. For it is only when sin is unacknowledged that the darkness remain. So, if the light that is in us is

darkness, how great the darkness be. In other words, if we so flatter ourselves in our minds to such an extent that we no longer recognize our transgression we are downright deceiving ourselves because anyone who says that he has no sin is a liar and the truth is not in him.

Mankind cannot live a completely sinless existence here on earth, sins and faults, even serious ones, will be committed, but the effect of these failures can be mitigated by sincere confession, penance, and a act of charity. Sin, when not removed by penance, by its very own weight soon drags down to another sin. This is really very hazardous, because it tows the sinner to impenitence which is the absence of contrition which alone can destroy in him the moral consequences of his rebellion against God.

This impenitence can be either temporal – lasting the course of one's life, or final – existing at the moment of death. Temporal impenitence is the cause of final impenitence: the simple absence of repenting and the positive resolution not to repent. In this last case we have the special sin of impenitence, which, in its final development, becomes a sin of malice. The soul on this road perseveres in sin, deliberately and coldly. It repels all thoughts of penance which might deliver it. Thus, as St. Augustine says, it is not only a sin of malice, it is also a sin against the Holy Spirit, that is to say, a sin which contradicts directly that which would save the sinner.

Hardening of heart supposes blindness of mind, and a will carried on to evil, with feeble movements toward good. The soul no longer derives profit from good advice, from sermons; it no longer reads the Gospel, no fear of God before his eyes, no longer goes to Church. It resists even the warnings of genuine friends. It falls under the indictment of the prophet Isaiah: "Woe to you that call evil good and good evil, that put darkness for light, and light for darkness, that put bitter sweet, and sweet bitter, woe to you that are wise in your own eyes, and prudent in your own conceit."

This condition, of course, is the corollary of sins reiterated, of vicious habitudes, of sinful entanglements, of erroneous reading.

Hoping against hope, however, while there's still breath, return to God is still possible because, even though hardened, the sinner receives "remotely" sufficient graces, for example, during the crucible of trial and suffering. He can begin to pray. If he does not resist, he receives efficacious grace to begin praying effectively.

If the sinner does not resist this last appeal, he will be led from grace to grace, even to that of a sincere conversion, for the Lord said: "I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his evil way and live." "Come now, let

us reason together, says the Lord: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool."

Hence salvation is still possible, but if the sinner resists these graces, he steps into a quicksand, where his feet sink down when he attempts to emerge, as the Lord goes on to say through the prophet Isaiah: "If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

If we consider the infinite 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.

Suppose we say: "I do not outwardly corrupt myself by fornication or adultery nor do I commit crime of avarice, therefore it follows that I am justified." We are completely off the mark in such thinking that we have perfectly fulfilled everything. There are not just three kinds of sin, as mentioned above, against which we are to guard ourselves, but the number is legion. Arrogance, presumption, unbelief, hatred, envy, deceit, hypocrisy, where do these come from? Is it not true that these come from the "deep" of one's heart which defiles a person?

Are we not obliged to wage war against these in our inner thoughts and to dash them against the Lord Jesus the rock of our salvation? If one should say: "I do not commit fornication or adultery, I am not avaricious; that's enough for me," he has indeed in this way contended against these sins, but against the other twenty or more kinds by which sin attacks him, he has not waged war, but has been conquered. Therefore we must contend and struggle against all kinds of sin while there is still blood in our vein, for they will keep on appearing again. Otherwise, we will just be flattering ourselves that we know not our sins. In this case, we will be told: →

### **Icon # 369 = Mischief and Deceit vs. Truthfulness and Meditation**

"The words of his mouth are mischief and deceit; he has ceased to act wisely and do good. He plots mischief while on his bed; he sets himself in a way that is not good; he spurns not evil."

The book of proverbs tells us that "Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but those who plan good have joy." St. Jerome once said that "it is much better to speak the truth clumsily than to wax eloquent with a lie." When a person becomes eloquent in lie it is a luminous sign that all wisdom is gone, because

every tree is known by its fruit. "A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit."

Without any shadow of a doubt, malice and deceit are not good fruits. They have a pernicious effect in the hardening of the heart and in the blinding of the inner vision of the soul. No wonder that "he sets himself in a way that is not good," for he is in darkness and does not know where the way that leads to true life is. The darkness has blinded his eyes. Consequently, he has ceased to act wisely and do good because all wisdom is gone.

If a man is mischievous and deceitful he certainly undermines trust, for we will be led to see him as insincere. Even if there will be times that he will speak the truth it will still make us wonder whether he is telling the truth or not. Take for example a man who went swimming and had cramped in his both legs, he shouted for help but the people who knew him as one who is always lying and deceiving others thought that he was just fooling them, so, he ended up drowning. In other words, he reaps what he sows, for "a fool's mouth is his ruin, and his lips are a snare to himself."

If he had been truthful he would have been saved because people could have taken his words seriously. Take another example how truthfulness can save a person who is already incarcerated for his crime: Frederick II, the eighteenth-century king of Prussia, fancied himself enlightened monarch, and in some respect he was. On one occasion he is supposed to have interested himself in conditions in the Berlin prison and was escorted through it so that he might speak to the prisoners. One after the other, the prisoners fell to their knees before him, bewailing their lots and, predictably, protesting their utter innocence of all charges that had been brought against them. Only one prisoner remained silent, and finally Frederick's curiosity was aroused. "You," he called. "You there." The prisoner looked up, "Yes, Your Majesty." "Why are you here?" "Armed robbery, Your Majesty." "And are you guilty?" "Entirely guilty, Your Majesty. I richly deserve my punishment." At this, Frederick rapped his cane sharply on the ground and said, "Warden, release this guilty wretch at once. I will not have him here in jail, where by example he will corrupt all the splendid, innocent people who occupy it!"

Experts in Moral theology tell us that deceit is a "malice added to lying, by which one, in addition to uttering an untruth, attempts to make another believe it." Strictly speaking, a lie consists of the intention of getting another to accept the expressed falsehood as the truth. How about mischief? Of course, there are shades of meaning of this word. One is, it is a cause or source of harm, evil, or irritation. In other words, it's an action that annoys or irritates.

Whether we like it or not, or whether we believe it or not, there are people who take delight in annoying or irritating other people. Why it is so is very mysterious in the sense that the reason why is partly knowable and partly unknowable, but it can be discerned by tracking it down right to its fountainhead, namely, to the Father of lies, the deceiver of the world, and the murderer from the beginning who is so ingenious in inspiring men and women to do so.

They take pleasure in lies and sharpen their tongues like swords; they aim bitter words like arrows to shoot at the innocent from ambush, shooting suddenly and recklessly. They scheme their evil course; they conspire to lay secret snares, planning treachery all the day long and drafting mischief while on their bed. Surely, this is in sharp contrast with the attitude of the man who is considered blessed because he does not follow the counsel of the wicked nor lingers in the way of sinners, but whose delight is the law of the Lord and who ponders his law day and night.

Both men, that is, the mischievous one and the happy one are actively engaged with their thoughts and intellect: the former is scheming evil course, conspiring secret snares, planning treachery, and plotting mischief, while the latter is delighting in the law of the Lord, and meditating on it all the day long, and night too; the former sets himself in a way that is not good, while the latter does not stand in the way of sinners; the former spurns not evil, while the latter hates wickedness.

As the book of proverbs says: "Deceit is in the heart of those who devise evil, but those who plan good have joy," no wonder that meditating on the goodness of the law of the Lord brings with it joy and happiness. Which one do we prefer? Certainly, we will be given whatever we chose; and what a person chose is, clearly, an indication of what is in one's heart, for out of the abundance of one's heart his mouth speaks. Thus a person will eat the fruit of what he sows, for "Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits."

If an idle word will render an account on the Day of Judgment, how much more if the words of one's mouth are mischief and deceit!

Accordingly, if we are united with the Lord and become one spirit with Him, then, we can say with the prophet Isaiah: "The Lord has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him that is weary."

Of course, this is a manifestation of God's love for us in order that we will not sink into depression when we have to pass through many trials and tribulations as we traversed the odyssey of life. Consequently, we can reverently say: →

## Icon # 370 = Spiritual Creation: Love and Faith

"Thy steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, thy faithfulness to the clouds. Thy righteousness is like the mountains of God, thy judgments are like the great deep; man and beast thou savest, O Lord."

Just as the works of natural creation are drawn by the law of gravity towards the earth's center, so the works of spiritual creation are drawn by the law of love towards the heart of God itself which is no other than love. Of course, it is steadfast love that transcends all boundaries – extending itself not only to the heavens but also to the earth, "for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

God does not love us because we are lovely or lovable; His love exists not on account of our character, but on account of His. Our highest experience is responsive, not initiative. And it is only because we are loved by Him steadfastly that we are lovable. His faithfulness, too, extends to the clouds, so much so, that even if all people on earth will be faithless He will always remain faithful for He cannot deny Himself.

The Lord Jesus takes into account not so much our achievements or accomplishments nor any feat or megalomaniac action nor our failures or disappointments, but craves only for our love that we may reciprocate to His love for us. In this way, our love too will be extended to the heavens where the Lord Jesus is, seated at the right hand of God – that we may have courage and confidence to approach the throne of mercy that we may receive grace to help us when we are buffeted by the winds of trials, tribulations, and distress.

We, too, will be allowed to taste the foretaste of spiritual contemplation – gazing upon the boundless love of the Lord Jesus on the cross and sees hidden mysteries of His passion and death, for "greater love has no man that this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." We are not only His friends but also His lovers if we both keep His commandments and reciprocate to His love. Love is that good disposition of the soul in which it prefers nothing that exist to knowledge of God.

But no person can come to such a state of love if he or she be attached to anything earthly, as one of our heavenly friends – St. Gregory the Great says: "He truly loves God whose soul is not conquered by consent to worldly delights. And the more a man delights in earthly things, the more he is shut off from heavenly love." No wonder, then, that we are told by our other friend, St. Paul, to seek the things that are above, where the Lord Jesus is, seated at the right hand of God. And also, to set our minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. This is a very salubrious and wholesome injunction because

“He who come from above is above all; he who is of the earth belongs to the earth, and of the earth he speaks; he who comes from heaven is above all.”

We have also to be aware that where love is, faith is also there. In other words, love and faith can never be separated. Love will never allow faith to be divorced from Him nor will faith ever tolerate to be sundered from her. It is our faith in Christ’s promise of eternal life – union with God forever, that gives us impetus to obey His commandments; and obedience to His commands is a veritable sign that we have love for Him.

Faith tells us what God wants and says; love then gives free obedience. True faith is followed by adherence to Christ’s commands. Faith is the eye that enlightens every conscience and produces understanding, for the prophet says: “If you will not believe, you shall not understand.”

On the Lord Jesus’ side, His faithfulness endures forever; it pierces the clouds above where the rainbow of His crucifixion will always remind of His steadfast, loyal, devoted, and faithful love for the human race: offering forgiveness to all no matter how unimaginable the heinousness of their sins are, so long as there is still a glimmer of repentance and a smoldering wick of humility left, for He does not desire the death of sinners but wishes the salvation of all – “man and beast” alike, that is, creation be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. For this reason we can awesomely exclaim: →

### **Icon # 371 = Fountain of Life: Love and Cross**

“How precious is thy steadfast love, O God! The children of men take refuge in the shadow of thy wings. They feast on the abundance of thy house, and thou givest them drink from the river of thy delights. For with thee is the fountain of life; in thy light do we see light.”

All those who have tasted the love of the Lord Jesus, especially those who were former sinners such as St. Paul, St. Mary Magdalene, St. Augustine, etc. never had a second thought in unanimously acclaiming that His love is “steadfast,” that is, it is loyal and devoted, and that it is “precious,” so much so, that St. Paul cries out at the top of his lung: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” St. Augustine, too, cries out: “late have I love You, O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new. Late have I love You.” How about St. Mary Magdalene? Would anyone have the guts to entertain even the slightest doubt that she was devoid of preciousness and steadfastness of the love of the Lord Jesus?

How about the martyrs? The voices of their blood are in unison – singing in chorus from the ground: “How precious is thy steadfast love, O God!” This love is so precious that they were willing to lost their lives in this world than to lost this love for all eternity.

The steadfast love of the Lord Jesus perseveres to the end that it, too, cries out: “Behold, I am with you always until the end of time.” Listen to the testimony of St. Polycarp when he was asked, under pain of death, to renounce this Love: “I have served Him for eighty six years and He did nothing to me but goodness, and now you commanded me to renounce Him?” Even the tongues of angels would not be enough to recount how precious is the steadfast love of the Lord Jesus. The whole world and the whole universe would not be large enough to contain this love.

Clouds of witnesses bore testimony to this love. Hear another evidence from someone who was intoxicated with this love, no other than one of our heavenly friends – St. Isaac of Syria/Nineveh: “As a man, who drinks wine on a day of mourning, become intoxicated and forgets to mourn the sadness of his situations, so a man intoxicated with the love of God forgets in this world, that is, in this house of weeping, all his hardship and sorrows and, in his intoxication, becomes insensitive to all sinful passions.”

Sin crucified this Love on the cross and Death buried this Love in the tomb, but this Love rises again as He foretold He would, for He is immeasurably stronger than death. Many waters of unbelief, blasphemy, and indifference cannot quench this Love, neither can floods of infidelity, betrayal, and irreverence drown this Love. Since it is love which unites the soul to God, the more intense this love is the more deeply the soul enters into God and is centered in Him.

Accordingly, God's love is satisfied only “when God stoops down to our nothingness” and transforms that nothingness into fire. “Oh, living flame of love” cries out our other heavenly friend, St. John of the Cross, “that tenderly woundest my soul in its deepest center, since thou are no longer oppressive, perfect me now if it be thy will, break the web of this sweet encounter....Oh, lamps of fire, in whose splendors the dark caverns of sense which were once dark and blind with strange brightness give heat and light together to their Beloved! How gently and lovingly thou awakenest in my bosom, where thou dwellest secretly and alone! And in thy sweet breathing, full of blessing and glory, how delicately thou inspirest my love!”

Just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, so the steadfast love of the Lord Jesus inspirest the love of the children of men to take refuge in the shadow of His wings – no other than His cross, for He said: “I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” “And as Moses lifted up from the serpent in

the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up...." The wings of the cross of the Lord Jesus are impregnable refuge of all wounded by sin, for as the people in the wilderness who were bitten by a serpent and would look at the bronze serpent that Moses lifted up were healed, so whoever is bitten by the serpent of sin and would look, with an act of contrition, at the cross of the Lord Jesus will receive forgiveness, too.

Our Lord bears His cross painfully. The way to Calvary was long, uneven, steep, too, in parts. He was worn out with the ill-usage of that day and the previous night. Think of the state of His Sacred Body from cruel scourging. One can well imagine how dreadful this journey must have been for Him under the weight of the cross. Blessed are those who, like St. Bernadette, hear this word: "I do not promise you happiness in this life, but in the next." This was a special revelation. She was predestined, but she would have great crosses on earth. All genuine Christian lives are marked with the cross.

Crosses well borne are a sign of predestination, says St. Thomas Aquinas. If we carry our cross willingly, it will carry us, and bring us to the desired end – namely, to that place where there will be an end of suffering. If we carry it unwillingly, we make it a burden to us, and load ourselves the more, and nevertheless, we must bear it. What is our chief cross? It is well to remember that the cross for every one of us means all that goes against self. All that costs to subdue self – to act on principle, submit to authority, to follow common life, to accommodate ourselves to others, to bear correction, to be faithful to irksome duties, to be submissive and humble during sickness, to struggle against self-indulgence and the softness of our times, persevering attention to the rules of Modesty, to be energetic in attention to our weak point, to bear up against failure and the monotony of daily routine, to be resigned when all seems to go wrong, whatever is contrary to our liking in our circumstances, our health, our companions, the way things are done, the way things turn out – all this is our cross.

The cross, indeed, is the test of the sincerity of our love for the Lord Jesus. How do we act when the cross touches us? To meet the cross with faith and bear it well with loving resignation, we must recognize it as the cross of Christ Jesus the Lord. Life is the road to Eternal Home, and this road goes by Calvary. Hence, in dangers, doubts, and difficulties we should not hesitate to take refuge in the shadow of the wings of the cross. When the immensity of our sins weigh us down, we have to take refuge in the shadow of the wings of the cross of Our Lord Jesus.

The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of trouble; He knows those who take refuge in Him – those who find shelter in the shadow of His wings.

Where do you go in your day of trouble? Is it in the shadow of the wings of the Lord? What stronghold provides your comfort? Is it in the shadow of the wings of the cross of the Lord Jesus, or is it in the crumbling and shifting sand of the world, seeking entertainment to distract you from pain or distress? Do you find consolation in food, feeding your sorrow? There are many things that call to us in the day of trouble, but only one that provides true safety and comfort, that is, in the shadow of His wings, for the Lord Jesus Himself is a stronghold, a refuge, in the day of trouble.

Unlike the fortresses offered by the world, such as: power, riches, prestige, honor, His walls cannot be torn down for His kingdom is unshakable. His defenses are not made of air. His outstretched arm is mighty to save and He has bent His arm for the good of the children of men who take refuge in the shadow of His wings. His wings will bring them to the house of His Father where there are many rooms. There they will feast on the abundance of His house, for He will feed them with His own Body, Blood, Soul, Humanity, and Divinity.

He will be in them, and they will be in Him. All that belongs to Him – also belongs to them. Their hunger for righteousness/holiness will be perfectly satisfied, for they shall eat the Bread of Life and drink the cup of eternal salvation; out of their own heart shall flow rivers of living water – clear as crystal in the noon day sun.

Their heart will rejoice forever without the slightest diminution and interruption, for they shall see God as He is in the light of His eternal glory and majesty: million and million times brighter and glorious than our noon day sun. In His light “do we see light,” for we, too, will see ourselves as we truly are: made in the image and likeness of God, being transformed from glory to glory – “to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” who boldly and unequivocally say, “I and the Father are one.”

Of course, having said all this, we have to assert that this is just a drop in the ocean of the abundance of God’s house – Our Father’s house, because its plenitude is immeasurably beyond one’s imagination and no human word is adequate enough to express the profusion of its delight, for no eyes as seen nor ear heard nor it enters the heart of men what God has prepared for those who love Him.

One thing we will know for sure is this: we will see Him as He is without the medium of any creature, to see Him better than we see those to whom we speak on earth, because God, being spiritual, will be most intimately present in our being – in our intelligence, which He fortifies with power to see Him face to face.

Thus we are called to see God, not only in the mirror of creatures while we are still on earth, however perfect and beautiful, not only by His highest radiations in the world of angels, but we are called to see Him without intermediary. Of course the penetration of this vision differs according to their due as they practice virtues here on earth.

For instance, here on earth many persons may see the same truth more or less profoundly. Many intellects see one and the same truth more or less comprehensibly. So, in the house of Our God where there are many rooms, all who are blessed by the Father of Our Lord Jesus will see Him as He is, but with an insight that varies in proportion to their integrity according to what they have done in the body while still in this present life.

Another thing we will know for sure is that our ultimate desire for happiness will be perfectly and fully satiated, for we will possess Him who we love. In the words of St. Augustine: "God is the goal of our desires, He is the One whom we shall see without end, whom we shall love without weariness, whom we shall glorify forever without fatigue." If we still need another testimony, here is one from one of our fathers St. Aelred of Rievaulx – one of the four evangelists of Our Cistercian Order: "Love is the eye that permits us to see God, and the sharpness of its vision is in proportion to its purity."

With Our Lord Jesus is the fountain of life, because in Him is life and this life is the light of the human race leading us back to the Father. He came into our world that we may have life and have it abundantly. He is the light of the world, and whoever follows Him sincerely and truthfully will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.

Undoubtedly, we can certainly say that there was once a time that we were in the darkness of sin, but in our conversion we participate in the light of the Lord that we may declare His wonderful deed in calling us out of darkness into His marvelous light.

In the house of the Lord Jesus we will be eternally grateful to all He has done for us, and for keeping us under the shadow of His wings. In the depths of our heart we will humbly cry out to Him: →

## Icon # 372 = Experiential Knowledge

"O continue thy steadfast love to those who know thee, and thy salvation to the upright of heart!"

Of course, the Lord continues His steadfast love to those who know Him not only in their mind, but also in their heart – who glorify Him not only in their words, but also in their deeds. See what love the Father has for us that while we were yet sinners, wallowing in the pleasure of sinful desires Christ Jesus died for us, how much more now that we gained some knowledge of Him. "For, if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life." "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." It is true to say that intimate knowledge of the steadfast love for Our Lord Jesus comes as we walk with Him to the place where He stays – as a response to His Invitation: "Come and see."

In other words, it is an experiential knowledge based on companionship with the Lord. This companionship evokes an enormous energy which makes even an uneducated person bold, as it happened to Peter and John when they stood in the presence of the elders and scribes together with Caiaphas and the high-priestly family to give an account of the healing of the crippled man in the temple. "When they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered; and they recognized that they had been with Jesus."

It is also true to say that the greatest scholar in the world, the man who knows everything about Jesus Christ, is less than the humblest Christian who knows Him everyday and loves Him sincerely, because knowledge which is wedded to love has deeper insight. Knowledge of the steadfast love of the Lord Jesus preserves us from sinking into despair, because He is full of mercy and compassion, His nature is all good, and His action pity and pardon: "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven....Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?... "No one Lord....Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again." Knowledge of ourselves preserves us from pride, for nothing is more efficacious for acquiring humility than knowledge of ourselves as we really are. These twofold knowledge assures salvation to the upright of heart, because seen in the radiance of this light there appears the on-going necessity for an encounter between our own misery and God's mercy.

So long as we are still in this present life, that is, there's still a possibility of losing the love of God, we should never cease praying that God will continue His steadfast love to us, and that we may walk in uprightness of heart, because we cannot have on earth the certitude of our predestination without special

revelation. We are even told by the Scripture to work out our salvation with fear and trembling.

Aside from this special revelation – as has been done to St. Bernadette and the three children of Fatima when the Blessed Virgin promised them to be in heaven, no person can absolutely know for sure if he will persevere in good works to the end. Nevertheless there are authentic signs of predestination which gives a kind of moral certitude that one will persevere. The Fathers of the Catholic Church, and our heavenly friends, especially St. John Chrysostom, St. Gregory the Great, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Anselm, have enumerated certain of these signs, following the directions of Scripture.

Eight signs of predestination are enumerated:

1. Good life;
2. The testimony of good conscience;
3. Patience in adversities for love of God;
4. Relish for the light and the word of God;
5. Mercy toward those who suffer;
6. Humility
7. Love of enemies;
8. Special devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

For instance, patience in adversity shows how inequality of natural condition is compensated for by divine grace. This is the truth expressed in the beatitude: Blessed the poor in spirit, blessed the meek, blessed those who weep, blessed those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, blessed the merciful, blessed the pure of heart, blessed the peacemakers, blessed who suffer persecution for righteousness' sake. These possess the kingdom of God.

To bear patiently and perseveringly a heavy cross: trials, hardships, and tribulations is a great sign of predestination. The first letter of Peter affirmed this when it says: "Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same thought, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer by human passions but by the will of God."

To bear patiently, then, our suffering has an amazing power to desist us from sin, for it can detach us from everything that is nonessential and ancillary in life and help us to zero in like a laser beam on what is important.

We have to assert that it is not suffering in itself that ceased us from sin, but the way we make use of our suffering, that is, it is bore patiently for the love of God in union with the suffering of the Lord Jesus on the cross. In this way, we attained an experiential knowledge of Our Lord, for in our own little way we have

identified ourselves with Him. In matters of fact, true knowledge of the other person needs closeness and indeed, to a certain extent, lives on it.

Suffering endured patiently for the love of God is a participation in the profound humility of Christ who humbles Himself and become like us in all things, enduring pain, and accepting death on the cross. Thus patience in adversity for love of God dulls the edge of our pride and arrogance, and repel the hand of Lucifer and his allies to drive us away from the love of God, because Christ Jesus the Lord makes us His own and no one can snatch us from His hand.

Therefore, trusting in His steadfast love and boundless mercy and humility, we humbly cry out: →

### **Icon # 373 = Greatest Failure**

“Let not the foot of the arrogance come upon me, nor the hand of the wicked drive me away. There the evildoers lie prostrate; they are thrust down, unable to rise.”

The letter of James is so emphatic in saying that “‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’ Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.” Since God is humility, therefore, it is not surprising He opposes the proud. And who is more proud than the devil? Lucifer is the epitome of arrogance.

In his pride he wanted to ascend to the highest heavens and be like the Most High shrieking with his battle cry: “I will not serve.” We are also told that Lucifer and his colleagues of angels fell from where they were, for no other crime than pride: their inordinate love of self rather than love of God and obedience to His will.

St. Benedict in his Rule indicated that every exaltation is a form of pride. Of course, the malice of pride differs according to its sphere and intensity. Thus there is a Luciferic pride that zero in drawing away every human person from subjection to God and incites him/her to willfully reject the commands of those in lawful authority. It breeds contempt for God and all authority and for every value and judgment that is not his/her own.

This kind of pride is the father of all nihilistic thinking and acting and, undoubtedly, the undercurrent of much of present – day immorality, because whenever there is the tendency to debase and to deny the relevance of God and of ethical values in the affairs of humanity, there is pride in its most grievous and Luciferic form.

When we isolate “self” from God and the rest of humankind and makes the “self” absolute or central, either ignoring all others or using them solely toward the achievement of our own personal interests, then we will certainly be diagnosed to have the vice of pride. It is in this sense that pride is traditionally regarded as one of the seven deadly sins and the queen of vices.

Pride is a rebellion against God and all that God stands for. It is a capital sin because it is a source and foundation for other sins, especially such sins as presumptuousness, which inclines the proud person to attempt what is beyond his/her powers; inordinate ambition, which is the inclination to aim at an honor and dignity beyond one's due or to use sinful means in the pursuit of them; and vainglory, which is the inordinate effort to manifest one's own excellence, real or fictitious. At the root of all such sins there is an exaggerated love and concern for “self” that clouds one's knowledge and appreciation of the “true self” and the corresponding worth of others.

For this reason, our good friend – St. Paul who knows the Lord Jesus more clearly counsels us dearly saying, “Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than ourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Lucifer, in his pride, wanted to ascend to the highest heavens and be like God, but he was cast down; on the other hand, the Lord Jesus, in His profound humility, descended Himself to earth taking the form of a servant and be like a human being in all things except sin, but He was exalted to the highest heavens. Lucifer ascended, but he was thrown down; the Lord Jesus descended, but He was exalted, “For every one who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Thus to Lucifer and his angels and to all human beings who sided with them who boast of their evil deeds will be told: “Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The haughty looks of man shall be brought low, and the pride of men shall be humbled; and the Lord alone will be exalted in that

day. For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high."

Even though we are just a fledgling in the spiritual life, yet we are not totally devoid of a little intuition that arrogance is a reliable precursor of one's downfall no matter how virtuous a person might be in the beginning, as the following story among the desert fathers had indicated: *there was a monk who had settled in the further desert and had practiced the virtues for many years. Now it happened that in his old age he was tested by the assault of demons. For this ascetic was particularly devoted to stillness. Spending his days as he did in prayer and hymnody and much contemplation, he saw clear visions of a divine nature, sometimes while fully awake, and sometimes while asleep. He had almost succeeded in laying hold of the traces of the incorporeal life. He did not worry about his bodily needs. Instead, from the day when he abandoned the world for the desert he was filled with confidence in God and took no thought how his body should find nourishment. On the contrary, oblivious to everything, he voluntarily kept himself in the presence of God by a perfect desire, and awaited his departure from the world. He was nourished for the most part with delight of what is hoped for and not seen. And neither was his body exhausted by the long duration of this regime, nor did his soul lose heart. On the contrary, he maintained his good state of life in a sober manner. He grew spiritually every day, adding to his present virtue and future hope and always advancing towards something better. But he came to be almost certain that the better portion was indeed his, as if he already had it in his grasp. And once this had happened, it only needed a little to make him fall as a result of the temptation which was to come to him afterwards. Because when he came to this presumption he began without realizing it to think that he was superior to most men, and that he had attained something greater than others, and having arrive at this opinion he began to trust in himself. Before long there was born in him first of all some small indolence, so small as not to seem to be indolence at all. Then there developed a more serious negligence. Then it became just perceptible. For he became more reluctant to rise from sleep and sing hymns. The work of prayer now became more sluggish. The mind turned its gaze earthwards. Thoughts became subject to distractions. And perhaps, in the secret recesses of his heart, he began to plan some wickedness.*

*The third night came and the evil returned three times more fiercely than before. He supposed it a trivial matter to be only just short of failing in his obligations. As a result of this, a powerful sensual desire seized him and diverted him by evil thoughts towards the world. His mind fell upon the thoughts with even greater alacrity, while his memory composed an image like that of a woman actually present and lying with him. He had the whole scene in front of his eyes as if all along he was actually performing the act. However, on the third day he came out again to do his work and to pray and sing hymns, but he could no longer keep his thoughts pure. On the contrary, he felt unsettled and turned about*

*restlessly, glancing this way and that. For the memory of his reflections interrupted his good work. The thoughts returned in throngs, enveloping him on all sides and battling against his understanding, and quickly taking him prisoner, they dragged him back to the world.*

Although what happened to this man is very mind boggling but it is not really surprising, because in reality when a person grows in the spiritual life the greatest temptations that he has to tackle with are blasphemy and lust. We are told by St. Gregory the Great that St. Benedict was vehemently attacked by the spirit of lust, so much so, that to overcome it he dove into a thicket of thorns. You can imagine the excruciating pain he has to endure as a price of his deliverance! St. Francis of Assisi was also assaulted by the spirit of lust, so much so, that he rolled himself naked on snow to be delivered from that passion!

We may not have the courage of St. Benedict to plunge ourselves into a thorny bush or the indomitable spirit of St. Francis to roll naked on a snow, but we will not be deprived of divine help if we humbly cry out for mercy not to succumb to the spirit of lust.

Notice that the monk in the story became so presumptuous to think he was superior to most men and began to trust in himself instead of God. His prayer life too became questionable, because it is unthinkable that a person who purportedly kept himself in the presence of God by perfect desire and was nourished for the most part with delight in the hope of the world to come will be so sluggish in one's prayer and be reluctant to rise and say his divine office.

Once our prayer life becomes sluggish, it is an infallible signal that we are heading towards the spiritual death of our soul: virtues of all kinds will be malnourished while vices of all kinds, too, will flourish. True humility will lament for good nourishment while shameless arrogance will be deceitfully contented with its own duplicity. In this case, the hand of wickedness will drive us away from our proximate goal, that is, the kingdom of heaven – the beatific vision.

At this stage, however, so long as we are still in this present life, we should never despair of God's mercy. There is still one more place where we can go to, that is, the Immaculate Heart of Mary – the refuge of sinners, the Mother of Mercy. Never was it known that anyone who fled to her for protection and implored her help was left unaided. Thus when the immensity of our sins weigh us down and we are bewildered by the loathsomeness of our conscience, when the terrifying thoughts of judgment appall us, so much so, that we will be in the verge of sadness and despair, then, we have only to think of this most merciful mother and invoke her help. Hence you will know by your own experience that she is truly a Mother.

She is so humble that God regarded her humility more than her virginity, as our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux says: "If you are not able to imitate the virginity of this humble maid, then imitated the humility of the virgin maid. Virginity is praiseworthy virtue, but humility is by far the more necessary. You can be saved without virginity; without humility you cannot be. Without humility not even Mary's virginity would have been acceptable."

Accordingly, the Blessed Virgin Mary magnifies the Lord, and her spirit rejoices in God because He has regarded her humility....He has shown the strength with His arm, He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.

In spite of this safe place of refuge, the Immaculate Heart of Mary, where we can go to: - just as Lot when fleeing Sodom said to the angels: ..."you have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtakes me, and I die. Behold, yonder city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there – is it not a little one? – and my life will be saved;" and just as his sons-in-law did not go with Lot to escape Sodom but stayed behind because it did not make sense to them, so, if we refuse to run for our lives and take refuge in this lowly Mother of God, then, we will sadly be like the people of Sodom and Gomorrah.

It is tantamount to being with Lucifer and the fallen angels. The foot of arrogance in adamantly pursuing evil deeds certainly dragged us to be deliberately with them. "There the evildoers lie prostrate, they are thrust down, unable to rise," because there is no more hope of salvation. The soul will lost forever what it is created for, that is, the never ending happiness in seeing God as He is.

It is a loss which nothing can replace because the soul though endowed with never ending existence will never attain the end or purpose to which it is made. It is the definitive and never – ceasing frustration of the craving of an immortal being. It is the Greatest Failure.

While we are still on earth no failure is complete, because it is always retrievable, if not in itself, at least in some other way; but in the place where Lucifer and the fallen angels and other human beings who died in a deliberate unrepented mortal sin dwell, the failure is absolute – failure of the whole of one's being, failure without hope of retrieving what is lost. In our life on earth, the impulse to re-start after failure is almost instinctive, but there will be no more re-starting in the next life after this final disaster, "there the evildoers lie prostrate, they are thrust down, unable to rise."

All is over; the soul is going to face utter ruin, beyond repair. All that is left is blank despair, for the soul realizes with a mental keenness unknown on earth the inner truth of things, the loss of God is a disaster exceeding in extent all that we can now conceive. Man has come to his final state in which with all his mental power and the whole energy of his will he either possesses God or, losing Him, is aware of the complete and everlasting failure of his existence.

Every fiber of his being tends toward God by inward necessity; God draws him as a magnet draws iron, his innermost self thrills with longing for God, who is infinite goodness, beauty, and truth, yet he is intimately conscious that his nature is so warped, disfigured, and deformed that it can never be united to God. Between himself and God there is a gulf fixed which no bridge will ever span.

Nor is God a distant object, which he might manage to forget, as he did on earth. God is intimately present to him, but this presence is a torment, not a joy, for holiness is both an object of horror and of desire to those that are in sin, for "the love of God will be an intolerable torment for those who have not acquired it within themselves;" as our other heavenly friend, St. Isaac of Syria/Nineveh indicated: "The sorrow which takes hold of the heart that has sinned against love is more piercing than any other pain...for love acts in a double way, as suffering in the reprov'd, and as joy in the Blessed."

Every instant of his never-ending life he wants God and he knows that he wants Him, yet every instant he feels an irresistible recoil, a disgust, a loathing, a hatred, which turns him from that which he wants. He is like a shipwrecked mariner in a little craft on the open sea. He raves with maddening thirst, though surrounded by water. He lifts the sea water to his lips then vomits it out, for it is salt. The salt is sin. His sin has turned even the sweet waters of God's goodness into brackish; it is a venom which he always tastes and makes him/her hate even God as poison, though at the same time he/she is mad with thirst for God.

The Lord Jesus speaks of this place as the losing of one's soul. He says: "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and suffers the loss of his own soul? Or what exchange shall a man give for his soul?" This expression: "losing one's soul," does not mean cessation of existence, for we know that the soul is immortal; but it does mean the complete cessation of the supernatural life of grace, which God intended for it, and without which man has utterly failed the purpose of his being.

If a person – an adult, who has had the choice between good and evil and with complete deliberation, has chosen evil and died persisting in his choice, thus fails to obtain the Beatific Vision, there is no substitute for it as the aim of his life. He has totally lost his soul in the fullest sense of the word. It is an asking never to receive, a seeking never to find, a knocking at a gate eternally closed, to hear

for ever: "Amen, amen, I do not know you. Depart from me you evildoers." There the evildoers lie prostrate, they are thrust down, unable to rise," there nothing remains of the supernatural except the marks of baptism, confirmation, and the priesthood, nothing except the bitter memory of graces once received, and these things remain to enhance eternal sorrow – the sense of the greatness of what is lost.

By creating us, God sent us on a journey, a journey towards Himself, a journey which was meant to end in a homecoming. The home intended is a nestling in the very bosom of God, the absolute possession, the closest embrace by mind, heart, and will of God Himself – what God is by nature we will be by grace, as iron in the fire, but the unrepentant evildoers – the damned the journey will never end, home and rest will never be; they are lost forever. They are wonderers, idly, foolishly, hopelessly wandering hither and thither, never making headway toward God.

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

All that has been said above is not intended to threaten us so as to become paranoid or to become extremely scrupulous, but to help us avoid the place and the state where the unrepentant evildoers will be; and to help us also to desire with the utmost longing of our whole being the Beatific Vision: to see God as He is and be with Him for all eternity; of course, with the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the angels and saints in heaven, for they are the members of the household of God, the citizens of God's kingdom. For this reason, we should: →

## Icon # 374 = Healthcare of the Soul

### Psalm 37 (36)

“Fret not yourself because of the wicked, be not envious of wrongdoers! For they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb.”

If we have the Beatific Vision in mind and also the destiny of the unrepentant evildoers, so, how can we be envious of the wrongdoers! Can you imagine if we will be with God forever and ever, of course by His grace, and be happy without the slightest anxiety that this happiness might dwindle a little bit! In this case, we will be more than willing and happy to accept and endure any trial and distress that come to us while we are still in this present world.

On the other hand, what tragedy would it be for a person who is terribly annoyed with God and himself because there are many wicked and wrongdoers in this world who seem to be enjoying the good things in life but are not stricken like others. Hence we have to pray for the grace to see what will be the end of the wicked and wrongdoers – how slippery are their paths. No matter how they grow in wealth they are not object of envy but of pity.

Wise, therefore, is the psalmist who counsels us not to fret because of the wicked nor be envious of the wrongdoers, for they shall be like chaff which will be driven away.

We have to admit that we, too, have done wrong to a certain degree and which varies in form – perhaps not serious enough to merit to be cast out and driven to prison. If the frequency of this wrong is not habitual and its duration is relatively short and its intensity is not that strong, it is likely that we may not be diagnosed as a chronic wrongdoer, but this does not completely exonerate us from sin.

Obviously, there are sins which civil society just shrugged off as conventional to human beings and does not consider these sins as crime; therefore the guilty ones are not put to jail. Take for example the sin of gluttony. Have you ever heard of someone who was put in prison because of gluttony? So far, no country in the world ever convicted anyone of gluttony. On the other hand, some of the affluent of the ancient city of Rome were known that when they gave a banquet they also provided sinks for people to vomit their food, then, come back again to eat! Yet gluttony is one of the seven capital sins.

The same is true of envy and the other capital sins. The people guilty of these sins are likely to evade being dubbed as wrongdoers in the eyes of the world, but are they going to escape from the eyes of the Lord?

Accordingly, the wrongdoers that are not tagged as wrongdoers in the eyes of the world such as the gluttons, the greedy, the proud; and those who are incarcerated such as the murderers, the rapists, the robbers, and the kidnappers, should not be, as far as common sense is concerned, an object of envy.

For instance, do you feel envious of the glutton, the greedy, the proud, the murderer, or the rapist? Certainly not. These people are tantamount to being sick spiritually. Normally, if we are in our right mind, we don't get angry with people who are diagnosed with different kinds of illnesses.

For example, when you go to a hospital you might see someone who just had an open heart surgery, or have a liver biopsy, or someone having a malignant cancer, but you neither get angry with them or envious of them. However, if you are health conscious, you will do the best you can to avoid any food or drink that might lead you to the same illness. You will also do some walking or any exercise that will enhance your bodily health.

Undoubtedly, you will also eat healthy and nutritious food and take vitamins. All this you do for the sake of your body. The same is true if we are earnest of the health of our soul. We will do some exercises for our soul such as: praying, reading spiritual books, and the practice of virtues. Once the muscles of our soul gained strength by means of these exercises, we will also train ourselves in self-denial because it is only by denying our unhealthy love of self that we can show our love for God and come, through the Lord Jesus, to an all-absorbing love for the Father who made us.

The practice of self-denial is one of the veritable signs of Christian discipleship, as the Lord Jesus Himself said to His disciples: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." The false self has to die by not feeding it with inordinate desires and self-gratifications such as lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. In so doing, we will find the true self which is made in the image and likeness of God.

Once the debris of vices are graciously removed, and the image of the Lord Jesus starts to emerge on the face of our soul, truly we are born again because if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old life-style of sinful living has passed away. Thus we share abundantly in the paschal mystery of Christ and have fellowship with him, for "those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

We will also take the multi-vitamin of the soul which has all the essential minerals such as: wisdom, knowledge, understanding, counsel, piety, fear of the Lord,

fortitude, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, modesty, chastity, humility, prudence, justice, temperance, faith, hope, and charity. Of course, we can increase the dosage of any of this vitamin if we notice we are developing a certain kind of disease.

For instance, we can increase the dosage of humility if we perceive that we are getting proud of the gifts, talents, and the things we have. This can be in a form of capsule of suffering. God draws us to Himself in innumerable ways, but one of the most common is by placing suffering upon our back and a cross upon our shoulder and then awaiting the result, for the distracted minds of fickle men do not easily turn to God when life goes on its placid way, day following happy day.

Men turn to God most easily when they are beaten down upon beds of physical sufferings, or when they are filled with anxiety over the sufferings of those they love, or when they are bent low under the humiliation of failure and defeat. Many, very many, are the people who have found God first when they felt upon their shoulder a cross the good and wise God drop there.

Who among the saints were exempted of sufferings? Not even the Most Immaculate and sinless Virgin Mary. Was she getting proud, too, because of the abundance of revelations she received, so she has to increase her dosage of humility through sufferings? By no means, of course. Ours is a remedy of our pride, but hers is to give us an example that we may follow in her steps. She too, like her Son, has committed no sin; no guile was found on her lips yet she also suffered for us that we may learn how to bear our pains and sorrows.

Thus when we patiently endure the trials and sufferings that come our way, we not only have God's approval but also have the powerful medicine for the healing of our pride. One of the doctors of the Church, St. John Chrysostom, bears witness to this when he said: "Suffering in the present life is the remedy against pride, which would turn us astray, against vainglory and ambitions. Through suffering the power of God shines forth in weak men, who without His grace would not be able to bear their afflictions." By this road, then, we are led to desire with utmost longing the kingdom of heaven with its unending eternal life.

The memory of the great sufferings of Our Lord Jesus and of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of the saints leads us to support our own and helps us to receive into our hearts whatever pain, sorrow, and distress that might come to us whether they are big or small. As no one can handle flour without carrying some of it about her/him, so no one can meditate devout and assiduously on the Passion of Our Lord Jesus without deriving great blessing from it, for nothing is more efficacious for curing the wounds of our conscience and purifying our souls from

the dregs of pride than the continual meditation on the sufferings of the Lord Jesus. If these sentiments are ours and abound they prevent us from becoming envious of wrongdoers, but instead impel us to: →

### **Icon # 375 = Trust in the Lord: Humility**

“Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will dwell in the land, and enjoy security. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”

It is interesting to notice that we are counseled both to trust in the Lord and do good, because one without the other is valueless. For instance, what is the use of trusting in the Lord if we do not also do good, can trust in the Lord benefit us if we do not also do what is good? The antithesis of not doing good is to do evil, because we cannot be neutral when morality is concern. Either the tree is good and its fruits are good, or the tree is bad and its fruits are bad; for a good tree does not bear bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Thus every tree is known by its fruit, for “the good man out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil....”

The great danger of trusting in the Lord but not doing good as well is that the unclean spirit who has gone out of us is likely to return again. When he comes and finds us empty, swept, and in proper order, that is, we are empty of good deeds and devoid of wholesome dispositions, and at the same time is seemingly pious, and extremely meticulous, then, he goes and brings with him a good number of other spirits more evil than himself; and our last state becomes worse than the first.

Take for example the spirit of lust who has gone out of a man for a while, especially at a time when he started to pursue the things of God. Everything seems to be peaceful, but it comes back again without giving any warning. When it found that chastity is not there nor the other virtues, it will bring other spirits more evil than or as evil as himself, such as: the spirit of pride, anger, acedia – boredom, etc.

Unless he will cry for mercy and humbles himself before the Lord, the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. God who sees the thoughts and intentions of the heart knows whether we are sincere or not, He knows who are His own. If He sees there is a flicker of humility in our heart, He will come readily to help us bind the strong spirit of lust that it may not become our master, because left to ourselves we might be too weak to offer resistance to this mighty spirit; for even David, strong and powerful as he was in battle, was held captive by this spirit when it visited him.

It was only the humility of David that moved the Lord to deliver him from his captivity, for in the depths of his heart David cries out, saying: "Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your compassion blot out my offense. O wash me more and more from guilt and cleanse me from my sin. My offenses truly I know them; my sin is always before me. Against you, you alone, have I sinned; what is evil in your sight I have done...my sacrifice, a contrite spirit. A humbled, contrite heart you will not spurn."

It is not farfetched to say that humility is like a radium, for it has a tremendous power both to transform and save a person. Any labor without humility bring no eternal reward, whereas humility even without any ascetical exercises is sufficient to find delight in the Lord and obtain deliverance from the captivity of sin, as one of our heavenly friends, St. Isaac of Nineveh, says: "Humility, even without works, gain forgiveness for many offenses; but without her, works are no profit to us and instead prepare for us great evils. What salt is for any food, humility is for every virtue, and she can mightily obliterate many sins....And if she becomes ours, she will make us sons of God, and even without good works she will present us to God. For without humility all our works are vain – every virtue and every righteous labor."

Since we are monks and the Church does not require us to do an active apostolate which is really a "good work," and though we have not attained the height of asceticism practiced by the desert fathers, so long as the ember of true humility is still burning in our heart that would be good enough to maintain our confidence in God.

Humility is primarily an inner quality. It consists in "trust in God" and in the presence of the Holy Spirit hidden in the depths of our heart. If we are to classify the signs of humility and to speak first of inner signs, the first of them would be a deep sense of God's presence, out of which humility is born. We cannot be humble by ourselves by means of our own efforts and external activities no matter how seemingly good they are, but we do humble ourselves when, in encountering God in our lives, we perceive God's greatness and our own nothingness.

Thus we have a fairly good reason to "trust in the Lord;" and at the same time we have also to do good no matter how little or insignificant it might be as, for instance, giving a cup of cold water not only to the disciples of the Lord Jesus and to those who have an affection for us, but also to those who dislike us, and perhaps hate us because we bear the name of Christians.

In so doing, we will truly "dwell in the land" promised by the Lord to the meek and humble of heart. In this land we will "enjoy security," for no swindlers will be there to deceive us and no thieves to break in and steal the joy of a peaceful

conscience. Even in this present life we can have a foretaste of the security of this land when our conscience bears witness to us that we are doing the will of God. A limpid and placid conscience is engendered, undoubtedly, by cultivating our trust in the Lord and doing good works – even as simple as washing a spoon or a fork left in the sink, or opening the door for someone.

Thus we have to spend our energy in doing good before we can take our rest in God with a peaceful and tranquil conscience. Consequently, our soul takes delight in the Lord, for He is the source of true happiness. On His part, He will give us the desires of our heart, first and foremost: the possession of God Himself the supreme Good – His highest gift to us, to see the breathtaking beauty of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to be admitted into the kingdom of heaven and be with all the angels and saints for all eternity and be happy with them in beholding the infinite goodness and majesty of God.

In other words, to depart from this world and be with the Lord Jesus, for this is far better – to be where Christ is now, seated at the right hand of the Father. What more can we ask for! What else have we in heaven but Him? Apart from Him we do not want anything on earth. Wherefore, our body and our heart faint for joy, because God is our possession for ever. Hence, if we have God we have everything!

All the other desires of the human heart such as: the desire to be rich, to be famous, to be powerful, to be prestigious or anything that the people of this world considered as important when put side by side with the desires to possess God, to be in heaven for all eternity, to see the Triune God and the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the angels and saints, and to be in a state of happiness without the slightest fluctuation, to share in all the attributes of God, and be completely one with Him, are, without any shadow of a doubt, rubbish.

Once we take delight in the Lord and once he gives us all the salubrious desires of our heart, then, what we need to do is to constantly: →

### **Icon # 376 = Committing all Our Ways to the Lord**

“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. He will bring forth your vindication as the light, and your right as the noonday.”

To commit our way to the Lord entails that we freely wanted to become His disciples, to adhere to His teaching, to listen to His Word, to catch His Spirit, to share His trust in the heavenly Father, and to allow Him to influence our thoughts, words, and actions. It denotes a change in the direction of our lives. It means getting ourselves a new orientation for the way we live, then act on it.

Committing our way to the Lord is truly a wholesome attitude – it is surrendering of ourselves to Him and relying on His goodness for everything.

We have to trust the Lord completely because He will not forsake us no matter what. He is so good that He could not find in His generous heart to forsake us if we trustingly commit our way to Him. The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to the perdition of our soul. On the other hand, the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to eternal life.

The world says, “trust your own ability and talents – and has nothing to do with God. Follow your own way and do what feels good to you.” God says, “do not lean on your own understanding, but trust Me to direct your paths, because there are ways which seem good to men but its end is destruction – the ruin of one's soul.”

The world tells us to value human freedom which, according to their whims, is to follow your own way and to do what you want even if this will lead to chronic deceitfulness and the espousing of the culture of death, but the Lord Jesus tells us to follow Him so that we will not be walking in the darkness of deceitfulness and unrighteousness but will have the light of life, because He is “The Way,” and “The Truth,” and “The Life.” He is the Way that leads to our eternal home, the Truth that enlightens the darkness of our minds, and the Life which knows no end.

What the world sees as freedom – following one's own way, is really slavery to sin; whereas, true obedience to the Lord which the world would look like slavery is really true freedom. To the world, following the Lord Jesus and spreading His gospel seems incredibly foolish, but to us though who are still in this world but are not of this world, it is the most precious truth ever revealed – the pearl of great price.

Committing our way into the hands of God delivers us from the confusion, conflicts, and cares that fill the world today. All our trials, or normal goings-on, ought to be committed to the Lord – to be given to Him as sacrifices and burnt offerings. Pray about all of it to Him. We need to put the concerns and cares behind us, who better with than God? As a man whose head is under water cannot inhale pure air, so a man whose thoughts are plunged into the cares of this world cannot absorb the sensation of the new world to come.

Committing all our ways to the Lord must be continuous. We need to allow Him pass a verdict on our ways. Are they right in His eyes? Have we placed it all in His hands? Only when we truly commit our way to the Lord and leave it with Him will we no longer be anxious and fearful. Then, after dying to ourselves – to our false

security, we ought to recognize our dependence on Him to carry out all our affairs.

Accordingly, by committing all our ways to the Lord we are taught how to preserve our minds in tranquility amidst anxieties, dangers, and floods of trials. The person, therefore, who, entrusting the issues of all his affairs and activities to the Lord, and who, patiently waiting to receive from His hand whatever He may be pleased to send, whether prosperity or adversity, consolation or desolation, casts all his cares, and every other burden which he bears, into the bosom of the Lord; or, in other words, commits to Him all his/her affairs, such a person, undoubtedly, entrusts his/her ways upon the Lord.

On the Lord's side, He will bring forth our vindication as the light, and our right as the noonday, because He will not suffer our righteousness to be always hid under the darkness of a bushel basket, but that He will maintain it and bring it forth to the light; namely, when He will bestow upon us such a reward as we desire, that is, the testimony of a good and peaceful conscience.

In this present life we may pass through many tribulations, yet this vicissitude should no more disturb our minds than the darkness of the night which covers the earth, for then the expectation of the light of day sustains our hope. Thus what we have to do in only to: →

### **Icon # 377 = Stillness: Patience**

“Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him; fret not yourself over him who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices!”

Our soul can be in stillness in the midst of chaos, storms, and confusion because we know the Lord is on our side. We know that through every change He remains faithful. We know that as He has faithfully lead in the past, He will continue to guide our future.

“Behold,” says the Lord, “I shall be with you always until the end of the world.” With so many things in this world vying for our attention and concentration, it is still possible to find rest and stillness in the Lord; it is still possible to be tranquil when the world seems to be racing all around us, for from the Lord comes our salvation. He is our rock and our salvation, our fortress. Therefore, we shall not be greatly shaken.

“Be still, my soul: the Lord is on thy side. Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain. Leave to thy God to order and provide; in every change, He who is faithful will remain. Be still, my soul: thy best, thy heavenly Friend through thorny ways leads

to a joyful end. Be still, my soul: thy God doth undertake to guide the future, as He has the past. Thy hope, thy confidence let nothing shake; all now mysterious shall be bright at last. Be still, my soul: the waves and winds still know His voice Who ruled them while He dwelt below" (Catharina von Schlegel).

"Wait patiently for him...." Being able to bear with sorrows and pain while still in this present world is part of patience; it is its beginning. It means being tireless in doing good even when the practice of virtue is more a matter of good habit than of present pleasure. It means setting aside feelings and adhering to the objective teaching of faith. It is not a depressive state of paralysis, but carrying on after the initial novelty has worn off, persevering in a task which, though worthy, brings no pleasure.

Real patience does not interiorly agitated violently. There is an inner stillness which accepts circumstance even though it may judge it to be unfair. The truly patient person is less concerned about the external details of the situation than about his/her handling of it. We need to come to the realization that this is God's will for us at this moment, even though we are aware of the sordid politics that have contributed to its fashioning.

Patience is really a matter of faith in the providence of God. If we can accept in our heart that this unpleasant moment is a vehicle of God's concern – solicitude, then we will be less angry or depressed because of human idiocy and more able to avoid inward rebellion. There is a mystery involved in patience. Often when we know the full story behind some circumstances we are happy to endure inconvenience and even pain. Once we perceived that the hostile actions of others really derive from their own suffering and from the malice in our regard, it becomes easier to anticipate and endure unpleasant attitude at their hands.

In fact, in dealing with another individual, we are encountering somebody who is severely scarred by the malice and indifference of others. If we really understood how much a victim this other person is, we would be compassionate and not condemnatory, for what he is doing is handing on the evil that was done to him/her and we are the recipients.

Each generation is wounded and perpetuates its pain by inflicting it on others. Genuine Christian patience calls a halt to this seemingly inevitable transmission. It receives evil and, instead of passing it on, absorbs it. Injuries are not recycled; the process is halted. Patience puts an end to the endless cycle of mutual hurt. This is what the Lord Jesus did in His lifetime and it is to this that He calls us. Not to render evil for evil, but rather patiently to bear hurt that is done to us. We have before us the example of the Lamb of God who bears, who takes upon Himself the sins of the world, who, in St. Paul's adventurous image, became sin for us.

Trial and difficulties borne in the name of Christ reduce the level of suffering to be endured by others for the purification of sins. To accept pain and sorrow is not mere stoicism; it is ultimate altruistic, because God will use it for the salvation of others.

There is a unique economy which transforms pain into an encounter with God, for God is far less likely to abandon us in hardship than in times of ease, as one of our heavenly friends – St. Ambrose of Milan said: “There are many who seek Christ in times of quiet and do find him, but they find him in persecutions and find him quickly. The same is true after temptations since God is present to his faithful in their dangers.”

True patience grows with the growth of love. We put up our neighbors to the extent that we love them. If we love, we are patient. If we cease loving, we will cease being patient. The less we love, then, the less patience we show. If we truly preserve patience in our souls, we are martyrs without being killed. Of course, it is a white martyrdom for we do not shed blood but tears, for it is in our patience that we share in the suffering – passion of the Lord Jesus.

Undoubtedly, in our present world there are good numbers of rich people who do not hesitate to carry out evil devices if these will bring more riches to their already abundant wealth. They prosper, of course, in their way and live in luxury and in ease. We are tempted to fret at this, to think them the only happy people, and so we are prone to do like them; but this is what we are warned against because outward prosperity is fading like wild flowers in the field which to today blossom but on the morrow wither away.

The rich people of this present world who do not have a qualm of conscience in carrying out evil devices will certainly have their hairs stand when they will hear this dreadful warning of St. James: “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days....You have lived in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter.”

Therefore, when we look forward, with an eye of faith, we shall see no reason to fret over those who carry out evil devices and to envy those who deceitfully prosper in their way, for they shall be judged according to what they have done in the body. Their weeping and gnashing of teeth will be unceasing. Wherefore, the psalmist does not tucker out in admonishing us, saying: →

## Icon # 378 = Anger: Healthy vs. Unhealthy

"Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. For the wicked shall be cut off; but those who wait for the Lord shall possess the land."

We have to assert that it is wrong to lose one's temper, but it can be equally wrong also not to be angry. The anger, to be a just anger, must always be under the control of reason, and therefore it is easy for us to sin by excess, that is, to allow the anger to get out of hand; but to fail to be angered by such things as blasphemous insults of God or diabolic cruelty to men is to sin by defect, for it argues either a very unworthy weakness and lack of spirit or else the sort of tolerance which is in fact a complete lack of principle or moral sense.

St. Thomas Aquinas says, "One may sin by not having used a holy anger when it was proper or necessary to do so." The Lord Jesus, too, was really very angry when the house of His Father, which is a house of prayer, was turned into a market place. Single-handedly, using a whip of cord, He drove out of the temple the oxen and sheep with their sellers, and overturned the tables of the money-changers. Moses, too, was really very angry when he saw his people worshipping the golden calf. St. Paul, too, says that we have to "Be angry." However, he qualifies it by saying, "but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil."

It is true to say that there are people who are so deep that it will really take a very long time to make them angry. An example of this is Moses and the Lord Jesus. They have a huge capacity for holding their anger. Moses was leading a people out of Egypt whom he dubbed as "stiff-necked people." Many years he bore them. His anger leaked out only when he saw them adoring a false god – do so with rock-n-roll. Christ started going to the temple every year at the age of twelve. He saw the House of His Father turned into a Mega Mall. It took, at least 18 years for His anger to leak out.

It is also true to say that there are people who are so shallow that it takes only a very little time to make them angry. These are the people who will get angry when they hear someone blowing his nose loudly, and feel irritated when you mispronounce some words, or when you burp. The bottom line is: What are we angry of? What is the motivation of your anger? Therefore, there's a need for discernment and an honest self-examination, for it is likely that it might be that our inner wound has been touched by the gesture of the other person. In this case, if we have a good sense this will make us slow to anger and count it as an honor to condone the offense.

Seeing, then, the wisdom of the Psalmist, we are persuaded to give heed to his wise counsel to “refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!” We don’t have to fret ourselves; otherwise, it will devour us, as St. Paul cautiously warned us, saying: “But if you bite and devour one another take heed that you are not consumed by one another.”

If the fools who remained silent are considered wise, so also we will be considered righteous if we refrain from anger and forsake wrath even though we feel it. We will also be regarded as meek, for meekness does not necessarily mean the absence of anger, otherwise, Moses will not be called the “meekest” man of his time and the Lord Jesus will not be qualified as the par excellent teacher, for He says: “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart.”

Not only shall the meek inherit the earth, the upright also will inhabit the land and men of integrity will remain in it, but the wicked will be cut off from the land, and the treacherous will be rooted out of it. →

### **Icon # 379 = Lost Soul**

“Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look well at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall possess the land and delight themselves in abundant prosperity.”

The book of Revelation tells us that the great dragon – the ancient serpent who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the world, has been thrown down to the earth and his angels were thrown down with him. Thus anguish and suffering has been proclaimed to us who reside in this world: “...woe to you, O earth and sea, for the devil has come down to you in great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!”

Scientists tell us that our planet earth is now 5 billion years old. It is mind boggling considering that the span of our life on earth “is seventy years or eighty for those who are strong. And most of these are emptiness and pain.” So, what is 80 years or 100 years compared to 5 billion years!? And what is 5 billion years compared to 100 trillion years or to eternity!? Can this be a wake-up call for us to be patient for a while, while still on earth, since there will come a time, though we do not know when, when our present world will eventually end – which is highly likely simultaneous with the second coming of the Lord Jesus, then, “the wicked will be no more” because they could not endure to see His face? If it be possible, Lucifer and his wicked angels and all wicked human being would rather run and will never appear before the presence of God than to hear the soul rending verdict: “I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.” Now is the judgment of this world, now shall the ruler of this world be cast out....”

Wherefore, "the wicked will be no more; though you look well at his place, he will not be there," for there will be no more place for all the wicked in heaven. Where do they go then? The book of Revelation gives us their whereabouts: "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 and ever....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."

The three children of Fatima, when they saw this abode where Lucifer and his wicked angels and all wicked men and women were thrown, were so horrified that if the sight had been prolonged even for a moment they would have died out of fear. It's so horrible, they said, that if a sinner will see that this is the place where he/she is going he/she will never commit sin. Why God revealed this to three little children and not to all people, especially the dyed-in-the-wool sinners, remains a mystery.

This mystery has its parallel in the same question mark that Judas (not Iscariot) asked the Lord Jesus, "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" We can ask the very similar question: "Why Christ, after His resurrection, appeared to His disciples and not to the high priest – Caiphas, or to the Scribes and Pharisees and elders of the people?"

It is called mystery not because we do not understand it, but because we do not "fully" understand it. There is something in it that has to be accepted in faith. We only understand a part of it, perhaps a little, but the bigger part of it is hidden from us. What we know or see is only a tip of an iceberg. Only few people actually saw an iceberg.

Suppose we live in a very remote village in a tropical country, and someone from a country near the north pole, who actually saw an iceberg, happens to come to our village and speaks to us about the iceberg, we will be likely inclined to accept his testimony because of his credibility even though we have not seen the iceberg itself. In other words, we accept in faith what he says. Much in the same way, we accepted in faith the testimony of the three children of Fatima concerning the place where Lucifer and his wicked angels are now.

The question may be asked what is the relation of the inmates of the abode of this wicked – fallen angels and men to those who still dwell on earth? Of the devils we know that they roam through the world for the ruin of souls – to draw people away from God. Until the last day in the providence of God the demons are allowed to tempt and to harm human beings.

The fall of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden was caused by a devil from hell; no doubt many of the last sins committed before the end of the world will still be the outcome of temptations from the abode of Lucifer. The abyss will be closed only at the end of time – the final countdown. Do the damned human beings similarly roam through the world for the ruin of their fellow men and women? No, because the case of the demons is different from that of the damned human beings.

The devils, by virtue of their higher nature as pure spirits, can come into contact with us and with the material world, and they can use this power to tempt and harm us, as what happened to the first man and woman. Such power is indeed absolutely under the control of God's supernatural providence, but it is natural to an angelic being. It is not so with the discarnate souls of human beings. These souls are by nature the life-principle of a human body, and through this body they come in contact with the material world. In their discarnate state they are incomplete beings. It is not natural to them to act on matter in this incomplete state. They can be active within themselves by thought and will, as they can subsist in themselves even without the body, but there is no connatural means of communication between them and the outer world.

On the other hand the blessed in heaven do not rejoice in the pains of the damned as such, yet they do eternally rejoice that they are saved from so great an evil, and the very greatness of the evil avoided adds to the enjoyment of the happiness secured. Thus all the redeemed will be eternally grateful to God for all He has done: First and foremost the Incarnation which reveals God's infinite humility in becoming a human being; then, the torment He underwent at His passion and death on the cross.

To see all these clearly as crystal on the day of final recompense will be a cause of inexpressible joy and gladness and thanksgiving for all who are saved, but a cause of unimaginable pain, torment, chagrin, shame, humiliation, embarrassment, and distress for all the condemned, as St. Paul says: "There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil,... but glory and honour and peace for every one who does good...."

Of course, what St. Paul says is an echo of what the Lord Jesus says that 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.

No one would deny that the teaching of the Church about the eternal damnation of Lucifer and his wicked angels and all wicked human beings baffles the imagination of the human mind, but we have to assert that it is a lesser mystery than the mystery of Bethlehem or Calvary. The human mind can

likely understand more easily that God should punish everlastingly those that die in the state of “unrepentant” mortal sin than that God Himself should die upon the cross to save them from eternal punishment.

The pains of the damned are equal as far as duration is concerned, since they are eternal, but they differ very much in degrees of rigor. God will render to each one according to his works – to what he/she has done in the body. Already the Book of Wisdom had said: “The mighty shall be mightily tormented.” You can imagine, then, the torment awaiting the presidents of countries, senators, congressmen/women, governors, mayors and councilors who promulgated wicked laws such as legalizing abortion.

It is clear that punishment must be proportioned to the gravity of the fault. Sins differ in gravity and in number, hence the sufferings of the wicked in the abode of Satan and his wicked angels must be unequal in their severity, but each one will be filled according to its capacity. It’s like a glass which varies in sizes, but each one will be filled.

We may say that the most guilty are at the deepest depths of this abode. We have to assert that both hell and heaven are places and states, not just a place or just a state but both place and state. It is a place because there are bodies there. For instance, the bodies of the Lord Jesus and of the Blessed Virgin are in heaven. And according to the testimony of the three children of Fatima “the devils could be distinguished by horrible and loathsome forms of animals, frightful and unknown, but transparent like black coals that have turned red-hot.”

On the general resurrection, general judgment, both the souls in heaven and those in hell will receive back their bodies. It is a state because the condition will never cease even a little bit. In our present life, for instance, when we are sick we feel ill at ease but once we recover from the sickness the feeling of being ill at ease is also gone. The same with happiness, too, and joy in this present life they are not in a permanent state. Our happiness and joy can easily be robbed by a sudden death of loved one or some tragedies. But it is not heaven or hell. The condition will last forever without the slightest diminishment, but it will be from glory to glory for the Blessed and pain to pain for the wicked.

Of course, we cannot say with absolute certitude where these places are, or what are its relation is to the whole universe, however, revelation does not allow us to doubt its existence. As to heaven, we have a testimony from Sacred Scripture that the apostles have seen the Lord Jesus ascended into the heavens: “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven.” The three children of Fatima, too, had testified that they saw the Blessed Virgin Mary gliding back to heaven, then, disappeared. From these two

accounts we can deduce that heaven is above. Since heaven is above, then, hell must be below.

That this is so is again supported by divine Revelation. Let us hear the testimony of John: "Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key of the bottomless pit and a great chain. And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and it and sealed it over him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years were ended."

Let us also open the ears of our heart to listen to the account of the three children of Fatima which shows that the abode of Lucifer and his wicked angels and the damned human beings are below. The Blessed Virgin Mary said to them: "Sacrifice yourselves for sinners and say often, especially when you make some sacrifice: O my Jesus, this is for love of You, for the conversion of sinners, and in reparation for the offences committed against the Immaculate Heart of Mary."

At these words, she opened her hands on the three children once again and the light streaming from them penetrated the earth and the children beheld a vision of hell. Lucia cried out in terror, calling upon Our Lady. "We could see a vast sea of fire," she revealed many years later. "Plunged in the flames were demons and lost souls, as if they were red-hot coals, transparent and black bronze – coloured, in human form, which floated about in the conflagration without weight or equilibrium, amid shrieks and groans of sorrow and despair that horrified us and caused us to tremble with fear. The devils could be distinguished by horrible and loathsome forms of animals, frightful and unknown, but transparent like black coals that have turned red-hot."

To be in this bottomless pit even for one day is already beyond the power of our imagination to comprehend; how much more if it will be for eternity. All the sufferings and pains of our present world combine together would not equal even the slightest pain endured by the lowest ranking wicked in the abode of Lucifer and all who sided with him.

"But the meek shall possess the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity." The meek, of course, are the students of the One Great Teacher who says, "Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart." Undoubtedly, Moses was one of the students of this Great Teacher, and had learned from Him, for he wrote about Him. Accordingly, before Moses came into being this Great Teacher already existed, for nothing came to be without Him.

All who learned from Him are blessed, for they shall possess the land, inherit the earth, and obtain the kingdom of heaven where they shall delight themselves in

abundant prosperity because all that belong to Him belong also to them. On the other hand, →

### **Icon # 380 = The Lord laughs at the Wicked**

“The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming.”

Plotting against someone conjures up the idea of harming the other person. For instance, more than forty Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. And gnashing one's teeth at someone evokes an image of a delirium of hatred against that person as in the case of St. Stephen as he recounted the history of his people in the presence of the elders and his fellow Jews how the God of glory appeared to Abraham when he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and told him to depart from his land and his kindred and go into the land which He will show him. And how God gave him the covenant of circumcision, and to his son Isaac then to Jacob and his twelve sons; and how the sons of Jacob, jealous of their brother Joseph, sold him into Egypt but God was with Joseph and rescued him out of all his afflictions and gave him favor and wisdom before Pharaoh – king of Egypt who made him governor over Egypt and over all his household. Then, how Joseph died and another king arose over Egypt who had not known Joseph. Then came the birth of Moses who eventually delivered the Israelites from slavery.

Then came the birth of King David who found favor in the sight of God; then, the birth of Solomon who built the temple. St. Stephen concluded this discourse by saying: “You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it.”

Listen to their response when they heard this speech: “Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they gnashed their teeth against him.” They must be in delirium, for they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together against him and stoned him to death. But, in so doing, they were the only one who were harming themselves because they tasted the foretaste of those who were thrown into the outer darkness where there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

We are told by the Lord to love our enemies, bless those who curse us, and to pray for those who persecute us; so, it is really grievous offense on the part of the wicked in plotting against the righteous and gnashing his teeth at him; for what

criminal deeds has the righteous done that wicked should plot against him and gnash his teeth against him? Is to love one's enemies, blessing those who curse him praying for those who persecute him constitute a crime?

This, of course, is very hard for our mind to understand until we can pierce the mysteries of God and penetrate what becomes of the wicked – how slippery are their paths which cause them to slide to their own destruction, because a person will reap only what he sows, and the measure a person gives will be measured back to him.

To those of us who have experienced watching a boxing either in actual or in television might have noticed, at times, that when a boxer can take in the punches of his opponent there emitted in his face a smile. It is an indication that chances are high that he will not be knocked out in this fight, and that the possibility of winning tilted in his favor. The same is true in the arena of the heart. If a certain vice, say for instance, greed or pride or lust or vanity, is throwing punches on us and we can take it in, that is, we can handle it constructively without yielding to it, chances are high that we will not be knocked down by it, that is, we will not act it out. We can legitimately call this as a "holy" dissent.

For this reason, "the Lord laughs at the wicked [vice] for He sees that his [its] day is coming," that is, He will regard all his attempts as vain. It is not that the Lord is disposed to deride, but that He regards all the punches of the wicked as unavailing, for He sees that the day of the wicked is coming to an end in this present life – the day of his destruction or overthrow. The Lord sees that the wicked cannot be ultimately successful, but that destruction is coming upon him.

In the mind of the Lord, as if He mocked or derided the vain attempt of the wicked, that is, He goes calmly forward in the execution of His own purposes, and He looks upon and considers their efforts as vain, as we do the efforts of others when we mock or deride them. In other words, the Lord will carry forward His own plans in spite of all the attempts of the wicked to thwart them.

This general truth may be expressed in two ways: 1<sup>st</sup>, the Lord sits undisturbed and unmoved in heaven while the wicked rage against Him, and while they consolidate their effort to cast off His authority. 2<sup>nd</sup>, He carries out His own designs in spite of them. This He does by directly accomplishing His schemes without regard to their attempt; and by making their purposes tributary to His own, so making them the instruments in carrying out His own plans as in the case of the chief priests and the elders of the people who threatened the apostles to speak no more to any one about the name of the Lord Jesus. The community gathered together in prayer, saying: "...for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod

and Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place.”

So long as we are still in this present world good and bad people will co-exist side by side. There will be injustice and persecution. The writer of the book of Revelation was told: Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.” For this reason, it is not surprising that: →

### **Icon # 381 = Missing the target**

“The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows, to bring down the poor and the needy, to slay those who walk uprightly; their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken.”

In his second letter to Timothy, St. Paul had already forewarned us what we should expect if we desire to walk uprightly. He says: “Indeed all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceivers and deceived.”

At first, it may sound and it may look that the wicked are really brave and intrepid, but if you examine it closely you will find that the wicked, by their very nature, are really coward and lily-livered. Notice, for instance: what in the world the wicked are up to in drawing their sword and bending their bows to bring down the poor and needy! If they are lionhearted and intrepid, then, why not draw their sword and bend their bows against the rich and powerful and wage war on them in the open field? Is it because the rich and powerful have lots of money and influence, and can easily hire private armies to do battle for them, whereas the poor and the needy could even hardly find food to eat and are so tired at the end of a day’s backbreaking labor that they are depleted of strength even to lift a plowshare?

In other words, the poor and the needy are easy prey to satiate the wickedness of the wicked because they could hardly offer resistance to them. In this case, the wicked are abusing and exploiting the powerlessness of the poor and the needy. However, we should not lost hope for the conversion of the wicked so long as we are still in this present life because God does not desire the death of the wicked but that they may be converted and live.

So, instead of drawing their swords and bending their bows to bring down the poor and the needy, they will beat their swords into ploughshares and their bows and spear into pruning hooks. Thus the poor and the needy together with

the converted wicked will sow the seed of peace and harvest the fruits of eternal life.

In line with the teaching of the Catholic Church we have to assert that the hope of the conversion of the wicked is applicable only to the wicked men and women who are still on earth. It is not applicable to Lucifer and his wicked angels because they had made a definitive and irreversible decision against everything that God stands for. They saw it clearly like a noonday sun without any passion or emotion that may have clouded their intellect, yet still did it very freely.

Whereas, men and women in this present life, no matter how wicked they might be and no matter how slim are their conversion are still recipient of the supplication of the Lord Jesus when He stretched out His arms on the cross: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing." They might have been filled with passions and emotions that blinded their intellect. Their minds may have been clouded with ignorance as what happened to St. Paul when he persecuted the followers of the Lord Jesus.

Although St. Paul would not be branded as a wicked yet out of his ignorance he was imitating the deeds of the wicked by his action in arresting and persecuting with fury those who walk uprightly in following closely the Lord Jesus. Nevertheless, he received mercy, as he himself confessed: "...though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief...."

What happened to St. Paul is open to all men and women of this world until the end of time who has still even a flicker of receptivity to accept God's mercy which is available all year round, 24 hrs a day, seven days a week. Thus St. Paul goes on to say: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life."

It is only when the wicked men and women of this present life will be so adamant that even if the mercy and kindness of the Lord will be rammed down to their throat but still they will vomit them because they deliberately and incredibly opted that the Lord should not rule over them that they will, unfortunately, suffer the consequences of their actions, because it is indicative that they do not love their lives even unto death.

In this case, their swords entered their own hearts and revealed the thoughts and intentions of their minds, that is, they have nothing to do with God and the

things of God. They are incredibly allergic of religion, so much so, that to hear or encounter this word will make them shudder. They even consider it as a child abuse to teach religion to children!

This is a modern day wickedness. They don't attempt anymore to slay the body, for that is very obvious to the world but they are trying to kill the souls of these little ones who are so dear to the Lord.

Since they consider it as a child abuse to teach religion to children, what do they teach them? Of course, they taught them sex education! What in the world are they doing! In doing so, they are the ones who are really abusing children because they are teaching children to sow the seed of immorality. Thus they are guilty of forced child labor.

What will the God of glory, the God of holiness, do to them when He return to judge the living and the dead – according to what they have done in the body? Will the God of holiness say to them, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over much; enter into the joy of your master," or "But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me?"

We leave the answer to this question once we reached the shore of our eternal destiny where all people will be sorted out: the good – edible fish into the bucket of everlasting joy while the bad fish be thrown into the abyss of darkness and misery; the wheat into the granary of inexpressible delight while the weeds into unquenchable anguish; the sheep at the king's right hand of majesty and glory while the goats at the left hand of unutterable pain and sorrow – and their bows shall be broken, that is, there's no more hope of hitting the target: the ultimate goal of union with God forever. For if while their bows were still intact but they still missed the target, how much more when their bows are broken! Truly, this is the lot of those who inexorably refused to consider the Lord as the stronghold of their lives but trust in the abundance of their wealth, intelligence, and pride, who would rather commit spiritual suicide than surrender their lives to God that they may be pardoned and received the gratuitous gift of eternal life and live righteously in the presence of God for all eternity. Accordingly: →

## Icon # 382 = Contentment: Humility

"Better is little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked. For the arms of the wicked shall be broken; but the Lord upholds the righteous."

In other translation it says: "The just man's few possessions are better than the wicked man's wealth; for the power of the wicked shall be broken and the Lord will support the just."

No matter how scanty our possessions would be so long as we are in the Lord that would be more than enough for us rather than be a billionaire but away from the Lord, because when we die we have to give an account of what we have done in the body.

So there is no value no matter how abundant the wealth of a man is if he lives in wickedness and dominated by vices, and would not give heartily to those in need, as the following story demonstrates: "A wealthy man lay on his deathbed. His entire life had been centered around money. As his life ebbed away, he presumed that in the afterlife, money would also be everything. So he gave orders that a purse filled with gold coins be placed inside his casket alongside his body. His last wish was carried out. In the next world it took the bookkeepers a long time to find his name in any of the good books. In fact it took so long that he got very hungry and thirsty just waiting. He looked around and sure enough, he saw an attractive eatery not far away. 'Aha,' he said to himself, 'it's just like I thought. It's a good thing that I brought some money along with me.' His mouth was already watering as he approached the restaurant. But before he sits down to eat, he was told that the money he had brought along had no value now. In fact, only money that was of any value now was the money he had given away on earth. The rich man dropped his head in deep thought, but could not remember having given any money away. So now he had none. As an Englishman of another stripe let his tombstone explains: 'What I spent I had. What I kept I lost. What I gave I have'" (partly after Leo Tolstoy).

We are instructed by Sacred Scripture that even if our riches increase we should not set our heart on it. Of course, it is for our own good why we should not set our heart on riches, because it can easily choke the word of God that is sown in our heart. Riches can smoothly confuse wants from needs. What we really want may guilely becomes a need. No doubt, we all need food but we don't sanely say, "I need ice cream." To be sure, we want ice cream not need it, because we can survive without it.

A certain degree of physical harmony and comfort is necessary, but above a certain level it becomes a hindrance instead of help. Therefore the ideal of creating an unlimited number of wants and satisfying them seems to be a

delusion and a snare. We fall from the pursuit of the ideal of plainliving the moment we want to multiply our daily wants. Our happiness really lies in contentment no matter how little are our resources. Contentment is not the fulfillment of what we want, but the opening of our inner eyes of how much we already have.

Most people in the world today are searching of some kind of contentment. Some seek it through purchasing a new house or a fancy car or elegant dress, or as many other items as their hearts desire. Other seeks to find contentment by sacrificing possessions and living a simple life, free from temporal things. Some equate contentment with happiness, others with simply being resigned to the fact that we won't ever get everything we desire. But the truth is that real contentment can only be found in, through and with Christ Jesus the Lord.

Here's a testimony of him who lives no longer himself but Christ lives in him – thus was contented in every way: "I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me."

The astounding feature of this testimony is that, we are told, St. Paul gave this attestation while in prison. Hence, he knew that whether he was in prison or in a palace, in any and all circumstances, he could be content because the Lord Jesus was with him. St. Paul found his identity in Christ. He unequivocally knew that the source of his satisfaction, joy, hope, strength, and riches was found in the Lord Jesus.

With utter confidence, St. Paul could say that satisfaction and contentment are found in Christ alone, a lesson he learned through many trials and tribulations. St. Paul knew that through Christ he could do all things...even be content in a seeming hopeless conditions. We have this same promise today that the same God who empowered St. Paul to be content in prison is at work in our lives today, for He says: "My Father is working still, and I am working." Of course, His work within the recesses of our hearts is for our sanctification and purification that we may learn to find that the purest and sweetest satisfaction of our heart lies hidden in Him, for where our treasure is there will our heart be also.

If we have God, what more can we ask for!?! Again, St. Paul had testified to the verity of this truth when he says: "There is great gain in godliness with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world; but if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and hurtful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For

the love of money is the root of all evils; it is through this craving that some have wondered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs."

Notice the multiplex tragedies of the wicked men and women who insist in their wickedness even at the hour of death: Not only their bows but their arms too shall be broken or has been broken. How can they do a hand to hand combat now that their arms are also broken?

This, of course, is an unfortunate condition because they are deprived of God's blessings. Although Jacob's thigh was put out of joint as he wrestled with God's angel, who appeared as a man, he prevailed for his hands were not broken. The angel wanted to go, but Jacob said to him: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." In the end Jacob received the blessings. The angel said to him: "you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."

Thus no matter how sinful we are so long as we can still lift up our hands in prayer to God asking Him for His pardon and strength we will surely receive His forgiveness and love. We, too, will prevail over God's heart, for He is more willing to bless us even before we approach Him. We may fall from time to time, but we will not sink into despair for the Lord will uphold us by His hands, not that of an angel but by the Lord Himself.

It is part of the Lord's method of teaching to allow us to stumble and fall so that having experience what life is without His support we might return to Him with greater commitment than ever. When the Lord seems to withdraw from us, it is inevitable that we will fall. It is right to say that this removal of the divine support confronts us with our overwhelming frailty, and this happens from time to time as we go along on our spiritual journey so that we will not become proud, and it will make us also realize that apart from Him we can do nothing. And yet this fall is for our profit if they make us more careful and humble.

In his second sermon on Psalm 90, our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux has this to say: "it is a necessity for men to fall occasionally, so long as they live here below; but while some are bruised by their fall, others are not, for the Lord putteth His hand under them. Surely our sins 'work together unto good' for us when they render us more circumspect and humble. Is not he who falls upon humility supported in his fall by the hand of the Lord?"

If there's still a glimmer of humility left in our heart, that would be an incentive to make us righteous. We will be truly righteous if we will never cease to ask for forgiveness, but how can we ask for forgiveness if we are devoid of humility? Our sins and failures can humiliate us, but they do not make us righteous if we are depleted of humility. Thus it is humility itself and not humiliation that makes us righteous. Surely, there are many who are humiliated but does not become

humble. There are some who meet humiliation with rancor, but some with patience, and some with cheerfulness. The first kind are culpable, the second are innocent, the third are righteous.

If the righteous will persevere in doing so, of course by the support of the Lord, eventually they will be blameless and be kept sound at the coming of the Lord Jesus. When we say, "blameless," we are not implying "sinless," for if we say that we have no sin we will be convicted as a liar and the truth is not in us. Among men only the Lord Jesus is without sin, and among women only the Blessed Virgin Mary is without sin.

Only when we arrived into our eternal home, where not an atom of sin could be found, that we, too, will be sinless. What we mean by blameless is that the Lord will not impute to us our sin as it was of old how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath but were guiltless. Thus is written: "Happy the man whose offense is forgiven, whose sin is remitted. O happy the man to whom the Lord imputes no guilt, in whose spirit is no guile." So, as long as the Lord will sustain us with His hands and subsidize us with His grace it is likely that we will be considered blameless when He comes again in glory. Without any shadow of alteration we can clearly say: →

### **Icon # 383 = Good Name: Heritage**

"The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will abide for ever; they are not put to shame in evil times, in the days of famine they have abundance."

In His sermon on the Mount, the Lord tells us not to lay up for ourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but to lay up for ourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where our treasure is, there will our heart be also.

If our heart is in heaven, there are thoughts and desires will be also. Even though our daily duties and responsibilities may distract our attention or pull us away from steadily gazing at the Lord, but our thoughts and desires will always gravitate toward the things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father.

It is not farfetched to say that when the Lord counsels us to lay up treasures in heaven what He is trying to convey is that a good name or a virtuous life is to be chosen rather than material riches, because it is the only treasure we can bring with us when we die. This is the only treasure where no slanderous tongue could

devour, nor the rust of worldly desires consume nor the thieves of infidelity, dishonesty, and insincerity could break in and steal, for in the memory of virtue is immortality because it is known both by God and men.

Here's another story which will help relay the idea we want to convey: "There were two men, one rich and the other poor. Eventually both of them died. The Rich man was accompanied by an angel to his place. As they were walking the man saw a very beautiful, gorgeous, splendid mansion. Thinking that he was rich on earth, he presumed that the beautiful mansion was prepared for him. But he was very disappointed when they passed by it. And he began to wonder, especially when he caught sight of the poor man in the house. He thought that the poor man might just be doing janitorial job. Then, they came to a tiny hut without even a running water. The angel told that this is his place for all eternity. So he starts complaining and tries to convince the angel that he deserves the mansion than the poor man. The angel told him that while the poor man was still on earth he keeps sending materials, which are prayers and sacrifices, for his mansion. What we built is out of the materials that he sent. On the other hand, while you were still on earth you seldom send anything. Hence we can only build out of what you sent."

Therefore, better is a little with fear of the Lord than great treasure which help facilitates our eternal misery. Godliness has to be preferred more than riches, for in its own amazing way there is great gain in godliness with contentment because we brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world except the residue of what we have done in the body. Thus having the eyes of heart enlightened by faith and by a life of godliness we shall be granted the knowledge and wisdom to know what is the hope to which God has called us and what are the "true and unfading" riches of His glorious inheritance in the saints who are now enjoying to the brim the sweetness of their heritage, that is, God Himself because what belongs to God belongs also to them, for they will be perfectly united with God as the Lord Jesus says: "In the day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you."

We don't have to be a super theonaut to know that what belongs to Christ belongs also to us, because we are members of His Body, the Church – His bride. So what belongs to the husband belongs also to the wife, for they are no longer two but one because whoever is united to the Lord become one spirit with Him. Since God Himself is our heritage, it is just common sense that it will abide for ever; and it will not diminish, even a penny, in abundance because He owns everything both seen and unseen – nothing that exist came to be without Him.

Consequently, we "are not put to shame in evil times, in the days of famine they have abundance," because we are like tree planted beside a running stream. We will not be depleted of virtues when trials, such as serious illness, or calamities

or tragedies come to us like a famine, because the roots of prayer has touched or has been immersed in the running stream of grace which sustains our faith, our hope, and our love, as the Lord Jesus Himself says: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" On the other hand, →

### **Icon # 384 = Vanish**

"But the wicked perish; the enemies of the Lord are like the glory of the pastures, they vanish – like smoke they vanish away."

When we say, "But the wicked perish," we do not mean the termination of existence because by its essence the soul is immortal, but it does mean the absolute cessation of the supernatural life of grace which God intended for the soul, without which the human person has utterly failed the purpose of his existence.

We are created for the purpose of participation in the glory of God; to know Him, to serve Him, and to love Him in this present life and be wholly perfected in the next. However, if by assiduous and deliberate doing of sinful deeds till our last breath and would inflexibly refuse the offer of forgiveness by God, by this very fact it would be considered as a clear indication that we are the one vanishing ourselves from the company of God and all the angels and saints on earth as in heaven.

Adding misery to our tragedy, while we are still running away from the Lord we will hear the awesome words of the Lord: "As for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me." This is a heartrending sentence from Him who is meek and humble of heart, and would not even cry or lift up His voice or make it heard in the street, who would not break a bruised reed nor quench a dimly burning wick. Who could endure it?

The wicked and all the enemies of the Lord would rather wish, if they could, to be forever deaf than to hear those words. It is a verdict. We are told by Sacred Scripture that the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son, that is, His Incarnate Word – no other than the Lord Jesus, because He is the Son of man. At one point in His life on earth the Lord Jesus says that if anyone hears His words and does not keep them, He would not judge that person because, He said, He did not come to judge the world but to save the world. However, He also said that if anyone rejects Him and does not keep His sayings that person has a judge, that is, the very words that the Lord has spoken will be the judge of that person on the last day. In other words, each human person will be judged

according to his/her conformity or non-conformity with the Word of God, which is very precise because it is living and active, sharper than any two edged sword and which pierced 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 His eyes with whom we have to give an account of all our thoughts, words, and deeds, that is, of our whole being.

We are constantly reminded by Sacred Scripture that God does not desire nor have pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Also, "if he turns from his sin and does what is lawful and right, if the wicked restores the pledge, gives back what he has taken by robbery, 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."

Of course, this is very consoling for the wicked who are still in this present life, because it offers the bright hope of salvation. Implicitly, it promises life with God forever. They, too, together with the wisest thief in the history of humanity who, in unprecedented feat, had robbed the treasury of heaven, will happily hear the voice of the Lord: Today, you will be with me paradise." What more can they ask for?!

That this is so, we have only to follow the evidence wherever it leads, "For, if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through Our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation."

Truly, it is only when the wicked will persist in being the enemies of the Lord by not desisting in their wickedness till their last breath, which is an obvious evidence that they do not love their lives even unto death, that they become "like the glory of the pastures, they vanish – like smoke they vanish away."

It is not implausible to say that, even to those who think that they are not wicked, to presume on the mercy of God by adding sin unto sin...is extremely dangerous. Without any shadow of a doubt, God is infinite mercy, but it is also equally true, without a slightest sagging, that God is also infinite justice, that even an idle word will give account on the Day of Judgment.

Take for example if a person, even though he is a priest, if he is in a state of mortal sin, yet still offer Mass without first receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation, is he not putting himself in an ultra hazardous position? Even if we are the dullest moral theologian, we are certainly right if we answer yes to this question. Our life on earth is so fragile that we don't have the tiniest inkling that

once we get out from our room or our house or workplace we might die. It would be unimaginable disaster if we die with mortal sin in our soul; it would have been better for us if we had not been born.

In this complex dangerous pilgrimage of life God has ordained, that no one shall know with absolute certainty whether a person is worthy of His love or hate, for if that person uses his reason rightly, this uncertainty will urge him to seek with all his/her powers the friendship of that same Lord. Otherwise, our life on earth will be "like the glory of the pastures, they vanish – like smoke they vanish away," or will be like the wild flowers which today blossom and then within a few days wither away. Moreover, →

### **Icon # 385 = Looks like Someone**

"The wicked borrows, and cannot pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives; for those blessed by the Lord shall possess the land, but those cursed by him shall be cut off."

It is reasonable to say that our life is not our own. It is being lent to us, that is, we borrow it from Our Creator. Thus we are expected to return it back to Him who is the Author of our life. We don't have to be a doctor of theology, or a nurse of theology, or a nursing aid of theology, or a handmaid of theology, or a midwife of theology, in order to know that we are made in the image and likeness of God.

Therefore, God's deepest desire is to see in us His own image and likeness, so that what He says of His only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus, "Thou art my beloved Son," He will also say of us: "Thou art my beloved son, Thou art my beloved daughter. In you I am well pleased." This is a combination of common sense and basic theology. Take for example a father or a mother. They are charmingly happy and pleased to see their son or daughter looks like him or her. Unless the father and the mother are so ugly that to see their son or daughter looks like them is an intolerable torment, because their son or daughter serves as a mirror to remind them of their repulsiveness.

But God is infinite beauty, unity, truth, and goodness that to see him makes one infinitely happy without the wispiest abatement. As the saying goes, "Like father like son," or "like mother like daughter." Accordingly, it is not hard to imagine how despondent a father would be if his son doesn't look like him but looks like someone else's.

We have asserted many times that it is sin that disfigured the beauty of our soul. So, it is just natural for Our Lord Jesus to be sad upon seeing His people – we may

call them His sons and daughters because one of His titles is "Father of the world to come," that they no longer look like Him, but of someone else's. Even if we don't mention the name of this "someone"...he cannot be hidden because he is so popular in this present world.

However, for the sake of those who might not be familiar with this "someone"...let us give some indications because the Lord Himself had identified him. Let us listen to this lively exchange between the Lord Jesus and those who claimed that Abraham was their father. The Lord challenged them and told them humbly and truthfully: "'If you were Abraham's children, you would do what Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth which I heard from God; this is not what Abraham did. You do what your father did.' They said to Him, 'we were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.' Jesus said to them, 'If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God; I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and 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.'"

This is just one of the many evidences which identified who this "someone"...is. We have to add as many as we can, so that we will have cloud of witnesses to bear testimony who are the children of God and who are the children of this "someone"...Here's another one: "He who commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning."

Consequently, "By this it may be seen who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: Whoever does not do right is not of God, nor he who does not love his brother," because "Any one who hates his brother" or sister too, "is a murderer."

Therefore, "If any one says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." All of the above, of course, are testimonies from Sacred Scripture. Thus they are divine testimonies. We will also recourse to personal revelation or private revelation to see how the Lord Jesus – the Father of the world to come, is sad on account of His wayward sons and daughters that look like more of the "someone"... than Himself.

In the apparition at Fatima in 1917, when Lucia told Francisco that the Lord Jesus was coming in October with the Blessed Virgin, the little boy joyfully exclaimed: "Oh, how wonderful! We have only seen Him twice and I love Him so much!...But

look, how sad He still is. I am so sorry to see Him sad." Of course, this is very mysterious, because how can He who is infinitely happy can also be sad?! However, although this is really very mysterious, at least, for us, it is not completely hidden from us.

We can understand a little of it, but not wholly, in the same way as we know that the mercy of God is infinite, but His justice is also infinite. It is true to say that the Lord Jesus is sad on our account, much in the same way as a father is sad when his son or daughter looks like "someone else's" than himself. It's just plain common sense. But it is also very mysterious, because not even the rebellion of Lucifer and his wicked angels and all the horrible and diabolic sins of humanity, since time immemorial, can tarnish the happiness of the Lord.

In other words, mystery is a combination of both natural and supernatural, comprehensible and incomprehensible, known and unknown. No wonder, then, that the Lord Jesus used to teach in parables drawn from day to day life which is very understandable to people in order to teach heavenly realities which are beyond our natural understanding.

Take this other parable of the Lord to identify this "someone":..."The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.'" When the disciples asked for an explanation, the Lord answered them, "He who sows the good seed is the Son of man; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil...."

The image of sowing is simply an act of planting. For example, a man is planting his "seed" in the womb of a woman by having sexual intercourse with her. If this sexual union is done within the context of marriage, with love and responsibility, we can say that the seed that is being sown is a good seed; but if it is done outside of marriage, in "pure lust," devoid of love and responsibility, we can sadly say that it is tantamount to sowing weed. When a person grows and is devoid of virtues, especially the three theological virtues, namely, Faith, Hope, and Love, so how can she/he pay back to the Lord!?

However, if we find ourselves more of a weed than a wheat, we should not lose hope because the Lord Jesus has power to transform a weed into a wheat just as He changed water into wine, but we need someone to intercede on our behalf. Even if I don't mention the name of this "someone" who will intercede

on our behalf, you certainly have already a presentiment who I am referring to; but for the sake of those who are not familiar with this “someone” I have to mention her because, if I say, I will not mention her or speak any more of her, “there is in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones, and I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot.”

So, with St. Bernard of Clairvaux, a good and faithful servant of this “someone,” we will say: “When the immensity of your sins weighs you down, and you are bewildered by the loathsomeness of your conscience, when the terrifying thought of judgment appalls you, then, you sink in the gulf of sadness and despair, think of Mary, call out to Mary. Keep her in your heart, keep her in your lips; follow the example of her life and you will obtain the favor of her prayers. Asking her help you will never despair, following her you will never go astray, keeping her in your thoughts you will never wander away. With your hands in hers you will not stumble, with her protecting you – you will not be afraid, with her leading you – you will not get tired. Her kindness will see you through to the end and you will know by your own experience how true it is that the virgin’s name was Mary.”

We will boldly say that she will not blink her eyes, or have a second thought, to intercede on our behalf. Never was it known that anyone who fled to her protection, implored her help, or sought her intercession was left unaided. So, when we are running out of virtues, or any good deeds to the extent that we could no longer pay back to God for the “life” that He let us borrow, then, we have our last recourse, that is, to beg the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is more than willing to help us, for she, too, does not desire the death of the wicked but that the wicked, who are still in this present life, may be converted and live – thus be able to pay back to the Lord, even by simply giving a cup of cold water in His name.

If they persevere to the end, of course by God’s grace, they too together with the righteous will be generous and gives, especially to those in need; for the Lord who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will certainly supply and multiply their resources and increase the harvest of their righteousness, “for those blessed by the Lord shall possess the land,” and “shall inherit the earth,” “but those cursed by him shall be cut off.”

Who are those cursed by Him that shall be cut off? Even though it is not ours to judge, we certainly will not be totally deprived of some hints of who are “those cursed by him.” Let us consider again what the psalmist says: “The wicked borrows, and cannot pay back....” The Lord Jesus Himself told a parable of a certain king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. When he began reckoning, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents; and as he could not pay, his Lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and

all that he had, and payment to be made. So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Lord, have patience with me, and I will pay you everything. And out of pity for him the Lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. But that same servant, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii; and seizing him by the throat he said, 'Pay what you owe.' So his fellow servant fell down and besought him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' He refused and went and put him in prison till he should pay the debt. When his fellow servant saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place. Then his lord summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. In conclusion of this parable the Lord says: "So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

One of the most poignant points in this parable is the enormous contrast between the two debts. The first servant owed his master 10,000 talents. One talent was more than 15 years wages of a laborer. In the "Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament," it is stated that the total equivalent of this amount is 60,000,000 (60 million) denarii. Whereas the fellow servant owed him only 100 denarii. One denarius was a day's wage for a laborer. So the contrast between the debts is staggering. It boggles our mind.

The whole point of this parable is that nothing that people can do to us can in any way compare with what we have done to God; and if God, out of His generosity, has forgiven us our offenses to Him, we ought also to forgive those who had offended us. Nothing that we have to forgive can even faintly or remotely compare with that which we have been forgiven. We have been forgiven a debt which is beyond all paying, for the sin of men and women brought about the death of the Son of God – Jesus Christ the Lord.

If that is so, therefore, we must forgive others as God has forgiven us, or else we can hope to find no mercy, because justice is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy, yet mercy triumphs over judgment. Yet, we all realize how difficult and even how risky it is to offer forgiveness. We may be taken advantage of again by new offenses from the other person, or our open hands of reconciliation may be refused; or we may say honestly to ourselves: how can I forgive if I am unable to forget the sting and pain of the wounds once inflicted upon me?

Despite these valid difficulties, the Scripture leave us no alternative than to forgive our neighbor, the member of one's own family or community. Sirach writes for us: "Should a person nourish anger against another and expected

healing from the Lord? Should a person refuse mercy to another yet seek pardon for their own sin?"

The answer in each case is obvious. Yet because of the inherent embarrassment, perplexity, and pain, Sirach repeats himself – this time in a clear statement: The Lord heals us only when we stop nourishing anger against another. The Lord pardons the sin only of those who are merciful toward another.

"The heaviest chains human beings could wear," Blessed Pope John Paul II told the Poles, were "the fetters of hatred...." He goes on to say, "Forgiveness is love's might, forgiveness is not weakness. To forgive does not mean to resign from truth and justice." Those who cannot and will not forgive others destroy the bridge over which they themselves must pass. Thus chances of paying back are also destroyed, for how can one go to the Lord when the bridge of forgiveness is demolished?!

Unfortunately, it is synonymous to being cut off from the land of the Blessed who, like them while still on earth, were willing to give and receive forgiveness – hence were able to pay back to the Lord what has been lent to them, that is, their "life." They have access to the Lord, for the bridge between them and Him had not been destroyed. It is true to say that the flicker of prayer was still burning in their hearts. It serves as a lamp to their feet and a light to their path as they trudge toward this bridge even though, at times, they were hobbling; yet this very effort to traverse the bridge is highly acceptable to the Lord. God took the initiative and they responded. Therefore, it is right to say: →

### **Icon # 386 = The Way of Righteousness**

"The steps of a man are from the Lord, and he establishes him in whose way he delights; though he falls, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord is the stay of his hand."

Since forgiveness is an icon of the divine, as the saying goes: "to err is human, but to forgive is divine," so every time we give forgiveness the image and likeness of God in us shines forth. Forgiveness is also a "way" which God delights, because He Himself has trodden down upon it. Innumerable times He forgave the sins of His people. It reached its highest crescendo on the cross when the Most Beloved Son of God – the Lord Jesus Christ, cried out at the top of His lung: "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."

Whether we like it or not we have to accept the fact that we had fallen and still will fall, from time to time, either in our speech, thoughts, and actions, for if we

say we have no sin we will surely be convicted as a liar and the truth is not in us, but if we acknowledge our sins we shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord Himself is ready to forgive and will hold us by His hand, so that we will not sink into despair.

If we recognize the sin within us and admit it, then we open ourselves to the truth and light of God, that is, to the Lord Jesus Christ who is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” and “the Light of the world,” in such a way that we may no longer walk in the darkness of sin and vices, of infidelity and insincerity, but in the light of a virtuous life, of honesty and loyalty. For once we were darkness, but now we are light in the Lord. Thus we have to walk as children of light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good, right, and true.

If we are truly children of light, surely then, our steps are from the Lord and not from the world. Undoubtedly, we need prayer and devotion to be able to persevere in the way of the Lord. They will help us to lay aside every weight of superfluous desires and unhealthy habits which cling so closely to us. Without prayer and devotion our steps will no longer be from the Lord but from the world.

Take for example the stag who are known to be agile animals. When they have grown too fat they hide themselves because they know that they are out of condition and would not run very fast if pursued; so if we burden our hearts with desires for useless and superfluous things we cannot run easily and freely in the ways of God, for they weakened our stamina to seek the things of God, the things that are above where the Lord Jesus is now.

It is right to say that there are many ways or practices that pleased the Lord – in which He is delighted. One of these, of course, is prayer; the other is reading, especially the Scripture and other good books; the other is psalmody, etc. This is why the contemplative life is really beautiful for we have ample time to do these with lesser distraction. When we have assimilated the values of these ways/practices, then, the giving and taking of forgiveness will be less difficult.

Of course, if we are lay people or belong to an active Order, we can also find many ways that delight the Lord, in which He is pleased; for instance, receiving the Sacrament of the Eucharist daily if it is in our power to do so; receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation frequently; cultivate also a filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Of course, common to both of us is the practice of virtues, such as: kindness, gentleness, patience, sincerity, honesty, fidelity, etc. If these things are ours and abound we will “not be cast headlong” even though we may fall, from time to time, in our words, thoughts and deeds.

One of our heavenly friends, St. Bede The Venerable, emphatically affirmed this when he said that “mankind cannot live a completely sinless existence here on earth; sins and faults, even serious ones, will be committed, but the effect of these failures can be mitigated by sincere confession, penance, and acts of charity and forgiveness towards others. The beginning of our righteousness is the confession of our sins.”

We are told by the book of Proverbs that “when a man’s ways please the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.” This is so, because we will learn wisdom and prudence to deal with other people. Take for example the following story: A man living in a small town had a nice backyard garden. But his next-door neighbor kept a flock of chickens who easily found their way through the hole in the fence and helped themselves to his vegetables. The man wondered how he could solve this problem and keep peace in the neighborhood. Then he hit a practical idea. He went to the local grocery store and bought some eggs. That evening he took a couple of eggs over to his neighbor and said, “Your chickens are laying eggs in my garden, but I don’t want to take what does not belong to me. So, you better take the eggs back.” The next day the owner of the chickens carefully fixed up all the holes in the fence, and there never was a quarrel between them (Friedrich Dietz).

Of course, this is one way of avoiding quarrel. Undoubtedly, it was a good idea. Since everything that is good, right, and true can be considered as fruits of light, therefore, the man’s idea of how to work out this problem can be traced to an inspiration from the Lord, because the Lord delights in peace, for He is the prince of peace.

The Lord knows the way of the righteous, because the steps of the righteous man are from the Lord and he runs in the way of the Lord’s commandments with freedom of heart. On His part, the Lord stores up sound wisdom for the upright, guarding the paths of righteousness and preserving the way of him whom he delights, for the way of the righteous is uprightness – it shall be called the “Holy Way.”

However, we have to reiterate that this does not “exempt” the righteous, while still in this present life, to stumble and fall, but he will not be deprived of grace to rise again, as it is written: “a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again....” In one occasion St. Peter asked the Lord how often he has to forgive a brother who sinned against him – whether it would be seven times. The Lord boldly told him not only seven times, but seventy times seven.

This certainly reflects God’s unfathomable willingness to forgive. Thus so long as there’s still a flicker of repentance in one’s heart we can be assured that God is

ready to forgive. All the love of loving parents combine together is just a glimmer of God's love for us. Therefore, no matter how innumerable our sins are so long as we cry out for mercy God will uplift us and press us to His breast. Surely, we will receive the kiss of forgiveness to give consolation to our soul. Even a child of a not too loving parents receives a kiss, though perhaps once in a blue moon, to comfort him when he falls, how much more of God who is Love itself!

Eventhough righteous people had experienced many sufferings, trials, and tribulations in this present life they never really were forsaken by God. God was even more closer to them than they could ever imagine. This is very obvious in the case of Job. Once the inner eyes of our heart are opened we, too, can say with the Psalmist: →

### **Icon # 387 = Never Forsaken**

"I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging bread. He is ever giving liberally and lending, and his children become a blessing."

Upon hearing these words of the Psalmist: "I have been young, and now am old; yet, I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging bread," some people might object saying: What about Christ who cried on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?," or the religious Orders at the early stage of their foundation, for instance, the poor Clare's sisters, begging for bread?

In response to the first objection let us listen to the testimony of Christ Himself: "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing of my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him."

Of course, they will retort by saying that that was before His crucifixion, but when He was crucified He was forsaken by God. In answer to this retort, we will say to them: Is Christ then divided? Did He not say that "greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends....No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father."

So, how can He take it again if He was forsaken by God? Since Christ Jesus is God, the Word of God made flesh – one being with the Father, does He, then, forsake Himself if God has forsaken Him? To be forsaken by God is tantamount to be in hell where Lucifer and the wicked angels and damned souls are. They

could no longer retrieve the dignity and honor that were once bestowed on them.

Christ Himself says: "And he who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him." Even if our knowledge of theology and Christology is minimal, yet it is still very obvious that Christ's death on the cross is highly pleasing to the Father, for it is the supreme, par excellent, sacrifice of the Son of God – the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, for the salvation of the human race, as it is written: "sacrifices and offerings thou hast not desired, but a body hast thou prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings thou hast taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God,' as it is written in the roll of the book."

When we scroll over the lives of the martyrs who were badly punished and tortured by their executioners, we will also discover that they were not forsaken by God although in the eyes of the foolish and the unbelievers they were thought to be abandoned by God for allowing them to suffer such incomprehensible torment, but they are now enjoying the vision of God and their hearts are filled with the unfathomable sweetness of the Lord, with joy which no one can ever take away from them.

Together will all the other saints in heaven and with those who are still on earth, all the martyrs: either by white or red martyrdom, gave their lives and all that they have and all that they are, first and foremost, to God and to their fellow human beings, liberally. For this reason they become a blessing to the whole world, because through their prayers and intercessions many people around the world who were sick with terminal illness and who were pronounced incurable by their doctors were completely cured.

They are the ones who laid up treasures in heaven where no rust consumes nor moth devours nor thieves break in and steal. They sowed bountifully, so they also reaped bountifully. We, too, are called to follow their example, to open our hearts to the action of the Holy Spirit in our lives, to give the Lord a chance to work in us and with us, for God 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, because he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply our resources and increase the harvest of our righteousness. If these things are ours and abound, they will sustain our strength and stamina to: →

## Icon # 388 = Gossip

“Depart from evil, and do good; so shall you abide for ever. For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his saints. The righteous shall be preserved for ever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off. The righteous shall possess the land, and dwell upon it for ever.”

In another occasion the Psalmist posed this question: “Who is he who longs for life and many days, to enjoy his prosperity?” Then he gave the answer: “Then keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit. Turn aside from evil and do good; seek and strive after peace.”

It really takes a sterling character to be able to keep one's tongue from evil and one's lips from speaking deceit, because it is very easy to be carried away in gossips, and even slander, without realizing it. Undoubtedly, it begins first in the mind before it is being actuated in words. If we are perceptive enough we will notice that there are two kinds of gossips: one is interior and the other one is exterior.

Interior gossip is when the soul is engaged in inner dialogue: talking about other people, criticizing them interiorly, complaining about them. This kind of gossip is known only by the soul, the spirits: both the angels and demons, and God, but also by the persons involved. If we acquired the habit of not entertaining the interior gossip, we will likely be able to control the itch in engaging in exterior gossip. You might have many ways how to do it, but here is one way to do it which is quite effective even if we have only little knowledge of how the psyche works, that is, to change the topic.

The following simple story will help us see the effectiveness of this modus operandi: There was a fine old priest named Father Magnus. He never spoke a word against a single soul. One day, he went to a nearby village to visit a sick priest, and as he left the house on his way home, a woman of the village came down the steps of the house next door. He knew her as one of the village gossips, and when she asked if she might walk along with him, he agreed. After a bit the woman broke out, “Oh, Father, I cannot tell what a wicked woman – you know her – my neighbor is.” “Is that really true? Then let us hurry to say the Rosary for her, that she might turn from the error of her ways. In the name of the Father....”...and so on through the five decades, the woman busy answering the Aves. This carried them about one-third of the way home, when the woman again took up her complaint. “Oh, dear Father, how can I ever have patience with that woman next door to me?” “It is hard to be patient,” said Father Magnus. “Let us say the rosary for you. In the name of the Father....” Again they finished five decades as they walked. But when the last Hail Mary had been said, she felt that her chance had come, and she said. “Really, Father, if you

could see the way that woman makes her husband suffer." "Poor man," said Fr. Magnus. "We should say the rosary for him." By the time this was finished, they had reached Father Magnus' home and the beaten gossip made up her mind that it would be some time before she joined him in another walk (Bruno Hagspiel).

In the story above we can see that the woman was not able to infiltrate her tittle-tattle, for Fr. Magnus knows the woman and was aware that she was just gossiping. Therefore, there's a need for discernment because we also know that we can share our thoughts and feelings to those who are responsible for our welfare: to religious superiors if we are religious, or to the "Visitors" who are conducting a "Regular Visitation" for the good of the community.

It is not just a matter of gossiping about other people although the names of other people might be mentioned. We can also share our thoughts and feelings to a trusted friend who knows us quite well. Of course, all of the above is done not merely because our tongue is itchy if we could not speak against other people but because the common good is at stake. The Visitors, or our friend, has also the duty to discern what we are confiding to them. They, too, can change the topic if they will notice that we are just grumbling and prattling.

Since it needs discernment to be able to recognize the difference between gossiping and confiding one's thoughts or feelings, so there's also a need to cultivate one's prayer life. Prayer and contemplation are so integral to a serious living out of the Christian life because thought determines action. If we send our thoughts down one road, our actions will follow our thoughts. Thought determines actions, and so the actions of our life are determined by our most dominant thoughts. For this reason, if we train our thoughts to change the topic once we are aware that we are engaging in inner dialogue or monologue against other people, we will likely find it hard to engage in exterior gossip.

Even people who are not highly perceptive can notice that evil deeds originate from evil thoughts. Take for instance adultery, dishonesty, and infidelity. Before a person commits any of this act, it has already been in the mind. Therefore, we have to do the best we can to depart from evil thoughts that we may be able to depart from evil deeds. One of the best ways to do this is the practice of the presence of God – keeping the memory of the Lord Jesus or the Blessed Virgin Mary before the eyes of our mind. In this way we can stave off the evil thoughts, or we can also call them negative or unwholesome thoughts, that come to our mind.

Just as we have to keep guard our ways that we may not sin with our tongue, so we have to keep guard our thoughts that we may not sin with our deeds. And who are the best guards to do this than the Lord Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary themselves!

Memory of any saint or our guardian angel is also a tremendous help in departing from evil thoughts, words, and deeds. Thus God provides us with all the help we need to be able to disentangle ourselves from evil and be able to do good that we may abide with Him for all eternity. "For the Lord loves justice" and He will never forsake us, for He always remain faithful to the extent that even if a woman forsake the child in her womb the Lord will not forsake us.

If we depart from evil and do what is good the chances are high that the Lord might deign to consider us righteous in His sight, thus shall be preserved for ever – beginning in this present life and be extended for all eternity in the life to come. This certainly is not our own doing, but owing to God's grace, because the Lord Jesus is interceding for us, as He Himself said: "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world."

If we are not of the world as the Lord is not of the world, then it is pretty obvious that our citizenship is in heaven – the homeland of the righteous men and women and of the angels. There we will dwell for ever. The joys of this homeland no one can tell, nor even conceive or understand, while we are yet clothed in the mortal flesh. For they are greater and more wondrous than they are imagined or conceived to be, as it is written: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God had prepared for those who love him."

For this eternal homeland is greater than all report, better than all praise of it, more manifold than all knowledge, more perfect than every conceivable glory. It is so full of pleasant light, and peace, and charity, and wisdom, and glory, and honesty, and sweetness, and loving kindness, and every unspeakable and unutterable good, that it can neither be described nor envisioned by the mind.

In this eternal homeland there shall be life without death, truth without falsehood, and happiness without shadow of unrest or change, for He who is the Truth, the Way, and the Life, and the Prince of Peace is its King and Ruler – Jesus Christ Our Lord, who lives and reigns forever and ever. Through union with His Spirit and participation in His Life, →

### **Icon # 389 = Wisdom**

"The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. The law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip."

Since the mouth of the righteous refrain from speaking deceit and does not indulge in gossiping nor slandering other people, and since the righteous is

assumed to be prayerful and in frequent contact with Sacred Scriptures and other good literatures, it follows that words of wisdom are not far from his mouth, as the Lord says: "For out of the abundance of his heart the mouth speaks." Then He added: "The good man out of his good treasure brings forth good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure brings forth evil."

Certainly, wisdom indeed has many brilliant and luminous facets. For instance, it is being portrayed as "good sense" linked with obedience to the law of God. We can see its distant light and hear the echo of its words even from of old, as Moses said to God's people: "Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, as the Lord my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the people, who when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'"

Of course, the apex and the ultimate source of wisdom is the cross of the Lord Jesus which sounds foolishness to the world, as one of our heavenly friends, no other than St. Paul, says: "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 the 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."

Wise, therefore, are those who rivet their eyes to the cross of Christ and anchor their heart to the crucified Lord, for they are drinking from the inexhaustible source of eternal wisdom and nourishing from the salubrious pabulum of justice because on the cross the God-Man, Christ Jesus the Lord, sits as on a throne, as infinitely wise Judge executing justly perfect judgment.

On the cross is laid open both the gentle and tough love of God: gentle to those who are to inherit eternal life and tough to those who are perishing – to those who spent their days and nights in planning, supporting, and doing evil, for all in the tombs will hear the voice of the Son of God – the Lord Jesus, and come forth: those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

"If anyone defines wisdom as the love of virtue," says our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "I think you are not far from the truth. I think it would be permissible to define wisdom as a taste for goodness." He also says: "When wisdom enters, it makes the carnal sense taste flat, it purifies the understanding, cleanses and heals the palate of the heart."

Just as the obstreperous and rambunctious people would not find it difficult to utter vulgar and obscene language – and when you happen to find yourself with such people that you will likely to hear such language, so righteous people will not find it onerous to utter words of wisdom and knowledge.

Wisdom is kind of knowledge which flows from interpersonal communion with God and is directed towards transforming union with Him in love. Wisdom is the knowledge of God by the experience of tasting His infinite goodness. The wisdom of God comes through people, those who have lived it, experienced it. As a knowledge of God, who is at once supremely knowable and supremely lovable, for He is the first truth and the highest good, wisdom becomes truly contemplative. One might say that wisdom's primary act is to contemplate divine things loved. Only in wisdom is the object known capable of evoking the personal surrender implied in genuine contemplation.

Thus when the righteous have tasted the infinite goodness of God, as it is written, "taste and see that the Lord is good," it follows that from the mouth of the righteous there emanates words of wisdom, and his tongue inevitably speaks justice, for "the law of his God is in his heart" which guides his steps so as not to slip into the clutches of the wicked, because: →

### **Icon # 390 = Temptations: Trials**

"The wicked watches the righteous, and seeks to slay him. The Lord will not abandon him to his power, or let him be condemned when he is brought to trial."

The first letter of Peter warns us to be really very watchful, because, it says: "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking some one to devour." This is so, because Lucifer and the other demons, by virtue of their higher nature as angelic beings, as pure spirits, can come into contact with us and with the material world, and they can use this power to tempt and harm us.

Such power, however, is indeed completely under the control of God's supernatural providence, but it is natural to an angelic being. Thus the fall in Paradise was caused by a devil from hell; no doubt many of the last sins committed before the final judgment will be the consequence of temptations from hell, because the abyss will be closed only at the end of time.

Hence, the first letter of Peter continues to advise us saying: "Resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experience of suffering is required of your brotherhood throughout the world." In other words, we have to pass through

many trials and tribulations before we can enter into eternal serenity of the kingdom of God. We will be tempted in many ways, but God is at our side ready to help us. He is faithful, and He will not let us be tempted beyond our strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way out, an outlet.

Truly, the best outlet to forestall temptation is prayer, or we might say, the practice of the presence of God. In this way, when a demon seeks to slay us by "inspiring" evil thoughts, the Lord will not abandon us to his power, because the Lord Jesus who is with us is greater than Lucifer and all the other demons who are roaming around the world for the ruin of human beings – of souls. The Lord Jesus had indicated that in the world we will have tribulation, but He also encourages us to "be of good cheer," because, He says: "I have overcome the world."

Our other heavenly friend, St. Maximus the Confessor, tells us of five reasons why God allows temptations: 1<sup>st</sup> so that from attack and counter-attack we may become proficient in discerning good from evil; 2<sup>nd</sup> so that our virtue may be maintained in the heat of the struggle and so be confirmed in an impregnable position; 3<sup>rd</sup> so that as we advance in virtue we may avoid presumption and learn humility; 4<sup>th</sup> to inspire in us an unreserved hatred for evil through the experience we thus have of it; 5<sup>th</sup> so that we may attain inner freedom and remain convinced both of our own weakness and of the strength of Him who has come to our aid.

Another example of how "the wicked watches the righteous, and seeks to slay him," is the story of Job. Job, we are told, was blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil. God, certainly, blessed Job in every way. However, this does not prevent the devil from being envious and jealous of Job. He watches Job – seeking ways to slay him by means of tragedies.

The Lord said to Satan, "whence have you come?" Satan answered the Lord, "From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it." And the Lord said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the Lord, "Does job fear God for naught? Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou has blessed the world of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face." And the Lord said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand."

As the story of Job tells us, he was being slayed by a litany of tragedies to make him forsake God and be distrustful of Him, so much so that even his wife told him to "curse God and die." But the Lord did not abandon Job to the power of the

devil, for the Lord restored the fortunes of Job and blessed his latter days more than his beginning.

In the words of our another heavenly friend, St. Angela of Foligno, "The sign whereby we may recognize that God is in us and that we are possessed by His love, is that we receive everything that hurt us, and causes us suffering, not only patiently but gratefully." This is what exactly Job experienced. In all the series of calamities that befell upon him, he still blessed God saying: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return; the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

Since the devil prowls and watches us, seeking opportunities to slay us, so the Lord Jesus encourages us also to watch and pray so that we will not be led into temptation. The spirit is certainly willing to resist but the body, which is beaten down by afflictions and sufferings and lacks the exercise of prayer, may be too weak to cooperate with the spirit.

Thus there's a need to watch and pray that we may be prepared to face adversities and difficulties manfully, patiently, bravely, and if possible with joy. Adversity is the touchstone of the soul, because it discovers the character of the virtue it possesses. One act of thanksgiving or blessing the Lord when matters go wrong with us is worth a thousand thanks and blessings when things are disagreeable to our inclination.

Many, says another heavenly friend, St. Alphonsus Liguori, "love Our Lord as long as the breeze of heavenly consolation refreshes them; but if the clouds of adversity lower, if for their trial, Christ Our Lord, withdraws His sensible presence from them they are sorely tempted to give up prayer, neglect self-denial, sink into despondency and tepidity, and finally turn for comfort to creatures and perishable things. Such souls love themselves more than the Lord Jesus. But those who truly Love Our Lord are faithful in darkness and trial."

Who, then, can separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? None of these really can separate us from the Lord Jesus if we are truly His, as the Lord Himself said: "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

Consequently, if God is for us, who is against us? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Susanna was brought to trial but she was not condemned, for she was found innocent. With tears in her eyes she looked up toward heaven, for her heart trusted in the Lord.

For our part, then, when Lucifer and his wicked angels furtively watch us to find ways to slay us, we have only to: →

### **Icon # 391 = Waiting for the Lord's return**

“Wait for the Lord, and keep to his way, and he will exalt you to possess the land; you will look on the destruction of the wicked.”

It is now 2,000 years since the Lord Jesus ascended to heaven. People from generation to generation waited for His return, as He said: He will. Feelings for His return range from intense longing, joy, and eager anticipation to hatred, disgust, and indifference. Many scoffers, too, cried out in vociferous voice saying: “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation.”

Truly, it is not difficult to see ourselves as like the people whom Moses brought out from the land of Egypt into the wilderness, at the foot of Mt. Sinai, where Moses went up and stayed for many days while the people were waiting below wondering what happened to Moses. When they saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, they gathered themselves together to Aaron, and said to him, “Up, make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”

To make the story short, they fashioned a molten calf out of their jewelries and they worshipped it offering burnt offerings. They sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. It is an image of what is going on in our world. Christ, the new Moses, brought us out from the slavery of sin. He ascended into heaven above while we are waiting for Him here on earth below. People, too, are wondering what happened to Him.

In this period of wondering many things, of course, happened which defy human imagination so much so that if they all be listed the whole world would run out of space. But to mention few, these include the discovery and manufacture of cocaine, heroin, opium, and the like to enhance, to its maximum, the sound of rock n' roll and disco dancing, and the like; also the discovery and manufacture of RU-486 to propel women to attain the optimum sexual freedom with minimum casualty of unwanted pregnancy which in all probability will still end up incredibly in the unimaginable evil of abortion.

Without any shadow of a doubt, all these will certainly blow up the mind of Moses and spin his imagination. However, we have to note clearly that there were also people who did not join in the worshiping of the golden calf and the

revelry of eating and drinking and wild disco dancing. The same is true, too, for those who were/are waiting for the second coming of the Lord Jesus. They did not join in the same wild profligacy, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry which is the worship of money, power, honor, prestige, and the like.

While waiting for the Lord, they live their lives for the rest of the time no longer by human passions but by the will of God. They are the wise and faithful servants whom the One Master has set over His household to give them their food at the proper time. They are the blessed servants whom the Master, that is, the Lord Jesus finds doing when He comes. They did their duties and responsibilities quietly and sincerely, leading a life worthy of the calling of a true Christian with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.

Although many of them are not good singers, yet they chant psalms and sing spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all their heart, always and for everything giving thanks to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. They are foolish and stupid in the eyes of the world, but wise and lucid in the eyes of the Lord. They are the true activists of peace and justice, for they are willing to give and receive forgiveness and fairness.

They keep the way of the Lord which is faithfulness and love. It is a way that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset, but once they make progress in this way their hearts expand and overflow with inexpressible delight in the things that are above where the Lord Jesus is, and the Blessed Virgin Mary too. On the other hand, the Lord, in His part, will exalt them to possess the kingdom of heaven prepared for them since the foundation of the world.

In this fatherland, which they will possess forever without the slightest scintilla of fear and anxiety of losing it, they shall see infinite Goodness as He is in Himself. Their eternal act of love will never suffer the least shadow of weariness. Infinite Goodness, seen without medium, fills so perfectly their capacity of love that it attracts them irresistibly more than any ecstasy that can be had on earth. They also see the breathtaking glory and majesty which overflow from the soul of the Lord Jesus upon His glorified body, and they see how He is at the summit of all creation, material and spiritual. In Him they see also the magnificent beauty of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Coredemptrix, the infinite dignity of her divine maternity, her position in the hypostatic order, superior to the orders of nature and grace. They see the greatness of her love at the foot of the cross, her elevation above the angelic hierarchies, and the radiation of her universal mediation.

Seeing one another in God, they love one another as God loves them. The degree of this love is measured by nearness to God. Each rejoices at the degree of happiness which others have received. Yet each love with special affection those to whom she/he has been united on earth. In this immense assembly the greatest variety is harmonized perfectly with intimate unity, the highest intensity with the deepest repose. Each of them has his personal distinction. Each is himself, with all his/her natural gifts and supernatural privileges, all of them unblemishly developed. Thus St. Paul differs from St. John, St. Augustine from St. Francis of Assisi, St. Bernard of Clairvaux from Bl. Pope John Paul II, St. Teresa of Avial from St. Catherine of Siena, and so on.

Yet they resemble one another since each contemplates one and the same divine truth, each is on fire with one and the same love of God. All their senses find a pure and ineffable joy in the humanity of the Lord Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, the choirs of the saints and angels, the incomparable beauties of the renovated world, the chants of adoration and thanksgiving in this promised land – the city of God, which they are to possess forever.

They “will look on the destruction of the wicked” – the damned, but do not rejoice in their torments as such, yet they do eternally rejoice that they are delivered from so great an evil and the very greatness of the evil avoided increases the enjoyment of the happiness secured. Each of them and each of us who will unite ourselves to them are likely be able to say with the psalmist: →

### **Icon # 392 = Overbearing**

“I have seen a wicked man overbearing, and towering like a cedar of Lebanon. Again I passed by, and lo, he was no more, though I sought him, he could not be found.”

Human history, of course, is not devoid of overbearing men in such a way that we will not be held guilty of libel if we say explicitly that they are wicked; for example, Antiochus Epiphanes of old, Adolf Hitler of Germany, Benito Mussolini of Italy, Joseph Stalin of Russian, Pol Pot of Cambodia in our modern time. Of course, you can add more if you wish. It is suffice to say that during their days on earth they were towering like a cedar. But, where are they now?

They are no more. They could no longer be found, at least, in the state of grace. It is not ours to judge, of course, but we say: at least, in the state of grace because of the manner they lived. For instance, Adolf Hitler: he is directly responsible for the deaths of over 46 million Europeans as a result of the Second World War. This, of course, includes the 6 million Jews who died in the Holocaust; Joseph Stalin: he is directly responsible for the deaths of 20 million, including up

to 14.5 million needlessly starved to death; Pol Pot: he is directly responsible for the killing of between 1 to 3 million Cambodians – a quarter and a third of the country's population; Benito Mussolini: he is responsible for the killing of 400,000 Italians and at least 30,000 Ethiopians during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia.

Shall we add Mao Tse Tung, too, of China who is responsible for the deaths of as many as 45 million either by execution or starvation, and Saddam Hussein of Iraq who is responsible for the killing of almost 2 million Iraqis, Iranians, and Kuwaiti nationals following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait?

History tells us that Hitler committed suicide by gunshot while biting down a cyanide capsule. His mistress, too, Eva (née Braun) also committed suicide with him by ingesting cyanide. What makes this dramatic is that it happened fewer than 40 hrs after their so called "wedding ceremony." The body of Benito Mussolini, too, and that of his mistress Clara Petacci had been strung up by their heels and later cut down and lay in the gutter where vengeful Italians reviled them.

It is true to say that if these men have asked forgiveness and really sorry for their crimes at the moment of their deaths, God is more than willing to forgive them, as the saying goes: "Between the saddle and the ground, mercy I asked, and mercy I found." This, of course, is a reference to a man being shot while riding his horse.

But the manner Hitler died suggested that he crossed the border of time and eternity with deliberate willfulness. He was not content of inserting a bullet in his head, but in his greediness for death he also devours a cyanide. He loved not his life even unto death. Now he is no more and could no longer be found, even in the slightest possibility, in the life of grace, but his immortal soul will remain forever with all the memories of what he has done in the body. The unforgiven sins that he has done in the body will be like worms that will never die but will nibble his conscience, which in his life on earth was insensitive to its munching.

Just as an upright person is meek and humble of heart, and lowly like a mustard seed, so to be overbearing is a peculiar distinction of a person whose pride is towering like a cedar, and a symptomatic characteristic of a person who is becoming wicked. Was there anyone among those people mentioned previously who was not overbearing?

They were dictators in their own ways, but now they are no more, though you look well where they were before, they are no longer there; though you sought them, they could not be found because they departed from the presence of Him who delights not in deeds of wickedness, but in righteousness.

They love evil more than good and preferred darkness more than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, that is, the Lord Jesus who is the Light of the world, and does not come to the light, lest their deeds should be exposed and could have a chance to repent while still in the present life. For the Lord Jesus does not desire the death of the wicked, but that the wicked may be converted and live forever.

But if the wicked will persist in their wickedness with astounding doggedness which brooks no repentance, so much so, that even if the kindness of God will be thrust down their throats they will still vomit it, then, the Lord with profound sadness in His heart and copious tears in His eyes will be powerless to save. By their dogged wickedness they bound the Lord hands and feet and cast Him out from their hearts forever. They cried out at the top of their lungs: "We do not want this man to rule over us, away with Him, away, with Him!"

But God would never be a distant object which they might manage to forget, for He is intimately present to them because in Him they have their being, but His presence is a torment – not a joy and peace, for holiness is both an object of horror and of desire to the wicked who died in the wickedness of their unrepented sins. Every instant of their never-ending life they inherently want God and they know that they want Him, yet every instant – every fiber of their being, they feel an irresistible recoil, a repugnance, a revulsion, and an abhorrence, which turn them from that which they want.

There is no more place for them in the blissful land of the blessed, for they forfeited, by their own volition, the unimaginable highest good which is God Himself. They could not and would never be found in the company of the Lord Jesus and all the angels and saints in their never ending and never dwindling joy and happiness who are now spotless and blameless in the sight of the Lord. Therefore, we are encouraged to: →

### **Icon # 393 = Role Model**

"Mark the blameless man, and behold the upright, for there is posterity for the man of peace."

Our friend, St. Paul, encourages us too by saying: "Brethren, join in imitating me, and mark those who so live as you have an example in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change

our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

Unequivocally, it is very highly important that we have role model in our life, someone we can look up to, who can give us a good example how to live a virtuous life. He/she doesn't have to be impeccable, otherwise, we will be unnecessarily frustrated when we will find out that she/he has still something that has to be removed but, at least, the gap between what he/she says and what she/he does is fairly minimal to such an extent that it won't even cause a slightest ripple of disedification on our part.

This can be a teacher or a priest or a nun or any religious person or a friend who, in one way or another, have influenced our life. If we have grown up in an environment where we were deprived of a role model, that is, we came from a dysfunctional family and our neighbors and friends were dysfunctional too, we will be like a boat without a rudder being tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of vices and bad habits in the tumultuous sea of life.

However, if we were lucky enough to be educated in a Catholic School, or if we are not Catholics but educated in a religion friendly school, chances are not remote that in later years, especially in times of severe trials such as serious illness or any kind of excruciating suffering, we might unknowingly hit the hidden treasure of God's saving grace buried in our heart.

In a very mysterious reason we will begin to say a prayer which we knew in school or maybe just mumble prayer understood only by God. We might even find ourselves starting to read a life of a saint. Inscrutably, we notice that it touches our heart in a certain way we never experienced before. Then we begin to receive the sacrament of reconciliation and to go to Mass as often as we can.

We also start reading the Sacred Scripture and captured some facets of the life of Christ. Then we read more of the lives of the saints or their writings. Without even our notice we were impelled to elevate the standard of our moral life. Our friends and neighbors perceived a dramatic change in our life-style which evokes praise and thanksgiving to God for some, and mockery and derision for others. They thought that we are crazy for turning a new leaf, but others consider us as their role model, thinking in their hearts: “No one can do such a thing unless God is at work in him.”

However, this is just a beginning of our new life in God. We still have to read and re-read again and again the lives of the saints, for they are our true models. They are the ones who follow Christ more closely – the par excellent paragon of all “the blameless and upright people.”

Since Christ is the role model of all models, we have to keep in touch everyday with Sacred Scripture because it is the love letter of God to us written in human words. Besides, "ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ," as our other heavenly friend, St. Jerome says.

In Our Lord Jesus there was always a stable balance between His feelings and His reason. His humanity was for Him a faithful instrument by which He lived in obedience, serving His fellowmen to comply with the will of His heavenly Father. We find a firm and attractive serenity in His obedience. His words are a mirror of His interior peace. He revealed to us the loftiest human ideal in sacrificing His life, throwing into bold relief the noblest and most all-embracing love, which is expressed itself in the service of others to the highest point of laying down his life freely to show the depths of His love for the human race.

The Gospels indicate that the appearance of the Lord Jesus, His looks, His personality, were agreeable and engaging. He was certainly very attractive, "the fairest among the sons of men." Does He look like His mother?

He spoke in the spirit of simplicity and serenity; He told us never to be downcast by earthly and temporal cares: "Therefore, I say to you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Let the day's own trouble be sufficient for the day."

A realistic and practical view of life guided the Lord Jesus in His attitude towards the circumstances and events of His time, towards the norms of social behavior and the conventional economic and political assumptions characteristic of the period. His spirit, filled with the highest ideals, because divine ones, knew how to handle and be at home with the most ordinary and commonplace things of daily life. He spoke in parable to give practical illustrations of His teaching, using

examples drawn from nature and everyday life in order to imprint on the hearts of His hearers the doctrine He preached.

With a few bold strokes He would make us see and live His parables, filled as they were with rich and subtly varied nuances, in the most disparate settings and in the widely differing circumstances to be found in the contemporary life of every era. Through Him we meet the hired hand and the merchant, the landowner and the farmer, a judge, an army commander and a king, a good Samaritan, an importunate widow; we come across fishermen and vine dressers.

The parables He spoke describe for us in a few words the grave simplicity and directness of the doctors of the Law, the humility of the publican contrasted with the stunning hypocrisy and conceit of the Pharisee in the temple. He told us of the wedding reception, the pitiful loathsome lepers, blind men groping towards the light, the unemployed, the mother whose love makes her forget the pain she has endured as she holds her newly-born child in her arms, the rich and avaricious who think of nothing beyond their private affairs.

He taught with authority which spins the imagination of the officers: "No man ever spoke like this man!" but with an altogether appealing humility, with unflinching healthy humor and inexhaustible patience. He would customarily use as an illustrative example any handy object nearby: a rock in the middle of a field, a plant choked by thorns, the meadow grass, the village well or a fishing boat moored by the shore.

His flexibility in adapting to life's circumstances and to the problems posed for Him indicate a serene and beautifully balanced nature. Each time His incredibly most hostile opponents tried to trap Him on some point, but He would leave them baffled and embarrassed with His clear and logical answers. They were compelled to retreat in unsavory silence. To objections hurled at Him, or to cunning and insulting questions put to Him by His bitter enemies, and doubtless sometimes even by those who were His followers, He always had a correct and friendly answer. He taught by His presence and with His words. His words has equal value with His actions.

The extraordinary impression He made on those who encountered Him, especially on the sick and on sinners, whether they were Jews or Gentiles, came from a spiritual strength radiating from His person and from His inborn personality. The crowd around Him would listen to Him enraptured by the wisdom of His words: "How is it that this man has learning, when He has never studied?" They were filled with wondering admiration and with love for God. His words came eloquently, evenly, simply; His speech was vibrant and penetrating, touching the hearts of His hearers.

Everything about Him was natural and simple; He spoke without convoluted sentences, rhetorical devices, or complicated syllogisms. This was not oratory. It was the Truth. When He presented Himself in the temple, talking with the sophisticated Canon Lawyers, "He spoke like someone of authority," without a trace of inferiority complex. He spoke as one who was aware of His divine mission, as one who brought a message of eternal value – like a "pearl of great price." He preached and taught with what was recognized as power. His words carried conviction. He humbled Himself even unto death, better still: He permitted His implacable enemies to humiliate Him and was patient in the face of their humiliations. He acquiesced in the atrocious injustice meted out to Him without a whimper or in the slightest degree demeaning Himself.

He submitted with total self-abnegation, but never once losing His patent superiority. He gave Himself to the point of shedding His blood to its last drop but never imposed. He was true to Himself, for He is Truth personified. With the excruciating dreadful treatment He received, with His submitting to relentless torture and to agonizing death on the cross, He vanquished His most virulent enemies, and Himself overwhelmed, gave life to the friends who abandoned Him; and to all who received Him in their hearts and to all who believed in Him, He gave power to become sons and daughters of God.

He spoke in such a way that nobody, no matter where or when he lived, even little children, could fail to understand. He saw things as they are – not as they should be or as He would like them to be. He accepted every human being just as he was, with his weaknesses, his faults, his miseries, with all his defects. On this apparently insecure underpinning He chose to build His kingdom of salvation with an extravagant outpouring of grace.

His unlimited compassion for the ills and weaknesses of humankind transcended the limits of human patience. His moving and effective speech, His influence with sinners such as Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, Paul, Augustine, and countless others, you and I included, from every generation till the end of time cannot be solely ascribed to a natural gift of persuasion. He knew how to deal with all sorts of environments and people, with rich and poor, without ever compromising His inherent dignity. He made Himself equally accessible to all and could be close and familiar with sage and the ignorant, with the sad and the happy, with those who have everything and with those who have nothing at all.

He would put Himself in the other's place, readily appreciating how He thought and felt. He was understood and loved by all except His enemies because He was transparently sincere and respected their freedom. They loved Him because He loved and understood them, because He was simple of heart and loved the realities of life and of human beings.

He gave Himself unreservedly to others because of His true simplicity. His own manner of living was in keeping with the goal of His Incarnation: "For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to bear witness to the Truth." Since the Lord Jesus came to manifest the truth, it is logical that His life would be lived out among men; He would not separate Himself from them, holding Himself aloof, but rather would make Himself visible, preaching in towns, squares and synagogues, in the streets, by the seashore, in the mountains, at all hours, everywhere.

He always begins His day with prayer to His heavenly Father, rising early in the morning before dawn to be in intimate communion with God. Thus giving us an example that we, too, should follow in His steps. He never used His powers for display or simply to make an impression. During His temptation in the wilderness He rejected the invitation to use His divine power for His own benefit. If ever He performed miracles, it was to teach people something, so that they might guard against still further hardening their hearts, since their minds and hearts were already resistant and closed to grace.

It was because He was moved with compassion for the people who followed and cried out to Him that He performed His miracles; it was always with the intent to help and ease their pains and afflictions.

Christ Jesus is God made man, placed within our reach in human likeness, making sanctity accessible and visible to us and making Him tangible, known, loved, and thus able to be emulated. His whole life and work are revelations of the divine perfections. In the words of our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux: "When I name Jesus I set before me a man who is meek and humble of heart, prudent, chaste, merciful, flawlessly upright and holy in the eyes of all; and this man is the all-powerful God whose way of life brings healing, whose support is the source of our strength. All these re-echo at the hearing of the name of Jesus."

Thus we have a fairly good reason to "mark the blameless man" Our Lord Jesus Christ, and to join in imitating St. Paul and all upright people who follow the Lord more closely, "For there is posterity for the man of peace." What more can ask for?! "As the Father has loved me," says the Lord, "so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." On the other hand: →

## Icon # 394 = Transgressors: Second Chance

"But transgressors shall be together destroyed; the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off."

One of the most dreadful verdicts that the Lord had uttered which people from every generation, till the end of world, would rather not hear is this: "But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to reign over them, bring them here and slay them before me." Who could ever endure this sentence? This is so, because God is infinitely holy and just, and will repay each one according to what they have done in the body.

If a person deliberately and habitually transgresses God's commandments and died in mortal sin without repenting it, by this evidence which, of course, is known by the Lord, he/she is heading to his/her own destruction, for "the perverseness of the transgressors destroys them." Moreover, "the way of the transgressors is their ruin." Of course, these are the consequences of blotting out God from one's life – living as though there is no God. However, "can he who made the ear, not hear? Can he who formed the eye, not see?"

In spite of this, while we are still in this present world, there's always a second chance for transgressors because God is an ocean of divine mercy. In Christ Jesus Our Lord there's a delightful good news of a second chance, for He is intensely interested not only in what a person had been but also in what a person could be. He doesn't mean, though, that what the transgressors had done does not matter; broken laws and broken hearts always matter; but He is certain that every person has a future as well as a past.

Nonetheless, it involves challenge, too; for there is no easy forgiveness. Christ points all transgressors to height of goodness of which they had never dreamed: "Go and transgress no more." It involves warning also. They shall be faced to face with eternal choice either to go on transgressing or to reach out the new life with Him. Inspiration shall available to them that they may capture the unglimped discovery that they are potential saints too.

However, if the transgressors will still persist in their transgression, and with shameless boldness will vociferously cry out, saying: "We do not want this man to reign over us," then, by making that choice they cut themselves from the influence of grace."

The attempt to approach God, and to be intimate with Him, while at the same time we outrage Him by deliberate transgression of His commandments and living a sensual and proud life, is a daring presumption and hypocrisy that God detests.

God most gladly hears us when we pray for grace to rise from our sins, and for pardon of our sins. As soon as a soul truly repents, all is changed – “A contrite and humble heart Thou wilt not despise, O Lord.” The infinite goodness of God greatly delights in seeing a soul truly penitent.

When a man goes down on his knees in the confessional because he has sinned, at that very moment he adds to his own dignity as a man. No matter how heavily his sins weigh on his conscience, no matter how seriously they have diminished his dignity, the very act of turning again to God is a manifestation of the special dignity of man, his spiritual grandeur – the grandeur of the personal meeting between God and man in the inner truth of conscience.

A sinful state is a state of departure and distance from God. When we deliberately transgress God’s commandments we fled from Him and go to a far country, to a land of unlikeness, because when we sin we are no longer like God. In this far country we misemploy our thoughts and all the powers of our souls, misspend out time in things that is only of this world.

On the other hand, God is always ready to forgive the transgressions of true penitents. The repentant transgressor is now clothed in the robe of the Redeemer’s righteousness, made partaker of the Spirit of adoption, prepared by peace of conscience to walk in the ways of holiness; while the angels and all the family of God rejoices at his being restored as a child to his Father’s house, and recovered from the death of sin to the life of righteousness.

One of the great mysteries of life is the respect God has for the free will of every human person. God does not coerce; God only appeals. When God seeks to forestall a person from transgressing His precepts, He does two things. First, He confronts him with his sin. He tries to make that person pause and think what he is doing. The Lord, as it were, says to him, “Look at what you are contemplating to do – can you really do a thing like that?”

It has been said that our greatest security against sin lies in our being shocked by it. Again and again the Lord Jesus bids a person to pause and look and realize, so that he or she may be shocked into sanity.

Second, the Lord confronts that person with Himself. He bids a person look at Him, as if to say, “Can you look at Me, can you meet My eyes, and go out to do the thing you plan doing?” The Lord seeks to make a person become aware of the horror of the thing he is about to do, and of the love which yearns to stop him or her doing it. But, if in spite of love’s ardent appeal a person opted to cover his ears lest he would be persuaded by the charm of the Lord’s voice, and freely chooses to go on transgressing the statutes of the Lord, then, unfortunately, that person “shall be cut off,” as the prophet Ezekiel says: “But

when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity and does the same abominable things that the wicked man does, shall he live? None of the righteous deeds which he has done shall be remembered; for the treachery of which he is guilty and the sin he has committed, he shall die."

Hence, the wicked shall be disappointed and frustrated, their last end is cutting off from the presence and sight of God; and so it stands opposed to the highest end of the godly and righteous man, which is union with God and eternal peace and happiness. Accordingly: →

### **Icon # 395 = Stronghold**

"The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their refuge in the time of trouble. The Lord helps them and delivers them; he delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in him."

The Lord has promised Himself as a stronghold in the day of trouble, as He says: "Call on me in the day of troubles, I will deliver you and you shall glorify me." Unlike the fortresses offered by the world, His walls cannot be torn down. His defenses are not made of air. His arm is mighty to save and He stretches out His arm for the welfare of His children.

Where do we go in times of troubles? What kind of stronghold which provides our consolation? Is it in prayer and doing good for others or is it in sensual pleasure and worldly allurements? There are lots of things that invite us in the day of distress but only one that provides true safety and consolation, as the Lord says: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

It is also true to say that in times of troubles many people who are allergic of the Lord will take refuge in mundane entertainment to distract them from pain and misery. Some take refuge in the consolation of food to feed their sorrow; some in drugs, alcohol, and pornography. However, the terminus of these things is not salvation but depression and moral death of the soul, as it is written: "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."

But the way of the Lord is righteousness, and its end is salvation. He stretches Himself to us on the cross for our salvation. If we are assaulted by pride on every side, then, we have to look at the cross and call upon the name of the Lord Jesus. When dishonesty and perfidy are battering the skiff of our soul, then, we have to gaze upon the cross and call out the Lord Jesus, for our salvation is from Him.

When we feel that in this tumultuous sea of life we are tossed about by the squalls of sorrow and the gales of anxiety than by treading on the dry land of security, if we do not want to sink in the tempest of dejection, then, we have to call upon the name of the Lord for He is our refuge in the time of trouble; He will help us and deliver us, for never was it known since the foundation of the world that anyone who sincerely and humbly call upon the name of the Lord was left unaided.

For proof, following the evidence wherever it leads, we have no less than His own promise: "Call on me in the day of troubles, I will deliver you and you shall glorify me." The Lord Jesus delivers us from the wicked Lucifer and his wicked angels, because we subserviently take refuge in Him. "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the work of the devil."

For each and every Christian there is only one way to live this life, and that is, operating under a full and complete surrender to the Lord where He is now the One who will be leading and directing our life in the specific direction that He will want it to go in. And the one thing that will kick this full surrender into full gear is our conscious choice to "take refuge in Him" – entrusting every single area of our life, holding absolutely nothing back to Him!

Granted that we will have to pass through many trials and tribulations as we plow our way through this earthly life, but if we will continue to hold fast to the Lord in our daily walk with Him and refuse to pull out of this full surrender to Him, as what the Blessed Virgin Mary did who never withdrew her commitment, no matter how bad things may get from time to time – we can still have this incredible peace of mind even through the worst of times. This is something that the Holy Spirit will graciously give to us if we humbly take refuge in the Lord and sedulously put all our trust in Him.

In this crazy day and age, more and more people are beginning to find out that material wealth and riches are not buying them true happiness. What they are seeking for are some blessings from on high where no moth devours, rust consumes, and where no thieves to break in and steal. But these kinds of treasures can only be found by those who are operating in a total submission to the Lord where they are fully trusting Him to handle both themselves and their entire lives. There may be times that they stumble and fall, and even flounder into serious sin, they can still, like David, cry out in humility: →