

Table of Contents

Psalm 38: (37)

[Icon # 396 = Guilt: Repentance](#)

[Icon # 397 = Divine Foolishness](#)

[Icon # 398 = Longing](#)

[Icon # 399 = Light and Darkness](#)

[Icon # 400 = The value of Suffering](#)

[Icon # 401 = Prudence: Deaf and Dumb](#)

[Icon # 402 = Be Prepared](#)

[Icon # 403 = Chance after Chance](#)

[Icon # 404 = Bringing Our Lives into line with God's will for us](#)

[Icon # 405 = Imploring God not to jilt Us](#)

Psalm 39: (38)

[Icon # 406 = The Tongue 2](#)

[Icon # 407 = What to do when Death is knocking at the door of our soul](#)

[Icon # 408 = Life that knows nothing of End](#)

[Icon # 409 = Heaping up Riches](#)

[Icon # 410 = Wait in Hope](#)

[Icon # 411 = Christian Silence](#)

[Icon # 412 = Stroke of Tribulations](#)

[Icon # 413 = The Role of Tears and Compunction in Prayer](#)

Psalm 40: (39)

[Icon # 414 = Never give up Prayer no matter what](#)

[Icon # 415 = Music is a language of the Soul](#)

[Icon # 416 = Right Living: Growing in Trust](#)

[Icon # 417 = Incomparable Greatness of the Works of God](#)

[Icon # 418 = Food of the Lord Jesus: God's Will](#)

[Icon # 419 = Whole Life and Work of Christ are Revelations of the Divine Perfection](#)

[Icon # 420 = God's Mercy and Steadfast Love](#)

[Icon # 421 = Deliverance From the Snatcher of Divine Life](#)

[Icon # 422 = Human Life: The Greatest and Highest pinnacle of Man's Achievement on Earth](#)

[Icon # 423 = God's Predilection: The Poor and the Needy](#)

Psalm 41: (40)

[Icon # 424 = Blessing in showing kindness to the Poor](#)

[Icon # 425 = Two Kinds of Healing: Bodily and Spiritual](#)

[Icon # 426 = Confession of Sins: The Beginning of Righteousness](#)

[Icon # 427 = Death Wish](#)

[Icon # 428 = Vices Really are Empty](#)

[Icon # 429 = Death and Resurrection](#)

[Icon # 430 = Betrayal](#)

[Icon # 431 = Blessing in showing kindness to the Poor](#)

[Icon # 432 = Integrity](#)

[Icon # 433 = Blessed be God from everlasting to everlasting](#)

Psalm 42: (41)

[Icon # 434 = Seeing that brings Happiness](#)

[Icon # 435 = Tears 2](#)

[Icon # 436 = Remembrance of the Good things of Our past Life: Liturgy on Earth, and in Heaven eternal Happiness](#)

[Icon # 437 = When Cast Down Hope in God 1](#)

[Icon # 438 = Deep Calls to Deep](#)

[Icon # 439 = Different Kinds of Love](#)

[Icon # 440 = Mourning](#)

[Icon # 441 = As Deadly wound is to the Body, so Deadly Sin is to the Soul](#)

[Icon # 442 = When Cast Down Hope in God](#)

Psalm 43: (42)

[Icon # 443 = God Defends Our Cause](#)

[Icon # 444 = Take Refuge in God](#)

[Icon # 445 = Danger of Entertaining Evil Thought](#)

[Icon # 446 = Light in the Way to God's Kingdom](#)

[Icon # 447 = Going to the Altar of God: Adoration](#)

[Icon # 448 = The Agony of Love](#)

Psalm 44: (43)

[Icon # 449 = Declaring the Deeds of the Lord: Mutual Delighting](#)

[Icon # 450 = The Kingship of the Lord Jesus and the power of His Name](#)

[Icon # 451 = Boasting 2](#)

[Icon # 452 = Abased](#)

[Icon # 453 = Sheep For Slaughter](#)

[Icon # 454 = Derided and Scorned](#)

[Icon # 455 = Disgrace: Shame](#)

[Icon # 456 = Subjected to Suffering yet still Clinching to God](#)

[Icon # 457 = Debacles emanated from Forgetfulness of God](#)

[Icon # 458 = God Awoke from Sleep](#)

Psalm 45: (44)

[Icon # 459 = Out of the Abundance of the Heart](#)

[Icon # 460 = The Fairest of the sons of Men](#)

[Icon # 461 = Truth](#)

[Icon # 462 = In the Presence of the Divine Throne](#)

[Icon # 463 = Oil of Gladness](#)

[Icon # 464 = Vocation](#)

[Icon # 465 = Seeking the Favor of the Blessed Virgin Mary](#)

[Icon # 466 = Different Kinds of Relationships: Virgin Companions](#)

[Icon # 467 = Entering the Palace of the King](#)

[Icon # 468 = Dignity](#)

[Icon # 469 = Honor](#)

Psalm 46: (45)

[Icon # 470 = God: Our Refuge, Strength, and Help](#)

[Icon # 471 = Overcoming Fear](#)

[Icon # 472 = Underground River](#)

[Icon # 473 = A Kingdom that Cannot Be Shaken](#)

[Icon # 474 = Works of the Lord](#)

[Icon # 475 = Be Still and Know that the Lord Jesus is God](#)

[Icon # 476 = The Lord is With Us](#)

Icon # 396 = Guilt: Repentance

Psalm 38 (37)

“O Lord, rebuke me not in your anger, nor chasten me in thy wrath! For thy arrows have sunk into me and thy hand has come down on me. There is no soundness in my flesh because of thy indignation; there is no health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; they weigh like a burden too heavy for me.”

It is true to say that the feeling of guilt is one of the most grueling cargoes that could make the human spirit sink into melancholy and despair, for it makes present the consciousness of one's sin. It has a double-edge sword which can lead a person to repentance as Peter did or to despair as Judas did.

King David experienced this, too, when he said: "My offenses truly I know them; my sin is always before me." Feeling of guilt that leads to repentance is certainly a great blessing, for it will end up in peace and forgiveness. Notice that the psalmist is not praying that God would not rebuke nor chasten him, but that God would not do it out of anger or wrath, for that would be an unendurable pain because it is a terrible thing to incur the wrath of God; but if God would rebuke or chasten him out of love, then, surely, it is a prodigious benediction, as it is written: "'My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor lose courage when you are punished by him. For the Lord disciplines him whom he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.' It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers to discipline us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subjected to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time at their pleasure, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant; later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

Even though, in our supreme ignorance, childishness, and tendency toward evil, we turn away from true life and place many impediments along our path because we really do not like to repent, nevertheless, God has great mercy on us. He patiently waits for us until we will be converted and return to Him and be enlightened in our inner selves that our faces may not be ashamed in the Day of Judgment.

If that seems difficult and troublesome to us because practicing virtue is hard, but, more so, because of the insidious suggestion of the number One Enemy of Life, still God is very full of compassion, long-suffering as He waits for our conversion. And when we do sin, He is ready to lift us up for He desires our repentance, as our friend St. Paul says: "Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"

In the words of other friend, Pseudo-Macarius: "We only have to have a sincere heart and live in vigilance and be converted immediately after seeking His help and He Himself is most ready to save us. For He looks for our ardent will, as best we can, to turn toward him. When we show good faith and promptness glowing from our desiring, then He works in us a true conversion."

God uses great and ineffable good and long-suffering toward us, if only we would be willing to be vigilant toward ourselves and strive to be totally converted to Him so that we may receive the gift of salvation.

To put off conversion would be presumption, because although God is infinitely merciful, He is also sovereignly just and must render to each person according to his deeds. Most certainly, God's providence is irreproachable, and no sinner will ever be lost because he lacked divine help. The judgments of God are always right, perfectly just, and justice does not manifest severity except where souls have abused mercy.

It is not far-fetched to say that repentance is tantamount to healing one's insanity, because if to offend a powerful man who can harm us is sheer madness, to offend God who can condemn our soul for all eternity it truly pure insanity. One of our heavenly friends, St. Isaac of Nineveh left us these substantial words: "Repentance is the door to mercy, open to those who seek it diligently; by this door we enter into Divine mercy and by no other entrance can we find mercy."

At the heart of compunction is a sense of pain, a stinging, a sensation of being pricked. It is a question of being pierced, aroused from torpor and complacency and stimulated to action. It is a dual sensitivity. It places before us both the reality of our sinful condition and the urgency of our desire to be possessed totally by God.

It is an active disgust at our low-level living; knowing that we are made for something better and that nothing less than God can bring us what our nature really craves. Compunction is a gift of divine love which is aimed to bring us to salvation. It causes in us salutary pain and fear which keeps us from forgetting the possibility of eternal death, and thus serves as a check on carnal desire, a remedy for depravity, and destroys any lack of seriousness or concern with trivialities. On the other hand, if we procrastinate repentance, then, →

Icon # 397 = Divine Foolishness

"My wounds grow foul and fester because of my foolishness, I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my loins are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am utterly spent and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart."

If to commit sin willfully is utter foolishness, to postpone repentance is an added asininity, because it not only makes our wounds grow fouler and festering but it also adds layers of callousness to an already thickened heart so as to make it incredibly insensitive to be receptive to the prompting of grace.

On the other hand, if we do not want our wounds to grow fouler and worsen, we have to go to Our Lord Jesus the divine Physician who knows how to heal our

wounds. We can do this by means of prayer and frequently receiving the sacrament of reconciliation. Thus instead of being utterly bowed down and prostrate because of our foolishness in committing sin and in our inordinate desires for the things of this present life, we shall renew our strength, we shall mount up with wings like eagles, we shall run and not be weary, we shall walk and not faint.

Our heavenly friend, St. Francis de Sales has this keen observation which is appropriate to what we are trying to convey, he says: "Ostriches never fly, hens fly sometimes but clumsily and not very high, but eagles, doves and swallows soar upwards swiftly and frequently. In the same way sinners never fly towards God but travel on the earth seeking only earthly things. Those who are good but not yet devout do fly sometimes on the wings of good deeds, but slowly and ungracefully. Those who are devout soar on high to God frequently and readily."

To pray and to frequent the Sacraments of Reconciliation and the Holy Eucharist are means to help us maintain our sanity. Christ, in His infinite goodness, and knowing the weakness of our human nature, established these sacraments to provide healing for our soul, wounded as it is by sin. So long as we are still on our way to our eternal home, we are highly liable to be ambushed by robbers, that is, the seven capital sins, especially if we travel by ourself without the companion of the Lord Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints.

Christ Himself says that apart from Him we can do nothing. Of course, this is foolishness to those who are adversely anaphylactic to Him. But to those who sincerely receive Him in their lives and believe in Him, He is a soothing balm for their wounded souls, an unspeakable sweetness in their mouths, and a stable peace in their hearts.

Instead of being utterly bowed down and prostrate by the foolishness of their sins, they are lifted up by the joy of forgiveness; and like David who was not ashamed to dance naked before the Lord, they too are not ashamed to expose their thoughts and feelings to Christ, and be transparent before Him even though it instigates derision from, of, by, the Evil One just as Michal derided David in her heart and expressed it in her lips, saying: "How they king of Israel honoured himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as one of the vulgar fellows shamelessly uncovering himself!"

And, like David who said to Michal, "It was before the Lord, who chose me above your father, and above all his house, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the Lord – and I will make merry before the Lord. I will make myself yet more contemptible than this, and I will be abased in your eyes; but the maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honour," so, they

too said to the Evil One and to his underlings: "It was before the God of heaven and earth, who chose our human nature above your angelic nature, and above the kingdoms of this world, to make us His sons and daughters, for He destined us in love to be His children through Jesus Christ the Lord, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished upon us; for truly we say to you that all the angels in heaven are happy because we have repented of our sins; you held us in contempt but they held us in honor because it was for our sake that the Lord of the whole universe suffered and died on the cross for our salvation; and as Michal had no child to the day of her death, so, you too and all your flunkies are deprived of all goodness, virtues, and truth; you were told by the Most High God that the second person of the Blessed Trinity – His own Word, will become a human being like us and you have to adore Him and venerate the woman who is going to become His most beloved mother, but in your incredible pride you rebel against God's command with full knowledge and consent without the slightest passion and emotion for you are pure spirits; you know full well the consequences of your choice that it is irreversible and it will plunge you into the lake of fire where you will be tormented day and night not just for 12 billion or trillion and trillion of years but for all eternity where you will be shrieking in solid pain without the millisecond of repose, but you still chose to disobey God than to have our human nature preferred to yours; and now you are roaming around the world for the ruin of souls – to be an accomplice to your rebellion, so they too will be "utterly spent and crushed," and be groaning in sorrow and despair because of the tumult of their hearts – of the worms of their guilty conscience that will never die.

"Rightly, the Lord Jesus says of you that you are the father of lies, the murderer from the beginning, and the deceiver of the world. You are so wise in deceiving our fellow human beings by false promises, deceitful happiness, and the fleeting pleasures of sins, but so foolish in dissenting against the infallible Magisterium of God. You are so ambidextrous in swindling Judges to legalize the killing of innocent children under the pretext that their mothers will be in danger of dying if they do it unlawfully at the back alleys, as though you want to legalize robbery so that it will be safe for robbers to rob banks! Undoubtedly, there are still many evil things that you are so wise that if all of them are written down by a human writer he will assuredly spent his entire life in jotting them down and the whole world would not be enough to contain all the books written about it. You have the reputation of having a keen intelligent, so brilliant a mind, but in your foolishness you became the dullest of the dull of God's creatures. You could have inherit the unspeakable glory of God if only you chose to obey and serve Him, but now you lost it forever. Is this not an utter foolishness!?"

“On the other hand, there is another kind of foolishness which is supremely pleasing to God for it is an effulgence of true wisdom – the wisdom from which is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or insincerity. This is the wisdom of St. Francis of Assisi who became foolish in the eyes of the world but so wise in the eyes of the Lord. He, too, stripped himself naked before the crowd – in the presence of his father in the flesh, to show to the whole world the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ Our Lord the paragon of divine foolishness who, too, was stripped naked on the cross in the presence of angels, demons, and men for the redemption of our fallen world, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart.’”

“So, where is Lucifer and his minions? Has not the Lord made foolish your moronic wisdom? For you even attempted to hijack the Son of God to bow down and worship you so that you will give to Him “the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them,” as though you are the creator of the world. This in your preposterous wisdom you tried to swindle the Lord of heaven and earth, the Creator of the whole universe.

“You were told by Him that ‘you shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve,’ but instead of heeding His words and obeying His command you have Him condemned to death and be crucified. What in the world are you doing! As though all these are too little for you, you also have His followers be executed. You were doing this from one generation to the next. You also have St. Maximilian Kolbe, ‘Our Lady’s Fool,’ be executed for giving his life in exchange of another prisoner. Truly, all the blood of the innocent people whom you have shed from Abel till the end of time, and all the aborted children, will be required of you. All these because of your unimaginable foolishness. Of course, you will say to me: “Fr. Alberic, you are so disrespectful of me, for you are only a simple monk and an insignificant servant of your ‘so called Lady,’ but you are too bold to call me foolish. Not even the angel Michael, my former colleague, would dare to say it to me when we disputed over the body of Moses but only say to me: ‘The Lord rebuke you.’ He never presume to pronounce a reviling judgment against me, but you sounded to appear more righteous than Michael and more arrogant than me; you are not afraid to be liable to be cast into that lake of eternal fire with me for violating the command of your ‘so called Lord,’ for He said: ‘Whoever says, ‘you fool!, shall be liable to the hell of fire.’”

“Well, Lucifer, I will not retract what I have said to you. I will stick to it! Tell my Lord Jesus about it, and do not ever forget to tell it also to My Lady; and see what is their infallible judgment!

“For myself and for all who eagerly await the blessed hope and the coming of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we can only say: →

Icon # 398 = Longing

“Lord, all my longing is known to thee, my sighing is not hidden from thee.”

For some of us who had experienced fallen in love, at least once, or even just a puppy love, can still recall how our whole being is longing and sighing for that “significant other.” It's still fresh in our memory, unless we are sick with alzheimer's, that whenever we see that person our heart beat a little bit faster than normal as though we are suffering from high blood pressure.

Both are related in some ways, in the sense that the feelings of “tense and anxiety” are involved. However, just as there is a good cholesterol and a bad cholesterol, so the feelings of tense and anxiety to see the person we loved are good feelings for they came from the desire to be in the presence of the beloved. Whereas, the feelings of tense and anxiety to see, for instance, a doctor, are bad feelings for they came from fear of what the doctor might tell us that we would rather not hear.

Even though we have a picayune knowledge of mystical theology, we are likely to be correct if we say that “longing” and “sighing” are the gestures of our soul. Just as we can spot the person we loved even a mile away, the way that person walks, his/her profile, so God can spot us even a billion light years away, the way we sigh and long for Him, because in Him we live and move and have our being.

He knows our profile because we are made in His own image and likeness; nothing in us is hidden from Him for He pierces the division of our soul and spirit, our joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and intentions of our heart; all our sighing and longing are not hidden from Him, but all are open and laid bare before His eyes. We sigh and long to be with Him forever, to see Him as He is no longer in a dim mirror of faith but in the brilliant light of love, for love is the eye that permits us to see God and the brightness of its vision is proportion to its purity. With the apostle Philip we, too, sigh and long, and cry out: “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.”

The soul too can spot God even an infinite light years away by an intuitive awareness of His presence in our day to day life. We do this by our “desire” to be transformed and conformed into the Lord Jesus which is effectuated by

exercising acts of charity and by our constant prayer. Desire is a “form” of prayer. Thus when we don’t cease desiring we don’t cease praying.

Like longing and sighing which are “gestures” of our soul, so desiring and praying are “activities” of our soul. As such they are very noble activities for their movements are toward the Lord. Wherefore, our good friend, St. Paul did not blink his eyes in saying: “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.” Furthermore, to show that there are some feelings of tense and anxiety that are healthy, let us listen to the first-hand experience of St. Paul in which he gave testimony of his diurnal pinching and of his anxiety for the Churches he founded like a solicitous mother who is anxious for the welfare of her children: “And apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the Churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?”

On the other hand, aside from seeing a doctor, we don’t have to be a psychologist to notice that there are feelings of tense and anxiety that are really very unhealthy, for instance, setting a time to see one’s paramour to gratify the passion of lust. These kinds of feelings are extremely dangerous because they led to the heart attack of the soul. Just as many people died of “heart attack” and a good number have also recovered, and that “heart attack” is one of the leading causes of the “death of the body,” so, also fornication/adultery is one of the leading causes of the “death of the soul.”

We are not exaggerating if we emphatically say that many souls died in this kind of death. This is an epidemic in our world that affected both young and old alike. The virus of this disease is what we will call “concupiscence.” We all have this virus. Only the Lord Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and very likely St. John the Baptist* and St. Joseph*¹ don’t have this virus.

The good news is that it can be controlled by living a healthy moral lives, by doing some spiritual exercises such as prayer, Lectio Divina or spiritual reading, and the practice of virtues. Also, it is very important that we “refrain” from anything that will aggravate this virus such as: bad literature, indecent places, indecent movies/videos, indecent talks, dresses, and the like.

Of course, this is demanding too much of our wounded-fallen nature. That is why we “sigh” and “long” for the grace of God to help us live a healthy moral lives, for apart from Him we can really do nothing. With St. Paul, we too sigh and long, and cry out: “Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

¹ At a certain point in their lives as a privilege.

Hence, as the deer longs for the running stream of clear and limpid water, so our soul longs for the Lord Jesus. We eagerly await His coming to transform our mortal body into His glorified body and become totally one with Him, for whoever is united with the Lord become one spirit with Him. We pray, then, "Come Lord Jesus do not delay. Free your people from their sinfulness."

Psychologically, solitude and silence are very necessary in the maintenance for a life of prayer. They make us sensitive to the voice of the Spirit who speaks not in the strong wind, nor in the earthquake, but in a "tiny whispering sound" where the Lord, too, make known His longing to us, as He Himself said: "Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in thy love for me before the foundation of the world. O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; and these know that thou hast sent me. I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them."

The instruction "Venite Seorsum" emphasizes this personal element, quoting a letter from our other heavenly friend St. Bruno the most illustrious founder of the Carthusians: "In silence and solitude men are able to recollect themselves and, so to speak, to dwell within themselves as much as they please, cultivating the buds of virtue and feeding happily on the fruits of paradise. Here one strives to acquire that eye by whose limpid glance the bridegroom is wounded with love, and in whose purity alone may God be seen. Here one is occupied in busy leisure, and rests in quiet activity. Here, as a recompense for the fatigued suffered in strife, God grants His athletes the reward they have long for, namely a peace unknown to the world and the joy of the Holy Spirit. This is the better part that Mary chose, that shall not be taken away from her." The prophet Hosea, too, has pointed out that the Lord Himself will allure us, and bring us into the wilderness, that is, in solitude and silence, and speak tenderly to us.

It is true that solitude and silence reduce the possibilities of expression, but we do this only in order to open up new avenues of life, as is seen in this saying of our heavenly friend, St. Anthony the Great: "The monk living in the desert is saved from three battles: those with his eyes, his tongue, and his hearing. One battle remains – the combat of the heart."

Here in solitude and silence our "longing" and "sighing" speak louder than words; so loud that they can be heard even from the outside of space and time. It is inevitable, though, that at the outset our heart comes to the surface with its inner division and unexplored regions but, little by little, inner harmony is restored with its necessary conditions and demands. The inner fruit, of course, is peace which the world cannot give – the restoration of the image of God in our soul

with a brightness brighter than the noonday sun. The radiance and its intensity is such that it makes: →

Icon # 399 = Light and Darkness

“My Heart throbs, my strength fails me; and the light of my eyes – it also has gone from me.”

The story of St. Paul on the road to Damascus is fairly familiar to us. It is so well known in the Christian world that even those Christians, who seldom go to Church have, at least, in a certain degree, heard about it. St. Paul himself related this story: “As I made my journey and drew near to Damascus, about noon a great light from heaven suddenly shone about me. And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ And I answered, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said to me, ‘I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you are persecuting.’ Now those who were with me saw the light but did not hear the voice of the one who was speaking to me. And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Rise, and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all that is appointed for you to do.’ And when I could not see because of the brightness of that light, I was led by the hand by those who were with me, and came into Damascus.”

It is interesting to notice in this account that even though those who were with St. Paul also saw the light, but they were not blinded. Only St. Paul was blinded. The moral lesson that we can draw from this event is that in the sheer goodness of divine providence the Lord intends that those who see may lead those who are blind, for if the companions of St. Paul were also blinded there will be a great danger that they will end up in a ditch, as the Lord says: “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?”

If we read the story of the apparition of Our Lady at Fatima, it will not be so esoteric for us to perceive, too, that although the companions of St. Paul saw the light but, they did not hear the voice of the Lord – only St. Paul heard it; for in the apparition of Our Lady at Fatima, although Lucia, Jacinta, and Francisco saw Our Lady, Francisco did not hear the voice of the Blessed Virgin. Our Lady only speaks to Lucia. However, Jacinta heard the voice of Our Lady but she did not speak to her.

That one’s “strength fails” in the presence of a supernatural being is not so abstruse either, for the book of Revelation describes John’s experience at Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of the Lord Jesus. He says: “I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, ‘write what you see in a book and send it to the seven

Churches...." Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me....When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead."

Did not the soldiers, too, who were with Judas looking for the Lord at the garden of Gethsemane, been knocked down by the simple avowal of the Lord: "I am he?" The power of Christ's word must be so great, for when He said to them, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. Since this is so, what it would be like to hear the dreadful voice of the Lord at the day of final reckoning uttered without leniency to all workers of iniquities who inflexibly persists in their evil deeds, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers?"

The light of their eyes will be gone, too, for they will be driven into the outer darkness without the slightest hope of seeing again. We have a prelude of this darkness in the story of Jack Abbot which he related in his book "In the Belly of the Beast." It recounts his experiences while in prison. Most of his life was spent in reform school and prisons. He had spent 15 years in solitary confinement. One of his worst solitary experiences was the so-called "blackout" cell, which he describes this way: "It was in total darkness. Not a crack of light entered the cell....the darkness was so absolute it was like being in ink. The only light I saw was when I closed my eyes. Then there was before me a vivid burst of brilliance, of color, like fireworks. When I opened my eyes, it would vanish....My eyes hungered for light, for color, the way someone's dry mouth may hunger for saliva."

Who in their right mind would want to reside in this darkness not just for 3 days or 20 billion years, but for all eternity?!

The Lord Jesus came as Light into our world so that those who follow Him sincerely and truthfully will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life. However, it's so mind boggling that people opted to walk in darkness rather than in light. We are told by St. John that the reason for this is that their deeds are evil. "For every one who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God."

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

At the end of the story of the man physically born blind whom the Lord Jesus healed, the Lord strikingly says: "'For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this, and they said to him, 'Are we also blind?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, 'we see,' your guilt remains.'"

In another occasion the Lord also says, "The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!"

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

For instance, we can be blind to the needs of others, to the pain of little children who are butchered in the womb of their mothers, to the excruciating hunger of those dying of starvation, to the dignity of every human person.

John Newton wrote the hymn "Amazing Grace," as a musical autobiography. At the end of the first verse, the hymn includes the line, "I once was blind, but now I see." Before John Newton said "Yes" to a life of faith, he had been a slave trader. He was blind to the needs of others and to the basic humanity of the people he bought and sold as slaves. St. Paul, too, knows of spiritual blindness. He once wrote to Timothy saying: "I once was a blasphemer and a persecutor, and an arrogant man and acted out of ignorance in my unbelief." He was metaphorically blind to the work of God among the early Christians until his conversion, when God physically blinded him and then later restored his sight.

Christ wants us to know, at least, to diminish our pride, that blindness is possible for all of us in the spiritual life. Even with a 20/20 vision we may discover that we are blind to God's work and ways in other people. We know it is easy to criticize the faults of others and overlook their dignity because of the faults we find in them. We notice the speck in their eyes, but we are unaware of the log that is in our own. For this reason, we have to pray always that God give us the clear vision of faith to see ourselves and others in divine light and grace. Then we can see that Grace is really amazing. If not, then: →

Icon # 400 = The value of Suffering

"My friends and companions stand aloof from my plague, and my kinsmen stand afar off. Those who seek my life lay snares, those who seek my hurt speak of ruin, and meditate treachery all the day long."

Most of us will affirm, unless if we are not in our right mind, that it is very excruciating when those who should be the first to come to our rescue when we are in deep trouble are the first to desert us.

Nonetheless, this is not incredibly surprising because in moments of profound soul trouble, even the most affectionate friends cannot enter into the inglenook of the sufferer's case. The friends can be anxious and solicitous as they may, but the sores of a tender conscience they are helpless to bind up. When our friends and those who live with us stand aloof from our suffering, we can make use of it by identifying ourselves with the Lord Jesus who, too was abandoned by His friends; even some of the women and others of His acquaintances gazed from afar on His cross.

The Lord Jesus drank the cup of suffering offered Him by the Father. Do we have, then, the guts to refuse the chalice of pain offered to us by the Lord in participation of His passion? With our other heavenly friend, St. Elizabeth of the Blessed Trinity, we too will say: "I cannot say that I love suffering in itself, but I love it because it renders me conformable to Him I am wedded and whom I love."

Thus suffering becomes lovable, and hence also less burdensome, according to the degree of our love for Christ. In order to suffer in peace, it is enough to will truly all that the Lord Jesus wills. Pain is, in appearance, the most useless of things, but it becomes fruitful by the grace of Christ whose love rendered sufferings in Calvary infinitely fruitful. It teaches us to distinguish false goods which pass away from true goods which last eternally. It makes us desire God who alone can heal certain wounds of the heart, and who alone can fortify and remake the soul.

Wherefore, even when our friends and companions and relatives stand aloof and afar off from our distress, the Lord Jesus will never abandon us. "Behold, I am with you always until the end of time," He says. And with our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux, we humbly say: "Lord, it is good for me to be in tribulation, provided that I have Thee as my companion. Yes, it is better to be afflicted with Thee than without Thee to reign, or to feast without Thee, or without Thee to be glorified. It is better for me, O Lord, to embrace Thee in tribulation, better to endure with Thee the furnace of affliction, than without Thee to enjoy even the bliss of paradise. 'For what have I in heaven but Thee, and besides Thee what do I desire upon earth?'"

If God is for us, who is against us? We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us, so much so, that even if “those who seek my life lay snare, those who seek my hurt speak of ruin, and meditate treachery all the day long,” our comfort is that Our Lord Jesus knows the pertinacious malignity of our foes, and will in due season put an end to it, as He even now sets a bound about it.

This snaring business is a vile one, the devil's own poachers alone patronize to it, but sincere prayer to God will deliver us, for the craft of the entire college of snarers can be resisted and overcome by those who are led by the Spirit of the Lord. Lies and slander poured from their mouths like water from the village pump. Their tongue was for ever going as though having a verbal diarrhea, and their heart for ever inventing lies. When they could not act they talked, and when they could not talk they imagined, plotted, schemed, and “meditate treachery all the day long.”

Restless is the activity of malice and deceit. Wicked men and women never have enough of evil. They travel far and wide, compassing sea and land, roaring like a lion seeking someone to injure; no labor is too severe, no cost too great if they may utterly destroy the innocent.

However, “The Lord is far from the wicked, but He hears the prayers of the righteous....” How, then, is distance from God measured? What can be seen in our lives that tell of the distance that is between God and us? Distance is truly a heart issue and what we delight in we feel closer to.

If we find our delight in the Lord, and find our hope and help in Him, we will certainly not fall into depression when our friends, companions, and relatives stand aloof from our affliction. In the words of Romano Guardini, “Perhaps we come nearer the truth when we say: Christ did not avoid pain, as we try to. He did not ignore it. He did not insulate himself from it. He received it into his heart.”

Man has come to equate suffering with unhappiness, since anyone who is unhappy suffers from his miseries. But one who suffers out of love is happy because he values suffering since it is undergone on behalf of another. What grace is meant to do is to help good people, not to escape from their sufferings, but to support their suffering with a stout heart, with a fortitude which gets its strength from faith.

In the materialist world man himself has made, pain and the need to suffer have no place. They have been deleted from his earthly agenda, because man is convinced that they entail unhappiness. In the world that men inhabit, pain and suffering are not what men would prefer them to be. They are what God, who is infinite Mercy and Wisdom, intends them to be. “My Father,” says the Lord Jesus,

“If it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt.”

Of course, it does not please God to see us suffer; He wants to see in what way and how much we love Him in our suffering. He wants to see what love we generate in the face of difficulties, of our miseries and weaknesses. God is pleased when we accept His gift – the ultimate happiness which awaits us if we are faithful to Him. If these things are ours and abound, they make us deaf to the charmer’s voice of the world, their seductions and snares. With the Psalmist we, then, can say: →

Icon # 401 = Prudence: Deaf and Dumb

“But I am like a deaf man, I do not hear, like a dumb man who does not open his mouth. Yea, I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.”

We don’t have to live long to realize that there are circumstances that a rebuke should be honestly given and there are also instances where it is more prudent to withhold a rebuke. The book of proverbs pointed out that a rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool. Our father St. Benedict, too, stipulated in his rule that the abbot, in his teaching, “Should always observe the Apostle’s recommendation in which he says: ‘use argument, appeal, and reproof.’”

This means that the abbot “must vary with circumstances, threatening and coaxing by turns, stern as a taskmaster, devoted and tender as only a father can be. With the undisciplined and restless, he will use firm argument; with the obedient and docile and patient, he will appeal for greater virtue; but as for the negligent and disdainful, we charge him to use reproof and rebuke. He should not gloss over the sins of those who err, but cut them out while he can, as soon as they begin to sprout, remembering the fate of Eli, priest of Shiloh.”

Community life is made up of a lot of small things. It is the small courtesy that matters: small marks of consideration, thinking of each other, being sensitive to others, aware of their needs, aware of their moods, tactful in handling them, kind in rebuking them, and be gentle to one another. It is right to say that patience is one of the ingredients needed to be able to discern when to administer or when to keep back a rebuke, that is, patience with ourselves and patience with others. The other ingredient, of course, is to realize that God, too, is patient with us. It is not hard to put up with others’ foibles when we realize how much God has to put up with us.

There's a legend that one day Abraham was visited in the desert by an Arab, who set up loud complaints of the food, the lodging, the bed, and the wine that his generous host had offered him. Finally, Abraham became exasperated and was to put him out, God appeared to Abraham at that moment and said: "Abraham, I have stood this man for forty years; can't you put up with him for one day?"

Approaching patience from somewhat behavioral perspective, St. Augustine describes patience as "that by which we endure evil with equanimity so that we may not through a lack of equanimity abandon the good through which we attain something better."

As St. Benedict had pointed out the abbot, this is also applicable to those in lawful authority such as parents, teachers, priests, bishops, and religious superiors, etc., that "he should not gloss over the sins of those who err, but cut them out while he can, as soon as they begin to sprout..." Hence, those in lawful authority have an obligation to admonish those who are in their charge.

There are three conditions that qualify one's obligation to admonish the sinner: 1st we are morally certain that a mortal sin is involved; 2nd we have reasonable hope of success; and 3rd we can do so without grave inconvenience to ourselves. A further qualification that must be kept in mind to admonish sinner is this: an obligation in justice vs. and obligation in charity. As mentioned above, those in authority such as parents, teachers, priests, bishops, and religious superiors have an obligation in justice to admonish those under their authority, even if it causes a grave inconvenience to them. We have an obligation in charity to admonish whomever we see doing or advocating the doing of something seriously (mortally) sinful (or venial sin).

Thus in cases where "sin" is not implicated such as "burping," which in other culture is even considered as a sign of satisfaction and content, especially in the context of eating, and "mispronouncing" words, a rebuke against the perpetrators of these acts can be reasonably restrained even if we feel a grinding "irritation" whenever these things happen.

However, if we could not bridle ourselves but feel a strong urge to rebuke the culprit we have, at least, to do it gently and dispassionately. We have also to examine ourselves that we are not guilty of doing the same things, otherwise, we will be shamefully convicted of deceitful hypocrisy, as the Scripture says: "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? You who boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? For it is written, 'The name of God is blaspheme among the Gentiles because of you.'"

Notice that St. Paul did not say the name of God is blasphemed among yourselves, but “among the Gentiles because of you.” It is not farfetched to say that the name of God is not blasphemed among ourselves because we could not dare to put the blame on God for the inconsistency of our brothers or sisters: saying one thing but doing another; whereas, among the non-believers it is God who bears the brunt of the deceitful hypocrisy of those who honor God with their lips while their hearts are far from Him. They became an instrument by which the non-believers, especially those who are incredibly repugnant of God and are really allergic of religion, will easily discredit the name of God. Unfortunately, they became the grist for the non-believer’s mill in blaspheming the name of God.

Since we are not the teachers nor the bishops nor the superiors of these non-believers, and it is very likely that the hope of success is at the nadir, and they will likely growl at us, so, in justice it would not be prudent to rebuke them to their face, but we can always admonish them in charity, doing it with gentleness and reverence, so that when they abuse us, they who revile our good behavior in Christ may be put to shame.

If even an admonition could hardly find access to them, then, we can peacefully allow ourselves to be “like a dumb man who does not open his mouth. Yea, I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.” We have to be aware though that it needs a good dosage of patience to be able to do this, always gazing upon the Lord Jesus.

Certainly, patience derives its positive power and confidence from a recognition of the victory of Christ. He remains the prime example and paradigm of patience for us to imitate. It is through Him that we can hope to pass from patience to glory. It is to Him, then, that we have to look to draw that inner strength and quiet which will enable us to pass through many tribulations, as our father St. Aelred of Rievaulx beautifully said: “Lest this divine fire cooled by the winds of injury, one should gaze constantly with the eyes of the mind on the tranquil patience of the dear Lord and Savior.”

Our other heavenly friend, Pope St. Gregory the Great, highly recommends that we have patience abiding in the mind, ready to be called into operation when the situation warrants it. We should prepare ourselves for the hardships in advance, by accepting them theoretically, before they happen; this way we will be protected “by the breastplates of patience” (from the *moralia*). “Yea, I am like a man who does not hear, and in whose mouth are no rebukes.”

A sacred indifference to the slanders of malevolent is true courage and wise policy. It is well to be as though we could not hear or see. Perhaps the psalmist means that this deafness on his part was unavoidable because he had no

power to answer the taunts of the cruel, but felt much of the truth of their ungenerous accusations. "But I am like a deaf man, I do not hear, like a dumb man who does not open his mouth." David, too, was bravely silent, and herein was eminently typical of Our Lord Jesus, whose marvelous silence before Pilate was far more eloquent than words. Therefore, on our part: →

Icon # 402 = Be Prepared

"But for thee, O Lord, do I wait; it is thou, O Lord my God, who wilt answer. For I pray, 'only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!'"

For most of us who had experienced human love can verily testify that waiting for the person we love naturally stirs in our heart feelings of longing, eagerness, excitement, and effervescent. This is so, because it is the nature of love to be united with the beloved. Even just to see the beloved is sufficient for the person who loves, how much more when it is united with the beloved with a union that could never be separated!

Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Not even the power of hell can snatch us out from His hand, for the Father who has given us to Christ Our Lord is greater than all, and no one can snatch us from the Father's hand, except when we deliberately commit sin. God forbid. Therefore, to hamper the possibility of committing sin deliberately, it is imperative to pray daily for the grace of fidelity to our commitments in life: to one's spouse if one is married, to one's religious vows if one is a religious. Also, fidelity to our day to day duty and responsibility.

Only few people are called to grandeur action but most of us are called to do the simple task entrusted to us. We have only to hold fast the hidden treasures, that is, the riches of the Christian faith, and the Pearl of great price, that is, the Lord Jesus, in our heart. If we do this while waiting for the final coming of the Lord Jesus in full glory and majesty, then, we will do well. In this case, the words of the Lord to the church in Thyatira will be applied to us: "to you I say, I do not lay upon you any other burden; only hold fast what you have, until I come."

Not many mainline Christians believe that the Lord Jesus is going to return to earth anytime soon and issue a grand call to accountability. Christian doctrine certainly professes belief in the second coming of the Lord, and it was a very strong and motivating force in the early years of the Church. But centuries have come and gone, and the vitality of that early belief has subsided to the back of most Christians' consciousness.

Thus we are face with the inevitable challenge about the quality and vibrancy of our Christian life and how we must endeavor to keep that alive. Most of us think that we have ample time to get ready for our final day, and we bank on that by putting off the attention we should be giving our life in the here and now. But in all probability such mentality is highly very precarious.

We must constantly and assiduously challenge our unfounded presumption that we know all the ins and outs of how God works. In this period of waiting the Lord has decreed, that no one shall know with absolute certainty whether he is worthy of His love or hate, for if one uses his common sense rightly and prudently, this uncertainty will propel him to seek with all his being the friendship and love of that same Lord.

God does not use, for sure, the same linear clock that we humans do. The unexpected day and the unknown hour when the Lord Jesus will come again cannot be detected by our clocks, not even by the modern atomic clock, nor by our reasoning. Therefore, we are encouraged to watch and pray so that when the Lord comes He will find us wide awake and sober like a servant living faithfully and carefully while he waits for the return of his own master.

Although we do not know when the Lord will return, we are called to live as faithful stewards of the life that He entrusted to our care. Our heavenly friend, St. Paul, picks up that same encouragement. He urges love and life of holiness on all who wait. For this is the will of God: our sanctification. For God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. In the meantime, as we watch and wait, we fix our eye on God's word; we strive the best we can to live faithfully, remaining vigilant, prudent, and dependable. We have to be proactive as the owner of a house would be if the thief called and said that the house was to be robbed tonight.

We need to stay awake, therefore, for we do not know on what day and hour the Lord is coming. St. Paul, however, remains practical and realistic; he never allows the expectation of Christ's return to distract from handling everyday, small needs, which comprise ninety percent of anyone's existence.

Moreover, no one is more insistent than Christ in drawing attention to household duties. He demands that as good stewards we "dispense food at need," eat and drink temperately, and always be alert. Such is "the faithful, far-sighted servant." In addition, if the Lord will not tolerate sleepy dreamers with head in clouds and body in bed, neither are we permitted to become busy-bodies, masters of trivia, activists with no time for contemplation, and strategists without moral principles.

We are asked to judge our action from the possibility of His sudden return like a robber who, in our modern time, will rob during day time when a person "least expects." Thus we are to be men and women of vision, of hope, of eternity. We should be willing to give and take forgiveness, for the Lord may return and find us nursing grudge over some harsh or impulsive words.

We are encouraged to be men and women of moral perspective; most of all to be prayerful and personally aware of the continuous, surprising coming of the Lord Jesus, for "Behold, the kingdom of God is within you." If these are ours and abound, we can confidently pray: "Only let them not rejoice over me, who boast against me when my foot slips!"

Whether we like it or not, so long as we are still on earth, we are bound to fail in our observance of God's commandments which are boiled down to the two great commandments to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind; and to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Unless we deceive ourselves we will surely notice that we are culpable of uncharitable thoughts against the people we live with whether it happens once in a while or whether it is against one or two brothers/sisters; we also fail in our action; most clearly we are convicted by our words, especially if we have an uncontrollable penchant for talking, as the Scripture says: "When words are many, transgression is not lacking."

However, if these failures teach us a lesson and also grow in humility and we frequently receive the sacrament of reconciliation, then, Lucifer and his cronies cannot protract their rejoicing over us and cannot boast loudly when we stumble and fall in our performance of God's commandments. It is only when we no longer pray and cast aside the thoughts of God from our heart that Lucifer and his colleagues will dance for joy and boast among themselves over our stumbling and falling, for we will become their prey. They would be like coyotes who feast and frolic over their booty.

Thus we should dread the sharp stings of their jeering malice; we should fear lest either by our conduct or our lifestyle we should give occasion to Lucifer and his wicked angles to rejoice over us. This fear will become for us an incentive to prayer, to anchor ourselves in God.

How careful, then, we ought to be, and how importunate in prayer for prevenient and actual grace to uphold us, for certainly, we do not wish to be the sport of our inveterate enemies like blind Samson. Accordingly, let us then beware of the treacherous Delilah of sin by whose means the eyes of our soul may eventually be put out. Therefore, we should humbly confess: →

Icon # 403 = Chance after Chance

"For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever with me. I confess my iniquity, I am sorry for my sin."

God who is infinite justice is also infinite mercy. For God justice and mercy are one. His justice demands that if we are found guilty of any iniquity we have to be cast in prison and never be released from there till we have paid the last penny, but His mercy also demands that if there's still even an iota of repentance left in us that would be more than sufficient for Him to forgive us our sins.

We have our life span to iron out the wrinkles of our moral life so that when we cross the threshold of eternity the pain which was caused by our iniquities will be healed. It is always Our Lord's way to give us a chance after chance. All the forgiven sinners, including us, would gladly have witnessed to that. The Lord Jesus is infinitely kind to the person who falls and rises again, that is, confesses one's iniquity and sorry for one's sin.

However, if we refuse chance after chance, if God's appeal and challenge come again and again in vain, the day finally comes, not when God has cast us into the eternal prison where there's no chance of release, but when we by deliberate choice have hurled ourselves into it.

The same God, in the person of the Lord Jesus, that bids us repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand, bids us repent, for otherwise we shall perish. He has set before us life and death, good and evil, pride and humility. Therefore, we ought to prefer good and humility that we may be able to confess our iniquities and sorry for our sins.

The acknowledgment of our sins need to be manifested by the renewal of our minds and the reformation of our lives in whatever state and condition we are in. If we found ourselves to be tax collectors or soldiers or just common people, we need to ask ourselves: "What shall we do to prove our repentance?" We should not ask what shall other people do, but "what shall we do?" We often fall into a trap of demanding from others to do this or that or to change their lives, but we are unwilling to do it or change ourselves. We should ask: "What fruits that befit repentance shall we bring forth?" When St. Paul was converted, the first question he asked was, "Lord, what do you want me to do?"

Repentance denotes a change in the direction of one's life. For instance, if we are going toward the north, repentance means going to the opposite direction toward the south. In other words, if we live a life of vices, dishonesty, and infidelity, repentance means living a life of virtues: from dishonesty to honesty,

from infidelity to fidelity. It means getting ourselves a new orientation for the way we live, then act on it.

True repentance will always make a difference in one's life. It can make a heart of stone into a heart of flesh, as God says through the prophet Ezekiel: "I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and will give them a heart of flesh that they may walk in my statutes and keep my commandments and obey them."

Confession of our sins is certainly good for our soul, and good also for those we live with. It has power to iron out wrinkles of rough relationship. We will be near to the end of our trouble when we come to an end with our sins. Nothing burdens the soul and draws it down as the consciousness of unrepented sins, but when we confessed our sins we feel a certain lightness in our body, we feel at peace.

The content of confession can be of two kinds: one comes from the feeling of thankfulness for graces received; the other with feelings of self-accusation of the evil done. Accordingly, every confession brings humility to the soul, whether it teaches it to recognize that it is justified by grace, or forces it to admit that it is itself guilty in its trespasses, through negligence. With the psalmist it humbly says: "I confess my iniquity, I am sorry for my sin."

Sorry for sin is also related to spiritual desire. Sometimes, when we remember that we have done things which are wrong we are pierced with pain at the recollection and become afire with love for God. We are consumed with a passion of desire as we yearn for our heavenly homeland. When we baptize our conscience with tears, we daily wash away our sins, and progressively make our way back to paradise and to eternal joy.

Sorry for sin comes into our lives through various channels. Primary among them is the attentive reading of the Scriptures, by the comparison of our lives with those of the saints, and by heeding the rebukes which spiritual men hurl at us though it's painful.

Mourning is a sorrowful thing, for it is the lament of one who is sorry. Does anyone mourn except for one who is dead? But all of us sinners ought to mourn for ourselves, since there is nothing else so dead as a man in a state of sin. Yet, how marvelous! If we mourn for ourselves, we come to life again. Thus we need to mourn through repentance, and we shall be comforted through forgiveness, as the Lord says: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Mourning through repentance has a prodigious power to loosen the grip of Lucifer and his allies over us, for no doubt: →

Icon # 404 = Bringing Our Lives into line with God's will for us

"Those who are my foes without cause are mighty, and many are those who hate me wrongfully. Those who render me evil for good are my adversaries because I follow after good."

It is very true that our wanton enemies are numberless and our lying foes are many. They have a knack for repaying evil for good and attacking us for seeking what is right, for they do not want us to be with God forever and inherit the never ending happiness which God has prepared for those who love and serve Him in this present life.

We have to resist them by being firm in our trust and faith in Our Lord Jesus and disciplining our body and spirit in obedience to the commandments of the Lord. It is not the power of our inveterate foes but our lack of self-discipline that makes them a threat to us, and we shall weaken them by overcoming ourselves.

In the days of Saul and David, it was when the Israelites fell into sin that the Lord allowed the Philistines to oppress them. And so they began to discipline themselves and to conquer the desires of the flesh in order to be able to conquer their adversaries.

The Israelites were attacked by human beings; we are assaulted by spiritual enemies. We can conquer solely by bringing our lives into line with God's will for us; then our enemies will give way before us, as one of our heavenly allies, St. James, says: "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."

Therefore, we must humbly ask God's help in this warfare, because our only means of conquering Lucifer and his allies is to conquer ourselves and be guided by the Spirit of the Lord Jesus.

Accordingly, true peace and freedom can only be ours when the flesh is ruled by the spirit and the spirit is guided by the will of God. Moreover, it is helpful to remember that the more we try to walk in the spirit the more determined will be the attack of the powers of darkness.

We have to keep in mind too that whenever we venture to stride in the way of the spirit and follow the spirit's guidance our foes take it as an attack against them, as indeed it is. The very fact of our seeking the kingdom of God and His righteousness is an unbearable challenge to our adversaries. It is an old quarrel between us and them: they are tortured by our salvation, because they see God inviting us to claim the inexpressible grandeur and glory which they forfeited. Whenever we are raised up, they are cast down; whenever we are

strengthened, they are weakened. The healing we receive from the Lord is a wound to them.

Everyone, therefore, who aims at being crowned with victory after the battle must not be discouraged while the fight goes on, for the Lord who prepares prizes beyond telling for the victors furnishes strength to the fighters. We must train, then, ourselves with the weapons of righteousness both to attack and to defend ourselves, so that whether we are held in honor or disgrace our conscience may be at peace, neither puffed up by success nor crushed by failure.

Who among our heavenly friends-allies was crowned without struggle? Seek and you shall find that everyone of them suffered multifarious hardships. Is it not better to fight for a short time, to carry a camp stake, arms, provisions, to grow faint under a coat of mail, and afterwards to rejoice with unspeakable happiness as victor, than to be slaves of Lucifer forever because of debacle to endure a little trial?

Of course, we are no match for Lucifer and all our enemies if we only rely on ourselves. That is why we have to watch and pray, and draw near to God for He who is in us is greater and far stronger than Lucifer and his wicked angels who are roaming around the world kidnapping human souls to be their slaves forever.

Our immortal foes are mighty and lively, so much so, that no matter how weak, and even dying, the righteous person may be, the evils which assault him are certainly to be lively and mighty enough.

Masters of the spiritual life tells us that we are battling against the world, the flesh, and the devil. They are, so to say, the trinity of evils which labor with mighty unremitting energy to overthrow us. With such lively and vigorous enemies we must not cease to cry mightily to our God. "Pray without ceasing," as St. Paul says. "Watch and Pray," as the Lord Jesus says.

Wrong as the cause of evil is, it is a popular one. Many human souls are adhering to it, and more and more the kingdom of darkness grows. It is only in the Lord Jesus that we can overthrow the kingdom of darkness, because in Him is light and whoever follows Him sincerely will not walk in darkness.

If we are honest with ourselves we will certainly affirm that there was a period in our lives when we were in darkness, but in our conversion we were ushered into the light of the Lord. Thus we are encouraged to walk as children of light, bearing fruits that befit repentance for the fruits of light are found in all that is good and right and true. But in order to bear much fruit we have to abide in the

Lord and He in us; otherwise, we wither, as He says: "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers." For this reason, we really need to pray saying: →

Icon # 405 = Imploring God not to jilt Us

"Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!"

This is one of the most profound supplications of the human soul which penetrates the deepest depths of our being, for it is an appeal not to be separated from God forever because that would be the greatest and most painful tragedy that could ever befall any being both angelic and human alike.

It is not cryptic to hear that many people attempted to commit suicide or exceedingly devastated for having jilted by girlfriend/boyfriend or husband/wife. How much more if we will be jilted by God forever because we rejected Him from our life in this present world by denying Him in the person of His Son, Our Lord Jesus, as Christ the Lord says: "Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven."

To be forsaken by God forever has an equal value of being ultimately deprived of the Beatific Vision for all eternity. This is the pain of lost which is the primary and the greatest of all pains, as the Lord says 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."

Thus the soul prays earnestly: "Do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me! Make haste to help, O Lord, my salvation!" We cry out to the Lord that He make haste to help us because apart from Him we can do nothing. We do not even know how to pray as we ought. Yet the prayer above is very indicative of the fundamental desire of the human soul for God to be with Him forever. Hence she beseeches Him: "Do not forsake me, O Lord!" To whom shall I go if thou forsake me? You alone have the words of eternal life, so please do not forsake me, O Lord! O my God, be not far from me!

When the Lord sees in our heart that we are earnest to be with Him for all eternity, He, on His part, will say to us: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may

forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands."

The mind of the person who does not seek the breathtaking beauty of his maker is unnaturally hard and remains frigid within itself. But if that person begins to burn with the desire of following the One whom he loves, then he runs melted by the fire of love. If we keep in mind what are the things which are promised us in heaven and how great they are, then everything which we have on earth is devalued for the soul.

We have to be aware, too, that the memory of God will be eroded during the day unless it is specifically cultivated on a fairly regular basis. In this case, it is not God who forsakes us but we forsake Him. So, if we are really serious of our spiritual life we need to have a regular time for prayer. The only way to pray is to pray; and the way to pray well is to pray often. If one has no time for this, then one must at least pray regularly. But the less one prays the worst it goes. It may be that regularity is not considered exciting in our era, but it remains an important feature of growth in prayerfulness.

It is a good practice to stabilize our orbit in God – that we will not be carried far away from Him. Our other heavenly friend, St. Francis de Sales, gives us a very excellent advise to moor our orbit in God. He said that "when our everyday duties do not demand any very great attention we should look more on God than on our work; but when they are so important that they demand our whole attention we should turn to Him from time to time, like sailors bound for port, who keep their eyes on the sky rather than on the ocean; in this way, God will work in us, with us, and for us, and our work will bring a blessing." Thus God will not be far from us and make haste to help us. On our part we can say with the Psalmist: →

Icon # 406 = The Tongue 2

Psalm 39 (38)

"I said, 'I will guard my ways, that I may not sin with my tongue; I will bridle my mouth, so long as the wicked are in my presence.' I was dumb and silent, I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. As I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue..."

We don't have to be a monk in order to value the importance of silence, and we don't have to be a religious in order to know the value of controlling our tongue, but if it's the only way to be able to value the importance of silence and to know the importance of controlling the tongue, then it's far better to become a monk and a religious.

The reason for this is quite simple, that is, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.” Tongue has an enormous power. It is a world in itself among the members of our body. St. James likens its power to a small fire that sets ablaze a great forest. Every kind of animal in sea, air, and land can be tamed and has been tamed by human being, but no human being can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Since no human being can tame the tongue, it follows that God alone can tame it. So when our relationship with God deepens, then, we will also be growing in knowing when to speak and when to remain silent. Only those who know how to remain silent know how to speak. In other words, they developed the virtue of prudence to use their tongue properly. They are delivered from verbal diarrhea which is indicative of shallow personality just as a river that is shallow is very noisy. Whereas the river that is very deep is quiet.

The Scripture tells us that even the fools if they remain silent are considered wise. On the other hand, we also know that we have to speak when it is necessary. Wisdom then lies in discernment. If we are newcomers in the monastery, it is far better to restrain our tongue even if we are intelligent and have a good education, and be considered a fool, than to be showy in our knowledge and be proven that those who listen to us are right.

One of our heavenly friends, St. Basil the Great the pride of Cappadocia, says that “silence is the beginning of purification of the soul.” It is wisdom to keep silent until one ought to speak. The saints and wise people loved to keep silent because they knew man’s speech is the beginning of error. The Scripture corroborate this assertion when it says: “When words are many, transgression is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is prudent.”

It is true to say that it is more difficult to know how to keep silent than how to speak. Most people speak because they do not know how to keep silent. A person, therefore, is wise who knows how to keep silent. Silencing the memory, the imagination, the impulses of the heart, where these do not help the work of absorption in Christ, is primary necessity. Such a silence frees our soul for prayer and disposes us to accept the suave influence of the Holy Spirit enlightening our mind to God’s demands, fortifying our will to strong decision, molding our heart’s affection after the model of the heart of Our Lord Jesus.

Our other heavenly friend, St. Peter Damian, rightly says: “we hold our tongues in check because if they are undisciplined they empty the soul of the strength of heavenly grace, and weaken its healthful vigor.” Our father St. Benedict, too, is very emphatic on the significance of curbing one’s tongue by devoting a chapter in his rule on the restraint of speech. He hammered out his point by declaring: “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 keys to life and death.' Speaking and teaching are the master's task; the disciple is to be silent and listen."

Not only does the guarding of the tongue speed the mind towards God, but it also gives great hidden strength for performing external actions with the help of the body, and enlightens a man in the secret doing, as the fathers said; "for guarding of the lips makes the conscience rise towards God, if only a man keeps silence with understanding, that is, trying the best we can to get rid of evil thoughts once we are aware of them, because a person may seem to be silent, but if his heart is unjustly condemning others he is bubbling ceaselessly."

Authentic silence results from wholeness and contentment; it comes from within, it cannot be imposed successfully from outside. Silence enhances the reflective quality of life and allows prayer to pass easily into awareness of the presence of God. God cannot be perceived in the midst of disturbance and so interior chaos needs to be diminished. When we grow in silence we grow in awareness of what is around us. As we mused about these things, they gave us reason to speak with our tongue saying: →

Icon # 407 = What to do when Death is knocking at the door of our soul

"Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is!"

To this we may add: "Make us know the shortness of our life that we may gain wisdom of heart." It is true to say that a good number of people have gained a certain degree of wisdom of heart when they were told by their doctor that they have only few days or months or years to live.

These people had lived an unexamined life most of their lives, but a terminal illness, somehow, jiggled them up from their relished illusion; and perhaps, for the first time in their lives they know "how fleeting my life is!" We call this "conversion."

Just as Christ Jesus, "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," so, these people gained true wisdom through their illnesses and became a paradigm that the Lord Jesus might display His perfect patience for an example to those who are suffering various kinds of trials that they, too, may gain wisdom of heart if only they stick to the Lord in spite of their afflictions, and many obtain eternal life which is not fleeting.

Death always pull us up short, and compels us to ask ourselves where we are going and what we are doing with our life here on earth. Our Christian belief tells us that death is not the termination of life but the beginning of new life in God, the gateway of our perfect union with God wherein there will be no more danger of separation.

While the human mind is at loss before the mystery of death, the Church, taught by divine Revelation, declares that God has created us, human beings, in a view of a blessed eternity that lies beyond the limits of our sad state on this present world. Moreover, the Christian faith teaches that bodily death, "from which man would have been immuned had he not sinned, will be overcome when that wholeness which he lost through his own fault will be given once again to him by the almighty and merciful Savior." For God has called us, and still calls us, to cleave to with all our being to Him in sharing forever a life that is divine and free from all decay. What God is by nature we will participate by grace.

One of the instruments of good works which our father St. Benedict laid down in his rule is to keep death daily before our eyes, and to prefer nothing, whatsoever, to the love of Christ. The Church encourages us in so many ways to prepare for our death. Simply recall the final words of the "Hail Mary" we all say so many times throughout our lives.

Most of our contemporaries do not want to think about death. It's too scary. Yet nothing is more certain for each of us than death. Whether we are prepared for it or not we will eventually die. Every tick of a clock brings us closer to death. It has been said that the thought of death is one of the most effective means of urging us to take every day and every moment of our lives seriously: to live each day as it were to be our last. We can even ask a decisive question, such as: if I die today, will I do this thing?

Assiduous reflection on death, then, is a noble philosophy, for it leads to wisdom especially if it is done in the light of the world to come and the eternal happiness which God has prepared for those who love Him. so let us eagerly pray for the grace to die daily to ourselves and to be able to prefer nothing whatsoever to the love of Christ, so that when the final hour comes wherein death will be knocking at the door of our soul, we can humbly request Our Lord Jesus, saying: My Lord, kindly open the door for me. →

Icon # 408 = Life that knows nothing of End

“Behold, thou hast made my days a few handbreadths, and my lifetime is as nothing in thy sight. Surely every man stands as a mere breath! Surely man goes about as a shadow!”

If we put time side by side with “eternity” it would be like putting man side by side with God, or humanity side by side with divinity. Thus our days on earth will be just a few handbreadths and our lifetime will be as nonexistence. We will be merely a breath and a shadow.

Scientists told us that our whole universe is now about 12 billion years, and our planet – earth is about 5 billion years old. It sounds like not a long years because 5 and 12 are relatively small numbers and billion is still lesser than trillion, but some students in college who are bored will tell you that even one day in school feel like a very long time.

The same is true for people who experienced boredom and could no longer find meaning in life, time too is like eternity. Time is too short for those who are content, too long for those who wait, but ask those men and women who love each other and they will tell you that time is nothing.

Thus God upon entering space and time and became a human being like us in all things except sin astoundingly humbles Himself in participating in our nothingness so that we, too, may participate in His endless majesty for all eternity. Accordingly, we will no longer be as a mere breath but also become partakers of divine life which God gives so abundantly to all who received Him in their hearts, for those who believed in Him and gratefully received Him, He gave the amazing power to become His children.

Consequently, we belong to the family of God and enter into the endless life of the Blessed Trinity; we are in them, and they in us as in a living tabernacle – as in a temple of glory, endowed with incredible knowledge and boundless love. As God necessarily loves His infinite goodness, so our love – arising from the happy seeing of God, can never interrupted or diminish its fervor.

Our eternal act of love will never suffer the least shadow of weariness. Seeing God to face, we will love Him above all things because we will see with the most perfect evidence that God is better than all creatures combined together. This love will never pass away. Faith will give place to vision; hope will be superseded by possession; but love never fails away.

Hence our lifetime is no longer nothing in His sight nor a mere breathe nor a shadow, but it will be a life that knows nothing of end. It breaths continually the

breath of the Holy Spirit – the breath of God. It knows no shadow, for it comes from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. It shall be a life without death and happiness without shadow of unrest. On the other hand: →

Icon # 409 = Heaping up Riches

“Lord, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is!”

The Lord Jesus, at one time, told a parable about a rich man whose land brought forth plentifully; and he thought to himself: “What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?” and he said, “I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones; and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; take your ease, eat, drink, be merry.” The Lord goes on to say: “But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ Then the Lord concluded the parable by saying: “So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

Certainly, it is true to say that greediness is a very dangerous vice. It is the mastermind of every economic crisis. Collapsed of the economy of a once prosperous country can be traced by this unrelentless vice. It drags down poorer countries to the dust. No wonder that the Lord warns us to beware of covetousness in all its form, for a person’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.

The vice of greediness, too, is the architect of the venality of discontent, for nothing is enough for a person of whom enough is too little. Thus the Lord warns, too, not to lay up treasures on earth where moth devours, rust consumes, and where thieves break in and steal, but to lay up treasures in heaven where no moth devours, no rust consumes, and where no thieves to break in and steal, because where our treasure is there our heart be also.

Of course, laying up treasures in heaven, undoubtedly, doesn’t mean that we should not care about our present life and are to care only about the next life. After all, in the Lord’s Prayer, Christ teaches us to pray for God’s kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. We are praying for glimpses of heaven to be known in the life we presently live. Consequently, this leads us to the issue of happiness.

St. Thomas Aquinas said that “all people agree in seeking happiness, but disagree as to where it is to be found.” “Some look for it in material things such

as riches, power, prestige, honor, and sensual pleasures." "And some look for it in spiritual things" which befit the dignity of their souls. This help us to understand why some people are greedy in heaping riches and material goods, some would pursue hedonistic or purely worldly life-style, while others would enter a monastery spending their whole lives in singing the praises of God.

In the first chapter of the book of Ecclesiastes, the "Preacher" who identified himself as "the son of David, king of Jerusalem, at the close of his life, after he had tested everything and ransacked all earthly good in pursuit of happiness, made a perennial conclusion that all is vanity, and what is important is to fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of the human person.

He recorded here his experience for the instruction and benefit of others, of course, of us. It shows that no created goods can truly satisfy the deepest longing of the human heart, and that true happiness is to be found in God alone and to live a virtuous life, stressing more heavenly values rather than earthly or worldly values.

If we have done these, then, we are a new creation which would be tantamount to our own resurrection in Our Lord Jesus, as our good friend St. Paul says: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things that are above," that is to say, "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is gracious, whatever is lovely, if there is only excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise," we need to think about these things and "the God of peace" will be with us; and not to set our minds only on things here on earth, because if we set our minds only on things here on earth we will definitely lost the eternal happiness that God is preparing for us, because it would be synonymous to having already our "reward." We will be likened to the man in the parable whom the Lord ascribes as foolish and said to him: "Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?"

So it is with a person who stores up treasures for himself/herself, but is not rich toward God. However, the consensus of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, we can specifically name some of them such as: St. John Chrysostom, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, St. Ambrose, and St. Clement of Alexandria, is that wealth in itself is not a bad thing so long as it is use properly, just as poverty, pure and simple, is not virtuous in itself.

St. Ambrose says: "Not all poverty is holy, nor all riches criminal. The crime is not in possessing worldly goods but in not knowing how to use them properly." Accordingly, St. Clement tells the Christians of Alexandria that it would be

irresponsible of them to think of throwing away their possessions when so much good can be accomplished with them. He said: "What kind of sharing would there be among people if no one had anything? How would one be able to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked and shelter the homeless if one were himself divested of all these things?"

Therefore, what God is against on the man in this parable is not his possession but his corrupted will, his greediness in heaping up riches for his own benefit, and to indulge in his own possession. That is why the Lord Jesus admonished His followers to shun all covetousness. In this parable the Lord is not knocking down the acquisition of wealth nor is He knocking private enterprise. What He is knocking down is the foolish idea that some people have on placing greater importance on heaping up material treasures than on heaping up spiritual treasures.

When we will take off from this world we can bring nothing with us except what we have done in the body, that is, how we use our life on earth. St. Paul makes the point in his first letter to St. Timothy, when he writes, "We brought nothing into the world, and we cannot take anything out of the world." And this, too, is the substance the Lord Jesus makes in this parable. He tells us that what counts when we die is not the wealth we acquired during life, but the person we became in the process of living.

He is saying that our priority in life should be on becoming a person, not on acquiring and heaping riches. Concretely, we violate the priority He speaks about when we acquire wealth at the expense of becoming dishonest, when we acquire power at the expense of becoming ruthless, when we acquire prestige and honor at the expense of becoming vainglorious. In short, we transgress the priority the Lord speaks of when we acquire and heap passing treasures in this present life at the expense of losing unfading and eternal treasures in the life to come. For this reason we humbly say: →

Icon # 410 = Wait in Hope

"And now, Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in thee. Deliver me from all my transgressions. Make me not the scorn of the fool!"

Waiting has an effect as a two-edged sword. It can cause trepidation and dread to one, and it can also cause excitement and joy to the other. If someone is guilty of any wrongdoing, waiting for the pronouncement of the verdict can be excruciatingly fearsome; but for someone to be awarded with honor and glory, waiting can be thrilling and stimulating.

Take for example those men and women to be awarded with the Nobel Peace price or the Templeton award, certainly the feelings of excitement and gladness are not far from their heart. However, we also know that these feelings cannot even be sustained within 24 hours, for after that other feelings will intrude again. But it would be different when we are awarded with the eternal joy of God which no one can take away from us, the unending ecstasy of happiness which will never dwindle nor diminish and sadness nor anxiety can ever intrude. It's a happiness worth waiting and a joy worth pursuing. It's a happiness and joy which is ours by inheritance but as yet to be consummated in the life to come.

However, even in this present life we have already a foretaste of this happiness when we grow in intimacy in our relationship with the Lord Jesus, and of course, with the Blessed Virgin Mary, too, for she is the joy of the angels and the happiness of the saints. With her on our side we will learn how to wait with eager expectation the coming of God's kingdom in all its fullness, we will learn how to wait the coming of the bridegroom from the marriage feast and be prepared to open the door of our heart when He knocks that He may enter in and have supper with us.

This, then, is our hope which is in God. Even if we have to pass many trials and tribulations in this present life we will not run out of energy sucking the juice of meaning and lesson of these afflictions, for our hope is in high gear and well activated to attain our ultimate goal, that is, the vision of God – the highest Good.

In the natural order, hope is one of the most noble sentiments God has placed in our heart. Hope is recommencing, “going on towards” the good which we want but which we do not yet possess. It is the latent desire in us which gives life to our faculties and puts them into operation to propel us towards the attainments of great ideals. Then humility enters to modulate this natural impetus, channeling it with grace.

When hope is interlinked with the virtue of humility, our petitions acquire greater efficacy. We ask because we humbly hope to acquire grace, and we hope because we ask through the Lord Jesus: “Amen, amen, I say to you, if you ask the Father anything in my name, He will give it to you. Hitherto you have not asked anything in my name. Ask and you shall receive, that your joy may be full.”

God willed and intended a perfect happiness for us and placed in our heart the desire and the hope of achieving it. Christian hope spurs us on, without fear of failure, to an ever more profound penetration of the furrow of everyday reality. “If God is with us, who is against us?” Hope is a powerful spiritual force that is activated through our positive attitude. If we must strive to reach the kingdom of

heaven, with an expenditure of effort which can be discouraging for those who suffer and struggle, we need to strain every nerve and sinew, applying especially our will which is strengthened enormously by the virtue of hope.

We put our faith to work, assisted by hope, when we live in charity. The virtue of hope, which is the virtue of eternal youth, is what thrills and energizes us and keeps us, whatever our age, young in heart, strong and noble. Hope is the source of energy and power, and it impels us to hurl ourselves audaciously against all the dangers to be overcome, and “we rejoice in our hope, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit we may abound in hope, hope for the deliverance from all our transgressions so that we will not become the scorn of the fool, for the fools does not blink their eyes to mock those “religious” people who fall into sin. They even use the media to publicize it, so that religion will be discredited.

Since we do not want to contribute to the disparagement of our religion by our transgressions, thus we need to be delivered from it by a sincere act of contrition and receive often the sacrament of reconciliation, for the confession of our sins is the beginning of our righteousness. Sin had to be confessed before salvation could be obtained. Conscience must be aroused. Once our conscience is aroused we will perceive that a good number of our transgressions are from our speech. Hence we learn to appreciate the value of silence where the small still voice of God speaks louder than audible words. Wherefore we say: →

Icon # 411 = Christian Silence

“I am dumb, I do not open my mouth; for it is thou who has done it.”

When the Lord Jesus was in the presence of Herod, being sent by Pilate, Herod questioned Him at some length; but the Lord made no answer. He was as though dumb, not opening His mouth. Wise, therefore, is the person who knows how to discern when to speak and when to remain silent.

It was Herod whom the Lord referred to as fox. This was when some Pharisees came, and said to Him, “Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.” And the Lord said to them: “Go and tell that fox, ‘Behold, I cast out demons and perform cures today and tomorrow, and the third day I finish my course.’”

One of the occasions, then, that it is more prudent to be silent than to speak is when we are in the presence of a wicked person, that is, when we perceived in our heart that no matter what we say, it will avail nothing. This kind of silence is not unhealthy. Of course, there is a healthy form of silence and there is an unhealthy kind of silence.

An example of an unhealthy kind of silence is when a husband and wife had quarreled and they remained silent for many day or weeks. This kind of silence is unhealthy because the reason for doing so is highly defective. On the other hand, there is a silence that is very healthy. For instance, a person remained silent to allow the word of God to surface in his consciousness and meditate upon it.

We practice silence in order to keep our thoughts on God, which, more than all else can restore us to our purity and bring us nearer to Him. Authentic silence results from wholeness and contentment; it comes from within, it cannot be imposed successfully from outside. Our father, St. Benedict, pointed out 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, as the psalmist says: "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 humbled, and refrained even from good words."

A love of Christian silence is a proof that a soul makes it her chiefest delight to be occupied on God, and finds not comfort like that of being in His presence. This is a foretaste of paradise of all serious seekers of God.

"The sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room" (Blaise Pascal). In other words, we run from silence, quiet, and privacy. We cannot stand our own company. We find it hard to rest in God. Of course, resting in God in the stillness of our heart is not a passive activity, rather something that we must continually work towards.

Our human nature does not naturally bend toward resting in God, but we have the promise that as we grow in this discipline, He will guide our paths. And when we see God's faithfulness displayed as we learn to trust him, our soul begins to feel at home in His presence. Our soul can be silent and still in the midst of chaos, storms and confusion because we know the Lord Jesus is on our side; of course, the Blessed Virgin too.

However, this does not mean that we are already exempted from sufferings or tribulations, but if they are too much for us and we could hardly bear them, then, it is legitimate to implore Him, saying humbly and sincerely: →

Icon # 412 = Stroke of Tribulations

"Remove thy stroke from me; I am spent by the blows of thy hand. When thou dost chasten man with rebukes for sin, thou does consume like a moth what is dear to him; surely every man is a mere breath!"

Eventhough we are not perceptive enough, but still we will notice that religious people, in general, have more capacity to bear sufferings than people who have no faith at all. Yet, even among religious people the capacity to bear sufferings or tribulations varies. What is unbearable to one might still be bearable to the other, and so on.

However, one thing is certain, that is, God will not put us to a test which is beyond our strength. He will never forsake us if we put our trust in Him even though we may experience excruciating blows of sufferings, because He is so much aware of all our weaknesses and limitations. Take for instance, a man knows the weight that can be placed on the back of an ass, a mule, or a camel, and burdens each beast with as much as it can carry; the potter knows how long he must keep his clay in the fire, for if he exposes it too long to the flames, the pot will crack, and if he does not bake it long enough, it will not be fit for use. Now if a man has a judgment as fine tune as this, how infinitely greater is the absolute wisdom of God in judging the degree of sufferings which a soul is able to bear?

Thus when we feel exhausted by the blows of sufferings we can rightly pray for the reposition of the stroke so that the relief we experienced due to His grace will become an incentive to becoming grateful for His leniency. On the other hand, if we have the courage and the stamina of the martyrs, we may humbly cry out: Let thy stroke, and these blows pass by me, but if they will not pass unless I willfully accepted them, then, not my will but your will be done.

Of course, the stroke of tribulations and the blows of afflictions seem painful for the moment rather than pleasant, but they have an amazing power to consume like a moth our hidden sinful desires which are dear to us, "for whoever 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."

The blows of anguish and the stroke of distress, if accepted in the right disposition, can help us detach from everything nonessential and ancillary in life and get us center on, like a laser beam, on what is most important. If appropriately utilized, they can lead us to ultimate victory and ultimate happiness. In the end, it's the crosses and trials and challenges that are most effective in shaping us into the kind of person we are meant to be.

They teach us to distinguish false goods which pass away from the true goods which last eternally. They have potent power to disable the stubborn will in us; they make us realize how dependent upon God we truly are for every breath we take; they make us desire God who alone can heal certain wounds of the heart and who alone can fortify and remake our soul.

As bitter medicines destroy the impurity of bad juices in the body, so the stroke of tribulations and the blows of afflictions purify the heart from evil passions, for they “consume like a moth what is dear to” us. This, of course, is owing to God’s grace given to us, for we never lost confidence in having recourse to Him in all our difficulties. Hence, we cry out: →

Icon # 413 = The Role of Tears and Compunction in Prayer

“Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear to my cry; hold not thy peace at my tears! For I am thy passing guest, a sojourner, like all my fathers. Look away from me, that I may know gladness, before I depart and be no more!”

Our father St. Benedict writes, in his Rule, a chapter on “Reverence at Prayer.” He says: “Whenever we want to ask some favor of a powerful man, we do it humbly and respectfully, for fear of presumption. How much more important, then, to lay our petitions before the Lord God of all things with the utmost humility and sincere devotion. We must know that God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words.”

We can hear the echo of these words in the writings of our other heavenly friend, no other than St. Simeon the New Theologian when he says, “Where there is deep humility, there also are copious tears; and where these are, thither too comes the Holy Spirit. When the grace of the worshipful spirit comes, the man under its influenced is filled with all purity and saintliness; then he sees God and God too looks on him.”

To bolster this evidence, let us hear from our another heavenly friend, the eminent St. Peter Damien who bore witness, saying: “The moisture of tears cleanses the soul from all stain and makes fertile the fields of the heart so that they may bring forth the seed of virtue. The tears which come from God approach the judgment seat of the divine mercy with perfect confidence, and obtaining at once what they ask, are assured of the certain forgiveness of our sins. Tears are the trustees in the making of peace between God and man, and true and wise masters amid the doubtings of human ignorance. For if we are wondering whether we are pleasing to God, no better guarantee can be given us that we pray with genuine tears.” He also said, “Any sacrifice of good works becomes sweet in the eyes of the heavenly Judge if it is sprinkled with the tears

of a contrite heart. Tears of compunction increase the strength of heavenly desire....Tears of compunction flow from our love of God, and on the other hand, because of our tears, our souls burn more fiercely with love of God.”

Compunction is something more than remorse for past sins. It is a habitual awareness of the tendency to sin. It has a twofold thrust: 1st, it keeps alive a sense of guilt with regard to previous failure; 2nd, it warns of weakness in the face of future temptations. Compunction views both past and future in terms of God’s mercy. The soul, conscious of personal insufficiency and seeing itself powerless to remedy what it sees within itself, puts complete trust in the power of grace. Where remorse and self-pitying are often tending towards despair and works its emotion inwards so that it can become to some as an obsession, compunction on the other hand works towards God.

Compunction is just as much aware of evil as remorse but sees it chiefly in relation to God rather than to self. An example of this is what our good friend, St. Paul, said in his second letter to the Corinthians, “As it is, I rejoice not because you were grieved but because you were grieved into repenting; for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.”

This is what happened to both Peter and Judas. Peter’s grief produces repentance that leads to salvation, but Judas’ grief produces death because he eventually committed suicide.

Those who imagine that the soul of compunction is the soul of misery have failed to understand the matter. Compunction has nothing to do with self-appointed misery, which more often than not is, like indulged scrupulosity, a defense against conscience. Remorse may be an escape, a reflex action, a device to screen guilt; compunction cannot be other than the expression of humbled love.

Compunction is a dual sensitivity. It places before us both the reality of our sinful condition and the urgency of our desire to be possessed totally by God. It is an active disgust at our low-level way of living out our lives, knowing that we are made for something better and that nothing less than God can bring us what our nature craves.

It is precisely the comparison between what we are and what we could be which constitute the triggering cause of the experience of compunction. It is a gift of divine love which is aimed at bringing us to salvation. It causes in us salutary pain and fear which keeps us from forgetting the possibility of eternal death, and thus serves as a check of carnal desire, a remedy for depravity, and destroys any lack of seriousness or concern with trivialities.

Compunction is objective and realist. It does not have to fancy guilt. The guilt is there, and compunction views it in the light of truth. There may be the scorching shame which accompanies remorse, that is, regret for one's sins or for acts that wrong others: distress from a sense of guilt, but the resolution which results from compunction is likely to be more effective. Compunction leads to sympathy with others, gratitude to God, and wider understanding of divine Providence.

At the heart of compunction is a sense of pain, a pricking, and a sensation of being stung. It is a question of being pierced, aroused from torpor and complacency and stimulated to action. It has nothing to do with obsessive and depressive sense of guilt, with endless reviewing of past failures and sins. Far from inducing depression in a person, true compunction makes for peace and joy. Thus the Lord looks away from our sins, hence we know gladness of heart. For this reason, we will know how to wait for the mercy of God. Therefore we can cry out diligently: →

Icon # 414 = Never give up Prayer no matter what

Psalm 40 (39)

"I waited patiently for the Lord; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure."

I do believe that so long as a person does not give up prayer there will always be a reasonable chance for that person to be converted even if that person is living in a state of mortal sin. This may sound contradictory because how can a person dare to say a prayer while continuing to live a sinful life! It sounds hypocrisy that a person persists in prayer while moonlighting evil deeds, say, for instance, adultery. It would be like a husband and wife making love but at the same time have an affair with someone else.

The reason of my belief is this: if a person will not give up prayer, it means that the line of communication between him/her and God is still open; whereas, if he/she gives up prayer it is tantamount to cutting off the line of communication between him/her and God. If a person cuts off her/his communication with God, especially if it is done deliberately, it would highly suggest that he/she has nothing to do with God anymore. If a person has nothing to do with God anymore, it would be considered as becoming completely independent from God.

In this case, a person will eventually be devoid of morality. If a person is devoid of morality, then, objective truth will be unjustly tormented, because at this stage

what a person considered as good, even if in reality it is evil, he/she will regard it as good; and what he/she considered as evil, even if in reality it is good, he/she will count it as evil. In other words, truth is severely distorted.

Whereas, if a person does not give up prayer, no matter what, even if she/he feels as being a hypocrite, there will come a time that he will realize that she/he is in a desolate pit and a miry bog. His/her sin is like an addiction that s/he is fastened into. By himself, he is powerless to get out of this miry bog. Thus he needs the power of God who alone can set him/her free. This, of course, he waited patiently to enable him to realize that apart from God s/he can do nothing.

On God's part, He is more than willing to draw out any kind of sinner from this bleak pit and from this miry quagmire of sin so long as there's still, even the tiniest, glimmer of repentance left in one's heart, for He came into our world "to seek and to save the lost." Moreover, He said: "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

It is in proportion to our repentance, confession, and tears that we receive the remission of our former sins, and as a consequence of this, sanctification and grace from on high. Thus the Lord sets our feet upon a rock of His mercy, so that we will be like a wise man who built his house on this solid foundation, hence making our steps secure in keeping His commandments and living a life of virtues – and no longer by human passions, living in licentiousness, infidelity, carousing, dishonesty, and wild profligacy which are like a miry clay.

Another dangerous aftermath if a person abandoned prayer is that the "self" becomes the center of one's life, a person will rely more in his natural ability. The adage: "Pray as though everything depends on God and work as though everything depends on you," lost its mutual cooperation. It now becomes: "Work as though everything depends on you." The "self" breaks partnership with God and looks for something else.

Take for example these words from Kristine Gumapac of Manila, Philippines, a 29 yrs old engineering student who no longer believes in God, she says: "Now if I want something, I don't go asking God to please give me this and I promise to be like this. When I want something, I don't look up, I search on the internet."

A good number of people, too, wanted to be completely independent of God because of a gripping fear that if they would sin they will go to hell: this ultimate desolate pit and eternal miry bog. At least, it gives them an amazing relief to think that if there's no God they would not be held accountable of their sins. Hear these words from a certain man named Tani, a 29 yrs old web developer who also does not believe in God anymore; he says: "I used to be afraid that I

go to hell if I would sin, I was very afraid because I really believed in a literal hell. But now, there's none of that."

When he used to turn to prayer in difficult situations, he said he now does "more planning, more doing, no more praying." If only he did not abandon God in his life, he could have still do more planning, more doing, and more praying. In this way he would have a healthy balance in his life which will enable him to focus steadily on the ultimate goal, that is, the vision of God.

The planning, the doing, and the praying could have served as the tripod of a transit. If the tripod is balanced you can zero in on the target. But if the tripod is not balanced, much more if one leg is lacking, it is impossible to hit your target especially if it is far. The same is true if God is lacking in one's life. It is impossible to attain the farthest, the highest, and the noblest ideals of heroic virtues, above all, the ultimate goal which is the never ending happiness of seeing God as He is – clearer than the clearest crystal and brighter than the brightest diamond hit by the noonday sun; as Christ the Lord say: "apart from Me, you can do nothing."

However, so long as we are still in this present life and while there's still breath in our nostril, the offer of repentance is available at all times and all seasons. At this point, pain and suffering can serve as a megaphone like what happened to the prodigal son who had squandered his property in loose living; and when he has spent everything, a great famine arose and he began to be in want. He would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate, but no one gave him anything.

However, when he came to himself, that is, hear the megaphone of pain, he realized and said: "How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" But, as the story goes on, the father said to his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found."

In other words, the once lost dignity of the prodigal son was fully restored to him. This, certainly, is an image of repentance, because the angels, who are the servants of God, rejoice too over one sinner who repents. For this reason, we can joyfully say: →

Icon # 415 = Music is a language of the Soul

"He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the Lord."

For some of us, before we met the Lord in one of the byways of our lives, if we are a music lover, probably were more interested in singing secular songs than religious ones. This would not be hard to understand because experience shows that the things which pertain the spirit is very less appealing to carnal minded people, for the desires of the spirit are against the flesh, and the desires of the flesh are against the spirit.

However, in our conversion, when we returned back to the Lord, He put a new song in our mouth, a song of praise to Him. We start going to Mass and participate in the singing, "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all our heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father."

Rendering praise to God does not mean simply directing piously exaggerated words toward God in heaven; the act of praise involves us in the very life of God-with-us. Words and gestures are performative; their utterance makes actual the glory of God to which they refer and which they intend. It is not as if God is needy for our praise; or that humanity is impoverished or diminished in dignity in the process of giving it.

Rather, the giving of praise to God has the power to bring our union with Him, to put us back in right relationship with God. We sing a song of praise and thanksgiving because in the concrete aspects of God's life with us we experienced His steadfast love, His gracious and everlasting presence among us. There is nothing on earth that is more really a foretaste of dwelling in heaven than when one praises God with spirited joy. There is nothing that exhilarates one's spirit, eases suffering, drives out evil spirits, or makes sadness disappear as does a singing a song of praise to God.

Singing a song of praise to God here on earth is already a foretaste of our eternal participation of the unceasing hymn of glory to God with all the angels and saints in heaven. It brings serenity to our soul, imparts peace by mastering swirling thoughts. It calms anger and controls concupiscence. From a heart of stone it can draw tears; of course, a silver tear of gladness and thanksgiving, of joy and acclamation.

It has been said that music is the language of the soul. Hence in putting a new song in our mouth, a song of praise to our God, we are learning a new

language of the soul. Precisely for this reason that we cherish the chanting of psalms and the singing of spiritual songs, because we developed a certain affinity with the things that pertain to God.

Worldly people, too, relish worldly music because that's their language. It has more meaning to them. They can relate to this kind of music, which for us may not make any sense at all. Thus whether we are worldly people or religious people, music is still a part of our life. Even among birds they have their own peculiar music. Humpback whales are said to sing sonatas as a form of communication. Hence God shared His love for music to His creatures so that we can begin in this present life what we will be doing in the life to come.

For the time being, "we know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the spirit, groan inwardly as we await for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." Wherefore, to alleviate the pang of our waiting, the Lord Our God made available to us the lullabies of heavenly glory.

We sing or listen to music regularly because it is an integral part of the rhythms of life: it heals painful wounds of the heart, it soothes stress syndrome, and help us feel and cope. We sing a song of praise to the Lord or listen to music because of the emotions it conjures up. We sing or listen to "oldies" for it is quite nostalgic. It has power to bring us back to a time when we were younger, or life was more carefree. It ushered us back to where we were at the time.

The music we cherish is usually related to good memories or a time that is particularly sweet and pleasant to us. Music is for every age. Mothers sing lullabies to their babies and are able to put them to sleep. Thus mother Church sing lullabies to us her children that we may sleep peacefully and bear our trials patiently.

Consequently, "many will see and fear;" fear here doesn't mean slavish but reverential, hence, will "put their trust in the Lord." Good music is like a shock absorber that helps us deal with the bumps of life at a reasonable discomfort. It stabilizes our sanity and makes us sober.

Since good music is from the Lord and listening to it contributes to the deepening of our trust, we partake in the life and happiness of God. For this reason, it is right to say: →

Icon # 416 = Right Living: Growing in Trust

“Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after false gods!”

If we trust a human person who is very limited and is possibly will forsake us when we are in hot water, how much more of God who has infinite wisdom and power, and who remains faithful even if all people will be unfaithful.

Just as the muscles of our body are developed and strengthened by regular exercises, so our trust in God grows deeper and stronger by exercising it. One of the many ways to exercise it is by allocating a personal time for prayer, and in other times just by a constant awareness of His presence.

Reading Scripture and other spiritual books is very helpful in cultivating, too, our trust in God, and above all by striving to put into practice His teaching. These are means to assist us in sustaining our trust in the Lord. As a result, we will not be deprived of the happiness which entails in having a healthy relationship with the Lord.

Living with faith and trust in the Lord Jesus is precisely the surest way to be truly blessed and to enjoy life on earth as we await for His final coming. This life being something in the nature of a down payment, a preparation for the supernatural and eternal life. Right living is the most trustworthy way to be reliably blessed.

If we walk humbly with Our God He will lead us by the hand to exactly who and what we need like a heavenly GPS² to those people, things, and experiences He has designed and intended, and this surely will be the cause of our deep fulfillment and blessedness.

If human life is in fact ordered by a beneficent Being whose all surpassing knowledge of our real needs and of the way in which they can be satisfied infinitely exceeds our own, we must expect a priori that His operations will sometimes appear to us far from beneficent and far from wise, and that it will be our ultimate and highest prudence to give Him unreservedly our trust in spite of this. What is more blessed than to entrust ourselves to the Lord who cannot fail!

The Lord Jesus never fails those who make Him their trust; He guides them through darkness and through trials secretly and securely to their end, and in the evening time there is light.

² Global Positioning System

Trust is the younger sister of Faith. Where Faith is Trust is also there. Thus if we have faith in the Lord Jesus we will also trust Him. We can confide and surrender ourselves and our troubles to Him.

The following story might help to convey our point: "Two four-year old boys were playing 'follow the leader' on top of an old tottering city wall, fully 18 feet above ground. Each dared the other to harder and harder challenges. They tiptoed across very narrow spots to prove that they would not get giddy or dizzy. They spat down in contempt from the height. Then they came to where the wall had crumbled completely. As they stood there looking down, the part behind them broke off. So now they were stranded on a little island 18 feet above the ground. They had to call for help. Up came a man, stood at the foot of the wall stretched out his arms and yelled to them, 'Jump down. I'll catch you.' Well, what to do? These two lads were so alike, as almost to be twins, but each reacted to the invitation in opposite ways. One jumped off the edge of the wall without hesitation. The other sank to his knees, cried in panic and waited for the firemen to come with their long ladders. The question now is: why did one boy have the courage to jump and the other, not? The answer is easy: the man down below was the first boy's father" (Ernst Lange).

One of the titles of the Lord Jesus is "father of the world to come." Thus Our Lord Jesus, stretching His arms on the cross, invites all humanity to make Him our trust for He offers us forgiveness of our sins and salvation of our souls. We have only to jump into His Sacred Heart and we shall find rest for our soul.

Just as the sheep hear the voice of the shepherd and follow Him, but does not follow the voice of stranger; so those who belong to the Lord Jesus hear His voice and follow Him, but will not turn to Lucifer, who by his pride fell from the heights of heaven, and to those who go astray after false gods of this world such as vanity, and the adulation of celebrities.

Those who make the Lord their trust are truly blessed, because their eyes are open to see the wondrous deeds that the Lord has done in our world: from the cleansing of lepers to feeding the hungry to opening the eyes of the blind to healing the sick, and to raising the dead. Their ears are open to hear the Good News of salvation being preached to the poor, the lowly, and the humble. Their hearts are open to welcome the Lord Jesus in their lives. Hence, with amazing joy they cried out in exultant voice: →

Icon # 417 = Incomparable Greatness of the Works of God

"Thou hast multiplied, O Lord my God, thy wondrous deeds and thy thoughts toward us; none can compare with thee! Were I to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be numbered."

At the conclusion of St. John's Gospel, it says: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written."

This simply means that the works of God far exceed what we could ever think or imagine. Scientists tell us that there are 10 millions known species in our world. Many of these species we have never seen and heard. Just imagine all the species under the sea, those under the earth, all kinds of flowers and trees, all kinds of birds too. What about the other domain in our universe!

This too is beyond our imagination. Yet all this is so little in God's eyes compared to the breathtaking glory which God has prepared for those who love Him, as the Lord Jesus says: "Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, may be with me where I am, to behold my glory which thou hast given me in their love for me before the foundation of the world."

The Lord Our God still continue His work until now in our world through His mystical Body – the Church by giving shelter to the homeless and street children; by feeding the hungry in soup kitchens; by helping the victims of human trafficking; by ministering to widows and orphans; by establishing schools, colleges, and universities for wholesome education; and above all the Lord continue His work in us for our sanctification, the renewal of our mind, the strengthening of our will in all that is good and right and true, and the purification of our heart.

All this is because His thoughts are toward us and He delights in the human race; as it is written: "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honour. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet...."

To be sure, there are still innumerable wondrous deeds that the Lord hast done and will be doing in our world, so much so, that if we are "to proclaim and tell of them, they would be more than can be numbered."

It is also true to say that the most wondrous deeds that the Lord has done for us and the whole human race are the mind boggling mysteries of His Incarnation, His passion, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. The mystery of evil, of course, baffled us but it is far less than the mystery of the Incarnation because

for a God – the Supreme Being, infinitely beyond we could think or imagine, to humble Himself by taking our human nature is more than enough to blow the minds of all the angels, much more to be crucified without the slightest dose of anesthesia. He endured Death that we may not be afraid to die; He showed the Resurrection that we may believe we can rise again. He came to call us to the Heavenly kingdom and taught us how to despise passing benefits of this world and not to fear temporary adversities.

Thus He did not disregard reproaches, He sustained injustices, He did not fear death, He did not shrink from the cross; and when the people came to take Him by force to make Him king He fled. Hence, He is intimating to us by these precedents that we must not fear hardships in this world, and to avoid giddy prosperity. In the words of our other heavenly friend, Pope St. Leo the Great: “Thy cross, O Lord, is the source of all blessings, the cause of all graces; by it the faithful find strength in weakness, glory in shame, life in death.”

The transformation of our mortal body into a glorified body, in the same pattern as the Lord Jesus, is a deed beyond all telling. This is already realized in the glorified body of the Blessed Virgin Mary – the pride of the human race. In the bodies of the Blessed Virgin and of the Lord Jesus we see what our body would be like when the glory of the Lord is revealed. Without any shadow of a doubt, this certainly is a wondrous deed. This is owing to His delectation towards us human beings, for He “rejoices in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men.” His thoughts are toward us.

None can compare with the Lord, because He surpasses the limits even of our wildest imagination. If we are to proclaim all the wondrous deeds of the Lord they would be more than we can tell. Thus our endeavor to speak and to declare them is our feeble attempt to acknowledge His incomparable greatness.

In so doing we are giving Him His due, for it is truly right and just that we have to honor Him not only because He is Our God and we are His creatures, but also because it is an expression of our gratitude for the grace He gave us in delighting to do His will and for putting His law within our heart so that we may be always mindful of Him. For this reason, we can humbly say: →

Icon # 418 = Food of the Lord Jesus: God's Will

"Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire; but thou hast given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering thou hast not required. Then I said, 'Lo, I come; in the roll of the book it is written of me; I delight to do thy will, O my God; thy law is within my heart.'"

After the Lord Jesus revealed Himself to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, His disciples besought Him, saying: "Rabbi eat." But He said to them, "I have food to eat of which you do not know." So the disciples said to one another, "Has any one brought Him food?" The Lord Jesus said to them, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work."

As food is to the body so doing the will of the heavenly Father is to Christ Jesus. The Father and His will are with the Lord Jesus always, upholding, sustaining, strengthening, fulfilling, and urging Him constantly on.

The will of God never takes us to where the Grace of God will not protect us. Knowing God apart from His will is nought either it be knowledge or understanding or inwardness or piety or repose. In God's will all things are and are something – they are highly pleasing to Him and are perfect. Apart from God's will all things are nought – they are not pleasing to Him and are imperfect.

Thus our highest priority in prayer is to have the grace to do God's will. If we are really determined to do His will, He will even send a little child to teach us how to discern and do God's will. If we truly seek God's will, whatever flows from it or is revealed by it we may take as a gift from God without ever looking or considering whether it is by nature or grace or whence it comes or in what ways: we need not worry about it.

It is well with us and we need only lead a simple and ordinary Christian, and religious life, if we take vows, without considering doing anything extraordinary. We should take just one thing from God, having no fear and anxiety that by our limitation we will be hindered in any way, inwardly or outwardly. Whatever we may do, with whomsoever we are, if only we are aware of having the love of God within us that alone suffices. What more can we ask for! Thus the psalmist says: "What else have I in heaven but you? Apart from you I want nothing on earth. My body and my heart faint for joy; God is my possession for ever."

When we know we are doing God's will, which alone is enough to sustain our happiness. When we don't have that, all the possessions in the world cannot uphold happiness in the depths of our heart. True happiness, then, comes from the knowledge of doing God's will. No wonder that the saints are happy people, for they conformed their lives to the will of God, and have their ears

opened to the admonition of Scripture, as it is written: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification." It also says: "Be holy, as I the Lord your God am holy."

The saints are the scientists in the science of knowing the mind and will of God, the artists in the achievement of perfect service of God and man. Not all the saints are intellectuals in the present use of that term. Many were simple men and women whose school was the heart and whose teacher was the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of the Lord Jesus. They have an open ear to respond to the universal call to holiness. They have translated and interpreted the Christian message, "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," in the particular context and tone of a given time, culture, language, and occasion.

Sanctity does not consist in always achieving great and difficult things but in repeatedly and always putting the love of God into every unnoticeable act, in living with the simplicity and naturalness of the sons and daughters of God the actual reality of the moment.

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

To have an open ear indicates a willingness to obey. Hence the ears of the Lord Jesus are always open to obey the will of His heavenly Father to the point of shedding His blood on the cross, for "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...."

Obedience is a way to give oneself entirely to God, to prove the love of a soul that, no longer belonging to itself, turns away from itself in order to be ruled by God. Our father St. Benedict opens his prologue by saying, "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, 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. The labor of obedience will bring you back to him from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true king, Christ the Lord."

Obedience is not relinquishing of human responsibility for life and activity. It is a light that clarifies what the Lord wants of us, here and now, regarding our task in the fulfillment of the immense plan of God. The one who obeys chooses freely to follow this light. He puts all his energy towards fulfilling this will with which his own will coincides. Obedience is a way to give oneself entirely to God, to prove the

love of our soul that, no longer belonging to ourself, turns away from ourself in order to be ruled by God.

It is the test of our availability to God – the measure of our love of Him. Our obedience is a participation of the Lord Jesus' obedience to the Father who is also Our Father. Obedience has an intimate connection to listening and hearing. To listen is the capacity to receive a word – to allow ourselves to be changed by the word we received. Hearing is the same with listening but it does involve the change of ourselves. It is important, then, to hear and to listen. Listening leads to insight. Insight is seeing with the eyes of the heart. Hence our good friend, St. Paul points out: "having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power in us who believe...."

To have the law of God within our heart is an earmark that we acknowledge Him as Our God and we His people, as the prophet Jeremiah says: "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord, 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.'"

Having the law of God, then, within our heart is also a veritable sign that we have some knowledge of Him. It is tantamount to conversion and a renewal of mind and heart, as the prophet Ezekiel says: "A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." Isn't this a glad news of deliverance? It is a deliverance from a heart hardened by vices and sin to a heart mellowed by gentleness and humility. Therefore: →

Icon # 419 = Whole Life and Work of Christ are Revelations of the Divine Perfection

"I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation; lo, I have not restrained my lips, as thou knowest, O Lord. I have not hid thy saving help within my heart, I have spoken of thy faithfulness and thy salvation; I have not concealed thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness from the great congregation."

When the angel Raphael had finished his mission in helping Tobias obtain the money which Tobit, his father, had left in trust with Gabael at Regis in Media, and for curing Tobit of his blindness, and for freeing Sarah the wife of Tobias from the demon who was in love with her, the angel Raphael called both Tobit and Tobias and said to them: "Praise God and give thanks to him in the presence of all the living for what he has done for you. It is good to praise God and to exalt his name, worthily declaring the works of God. Do not be slow to give him thanks. It is good to guard the secret of a king, but gloriously to reveal the works of God."

In our case, it is our duty and our privilege to make known the deeds the Lord Jesus has done for us, for all the works He has done, in His human nature are the works of God Himself, as the Lord Jesus says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise."

Hence in declaring the works of the Lord Jesus we reveal the works of God. One of the innumerable works that the Lord has done for us was to set us free from the slavery of the devil, that is, from the slavery of sin because whoever commits sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The reason why the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. In doing this He underwent a torment which baffles the imaginations of all created intelligence both angels and men, for the minds of angels and men can comprehend more easily that God should punish everlastingly the demons and those men who die in mortal sin, than that God Himself should die upon the cross to save men from everlasting punishment.

The Lord Jesus is the All Powerful God became a human being like us in all things, placed within our reach in human form, making sanctity accessible and visible to us for thirty-three years and making Him tangible, known, loved, and thus able to be emulated. His whole life and work are revelations of the divine perfections.

Everything He did has a transcendental value. It shows us the nature of God and beckons us to believe in the love of the God who created us and wants us to share His intimate life. All His words and deeds gave His being an aura of loyalty, truth, and nobility which even His indomitable enemies acknowledged: "Master, we know that you are true, and teach the way of God truthfully, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men."

He confronted problems and dangers along the way decisively and with fortitude. Human heroism of the highest order was in harmony with His person. He was not a man of half measures in anything He did: He suffered, acted, and loved with intensity of motive, in profound silence and joy. He brought everything

to the light and from every event extracted the most it could yield: "a hundred from one and life eternal."

This is absolutely a glad news of deliverance which is imperative to be told in the great congregation of the faithful, for the Lord Jesus is the aroma of God the Father among those who are being saved, a fragrance from life to life. He wanted to be for us a real and living exemplar, to give us an example of struggle and victory. He wanted to leave us a complete life's series of human actions, done by Him, so that we may ponder them in prayer, since Christ is God became man: a complete, perfect man. And through His human nature, He shows us what His divine nature is.

Recalling this human refinement of the Lord Jesus, who spent His life in the service of others, we are doing more than describing a pattern of human behavior; we are proclaiming His steadfast love, His faithfulness, and His saving help; we are discovering God. Therefore, we can confidently approach the throne of mercy to receive grace by saying: →

Icon # 420 = God's Mercy and Steadfast Love

"Do not thou, O Lord, withhold thy mercy from me, let thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness ever preserve me! For evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me, till I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head; my heart fails me."

When we grow in self-knowledge we will also grow in the awareness that there are still lots in us, in our hearts and minds, that has to be removed. We will surely be deceived if we think that there's nothing more in us that has to be pulled out. If we will let fallow the garden of our hearts, certainly, it will not take a long time for the weeds of iniquities and the darnels of evils to grow without measure, so much so, that we could no longer see the admirable beauty of our souls which are made in the image and likeness of God.

With stunning subtlety, the weeds of iniquities and the darnels of evil will strip us of our priceless dignity as children of God. This, of course, can make our hearts sink into a severe depression, and if unlucky will even lead to eternal desolation. It is for this reason that we should be earnest in cultivating the soil of our hearts and cry out for God's mercy to preserve us in His steadfast love and His faithfulness, and pray that we may have the grace to be faithful to His commandments and that He will never allows us to be parted from Him. Our other heavenly friend, blessed Pope John XXIII, has this to say: "God's mercy is my only merit."

The beauty of God's mercy is that it does not weaken or humiliate its recipient. It confirms the recipient in his or her human dignity. Christ's parable of the prodigal son, for instance, is a synthesis of the biblical theology of mercy, and demonstrates how the question of a true humanism inevitably opens up the question of God. The prodigal son represents every human person burdened by the tragedy of the human condition, which is "the awareness of squandered sonship," evils and iniquities which have encompassed and overtaken our human dignity.

God the forgiving father in His mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness to His paternity and going beyond the norm of strict justice, restores to the wayward son the truth about himself, which is the lost dignity of his sonship. Thus he was preserved. So long as we still have breath we should never cease to cry out for God's mercy. In doing so, it shows that we are not far from the kingdom of God and is likely to be justified as we enter the inner chamber of our heart. It is wise, therefore, to say: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me a sinner."

The steadfast love of the Lord Jesus for us is potently willed by Him to transform all of us into His own likeness and grow into a mature manhood in the fullness and stature of His divine life. He gave Himself in complete submission to the loving will of His heavenly Father; He gave everything right up to the last drop of His blood and water that lingered in His battered body. Then He gave us His own beloved Mother, the most gracious of creatures in all the earth, and no one can rob nor hijack us of His steadfast love.

The Lord Jesus who loved us to the end cannot be content unless we love Him as much as He loved us. And the same goes for the loved one: Man cannot be satisfied until he loves as much as he himself is loved. In the words of one of our heavenly friends, the flower of France, St. Therese of Lisieux: "God's love is satisfied only when God stoops down to our nothingness and transform that nothingness into fire."

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, as St. John says: "We love, because he first loved us." Hence, it is only because we are loved first by God that we are lovable. Thus when we reciprocated the steadfast love of Our Lord Jesus, countless evils and iniquities who were seeking to snatch away our life will be turned back in dishonor and confusion, and be put to shame. For this reason, we humbly beseech Him saying: →

Icon # 421 = Deliverance From the Snatcher of Divine Life

“Do not thou, O Lord, withhold thy mercy from me, let thy steadfast love and thy faithfulness ever preserve me! For evils have encompassed me without number; my iniquities have overtaken me, till I cannot see; they are more than the hairs of my head; my heart fails me.”

The first letter of Peter forewarns us that our adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. It is for this reason, then, that we have to ask the Lord to deliver us, and make haste to help us. Once the Lord comes to our aid it would be the devil and his minions that will be put to shame and confusion because we will have the grace to resist them and not to yield to their temptations.

If we make it our aim to always anchor ourselves in the Lord Jesus, chances are high that Lucifer, the fallen angel, who became a devil, would scratch his head every time he attempts to snatch away the divine life which Christ gave us, as the Lord Jesus 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.”

The Lord Jesus dubbed Lucifer as the father of lies, the murderer from the beginning, and the deceiver of the world. It is also true to say that Lucifer and the other fallen angels are snatchers of divine life, because they are so desperate, envious, and jealous of us for we are to inherit the unspeakable glory, majesty, and grandeur of God which they forfeited by their willful rebellion against God.

Thus they prowl around the world like roaring lions, seeking to snatch away the divine life which Christ gave to those who received Him and believed in His name. We have to assert that these lions can only devour those who freely yielded to them by living a life contrary to the Gospel, that is, that men should no longer live for themselves but for God.

It is consoling to know that these lions are powerless over those who are in the state of grace. For instance, when St. Therese was about four years old she saw a demon in a form of a black child. St. Therese looked at the imp and it disappears. She, then, was convinced that demons are more afraid of those who are in the state of grace, for the imp could not even bear the gaze of a little child.

In God's providence everything is absolutely right and whatever happens is for the assistance of our soul. For whatever God does with us, He does out of His love and consideration for us because it is adapted to our needs. When the Devil and the other demons know that the Lord intends to have mercy on us

and make haste to help us, they aggravate us all the more and attack us all the more vehemently.

Our heavenly friends, knowing this by their own experience in their lives on earth, strengthened mankind with their teaching and do not allow us to be a prey to anxiety and despair. One of them said: "Have you fallen? Rise up; and if it happens again and again and again, do the same." And another said: "the strength of those who really want to acquire virtue is this: even if they fall they don't get discouraged and gave up but go on, thinking only of starting again."

If we truly made up our mind to be delivered from Lucifer and the other fallen angels we ought never feel completely secure until our last breath. Labor and deep concern and prayer to God about everything is necessary that He may protect us, deliver us, and bring us safety to our eternal home by His goodness to the glory of His name.

In this way, it is Lucifer and the other demons that are put to shame and confusion, be turned back and brought to dishonor. It is dishonor and humiliation to them because they are defeated by mere humans like us who are so inferior to them in power and strength. This, of course, is owing to God's grace at work in us because apart from Him we can really do nothing but with Him helping us we are more than conquerors.

The letter of James enjoins us also to submit ourselves therefore to God; and to resist the devil and he will flee from us; to draw near to God and he will draw near to us.

If it happens that we will be terrified and trembling in the presence of imminent peril, we should not delay to call upon the name of the Lord Jesus to help us, for it is very pleasing to Him when we humbly invoke His name to deliver us, as it is written: "Call on me in the day of troubles, I will deliver you and you shall glorify me."

Just as Lucifer is seeking to snatch away our life, so the Lord Jesus is also seeking to snatch away those who are under the dominion of Lucifer, because "the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil."

Lucifer and the other demons are roaming around the whole world in order to kill, to steal, to snatch, and destroy the families and lives of people, but the Lord Jesus came that we may have life and have it abundantly. His spirit is in the whole world hounding those who are still lead astray from the right path of life, offering them another chance to repent so that by their conversion the grip of Lucifer and the other demons that enslaved them be loosened.

Thus it is Lucifer and the other wicked angels that are put to shame and confusion; turned back and brought to dishonor; and appalled because of their shame. It is a shame, dishonor, and confusion that will never end nor have any intermission. This would also be the destiny of all who willfully do evil and died unrepentant, for God “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. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil....” On the other hand: →

Icon # 422 = Human Life: The Greatest and Highest pinnacle of Man's Achievement on Earth

“But may all who seek thee rejoice and be glad in thee; may those who love thy salvation say continually, ‘Great is the Lord!’”

If we consider as “great” a human person who achieved great things in this life, for example, Pope St. Leo the Great, St. Basil, Pope St. Gregory the Great, and likely Pope John Paul II, and other scientists, how much more of God who is infinite Being with infinite wisdom and knowledge and intelligence and power, who created the whole universe out of nothing!

He spoke and they came to be. God, in knowing Himself perfectly knows everything perfectly. In God being is the same as knowing, and that the highest activity within God is His knowing Himself. “Godhead” is the divinity in its purity and immutability. Hence He is exceedingly Great beyond measure.

No matter how intelligent and knowledgeable scientists are in unlocking the secret of nature they are still absolutely nothing compared to the knowledge and intelligent of God, because even the intelligence and knowledge of all the angels combined together are still infinitely deficient when put side by side with the intelligence and knowledge of God, because God is intelligence and knowledge itself. Between men, no matter how brilliant they are, and angels there is still an interminable distance in terms of knowledge and intelligence. How much more between men and God! Therefore, God is Great.

God, in His infinite love for us human beings, freely share His attributes to us such as: knowledge, intelligence, wisdom, goodness, understanding, power, creativity, etc. This is very apparent in different kinds of constructions such as houses, buildings, bridges, etc; and inventions such as electricity, telephone, radio, and all kinds of communications and transportations both land, sea, and Air, and space travels.

With all these impressive feats, it is still utterly clear as crystal that human beings are absolutely dependent on existing materials in achieving these feats. It is not farfetched to assert that if man can create or invent a firefly without borrowing any material from someone else, and let this firefly engender by itself, that would be the greatest and highest pinnacle of man's achievement on earth.

But we know, and even little children know, at least those at the age of reason and are intelligent enough, that no man can invent or create something by producing the materials out of nothing. **It is also true to asseverate that there is one thing in the whole earth which human beings can create without borrowing materials from someone else or somewhere else, for the materials are within themselves but just need unification of these materials. This creation is human life itself.**

Thus in the union of man and a woman, human beings are endowed with incredible power and incomprehensible dignity to become co-creator with God, because the ultimate source of life is God Himself. **Hence, the greatest and highest pinnacle of man's achievement on earth is human life itself.**

This is an achievement which is open to both poor and rich alike. God, in His inconceivable love for the human race, intends to partake our human life that we, in turn, may partake in His divine life. He humbles Himself to share our humanity that we may share in His divinity. Therefore, God is exceedingly Great beyond measure.

If our ultimate end is to have been created and elevated to the order of grace, that is, what God is by nature we will be by grace, in order to give unending glory to God, it is but logical and natural that whatever earthly goal we may seek, there is nothing that can give us supreme happiness except God. If God, on the other hand, wished us to attain glory here on earth, it would be natural for us to want to know how to go about it. We know the subject, we know the goal; we then look for the specific means that will help us carry out our mission in this world where we live. Where are the means? Who can give them to us? And who better than God the Creator of man and the world to tell us which are the best means?

One of the means, of course, is the keeping of God's commandments. Take for example these words from our other heavenly friend, no other than Bishop Fulton Sheen: "When you buy an automobile, the manufacturer gives you a set of instructions: the pressure to which you ought to inflate your tires; the kind of oil you ought to use; and the proper fuel to put in the gas tank. He has nothing against you by giving you these instructions, as God had nothing against you in giving you commandments. The manufacturer wants to be helpful; he is anxious that you get the maximum utility of the car. And God is anxious that you get the

maximum happiness out of life. Such is the purpose of His commandments. We are free. We can do as we please. We ought to use gas in the tank, but if we please, we can put in chanel No. 5. Now there is no doubt that it is nicer for our nostrils to fill the tank with perfume rather than with gasoline, but the car simply will not run on chanel No. 5. In like manner, we were made to run on the fuel of God's love and commandments, and we simply will not run on anything else. We just bog down" (Preface to Religion).

The Baltimore catechism said that God made man in order to know Him, love Him, and serve Him in this life and be happy with Him in the next. Moreover, St. Thomas Aquinas points out that "all people agree in seeking happiness, but they disagree as to where it is found." This helps us explain why some people adopt a hedonistic way of life and why some people enter a monastery.

We know that not every enjoyment is true happiness; there is only one beatitude befitting the soul that is God's image, that is, the possession of the supreme good. Wherefore, the psalmist hits the nail on the head when he says: "But may all who seek thee rejoice and be glad in thee; may those who love thy salvation say continually, 'Great is the Lord!'"

No doubt the happiness that the Lord Jesus promised is in sharp contrast to the ideals of the world. For instance, **Christ's happiness** consists in excellence and abundance of good things in God. It is obtained by the poor in spirit. In contrast, the world seeks their happiness in excellence and abundance of wealth and prestige. It is obtained by avarice and vainglory. **Christ's happiness** consists in Divine Consolation. It is obtained by those who mourned for their sins, for they received forgiveness. On the other hand, the world seeks their happiness in consolations for the hardships of life. They obtained it by lust and pleasures. **Christ's happiness** consists in secure possession of real eternal joy. It is obtained by the meek who shall inherit the land. In contrast, the world seeks their happiness in worldly security. They obtained it by destroying their enemies. **Christ's happiness** consists in the fulfillment of justice. It is obtained by those who hunger and thirst for justice. On the other hand, the world seeks their happiness in temporal possession. They obtained it by injustice and robbery. **Christ's happiness** consists in divine mercy and freedom from eternal misery. It is obtained by the merciful. In contrast, the world seeks their happiness in avoiding the troubles and hardship of others. They obtained it by hardening their hearts. **Christ's happiness** consists in the vision of God. It is obtained by the pure of heart, for they shall see God. On the other hand, the world seeks their happiness in worldly success. They obtained it by seeing only the things of this life. Finally, **Christ's happiness** consists in perfect union with God in wisdom. It is obtained by the peacemakers. In contrast, the world seeks happiness in having their own will. They obtained it by stirring discord.

Therefore, seeing the unambiguous contrast between Christ's happiness and the world's happiness, and how it is obtained, and where it ultimately leads, we can absolutely say without a second thought: "Great is the Lord!" Truly, "Great is the Lord!"

Since the Lord is exceedingly Great beyond measure; His power and might and wisdom and knowledge are boundless, hence, our feeble attempt to recount His wondrous deeds is our humble way of saying continually: "Great is the Lord!"

Is there any god like the Lord Jesus who, though He was by nature God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant and being found in human form He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross? Is there any god like the Lord Jesus who ransomed us from the futile ways inherited from this present world, not with perishable things such as silver and gold or other hard currency, but with His precious blood like that of a lamb without blemish or spot? Is there any god like the Lord Jesus who gave His own Body as food and His own Blood as drink for the life of the world? Is there any god like the Lord Jesus who raised the dead, gave sight to the blind, cleansed lepers, healed the sick, and preached the good news of salvation to the poor? Is there any god like the Lord Jesus who forgave His executioners and offered paradise to the thief who asked to be remembered by Him when He comes to His kingdom?

Truly, no human words and thoughts can fully do justice in describing the greatness of the Lord, for between God and ourselves there will be not even an intermediary idea, because all created ideas even infused ideas and thoughts, however elevated, can be only limited participations in the truth and greatness of God, and therefore cannot represent God as He is in Himself: Supreme Being, Infinite Truth, Wisdom without measure, Power without limit, infinite and luminous source of all knowledge.

No created concept could ever represent God as He is in Himself Him who is thought itself. Thus the child's cup cannot contain the ocean. It is enough, more than enough, for the child to say continually, without weary, "Great is the Lord!" Yes, "Great is the Lord!" "Great is the Lord!" "Great is the Lord!"

Although the Lord is Great and highly to be praised and we are poor and needy and worthy to be despised, yet we are the object of His predilection for He takes delight in the human race and His thoughts are upon us, as it is written: "What is man that thou are mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him?" Hence, in true humility, we humbly say: →

Icon # 423 = God's Predilection: The Poor and the Needy

"As for me, I am poor and needy; but the Lord takes thought for me. Thou art my help and my deliverer; do not tarry, O my God!"

People who experienced falling in love, even once, will likely agree that when we caught the person we love glancing at us from time to time we feel an unutterable delight. When the Lord takes thought for us, it simply means that He is glancing at us not just from time to time, but all the time.

This, of course, presupposes that although we are poor and needy we are also righteous, for "the eyes of the Lord are toward the righteous, and his ears toward their cry....When the righteous cry for help, the Lord delivers them out of all their troubles." Thus the Lord is our help and our deliverer. He helps us in carrying out His commandments. He delivers us from the slavery of vices and sin. He helps us live a dignified Christian life in spite of our poverty and necessity, for in doing so the light of holiness shines in our lives – therefore God is glorified in us.

Being poor and needy is another way of participating in the mystery of the Incarnation where the Lord Jesus Christ – the second Person of the Most Blessed Trinity willingly set aside the richness of divinity and heavenly glory and accepted the poverty of humanity in all its consequences. In the words of one of our heavenly friends, St. Simeon the New Theologian, "Our Lord was pleased to assume the likeness of every poor man and compared Himself to every poor man in order that no man who believes in Him should exalt himself over his brother, but, seeing his lord in his brother, should consider himself less and worse than his brother, just as he is less than his creator; and should take the poor man in and honor him, and be ready to exhaust all his means in helping him, just as Our Lord Jesus Christ exhausted His blood for our salvation."

More than just an economic condition, the ideal of poverty the Lord Jesus preached to His disciples included the elements of interior disposition or attitude, as well as correctness of intention in the use of one's own goods. Poverty does not mean throwing away all that belongs to us, it means using our property to the greater of God. St. Pius X, our another heavenly friend, has this to say: "According to the law of Spirit and truth I call them truly poor who, even in the midst of riches, in heart and mind are indifferent to any advantage that worldly goods may bring them."

In the Rule of St. Benedict, we can see that the preoccupation of St. Benedict in speaking of the use of material goods is not that the monastery be as poor as possible, but rather that it be as full as possible of peace, fraternal communion, and the spirit of Christian sacrifice. What matter for St. Benedict is not primarily the poverty of the monastery as a whole, what could be called "sociological

poverty," but rather ascetical poverty and personal poverty directed toward a spiritual dependence on Christ as represented by the abbot, toward a sense of responsibility for material goods, and toward the true peace of the community.

In our life, an expression of personal poverty is frequently the acceptance of a communitarian poverty which is less austere than what we desire it to be. One of the keys to personal poverty is the difference between what is useful and what is superfluous. The superfluous, be it private or collective, has to be banished in virtue of the law of universal fraternal charity, which cannot suffer superfluities when other suffer need. What is useful, on the other hand, can, and many times must be kept.

In order to be sensitive to the dividing line between the useful and the superfluous, we need sincere detachment. First personal detachment, in order to eradicate all that is superfluous and be increasingly aware of what is not too necessary. Then collective detachment, in order to reduce community needs to a minimum, living in sober austerity with a simple standard of life. We should realize that comfort is the mask with which the wealth and riches of much of our society are disguised.

Exterior poverty is essential before we can advance into the realm of real interior poverty. We should be wary of kidding ourselves that we are practicing poverty of spirit if exteriorly we are accumulating useless objects and protecting ourselves against the hardship of life by all kinds of shock absorbers. This is not to be poor and needy, but weakness and evasion.

Interior poverty, based on serious poverty, is an emptying of self and inner deprivation, a death to self, a diminishment of the "I" or ego. One ceases to be attached to one's desires, opinions, tastes, everything that makes the ego solid and evident even in apparently good things. One should desire to lose this "ego" this "self" for the sake of Christ. Thus to lose oneself is to find oneself, and thus to die is to be saved, to live in Christ. Hence though we are poor and needy, but we are the Lord's predilection, His thoughts are on us. What more can we ask for!? →

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In order to be sensitive to the dividing line between the useful and the superfluous, we need sincere detachment. First personal detachment, in order to eradicate all that is superfluous and be increasingly aware of what is not too necessary. Then collective detachment, in order to reduce community needs to a minimum, living in sober austerity with a simple standard of life. We should realize that comfort is the mask with which the wealth and riches of much of our society are disguised.

Exterior poverty is essential before we can advance into the realm of real interior poverty. We should be weary of kidding ourselves that we are practicing poverty of spirit if exteriorly we are accumulating useless objects and protecting ourselves against the hardship of life by all kinds of shock absorbers. This is not to be poor and needy, but weakness and evasion.

Interior poverty, based on serious poverty, is an emptying of self and inner deprivation, a death to self, a diminishment of the "I" or ego. One ceases to be attached to one's desires, opinions, tastes, everything that makes the ego solid and evident even in apparently good things. One should desire to lose this "ego" this "self" for the sake of Christ. Thus to lose oneself is to find oneself, and thus to die is to be saved, to live in Christ. Hence though we are poor and needy, but we are the Lord's predilection, His thoughts are on us. What more can we ask for!? →

Icon # 424 = Blessing in showing kindness to the Poor

Psalm 41 (40)

"Blessed is he who considers the poor! The Lord delivers him in the day of trouble; the Lord protects him and keeps him alive; he is called blessed in the land; thou dost not give him up to the will of his enemies."

It is not implausible to say that kindness to the poor shall not be forgotten by God, because He has identified Himself with the poor. He knows what is to be poor by experiencing it Himself. He was born poor – in a manger. His parents were poor, so much so, that they can only afford the offering of two young pigeons. He died poor – in a borrowed sepulcher. Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Lord Jesus has nowhere to lay his head.

If someone who gives a cup of cold water to any followers of Christ does not lose his/her reward, so anyone who considers the poor shall not be deprived of mercy from the Lord.

To perpetuate the affinity of Christ for the poor, the Church deliberately favored a preferential option for the poor. Christian, then, has to seek and find Christ in his neighbor, especially the poor and to serve Him in their needs.

Lest we will be guilty of pronouncing unfair judgment on rich people, we have to say that a rich person who truly considers the poor can be rightly called blessed, for instance, to name a few: St. King Louis of France, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, St. Elizabeth of Portugal, etc., because it is not riches that is harmful but the love for riches. The blame is not on the created things but on the corrupted will. It is possible to be rich and not be deceived by riches if they use their riches for the greater glory of God which is made tangible by considering the poor who are materially less fortunate.

They are blessed because whatever they do to relieve the suffering of the poor they did it to Christ, for He says: "Whatever you do to the least of my brethren you do it to me." He also said: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Undoubtedly, the merciful are those who consider the poor or afflicted whether in mind, or body, or spirit. Hence, we must ourselves be instructed by the poverty and affliction of others.

Whoever considers the poor and has a compassionate concern for them, even if he cannot relieve them, shall be regarded by the Lord: he shall not only be recompensed in the resurrection of the just, but he shall be blessed upon the earth.

Liberality to the poor is the surest and safest way to obtain blessing from the Lord and effectual relief from God. For instance, in all troubles: God will deliver them in the day of evil, so that when the times are at the worst it shall go well with them. They shall be preserved and kept alive when the arrows of death fly thickly around about them. Do their enemies threaten them? The Lord will not deliver them into the vagary of their enemies; and the most potent enemy we have can have no power against us but what is permitted him from above.

The good-will of Our Lord Jesus who loves us far beyond we can tell is sufficient to secure us from the ill-will of all who hate us, men and demons alike; and that good-will we may promise ourselves an interest in if we have considered the poor and helped to relieve and rescue them.

Perhaps we don't see a whole lot of poverty where we live, so we are not directly confronted by the need to consider the poor. We can sometimes bring

our definition of 'poor' to its lowest and most absolute form, which in turn can affect how responsible or involved we feel we should be in bringing answers. However, when we start thinking of the poor as anyone who is less fortunate than ourselves, we'll never have any difficulty finding people to consider.

Considering the poor is the responsibility of a Christian, and it's a responsibility that comes with promise: "Blessed is he who considers the poor," for the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble; the Lord will preserve him and keep him alive, and he will be blessed on the earth; the Lord will not deliver him to the will of his enemies. In a similar vein, Proverbs 19:17 tells us that, "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed."

On the other hand, there are attitudes to be guarded against if we are to respond to the needs of the poor. One is excuses. In the Parable of the Good Samaritan the Lord Jesus told a story of a man who was robbed, beaten black and blue and was left for dead. The Lord parallels the response of the two religious men who passed by on the other side when confronted by the half dead man and the actions of the Samaritan who stopped to help.

It is not unreasonable to attest that the two men who did not stop to help would have been reasonably able to justify their inaction. Perhaps they had to get to an important business meeting or to be in the temple on time or had to get the bank or the supermarket before closing time. Perhaps they had thought they were not in a position to help.

Similarly, we can have multitude of excuses that can hinder us from helping the poor. We can snuggle in the nooks and crannies of our busyness, our religiosity, our lack of resources or our perceived indifference of the problem. This is tantamount to passing by on the other side when confronted with the reality of people's needs, circumstances, and situations.

The Scriptures forewarn us of the consequences of ignoring the condition of the poor. For instance, Proverbs 21:13 tells us, "He who closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself cry out and not be heard," moreover, in chapter 28:27 it says: "He who gives to the poor will not want, but he who hides his eyes will get many a curse." Hence, if we respond to the needs of the poor God will give us the provision and capacity to continue to do so; after all, it is He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food.

The other one is judgmental attitude. Ignorance can induce us to make wrong judgments about the poor and the underprivileged. We can make presumptions about why people are poor; how smart they are, and how they are taking advantage of the help afforded to them.

It is not farfetched to say that a judgmental attitude can actually ostracize us from the very people we are meant to be helping. For instance, Prov. 28:11 tells us: "A rich man is wise in his own eyes, but a poor man who has understanding will find him out." When it comes to a person who is less fortunate than us they often have had to develop 'street smarts' to survive and get through life. This ability can in turn help them discern between those with bad motives, judging attitudes, tokenistic responses, and those with a genuine heart to help.

The third one is moralizing attitude. It would be a painful and distressing experience if you are in a situation where you are made to feel like you don't care enough about the circumstances and needs of the poor by someone who thinks they somehow know better how to serve the poor and be compassionate to them. They can deride the wealthy for being greedy, and be moralistic and critical toward how others respond to the poor in order to elevate themselves. Generosity is fantastic, but when it is showy, elitist and trying to prove something it is hollow and unattractive, and again the poor we are trying to help are likely to see right through it.

On the other hand, those who truly consider the poor are blessed, for they too will be considered by the Lord because the measure they gave will be measured back to them, pressed down, shaken together, and running over.

Since we are all part of God's plan for humanity, our Christianity, then, should not just be limited to ourselves but has to be extended to others, especially the poor who are less fortunate in material things, for in doing so we will be blessed because if someone who gives a cup of cold water to the least disciple of Christ shall not lose his/her reward, how much more those who consider the poor and destitute, say, for instance, mother Teresa of Calcutta and her sisters. Thus mother Teresa 'is called blessed in the land,' for she was beatified then canonized; Fr. Damien of Molokai and many others are truly "blessed in the land," for they are now in the land of the living. And since in their ministry to the poor they did not seek to glorify themselves but the Lord, God did not give them up to the will of Lucifer who threw punches of prideful thoughts and vanities which could knock them down.

Our passions, too, can become our enemies, for the Lord says that our enemies are within us, However, the Lord will not give us up to our passions if we, too, will not give up considering the needs of the less fortunate. Moreover, we can say:
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Icon # 425 = Two Kinds of Healing: Bodily and Spiritual

"The Lord sustains him on his sickbed; in his illness thou healest all his infirmities."

In one of His discourses at the Last Supper, the Lord says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father." Down through the centuries, one of the many works of the Lord Jesus that those who believe in Him also did was healing the sick and curing those who were afflicted with various illnesses and infirmities.

For instance, Peter and John healed a cripple man in the temple in the name of the Lord Jesus; multitudes both of men and women carried out the sick into the street that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them; those who were afflicted with unclean spirits were also healed. At Lystra, Paul healed a man who was a cripple from birth. In the neighborhood of Malta, Paul also healed the father of Publius who was sick with fever and dysentery by praying and laying his hands on him.

The letter of James, too, encourages us, saying: "Is any among you sick? Let him call the elders of the Church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven."

For those who have a certain affinity to the spiritual life, it would not be hard to see that there are two kinds of healing: one is bodily, and the other is spiritual which, of course, includes healing of memory of the past, emotional, and psychological, and the forgiveness of sin. The Lord Jesus did these two kinds of healing, from time to time, during His active ministry. For instance, the case of the paralytic man lying on his bed.

It was a belief at that time that sin has a lion's share in the illness of a person, as echoed in the question of the disciples to Christ about the man born blind whether he or his parent sinned that he was born blind.

In the case of the paralytic man, when the Lord saw the faith of those who brought him, He said to him: "Take heart, my son; your sins are forgiven." The simple logic of this statement is that since sin is the cause of his illness, the Lord first healed the cause. Of course, this spins the imagination of the Scribes because it is tantamount to blasphemy for it is God alone who can forgive sin. Once He healed the cause He also healed the effect. Knowing their thoughts, He said: "Why do you think evil in your hearts? For which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sin," He then said to the paralytic, "Rise,

take up your bed and go home." And he rose and went home. Hence forgiveness and healing work side by side for the well being of a person.

The Lord Jesus' compassion toward the sick and suffering, and His many healings of every kind of infirmity are dazzling evidence that "God has visited his people" and that the kingdom of God is near at hand. Christ has the power not only to heal, but also to forgive sins; He has come to heal the whole person: soul and body; He is the physician the sick and those who are afflicted by various infirmities have need of.

His compassion toward all who suffer goes so far that He identifies Himself with them: "I was sick and you visited Me." Moved by so much suffering the Lord Jesus not only allows Himself to be touched by the sick, but He makes their miseries His own, as it is written: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."

His healings were signs of the coming of the kingdom of God. They announced a more radical healing: the victory over sin and death through His passion, crucifixion, and resurrection. On the cross the Lord Jesus took upon Himself the whole weight of evil and took away the sin of the world of which illness is only a consequence. By His passion and death on the cross the Lord Jesus has given the human race a new meaning to suffering. It can henceforth configure us to Him and unite us with His redemptive passion.

Thus even though we suffer various infirmities the Lord sustains us on our sickbed; in our illness He heals our maladies and forgives us of our sins, "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."

The Church believes and confesses that among the seven sacraments there is one especially intended to strengthen those who being tried by illness, the Anointing of the sick. The Church's Catechism has this to say: "The sacrament of Anointing of the sick is given to those who are seriously ill by anointing them on the forehead and hands with duly blessed oil – pressed from olives or from other plants – saying, only once: 'Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with grace of the Holy Spirit. May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.'"

So long as we are still in this present world it is very likely that we will stumble and fall from time to time, that is, commit sin in our thoughts, words, and actions. Thus we should never cease to cry out for God's mercy and inner healing. Hence we have to admit our sin/s and humbly say to the Lord: →

Icon # 426 = Confession of Sins: The Beginning of Righteousness

"As for me, I said, 'O Lord, be gracious to me; heal me, for I have sinned against thee!'"

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 inner darkness remains. Thus it is written: "If the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!" The first letter of John also said: "He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in darkness still. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and in it there is no cause for stumbling. But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes."

We cannot live a completely sinless existence here on earth; whether we like it or not sins and faults, even serious ones, will be committed, but the consequences of these failures can be mitigated by sincere confession, penance, and acts of charity and forgiveness towards one another. If we forgive one another God also forgives us. Forgiveness is a very potent balm that brings healing to our wounded soul. It cures the wounds of hurt, quenches the flames of revenge; it cools the thirst of hatred, controls unbridled fury, and vanishes the itch of violence.

The beginning of our righteousness is the confession of our sins. We are on the path of righteousness if we will never cease confessing our sins, for the first requirement of healing is to remove the rough garment of sin; so we have to stop sinning deliberately and need to cry out for mercy for our past sins. Sin had to be confessed before the healing power of salvation could be obtained. Conscience must be aroused.

Venial sin lessens charity, obstructs the sources of special grace, brings on lukewarmness, vitiates acts of virtue, and finally, despoiling by degrees, the soul under her dominion leaves her beaten black and blue. As often as this happens we have to cry for mercy and say: "O Lord, be gracious to me, heal me, for I have sinned against thee!"

When we explore in depth our unruly and wild emotions we will be confronted with our wounded self. However, this confrontation should not lead us to despair but rather should set us free to receive the compassion of God without whom no healing is possible. Hence, with king David we humbly cry out: "Have mercy on me, O God, in your kindness; in your compassion blot out my offense. Wash me more and more from my guilt, and cleanse me from my sin. My offenses truly I know them, and my sin is always before me. Against thee, thee only, have I

sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou art justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment.”

Just as God works in nature, so likewise He works in the supernature. Take for example the rose. With too much sunshine it withers, but with too much rain it wilts. So, too, the human soul. It must have contraction for it is proud; it must have expansion for it loves. It needs desolations for it is grasping, greedy, and miserly; it needs consolations for it is not yet divine. Nature must have balance, its sunshine and its rain; so, too, supernature. Thus when we are wounded by sin, the Lord heals us by His forgiveness, for He is the true physician of our soul.

Let us strive to humble ourselves as deeply as possible when we become aware of the imperfections, faults, or vices of others. Those who take scandal, those who harbor feelings of surprise, disgust, or indignation, may be pretty certain that God will permit them, for their humiliation, to fall into the very same failures and disorders which they blame in others.

Abba Mathois says: “The nearer a man comes to God, the more he sees himself to be a sinner. Isaiah the prophet saw the Lord, and knew himself to be wretched and unclean.” On the other hand: →

Icon # 427 = Death Wish

“My enemies say of me in malice: when will he die, and his name perish?”

In the interior struggle between the human soul and its mortal enemies: the demons of lust, avarice, pride, anger, vainglory, gluttony, and acedia, etc., any truce is treason and any compromise means defeat. These are the enemies of our soul who in their malice say of us, “When will he die, and his name perish?”

In our baptism we bear the name of Christian. This name will perish when we are vanquished by these vices, because we no longer act as a true disciple of the Lord Jesus. These vices disfigure the beauty of our soul who are made in the image and likeness of Christ, destined to grow into a mature manhood, in the fullness of the stature of Christ.

Instead of these enemies overcoming us we can conquer them by our attachment to the humanity of the Lord Jesus who though He was by nature God did not count equality with God a thing to be clung to, but He emptied Himself taking the form of a servant. Hence, the chief means by which we can subdue our inborn pride is to reflect upon whatever reminds us of our ignorance, our weakness, and our nothingness; to cherish every truth and every evidence that serves to healthily lower us in our own esteem or in the opinion of our

neighbor; to eagerly resist every movement of self-complacency, vanity, impatience, fault finding, uncharitableness, movements such as we are likely capable to experience at any moment. However, if we fail we should not be discouraged but rise and begin again.

Our heavenly friend, St. John Chrysostom, has this to say: "It is a great good to acknowledge our sins, and to bear them in mind continually. Nothing so effectually cures a fault, as a continual remembrance of it. For sin confessed becomes less, but not confessed worse. If we remember it, God will forget it." Thus even if we die our name will not perish because it is written in the book of life. When the eyes of our heart are cleansed, the joy of our heavenly homeland opens.

Even if the gate of hell is whispering a death wish against us, saying: "When will he die, and his name perish?" we should not be afraid so long as we fastened ourselves to the Lord Jesus, for with Him at our side the enemies of our soul cannot overcome us. It is only when we rely more on ourselves that we will be easily become the prey to our indomitable enemies, because no one when left to himself can walk with safety in the path of the spiritual and interior life; for often times he will be exposed to the danger of going astray, of losing heart, or falling into the snares of the enemy, more of perishing.

Our name will also perish when we are in the habit of following our own will, because only those who renounce their own will in order to collaborate with others in the kingdom of God can survive in the battle against vices, evil thoughts, and fleeting human daydreams. Self-will is the root of all religious imperfection.

In our relations with others, if we will sacrifice our self-will, our own convenience, our own comfort, and try to serve, we will be happy. If we are always ready to give way to the wishes of others, are quick to acknowledge ourselves in the wrong, or to have committed a fault, we will be at peace, and there will be unity in the community.

It is only by denying our 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. Thus when our enemies say of us in malice: "When will he die, and his name perish?", and when our "adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour," we will have the stamina to resist them because the Lord Jesus who is with us is greater than they, and He came to our world to destroy the works of the devil, and to give eternal life to those who believe in Him, so much so that even if they die yet shall they live and shall never perish because the Father who has given them to Him is greater than all, and no one not even the gate of hell, can snatch them out of the Father's hand.

The true criterion of our love for God is the submission of our will to His, especially in the painful circumstances of life. To the soul that has long yearned for beatitude, the supreme separation, death, should hold no terrors. Happy the soul, then, who, so pure in conscience, so stable in hope, sees in death "the foretaste of the freedom of beatitude," the beginning of what lies in the future, the end of what is now. Hence, even if the enemies say of us in malice: "when will he die, and his name perish," we will not be afraid but trust in the Lord, for He will act and save us from our enemies, and from the hands of all who hate us. Moreover, →

Icon # 428 = Vices Really are Empty

"And when one comes to see me, he utters empty words, while his heart gathers mischief; when he goes out, he tells it abroad."

The evil spirit that comes to see us by means of temptations heedlessly utters empty words, for temptations are empty and mischievous, and it is all over the world. Take for instance vanity that the evil spirit utters in the mind of human beings though it is empty, that it, it doesn't really lead to true glory which the Lord has prepared for those who serve Him in this present life as He Himself said: "If any one serves me, the Father will honour him," yet people around the world yielded to it; for it is vanity that raises the need to be extravagant, expensive, covetous, and mischievous.

The same is true with the other vices. They are empty for they are devoid of virtues which alone can usher a person to abundant life.

Vices really are empty and inimical to virtues. For example, licentiousness assails chastity, wrath disturbs tranquility of mind, unseemly pleasure dissolves mental vigor, chattering destroys the defenses of the heart, envy devours charity, pride undermines the citadel of humility, and finally deceit when it has corrupted truth in speech also corrupts it in understanding so that s/he who is unwilling to speak the truth which s/he has understood does not understand either the truth s/he avails to say. Again deceit is generated by much speaking, because it is extremely difficult for anyone who chatters not to lie as well, and the lie is often concealed by perjury so that it is hidden from human justice. Pride too can by no means exist without envy and vainglory, for each proud person vies the honor which s/he her/himself solicits from others. All these are from within the heart of the human person and are the cause of man's defilement. Hence, his/her heart gathers mischief.

Just as the human person does not arrive all at once at sanctity, so too s/he does not arrive at once at complete mischief and perversity. Empty and inordinate love of self, when it becomes dominating, puts forth roots more and more deep, to be seen in certain souls who are on the road to perdition gathering mischief in their heart and uttering silly words. They close their eyes to the divine light which alone could illumine and deliver them.

Mischiefs have one root in common, namely, the disordered love of self, opposed to the love of good, especially of the sovereign good which is God. This evil root tends to sink itself ever more deeply into the will, and from this root is born an evil tree – the tree of mischief. The trunk of this tree is egoism which, again, is empty, of which the central and principal branch, the continuation of the trunk, is pride, of which the lateral branches are the concupiscence of the flesh and the concupiscence of the eyes. From concupiscence of the flesh is born gluttony and luxury. From concupiscence of the eyes, that is, immoderate desire of external goods, is born avarice, and then perfidy, fraud, cheating, and hardening of heart. From the pride of life are born vainglory and ambition, disgust for spiritual things, forgetfulness of God, envy, unjustified anger, and injuries to one's fellow human being.

Some of these vices in the most wicked people who are masters of deceit and mischief have roots that are very deep, which manifest in their own sad manner the perversity of the soul. Our other heavenly friend, no other than St. Augustine, has this to say: "Two loves have built two cities: the love of self extending to the scorn of God has made the city of Babylon, that is, the city of the world, the city of immorality, whereas the love of God even to the scorn of self has made the city of God."

Just as the weeds and the wheat has to grow together until the time of harvest, so these two cities co-exist side by side until the end of time, where the weeds and the wheat, the sheep and the goats, the good and the wicked will be separated. Therefore, so long as we are still in this present life it would not be surprising to hear: →

Icon # 429 = Death and Resurrection

"All who hate me whisper together about me; they imagine the worst for me. They say, 'A deadly thing has fastened upon him; he will not rise from where he lies.'"

When the Lord Jesus was crucified, all who hate Him, namely, the chief priests, the Scribes, and the elders, whispers together about Him; imagining the worst for Him and mocked Him, saying: "He saved others; he cannot save himself...." The passersby too derided Him, wagging their heads and saying: "You who would

destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.”

They killed Him presuming that He will not rise again from the tomb where He lies, but they were mistaken because He rose again as He said He will. They concocted the worst for Him by bribing the soldiers, who guarded His tomb, to spread the tale that His disciples had stolen His body while they were asleep. But this prevarication confuted itself, because had the soldiers been all asleep, they could not have known what had taken place. If any had been awake, they would have roused the others and prevented the removal; and certainly if they had been asleep, they never would have dared to relate it, for the Jewish rulers would have been the first to call for their punishment because it is a great offense to sleep while on duty.

Take for example the jailer who guarded Paul and Silas in prison. About midnight when Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prisons were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and every one's fetters were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped.

Therefore, the tale that was spread by the bribed soldiers shows that the story was entirely false. The great tragedy here is that malice against the truth will resort to any means, whispering together and imagining worst, to propagate error, and infidels will swallow the most absurd falsehoods. But truth will always prevail, as a Roman proverb says: “Great is the truth and it will prevail.”

It is the fact of history that not all evil machinations of men can in the end stop the truth. The Gospel of goodness is greater than the plots of wickedness, because eventhough all who hate the Lord Jesus whisper together and imagine the worst for Him, a deadly thing, that is, the sting of death, has fastened upon Him, yet He conquered death by rising again. Thus come to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” For the Lord Jesus must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Quite apart from the fact that it was very unlikely that a whole guard of Roman soldiers slept while they were on duty, it was absurd for them to say that what had happened, happened when they were asleep. The soldiers were advised to say they were asleep; and yet they were so awake as to have seen thieves and to know that they were disciples! Moreover, it is equally improbable that a few timid disciples should attempt to steal their master's Body from a grave closed by stone, officially sealed, and guarded by soldiers without awakening

the sleeping guards. Accordingly, the orderly arrangement of the burial cloths afforded further proof that the Body was not removed by His disciples.

Now that the Lord rose from where He lies, from the sleep of death, and now that His Body was glorified, what people saw of Him depended on His willingness to reveal Himself and also on the disposition of their own hearts.

Our faith in the resurrection is based on more than circumstantial evidence. The Lord Jesus also appeared to many people after His Body was found missing from the tomb. St. Paul gives us a list of His appearances: to St. Peter, the twelve, five hundred Christian brothers, and, of course, to St. Paul himself.

Based on their testimony, the empty tomb, and our own experience of the power of the Lord Jesus acting in our lives, we do not hesitate to affirm that, yes, He rose from the dead, from where He lies, to save us from sin and death. Hence, when we, too, experienced betrayal of trust we can identify ourselves with Him who said: →

Icon # 430 = Betrayal

“Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.”

Christians of every type who are familiar with Scripture and those who frequently attend Bible services and those who often go to Mass, would easily notice that this “bosom friend” refers to Judas Iscariot – one of the apostles. The Lord Jesus quoted this psalm the day before He died when He knew that His hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. He said to them: “I am not speaking of you all; I know whom I have chosen; it is that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.’”

It is not an exaggeration to say that betrayal is one of the most painful incidents that any person could experience: betrayal in spousal relationship, in friendship, in business, and in all kinds of relationship. If we are religious we can also betray our vows. Hence, all of us are capable of betrayal. It is true to say that we are a bosom friend of God because we are made in His own image and likeness. We are more intimate to Him than we are to ourselves because in Him we live and move and have our being.

As religious we eat the Bread of Life daily and drink the cup of eternal salvation, and like Judas we too have the potentiality of perfidy. It is very likely that Judas had entertained the thought of the betrayal of Our Lord for a long time. It is right

to assert that no one falls away from nearness to Christ on a sudden. It always starts in little things: little flirtation will eventually lead to sexual activity; little dishonesty will eventually tug one to treachery, as the Lord says: "...he who dishonest in a very little is dishonest also in much." Hence, neglect in little things gradually leads to a serious fall.

The fundamental cause of Judas' betrayal was probably the shallowness, untrustworthiness, and superficiality of his character. He seems to have been a man of no depth or moral stamina. Thus it is very dangerous for a person to join the priesthood or enter the religious life if one is shallow, untrustworthy, and superficial in character; above all, if one has no moral stamina.

The other cause of Judas' treachery was likely his ambition, worldliness, and avarice. He was probably under the influence of worldly spirit – the spirit which is so directly opposed to the spirit of the Lord Jesus, that St. John declares: "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Christ Himself said that we are in the world, but we are not of the world, that is to say, though we live in this present world we should not conform ourselves to worldly values such as: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.

The world is the antithesis of the Lord Jesus and His Gospel. It is composed of those who center their happiness in earthly things, detest and shun poverty, suffering, and humiliation; while they love and worship wealth, pleasure, and dignity, esteeming these as the only treasures worthy of man's ambition; pursuing them with unrelenting ardor and deliberately sacrificing their souls to attain them.

Judas' downfall is a sad confirmation of the great principle, that is, the Lord Jesus and the world are mortal enemies. Christ Jesus is light, and the world is darkness; and as light and darkness cannot exist together, one casts out the other, so neither can the Lord Jesus and the world be one. When the spirit of the world gets entrance to our heart, Our Lord is cast out and rejected; and in proportion as the spirit of Our Lord gains ground in our soul, the spirit of the world is cast out. By generous persevering efforts to rid ourselves of everything savoring of the worldly spirit shall we make solid, genuine advance in sanctity.

It is highly probable that the other cause of Judas' betrayal was unbelief; he gradually lost the faith he had at first. Loss of faith is the usual result of worldliness and distasteful of prayer. The Lord Jesus showed us the way of faith in our lives so that we might live a life of faith. Modern man wants to separate faith from life; and when this separation is achieved there follows a de-Christianization of life. This is observable: infidelity increases, betrayal multiplies, and deceitfulness proliferates, and treachery amplifies. We move in a pagan environment – a land

of unfaithfulness and a meadow of perfidy in which spiritual ideals and all true sense of the meaning of life, of loyalty, are endangered.

The Lord Jesus had often spoken of His crucifixion and death without such distress of spirit as He now perceived when He spoke of Judas' betrayal. However, we should not confine our attention to Judas because our own sins and the sins of all people, especially of Christians are the agony of Christ. The foretelling of Judas' perfidy is also applicable to all who partake of the Lord's mercies but meet them with ingratitude and indifference. For instance, the freethinker who only browses at the Scriptures with a desire to do away their authority and destroy their influence; the hypocrite who professes to believe the Scriptures but will not allow him/herself to be governed by them; and the apostate who turns aside from the Lord for the things of this world. Hence humankind, supported by Divine Providence, after eating bread with the Lord, lifts up the heel against Him!

Judas was a paragon of an ultimate tragedy, the greatest tragedy that ever live, the greatest example of lost opportunity the world has ever seen. He became all the more terrible because of the splendid beginnings he had. He followed the same Christ as the others. He saw the same miracles; heard the same word; performed some of the same ministries; was esteemed in the same way the other disciples were – yet did not become what the others became. In fact, he became the very opposite. While they were growing in sanctity and becoming true apostles of the Lord, he was progressively forming into a vile, calculating tool of the Evil One.

Greed, ambition, and worldliness had crept into his heart, and avarice had become his predominant demon. Perhaps he was tormented by the unbearable rebuke of the presence of Christ. It must have created a great tension in his heart to be constantly in the presence of sinless purity. Perhaps, too, he began to sense that the eye of the Lord could see who he was and what he was. Or it may be that all these things had begun to nibble at him.

What happened to Judas is possible to happen to us. Therefore, we have to watch and pray that we may not be led into temptation. It is one thing to be tempted and another thing to succumb to temptation. The former is necessary before we can enter the kingdom of heaven, and the latter needs grace.

To live in faithfulness and loyalty is not just to feel grateful every now and then, or to recognize God's intervention in some surprising occurrences or spectacular events that may brighten humdrums days. To live in fidelity really consists more in asking, with filial confidence in humility, for the supernatural good which we can extract from the many little things which form the texture of our every day existence which are the mediums by which we encounter our Lord. We begin to

live fully in faithfulness when we become aware of the potentiality of our capability for betrayal and are mindful of the limitation of our human effort.

Acknowledging our natural limitations, our weakness and miseries, and our capability for betrayal, we turn the Lord Jesus and let Him take over our life completely. Hence, we are no longer our own, we were bought with a price. Moreover, if the spirit of Him who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead dwells in us, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to our mortal bodies also through His Spirit who dwells in us. Therefore, we can say: →

Icon # 431 = Foretaste of Resurrection: Conversion

"But do thou, O Lord, be gracious to me, and raise me up, that I may requite them! By this I know that thou are pleased with me, in that my enemy has not triumphed over me."

In his letter to the Romans, our good friend, St. Paul, says that "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit who dwells in you." This "Spirit," of course, was first given to us in our baptism by which we were incorporated into the family of God and participated in the death and rising of Christ from the dead, for "all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

"Walk in newness of life" certainly indicated that there was a time when we were in darkness, when we loved darkness more than light because our deeds were evil, when we were dead through the trespasses and sins in which we once walked, "following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

Truly, we have a foretaste of resurrection when we experienced conversion, because before we were converted we were dead through the trespasses and sins in which we once walked, but God has been gracious to us and raised us

up from the life of vices that we may walk in the newness of life that the Lord has deigned to bestow on us, "so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer by human passions but by the will of God." Thus we know that the Lord is pleased with us when our former vices no longer shout in triumph over us.

Those who are converted from their sins to the Lord not only bewail with tears the evil deeds they have committed but also make headway to the heights through good works so that they become sacred creatures of Almighty God, so much so, that they soar to the loftiness of virtues wholly abandoning worldly behavior, and with graces received reach God's kingdom which He prepared for those who loved and served Him in this present life. If we are being fashioned into sacred creatures, virtue arouses virtue in us – one impels the other to perfection.

We, whom the Lord has raised from the life of vices, and learning to know God, begin to lament our sins. In already loving Him whom we are learning to know, we do not cease to yearn for Him with tears. When we humbly prostrate before the Lord, when we know ourselves to be dust and ashes, when we ponder the weakness of our proper condition and do not adopt a stance of stiffness and pride, the Lord through His spirit of compassion and love raises us and sets us upon our feet, so that we who humbly lay and lie through the awareness of our infirmity afterward in good works, as it were, and in a life of virtue, stand our feet and raised up through righteousness.

Therefore, we know that the Lord is pleased with us when the vices of our former way of life no longer triumphed over us. We have to assert though that this is not our own doing but it is owing to God's grace that He may stabilize our integrity. Thus we can say: →

Icon # 432 = Integrity

"But thou hast upheld me because of my integrity, and set in thy presence for ever."

As soon as we begin to love heavenly things, as soon as we bind ourselves with all our heart, mind, and will to the vision of inward peace, and to walk in integrity, then that old adversary of humankind who fell from heaven is envious and jealous, and begins all the more to lie in ambush against us. Insofar as the vision of eternal peace looms in our soul it is needful that the wars of temptation be proclaimed to us in order to test our integrity and that the power of God might be made manifest in us to uphold us because apart from Him we can do nothing. For in order that we may avail to attain to those eternal joys of peace we must undoubtedly undergo many struggles of tribulations.

Because the Lord Jesus came to call us to the Heavenly kingdom and walk in integrity, He taught us to despise passing benefits and not to fear temporal afflictions. Thus He did not disregard reproaches, He endured injustices, He did not shrink from the cross, and when He perceived in His heart that the people were coming to take Him by force to make Him king He fled against to the mountain. What He is trying to convey to us by these gestures is that we must take courage to face adversities and intrepid to avoid prosperity.

When the elation of this world is destroyed by the mind's yearning to be in the presence of God forever, then the soul is rightly upheld in its integrity. Anyone who has already renounced everything which belongs to this present world endeavors to poise his integrity by walking uprightly in the presence of the Lord. He rejoices in the hope of heavenly reward and transcends the very things he is allowed to have.

No care for the passing world disturbs his spirit. He always extends his mind and thoughts in the expectation of heavenly joys. Indeed the spirit is often lifted in divine contemplation so that it rejoices that through some image it already perceives a glimpse of that eternal freedom which "no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him," for we stand where we fix the eyes of our mind, and stood where we had set our heart.

Our human mind, when it glimpses those superior heavenly things in an allegory, already leaves the bonds of its corporeal habituation through uplifted thought and humbly adores God whose pure substance it nevertheless does not avail to see, yet wonders at His power through inward illumination of the spirit.

It must be realized that as long as life continues in this mortal flesh no one can advance so far in the virtue of contemplation as to fix the eyes of one's mind, without the slightest interruption, on the limitless ray of light itself. Nor is the Almighty God seen in His unspeakable splendor, but the soul glimpses something short of its radiance and progresses refreshed thereby, and afterward, when the mortal life is ended, attains to the infinite glory of His breathtaking Beauty. Hence, when the delight of this present world is conquered by the soul's yearning of God's divine majesty, then the mind itself unflaggingly contemplates the eternal glory of God.

Therefore, every redeemed soul is upheld in its integrity and set in the presence of God forever. For this reason, the soul has a fairly good ground to cry out at the top of his voice, saying: →

Icon # 433 = Blessed be God from everlasting to everlasting

"Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and amen."

When the soul makes progress in the spiritual life it cannot help but bless the Lord for all He has done in our world and in the whole universe, and especially for all He underwent for our redemption: His Incarnation, public ministry, His passion, death, and resurrection. The Lord Jesus, though He was by nature God did not count equality with God a thing to be clung to, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, became a human being like us in all things except sin. And being found in this form, which is already an indescribable humility, He still went down deeper by becoming obedient unto death on a cross. He endured death that we may face our own death squarely. He showed the Resurrection of His own body that we may believe we can rise again in immortality. He who in His own nature always remains incomprehensible deigned to be comprehended in our human nature and to be flogged, because if He had not assumed the attributes of our weakness He could never have raised us to the power of His fortitude. Therefore, it is right and fitting to cry out in a loud voice in the halls of the whole universe: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!" So be it and so be it.

Insofar as He bore our sins in infirmity He led us, who are His creatures, to the glory of eternity. He uncovered for us a new world, full of color and supernatural variety, a world wherein we may unfold our personality. He raised fallen nature to a new supernatural Order of existence and destiny. Hence Blessed be the Lord from everlasting to everlasting!

He came down to earth and was made flesh to establish the point of union between heaven and earth, to unite us with God forever: "In that day," He said, "you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you." Thus He wedded divine and human love forever. He transformed men and women who obeyed and loved Him, from one generation to another generation, spiritualizing the "old Adam and the old Eve," showing us a new unity and integrity in life through union with Him in sincerity of heart. Wherefore we could not help but cry out: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting!" So be it. So be it.

Christ the Lord uncovered the most recondite feelings and the most deep-seated instincts of us all so that all of us might see our own misery and where it would lead if not because of Him; and this He did, not to dishearten us but, to infuse in us a holy hope. Because we are cold and calculating in judging and estimating the value of others, the Lord Jesus showed us His own warmth, affection, and understanding. All human relationships, with all their gladness,

grandeur, misery, and grief are put aright and made wholesome by the clean and unblemished blood of a true man who was truly divine. He gave meaning; He gave new form and expression to sleep, thirst, hunger, family ties, pain, joy, and work. He was what LOVE is. Christ Jesus is Life, He is God made man; He has ennobled the world and offers true nobility to all who live in it. Therefore, it is right and fitting and just to thunder with all our might, saying: "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen. Amen."

He taught us that when the passions, feelings, and emotions are pure and noble, when they are all guided by faith, they ennoble us and help us attain the supreme good which we yearn for and in our heart of heart loves. Therefore, with ardent desire we cry out: →

Icon # 434 = Seeing that brings Happiness

Psalm 42 (41)

"As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?"

When we gaze through the window of this passage, what the eyes of our mind see is the compelling vehemence of the Psalmist's ardent desire to be with God forever to see Him face to face. It is clear as crystal that only a person who is deeply in love can rightly utter these words. We an echo of this in St. Paul when he says: "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." It is also true to say that there are people who long for death but, of course, for different reason. Some of them really ended up in committing suicide. When their lives were examined it was found out that they were having lots of problems and have sunk into a severe depression.

On the other hand, never was it known that those who truly long for God to behold His face committed suicide. When the prophet Simeon saw the child Jesus at the temple, he can only say: "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for the glory to thy people Israel," that is, he died a natural death. Of course, St. Paul did not die a natural death but at least he did not take his life in his hand. Hence motivation is of paramount importance.

Lovers, too, are known to yearn each other's presence to satisfy the desire of their hearts. Thus what desire is to lovers, and what a flowing stream is to a deer, is what the vision of God to those who loved Him. Our good friend, St. Augustine, has this to say: "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.”

Since God is infinite Beauty, unbounded Goodness, unconfined Being, and all-embracing Truth, therefore, we could not help but to long to see His face. It's a seeing that makes us happy, a joy which no one can take away from us. The first instant of this seeing God face to face lasts forever, without an atom of interruption nor distraction, like an eternal morning, eternal spring, eternal youth. It resembles the eternal beatitude of God. The indescribable joy of that instant will never pass away. Its newness, its freshness will be eternally present. As this beholding the face of God will be always new, so likewise the happiness which flows from this seeing.

If here on earth we are enchanted by the reflection of divine perfection in creatures, by the enchantments of the visible world, by the harmony of colors and sounds, by the immensity of the ocean, by the splendor of the starry heavens and the vastness of the whole universe, and still more by the spiritual splendors revealed in the lives of the saints, what happiness shall we feel when see the face of God, this creative center of life and love, this infinite plenitude, eternally self-existent, from whom proceeds the life of all created things both seen and unseen, for nothing exist came to be without Him!?

Let us listen to our other heavenly friend, St. Cyprian of Carthage as he says: “What glory and what joy to be admitted to see God, to be honored with Christ Our Lord! This is the joy of salvation, this is eternal life: to live with the just, with all the friends of God in the kingdom of immortality. When God shall shine upon us we will rejoice with the inexpressible gladness, sharing forever the kingdom of Christ.”

The Blessed see clearly and intuitively God Himself as He is in Himself, that is, they see His essence, His attributes, and the three divine persons. The Council of Florence says: “They see clearly God Himself, one and three, as He is.” Hence this seeing the face of God surpasses immeasurably, not only the most sublime human philosophy, but even the natural knowledge of the most elevated angels, even of any creatable angel.

In His discourse at the Last Supper the Lord Jesus decisively proclaims: “he who sees me sees him who sent me.” Thus in seeing the Lord Jesus we also see the face of the heavenly Father, because the Lord Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the Icon of the new creation. With our good friend, St. Paul, we say: “We are very bold, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor,” but “we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another....”

For the time being though, while still on earth, we are to behold Him through a dim mirror, through the faces of our fellow human beings, through the signs of the times, through His actions in our lives, through the renewal of our minds and the transformation of our souls, but then face to face.

The Lord Jesus, too, before coming to earth was thirsting intensely for our souls, for men and women fully alive in the life of grace, for God is glorified in men and women who are living a virtuous life. On the other hand, it is the glory of these men and women who are living a virtuous life to behold the face of God. Truly, their thirst for the living God will be fully satisfied, for the Lord Jesus Himself had pronounced an irreversible verdict of happiness on them: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

Our soul has a natural tendency to be hungry and thirsty for something else; therefore blessed are those men and women who fasten upon the right object. It is God alone who can ultimately satisfy the deepest longing of our souls, whose grace and favor are sufficient to its righteous desires; and He will satisfy those who, with a sense of thirstiness, have recourse to His fullness as the Lord Jesus Himself said: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" Of course, He said this about the Holy Spirit which those who believed in Him were to receive. Accordingly, it is by the Holy Spirit that we confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

The more we possess Our Lord Jesus, the more we desire Him, and the more we desire, the more we thirst for Him like the deer that longs for running streams. On His part He will say to us: "To the thirsty I will give water without price from the fountain of the water life," and "whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." We shall never thirst and will never be depleted when drinking the water that the Lord Jesus gives because it is the Holy Spirit Himself which is given to us, for we are all made to drink of the one Holy Spirit. Each one will be filled according to its capacity.

On the other hand, while waiting to behold God face to face it is imperative that we have to shed tears. As food is necessary to the body so tears are necessary for the cleansing of our souls and the sustenance of virtues. Hence we can graciously say: →

Icon # 435 = Tears 2

"My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually, 'where is your God.'"

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

Tears become our food day and night, that is, while we are still in this present life, if we will not cease repenting for our sins, because before we have mourned and shed tears we have no repentance, nor a true desire to change, nor fear of God in our hearts. For we have not yet become conscious of our guilt nor judged ourselves, nor has our soul had the foretaste of the last judgment and eternal torment. For if we have judged ourselves, if we had experienced such movement of the heart, if we had such feeling, we would have shed tears forthwith. Without this the hardness of our hearts cannot be softened, nor can our souls acquire spiritual humility, nor have we ourselves the power to become humble.

Sometime we shed tears of repentance, at other times tears of joy, at other times tears of sorrows, grief, and sadness. We shed tears of repentance when we meditate upon the passion and crucifixion of Our Lord and we are deeply touched by it and how much our sins have caused it. We shed tears of joy when we are struck by the goodness of someone close to us, especially the goodness of the Lord. We shed tears of sorrow, grief, and sadness when we empathize on the tragedy of other people or when we lost someone dear to us.

Thus there are different kinds of tears just as there are different kinds of ministries. There are tears of love as the Lord Jesus wept for Lazarus whom He loved. There are tears of heartbreak as the Lord wept over Jerusalem who are killing the prophets and stoning those who were sent to her, for how often would He had gathered her children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and she would not. There are also tears of solicitude as St. Mary Magdalene wept, for she thought that the body of the Lord was stolen. There are also tears of distress as the psalmist have when men were mocking him continually, saying: "Where is your God?" as though God has abandoned him and shown no care for him. It is a painful tears; it challenges him of God's existence in the midst of

his anguish. "Where is your God?' they say, "If God is your friend let Him save you from all your sufferings and deliver you from all your distress."

They did not know that through suffering the power of God shines forth in the weakness of men, who without His grace would not be able to bear their distress. Patience in suffering manifests the goodness of him/her who is in anguish. By this road s/he is led to desire eternal life where there will be no more question: "where is your God?," for God will be in their midst wiping every tear from their eyes. For this reason we can say: →

Icon # 436 = Remembrance of the Good things of Our past Life: Liturgy on Earth, and in Heaven eternal Happiness

"These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I went with the throng, and led them in procession to the house of God, with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival."

Fortunate are we if we are still able to recall to memory the good things of our past life. They gave us a fragment of consolation in times of desolation. Even monks and nuns, priests, religious brothers and sisters who left the religious life can still call to mind the time, when they were still religious, how they have procession on big feast day, such as Corpus Christi or a Marian day, singing hymns of praise and thanksgiving as they celebrate these festivities. The liturgy was so solemn and joyous. It expresses every passion, every emotion, and every experience of the human heart.

These festivities in the house of God, which is the Church, will continue for all eternity amidst shouts of joy and songs of thanksgiving, with all the angels and saints, and all the redeemed, in the kingdom of heaven. What we have now is a foretaste of what we will be doing for all eternity. In participating in the liturgy on earth, celebrated by the Church, we are participating in the liturgy in heaven, for the liturgy is the voice of the Mystical Body of Christ lifted up to God, it is the love song of God and men.

There is no universal emotion that is not given a voice in the liturgy; no individual experience that is not in it like the words in a poem. Love, joy, mourning, contrition: all have their expression, and so to the stronger passion of the soul, the longing for the descent of the Holy Spirit and the adoration of God. All our inarticulate longing and adoration, all our stammered, incoherent love, set in the tremendous meter of the liturgy and lifted on the voice of the Lord Jesus to Our Heavenly Father.

Meditating upon the joy and happiness of the kingdom of heaven with innumerable angels and saints keeping festival in joyous songs and praise and thanksgiving is truly a wholesome exercise to help us handle constructively the sorrows and difficulties of life because the sorrows and pains of this present life are not worth comparing to the inexpressible glory of God's infinite majesty that has to be revealed to us, for this slight and momentary affliction that we experienced in this world is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison.

We begin to be happy when first we glimpse God here on earth and go on to the consummation of our eternal happiness in Heaven, in an eternal contemplation of the all-in-all, face to face with God. It is sooner, at the outset, in fact, that we can be and, indeed, must be happy during our lifetime on earth. Granted, it will be an imperfect happiness, when we consider and compare it with the perfect and eternal happiness God has planned for the human race, but it is a happiness that comes from our participation in the divine nature, since we start to attain and love what we get to see and know of God through Our Lord Jesus. We are going to possess everything bit by bit, piecemeal, by installments in which the whole is manifested.

Living with faith in Christ Jesus Our Lord is the only way to be truly happy and to enjoy life on earth, this life being something in the nature of a down payment, a preparation for the supernatural and everlasting life. For Christ, with Christ, and in Christ, humanity transforms the earth into an anteroom of heaven where there will be an eternal gladness and songs of thanksgiving, for if we hope to ever have our desire for everlasting happiness satisfied it is essential that we turn our attention toward the acquisition of virtue.

However, no matter how good and holy a person is while still on earth s/he is still liable to stumble, and fail in the practice of virtue. Of course, this can disquiet and cast down one's soul. When this happen we have to muster up our confidence and say: →

Icon # 437 = When Cast Down Hope in God 1

"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God. My soul is cast down within me, therefore I remember thee from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar."

It is obvious that the psalmist is sinking into sadness, verging into depression, but it is remarkable that in spite of his troubled soul he was able to muster up fortitude to, still, "Hope in God." He still acknowledged God as his God and his helper. He

did not look for something else to fill up the void of his soul, but instead he continues to remember God in the land of his exile. In the recesses of his soul his hope in God was intact; he was confident that he shall again praise Him.

Hope is a powerful spiritual force that is activated through our positive attitude. In the natural order, hope is one of the most noble sentiments God has placed in the human heart. Hope is recommencing, "going on towards" the good which we want but which we do not yet possess. God willed and intended a perfect happiness for us and placed in our hearts the desire and the hope of achieving it.

On the other hand, if a person lost hope in God and is cast down that would be an unimaginable tragedy, a great tragedy, a great failure because the impulse to re-start again after a failure is almost instinctive during our life on earth. But what if a person dies without hope in God? S/he will carry it with her/him forever. That is why it is a tremendous blessing that in spite of our trials and afflictions in this present life which weighed us down, we still have hope in God.

The object of hope, says our heavenly friend, St. Thomas Aquinas, has two aspects. First, it must be with regard to a good; otherwise, one does not hope – one fears. In the second place, it has to be concerned with an arduous, difficult, but attainable good. The higher the good to be gained, the higher should be the wish and hope to reach it.

And if the good to be reached is supernatural, that is, God, adequate supernatural means are required to reach it. Such requisite holy desires are propelled by the virtue of hope. Thus even though we experienced tribulations and distress which greatly disturbed our heart and make us cry out: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me,?" we also have the grace to utter humbly: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

Hope is the latent desire in us which gives life to our faculties and puts them into operation to move us towards the attainment of our ultimate goal, that is, the kingdom of God. Then humility enters to modulate this natural impetus, channeling it with grace. When hope is interlinked with the virtue of humility, our prayers acquire greater efficacy. We ask because we humbly hope to acquire grace, and we hope because we ask through Our Lord Jesus. "Amen, amen, I say to you, if you ask the Father anything in my name, He will give it to you. Hitherto you have not asked anything in my name. Ask and you shall receive, that your joy may be full." "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

On the other hand, we lose hope when we allow ourselves to be dismayed by our awareness that we can fail, or when we do not act with humility, or when we add to the obstacles in our path with our sins and our uncorrected weaknesses. These are ingredients that work secretly in order that our soul be cast down and disquieted within us, because sins and pride has intrinsic power to disquiet the serenity of our soul and cast us down from the height where we stand.

An example of this is no other than our indomitable foe, Lucifer himself – the fallen angel who fell from the height of heavenly glory to the deepest depth of the bottomless pit of hell where he and the other fallen bad angels were cast down without the slightest hope of attaining eternal glory with God because of their sins and pride, with no more hope of praising God again.

Through the pride of Lucifer and the other wicked angels, they introduced sin into the world, darkening the human mind in the process. On the other hand, through the humility of the Lord Jesus light come pouring into the world, showing us truth itself, pure and spotless. What we should first surrender to God is our mind, our intelligence which is our highest faculty and the hardest one to give away, precisely that assent which we have been withholding from God. If we do this even when we experience being cast down and disquieted within us we can redirect our feelings by thinking of the joy of the world to come where we shall praise the Lord without ceasing, where no sorrows and pains to obfuscate it.

Praise is always rendered in response to God's goodness, or God's majesty in creation, or God's faithfulness in spite of our infidelity, or God's peace-making in the heart of us sinner, or God's face seen in Our Lord Jesus. Praise is offered to God because in the concrete aspects of His life with us we experience His steadfast love, His gracious and everlasting presence among us.

There cannot be such a thing as true life without praise. Only where God is praised is there life. It is not as if God is "needy" for our praise, or that we will be impoverished or diminished in dignity in the process of rendering it. Rather, the giving of praise to God has a cogent power to bring about our union with Him, to put us back in right relationship with Him. Thus in the deepest crevice of our heart, and in the cranny of our mind, and in the nook of our will, we hear the thunderous silence: →

Icon # 438 = Deep Calls to Deep

"Deep calls to deep at the thunder of thy cataracts; all thy waves and thy billows have gone over me."

In one of His trips at the sea of Galilee, the Lord Jesus and His disciples were caught in a great storm, and the waves beat into their boat, so that the boat was already filling. But the Lord was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" And He woke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them, "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?"

Often in life we feel afraid and anxious when we are caught in a life threatening situation. In Christian faith, however, fear is not eliminated but transformed, through a profound personal encounter with the Lord Jesus and His cross – the locus where all human fear was offered by the Son to the Father in the Holy Spirit, setting us all free from fear.

"Do not be afraid, it is I," said the Lord in another occasion. "Do not be afraid Mary for you have found favor with God," said the angel Gabriel to the Blessed Virgin at the Annunciation.

When the waves of problems and the billows of troubles are so overwhelming to such an extent that they swept over us, if we do not want to sink in the tempest, then, the deep of our human weakness has to call on the deep of God's kindness and compassion. Whoever we are who feel that in the tidal waves and billows of this present life we are being tossed about among the squalls and gales of anxiety and distress, if we want to keep our head above waters, then, the deep of our worry has to call on the deep of divine providence.

When the waves of tribulations and the billows of afflictions are battering the skiff of our souls, then, the deep of our misfortune has to call on the deep of God's consolation. When the immensity of our sins weigh us down and we are bewildered by the loathsomeness of our conscience, and when the terrifying waves of judgment appalls us and we begin to plummet in the abyss of sadness and despair, then, the deep of our misery has to call on the deep of God's mercy. Never was it known that anyone who sincerely pleads for God's mercy was left unaided. The deep of His divine mercy is calling upon the deep of our agony to be lifted up to His throne of glory, for if we share in His distress we will also share in His bliss.

We are telling the truth if we say that there are times we feel tired in our struggles in life. What if during these times we will also take a nap in the cushion of the

heart of the Lord Jesus and let the waves of adversities and the billows of calamities beat down the boat of our soul? Will He wake us up and say whether we do not care if we perish? But, in this case, He and us are sleeping, taking some rest. We are just responding to His invitation: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Take my yoke upon you," that is, "lean on my Sacred heart and hear its beating for from it you will learn how much it loves you, loving you to the end. Even though the waters are roaring and the torrents have gone over you, yet you will muster up trust and confidence because you are gaining strength from taking rest in my Sacred Heart."

The deep of our grief is calling upon the deep of God's grace to give us some relief. The more we bear our trials patiently the more it becomes lighter to bear, but the more we avoid trials and difficulties the more it becomes heavy to bear. Wherever trials and difficulties come from they can be beneficial for us if we know how to accept them all from God, bring them back to God, and together with Him overcome them.

Not many people can see and humbly say that trials and sufferings are integral and essential part of our human drama; that they fall upon all people in varying degrees and forms whose comparison lies beyond our competence; that they belong to God's design for us here on earth, so that in the end all the experience of living has to teach us is to say: "Thy will be done," to say it standing before a cross which signifies the suffering of God in the person of a Man, and the redemption of a Man in the person of God.

Thus the deep of Christ's humanity and all the sufferings and pains it endures is calling upon the deep of His divinity to help us withstand steadfastly the waves of anguish and the billows of distress. Of course, this is owing to His steadfast love for us, so that at the night of our anguish we will not be depleted of the stamina to offer up prayer and songs of thanksgiving to the Lord. Wherefore, →

Icon # 439 = Different Kinds of Love

"By day the Lord commands his steadfast love; and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life."

To be able to sing a song in times of trials is a good indicator that our faith and hope are still activated. Or good friend, St. Paul, encourages us to address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with all our heart, always and for everything giving thanks in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father.

It is a universal knowledge that praying and singing has an intrinsic power to touch the heart of God and the hearts of men. An example of this can be seen in the case of Sts. Paul and Silas. About midnight, at prison, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken; and immediately all the doors were opened and every one's fetters were unfastened.

When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here." And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, "Men what must I do to be saved?" And they said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household."

As the story tells us, the jailer and his family were baptized that same night. Thus, in this case, praying and singing were instruments to touch the heart of God and men. On the part of God, He was touched by the prayer and song of Sts. Paul and Silas that He sent an earthquake to unfasten the fetters of Sts. Paul and Silas and all the other prisoners. On the part of the prisoners, they were so touched that they did not take the advantage of escaping which they could have done – thus ushering the death of the jailer. On the part of the jailer, he was so touched that he subsequently asked to be baptized and all his household.

Prayer is like a window opening our hearts and minds to another influence than simply our own cognitions and feelings, opening to God. We believe that we are not alone; prayer shows that we truly understand that we are not alone, that God is present and available to influence what we do and think. Our Lord Jesus, while still on earth, sets us an example of allowing God to influence our thoughts and actions. He always set aside a quality time for prayer, especially in the early morning while it is still dark. He will go to a secluded place where He can have a communion with His heavenly Father.

By this gesture He is conveying to us a message that there is no person on earth who cannot raise his/her heart to God in simple and humble prayer, for the capacity and the ability to be able to converse directly to God is one of the greatest privileges we, human beings, have. "Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything, as from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God," says our good friend, St. Paul.

In the hour of temptation, in the middle of the fight, if there is no prayer, if we do not go to God at such times of trials or when all seems lost, we are a coward. And we will inevitably fall at the hour of trial. Without prayer we in effect are

saying that we can take care of everything by ourselves and do not need guidance or help from God.

It is in prayer that we experience hope in God, that we let go of the "not yet" and get a glimpse of the "yes" which impels us towards faith, since we who live in faith has the certainty of divine mercy and omnipotence. The best prayer we can offer, sometimes, carries with it a thank-you-God, for whatever solution we have managed to come up with under the pressure of necessity.

"By day the Lord commands his steadfast love...." Our another honorable friend no other than the venerable Bishop Fulton Sheen once pointed out five ways in which we human beings can love others. The first is utilitarian love, which is directed to another because s/he is useful to us. We can get it at wholesale. We know where to buy inks at a discount. However, the difficulty with this kind of love is that when the advantage is lost, the friendship no longer endures. The second kind of love is a romantic love. This is the kind of affection we bear to another because of the pleasure that the other person gives us.

The "I" is projected into the "thou," and though the "thou" is pretended to be loved, actually what is loved is the "I" that is in it. One of the reasons why many modern marriages do not endure is that people do not marry a person. They marry an experience. They fall in love with an ecstasy or a thrill, loving the cake only as long as it has frosting. The third kind of love that we can have for another is democratic love, which is based upon equality under the law. Others are respected because they are fellow citizens; or their liberties are recognized, in order that ours, in turn, may be recognized. The reason for contributing to the good of others is the expectation of a return good. Democratic love, however, functions only up to a certain point; it is often subtracted in competition or else invalidated on the assumption that the other person is "not worthy" of our affection. Democratic love is often under a great strain during a political campaign as candidates call one another "cheap politicians."

The fourth kind of love, which has given much inspiration to poetry, is humanitarian love, which is love for humanity in general. One of the defects of this type of love is that it is love in the abstract, rather than in the concrete; it is love at a distance, rather than an immediate service. It is a historical fact that those who have most proclaimed their love of humanity have it very difficult to love certain human beings.

Humanity is like a composite photograph: it is nobody in particular. Dostoevsky makes one of his better characters describe the insufficiency of this type of love: "I love humanity but I wonder at myself, because the more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular. In my dreams I have come to make enthusiastic schemes for the service of humanity, and perhaps might actually

have faced a crucifixion had it been suddenly necessary, and yet, I am incapable of living in the same room with anyone two days together, as I know by experience. As soon as anyone is near me, his personality disturbs my self-complacency and restricts my freedom. In twenty four hours I begin to hate the best of men; one because he is too long over his dinner; one because he has cold and keeps blowing his nose. I become hostile to people the moment they come close to me, but it has always happened that the more I detest men individually, the more ardent becomes my love of humanity."

Surpassing these four kinds of love is Christian love summarized in the words of Our Savior: "A new commandment I give unto you that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13: 34). What is new about this commandment? Did not the Old Law say, "Love one another?" Have not all ethical teachers through the centuries pleaded for altruism? What is new about it? Two things are new. First, the way Our Lord loved us, that is, to a point of self-sacrifice; second, it is new because it is a commandment. By making it a commandment, Our Divine Lord made a distinction between liking and loving. Liking is in the emotions, in the temperament, in the glands, in feelings, and over these we have little or no control.

Loving, however, is in the will and, therefore, is subject to command. There are certain things we do not like, and we cannot help not liking them. For example, some do not like fat people in tweeds; others cannot bear olives at the bottom of martini glasses. Others do not like turnips. These are all instinctive reactions in us which we cannot completely control, but by putting love in the will, we can control it, and even extend it to those whom we do not like. Love, then, is not a gush but a virtue; not a spasmodic enthusiasm, but an abiding relationship of service, affection, and sacrifice.

The commandment to love is new, not only because it is in the will, but also because the model of such love, that is, steadfast love, is God Himself: "As I have loved you."

Love is given sometimes without effort, and sometimes against our will. How many times have we found it necessary to control the heart! On the other hand, demonstrations of love need the will to come into play, frequently requiring effort, sacrifices, and the acceptance of humiliations on the part of the one who is making them.

As our good friend, St. John the Evangelist grew older and became unable to preach, his sermons were shortened to one line: "My dear children, love one another." When he was asked why he said the same thing over and over again, he answered, "Because it is the precept of the Lord, and if you comply with it you do enough."

Just as the body is nourished by food and drink, and without food and drink the body dies, so also love is nourished by prayer and sacrifice, and without prayer and sacrifice love eventually dies. Again, the Lord Jesus sets us an example. He nourished His love by prayer and sacrifice. By prayer in rising up early in the morning to pray to His heavenly Father; by sacrifice in offering up His body, blood, soul, humanity, and divinity, on the cross as a living sacrifice. Thus He gave us an example that we may follow in His steps.

Fulfilling His command will be our food on the way. The Lord Jesus will become for us honey in the mouth, music to the ear, and song in the heart. He will be our rock where we can build our spiritual life and prepare ourselves in times of temptations, and even oppression by our indomitable enemy. This oppression can be so severe that we may feel being forgotten by God. Hence we cry out:
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Icon # 440 = Mourning

"I say to God, my rock: 'why hast thou forgotten me? Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?'"

It is a natural habitat of our human nature to feel forgotten by God when we are badgered by series of calamities. Again, we see this in the Lord Jesus when He cried out at the Cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" On the other hand, we are also told that God is infinite Love. His love for us human beings surpasses that of any loving mother has for her child, so much so, that God can definitively say: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands...."

Hence, the feeling of being forgotten by God slanted more to the human side than the side of God. Not even the souls of the damned in hell and the demons are forgotten by God; otherwise, they will be out of existence, which cannot be because they are endowed with a never ending existence. However, their mourning, because of the oppression of the enemy, will also be a never-ending.

The experts of theology tell us that the demons are the indomitable enemies of the human race who are bent to destroy us because of envy and jealousy that we are to inherit the ineffable glory of God's kingdom which they lost. Thus the human beings who were and who are to be deceived by the demons in making friendship with them by their evil deeds, when they die of unrepented mortal sin, are now mourning because of their oppression, that is, they are being tyrannized by the demons who are far powerful and stronger than they.

Beyond doubt the power of the devils to be a source of affliction to the damned is real. This affliction will arise from two-fold source of their companionship and their dominion. Demons and damned are enclosed in the same hell, and the imagery of Holy Scripture leads us to believe that the perpetual and intolerable nearness of innumerable beings will be an added horror to the damned.

Moreover, the devils, as angels, are mightier than the damned, who ever remain but men. These men, however, by sin have yielded to the temptation of evil spirits, and therefore chosen them as masters rather than God. They have surrendered to their dominion, and in consequence remain under their tyranny for evermore. How this tyranny is exercised we have conception. Somehow, overwhelmed and mastered by giants in evil, the souls of the damned will be cowed and terrorized into everlasting submission. Thus they continually go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy who now become their master for all eternity.

Hence, while we are still in this present life we should never cease praying to God to deliver us from all forms of addiction and self-destructive behavior, lest they become sources of oppression to our soul and we will be mourning for all eternity. On the other hand, if we go to heaven, by God's grace, of course, there will be no more feeling of being forgotten, no more mourning because there is no more enemy to annoy us by their oppression.

In the words of our other heavenly friend, St. Patrick: "In the kingdom of God every good abounds and there is nothing evil; in the prison of hell every evil abounds and there is nothing good. In the kingdom of Heaven no one who is unworthy is received; but no worthy, no just one, is brought down to hell. In the eternal kingdom there shall be life without death, truth without falsehood, and happiness without shadow of unrest or change, in Christ Jesus Our Lord, who lives and reigns world without end. Amen."

It is not outlandish to say that there's another kind of mourning which is highly beneficial to our soul, that is, when we mourn for our sins because we will be comforted by forgiveness. This kind of mourning is gracious because it is penitential mourning for our sins. This is godly sorrow, sorrow for sin, looking unto the Lord Jesus with constant application to the Holy Spirit to cleanse away our remaining evil. We are blessed if we mourn in this way for we shall be consoled with God's pardon and mercy, with peace, hope, and joy in the Holy Spirit.

As a consequence, the muscles of our soul develop a certain sturdiness so as to make us strong enough to withstand all challenges and adversities in life. With courage and fortitude we can audaciously say: →

Icon # 441 = As Deadly wound is to the Body, so Deadly Sin is to the Soul

"As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

Notice that the word adversary is in a plural form which means they are many. As a deadly wound is to the body, so deadly sin is to the soul. Just as our human adversaries taunts us when we are wounded in our body, so our spiritual adversaries, no other than Lucifer and his wicked angels, taunt us when we are wounded in our soul by a deadly sin, for this is a clear sign for them that the grace of God has been withdrawn from us.

As long as we are in a state of mortal sin we are giving our resolute enemies the authority to mock us continually, saying: "Where is your God?" This authority, however, can be taken back by a sincere act of sacramental confession, for by doing so we are saying, No to sin, and Yes to God. In the words of our other heavenly friend, St. Bede the Venerable: "The beginning of our righteousness is the confession of our sins."

Sin is not material but spiritual in its origin, for the devil fell before men did so, and the devil has no body. Sin is seen as something which upsets the intended harmony of nature. When sin is reduced the capacity to seek God and find Him is enhanced. Sin is like a dark cloud which blocked the light of the sun, but when the dark cloud is dissipated the light of the sun began to appear. It does not mean though that the sun was not shining when the dark cloud obstructed its light. It was always shining, but something has just screened its light.

Lucifer and the other devils, and all the enemies of God and the Church – who are also the enemies of our souls, taunting us in their utterances: "Where is your God,?" are not to be feared because it would be very foolish for us to seek to please those whom we know do not please the Lord. The taunting by our adversaries is the approbation of our life because it is then shown that we possess a modicum of righteousness if we begin to displease those who do not please God.

The adversaries of God are also our adversaries. And no one can find favor in the same matter with both Almighty God and His enemies. For everyone denies that s/he is a friend of God who pleases His enemy. What profit is there if all people praise us when our conscience accuses us?

On the other hand, what could hurt us even if all people slander us when our conscience defends us? Therefore, blessed will we be if we persevere with unswerving mind to serve Our God and confess His name amid the tongues of our adversaries, because we who are impugned on earth by mockery and false

accusations sought our veritable witness in Heaven who can never be deceived, for nothing that is covered that will not be revealed nor hidden that will not be made known. Hence, if there will be times that we feel like being "cast down" and our soul is troubled, so long as we persevere in praising God, our hope in Him will be intact for we will know by our own experience that Our God is really our help and our deliverer. Thus we humbly ask: →

Icon # 442 = When Cast Down Hope in God

"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

There are several factors that can cast down and disquiet one's soul such as: breakdown in relationship, especially divorce; financial difficulties, especially lost of jobs and unpaid mounting debts; failure to pass exams, especially students and newly graduate; death of loved ones; and series of natural calamities; and to be diagnosed with fatal illnesses.

Of course, there are still other factors that caused the soul to be cast down and disquieted, but those mentioned above are the most popular ones. However, we are given an antidote to prevent us from sinking into a severe depression, that is, we should never abandon prayer no matter what, because prayer has a very powerful compound to sustain our hope in God. It enables us to say thank you to God for all that happened or will happen both positive and negative.

If Hope is within us Faith is absolutely within us too. Both Hope and Faith gently and graciously encourage us to persevere in praising God. At the outset, we may not feel the delight in the thoughts of doing so, but once we do it we will be amazed that the luminous pearl of tears of joy will freely trickle down from the twin reservoir of our eyes. Of course, this is not our own doing but owing to the hope we have in God which empower us to praise God in spite of our trials and difficulties.

The virtue of hope, which is the virtue of eternal youth, is what thrills and energizes us and keeps us, whatever our age, young in heart, strong and noble. Hope is the source of energy and power which impels us to hurl ourselves audaciously against all the dangers to be overcome, and all the inner disquiet to be muffled. It is not a commodity that we either have or do not have; hope is the very essence of human existence. Where there is no hope life becomes completely meaningless. In the words of Vaclav Havel: "hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something make sense, regardless of how it turns out."

Christian hope is realistic since it unites us with Our Lord Jesus who is far more interested in our well-being than we to ourselves. It guarantees continuity in our fundamental option for ultimate meaning and the ultimate goal which is union with God forever in His everlasting kingdom. Hope makes us eager for spiritual growth and for ongoing conversion – the renewal of our mind and the transformation of our heart. It never says, “This is enough,” for it bears in itself the energies of divine love and the dynamics of faith. Hope is intrinsically faithful. As our past is marked by God's fidelity in all its vicissitudes, so hope turns our heart and will to His promises, “Behold, I am with you always until the end of time.”

Never giving up prayer in both good and bad times is a transparent sign that faith and hope stick to their love for us. It is our prayer which reveals to us the true quality of our behavior. If we are sane and sober, our prayer is a mirror which does not lie.

Are we cast down? So we have to pray. Are we disquieted? Then we have to pray. We are cast down and disquieted because we are weak, but it is precisely in the experience of our own weakness that we become aware of the Spirit animating our prayer, “interceding for our weakness,” bridging the gap between ourselves and God. In fact it is usually the experience of our own weakness, our being “cast down” and disquieted,” that brings us to prayer, breaking through the hard shell of complacency and making us aware of our own fragility and vulnerability.

“Because I am human, therefore I am weak. Because I am weak, therefore I pray,” said our good heavenly friend, St. Augustine. In the words of our other heavenly friend, St. Nilus of Sinai: “Prayer is a remedy against sorrow and depression.” Hence, if we are cast down we have to pray and if we are disquieted the more we have to pray. In doing so we will not run out of “Hope in God,” for we shall again praise Him, our help and our God. If these attitudes are ours and abound, then we will have the courage to say: →

Icon # 443 = God Defends Our Cause

Psalm 43 (42)

“Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from deceitful and unjust men deliver me!”

Our good friend, St. Paul, tells us that “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? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, 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."

Since God loved us so much, He will certainly vindicate us and defend our cause against ungodly people as He had vindicated His Son, Our Lord Jesus, by raising Him from the dead. Our Lord Jesus did pass through tribulation, distress, persecution, hunger, nakedness on the cross, peril, and sword – as He was pierced by a lance; yet, He was more than a conqueror, for by rising again from the dead He destroyed death forever. He nobly defended His cause, that is, the proclamation of God's kingdom on earth.

We, too, have to pass through many trials and tribulations before we can enter the kingdom of God. We have much to endure; even to suffer from ungodly people because of our belief in Christ and our adherence to His teaching which is repulsive to the ungodly, abhorrence to the deceitful, and loathsome to the unjust.

Since we professed to be followers of Christ, so His cause becomes also our cause. Thus we have to proclaim God's kingdom, the good news of our salvation, not so much by our words but by our lives, because deeds speak louder than words. Just as there are abominations of evil deeds which good men loathe, so causes of good works are abominations for the ungodly people. Hence it is written: "The just abhor the wicked man; and the wicked loathe them that are in the right way."

If we aim at being crowned with victory after the battle we must not be cast down while the fight goes on, for the Lord Jesus who prepares prizes beyond telling for the victors furnishes strength to the fighters. He who gives us the will to serve Him gives us also the assurance that He is working with us to defend our cause against ungodly people, and to deliver us from deceitful and unjust men. If we claim the gift of His Spirit in order to choose what God wants and to reject what He prohibits, then a wonderful thing happens. We experience His power at work in us, and we find Him taking over our struggles and finishing our battles for us. Hence, with confidence born out of trust, we say: →

Icon # 444 = Take Refuge in God

"For thou art the God in whom I take refuge;...."

What safer place to take refuge than God! He is a stronghold to all who take refuge in Him. Space and time are His; therefore, wherever we are we can always take refuge in Him. You might ask, how do we know that we are taking

refuge in God? The answer to this question is simply this: Awareness of His presence.

God is Omnipresent. He is ubiquitous, that is, He is everywhere. It is in this sense that we are under His protection. However, we are not conscious of it until we are aware of His presence. The popular name of taking refuge in God is prayer. In the hour temptation, in the midst of the struggle, if we pray, if we have recourse to God at such times of misfortunes or when all seems lost, then, we will be counted as courageous. We will be granted the grace to withstand our trial, as the Lord says: "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

On the other hand, if we do not take refuge in God, if we do not pray in the moment of temptation, we will be considered as a coward because we handed over ourselves into the clutches of the enemy. We freely surrender ourselves into the hands of our adversary – the Devil. It is extremely dangerous to do evil by presuming that God is merciful and He understands our weakness, as it is written: "Do not be so confident of atonement that you add sin to sin."

We have to be convinced that eagerness for prayer is nourishment and strength for the soul, a shelter against dangers of all kinds, a bulwark in time of temptation, and a refuge in the hour of trial. When we feel weak and helpless then we have to recourse to prayer, take refuge in the Lord, for our helplessness becomes prayer the moment we take refuge in the Lord and speak candidly and confidently with Him about our needs and struggles.

To take refuge in the Lord is to open the door of our heart unto Him and admit Him into our distress. Our problems and difficulties are the very thing which open wide the door unto Him and give Him access to all our needs. Hence we should not abandon prayer under the pretext of infirmity so long as we still have breath, for God's power is made perfect in our weakness, as our heavenly friend, St. Paul, says: "When I am weak, then I am strong."

Are we are tired in our struggle in life? Then, take refuge in the Lord. Are our earthly achievements made us vainglorious? So, take refuge in the Lord. Do we find life burdensome? Then, take refuge in the Lord, for the Lord Himself says: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." On the other hand, in a very mysterious way, we may wonder and ask this question:
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Icon # 445 = Danger of Entertaining Evil Thought

"Why hast thou cast me off? Why go I mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?"

In answer to the first question, there are several possibilities why God has/will cast us off; one is to teach us a lesson of humility. God allows/will allow us to fall into sin; of course, this varies in degrees, to remind us of the danger of self-complacency and the danger of entertaining evil thought. Here is an example to help you understand what we are trying to convey.

I know of a man who had liver ultrasound. This was his third in a period of one and a half year. This time it was a young woman, in training, or probably a newly graduate who did the ultrasound. She was quite a good looking woman. Since she was in training, no wonder that it took her a long time, longer than the previous other ones, to take pictures of his liver by using a mouse with gel on it and rubbing it on his stomach and sides to see the pictures on the screen.

While rubbing the mouse on his stomach, the man feels sometimes, or must have just imagined it, which is also possible, that her wrist touches his stomach. This is where the danger of entertaining evil thought comes in, because a very subtle notion finds its way into his mind insinuating an idea that if, for whatever reason, her wrist will be led astray, either deliberately or by accident, into his private part, will he complain about it or resist it?³

In all honesty, he was deceitfully captivated by the idea so as to allow himself to be open to it. He thought that he will just hold his breath. Of course, this did not happen. All this was just his imagination, but he was so embarrassed about it and was mourning till evening because the guilt for entertaining such evil thought oppresses him.

This man says "I love you," everyday, to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to Our Lord Jesus, but he was so disconcerted and abashed by what he was cooking up in his mind during that ultrasound procedure that it really took the whole day for the feeling of shame and guilt to subside. He did say, "Sorry" to the Blessed Virgin and to Our Lord for harboring such scenario. For him, it was like a husband saying to his wife, "I love you," or a wife saying to her husband, "I love you," but at the same time flirting with another man or woman. It's an ingenious sanctimony!

One thing that became apparent to this man, whom I am referring to, is a vivid realization of his capability of sinning. With St. Paul, this man will humbly say: "We

³ A famous anecdote of St. Bernard relates that he shouted: "Thief, thief," when a woman entered his room, in one of his travels. The woman walked out.

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 in me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. 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. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ Our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin."

The other thing that was obvious to this man is that the spirit of lust is not yet totally dead in him; its head surfaces from time to time. He is inclined to believe that so long as there is still blood in his vein this spirit may still have a chance to crane its head. Since it is a spirit, so it cannot be killed by physical sword, but can be quelled by the word of God, shooting it by the arrow of prayer. Feeding one's mind with wholesome thoughts can greatly contribute to the weakening of this spirit.

On the other hand, if we don't nourish our mind with healthy thoughts, we will certainly go mourning because this spirit can be very oppressive. It doesn't respect anyone. It is like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour. King David was devoured by it, but because of his repentance he was vomited by it. In humility, he cried out: "Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness. In your compassion blot out my offence. O wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sin. My offences 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."

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, that is, we make ourselves liable to be put in a position where we will be cast out into the outer darkness because we are not wearing the garment of humility that enables us to report and be admitted to the dwelling place of God. Therefore, we really need to pray, saying: →

Icon # 446 = Light in the Way to God's Kingdom

"Oh send out thy light and thy truth; let them lead me, let them bring me to thy holy hill and to thy dwelling!"

In His farewell discourse at the Last Supper the Lord Jesus explicitly says: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me." In another occasion, for instance, after the Lord defended the woman who had been caught in the act of adultery, then saying to her, "go, and do not sin again," He spoke to the people, saying: "I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Since the Lord Jesus is the Way, and He is also the Light, so it is not difficult to conceive how radiant is the brilliance of this Way and how straight it is because light, as we know, travel in straight line. As light He enlightens our darkness that we may walk in newness of life and no longer live as worldly people in the futility of their minds and darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance of the way of the Lord Jesus due to hardness of heart.

Once we were darkness but now we are light in the Lord. Thus we have to walk as children of light, so that we may declare the wonderful deeds of the Lord Jesus who called us out of darkness of vices and sin into his marvelous light of righteousness and truth. In Him is life, and the life is the light of our human race. As a light He shines in the darkness of our world and the darkness has not overcome Him. The darkness of sin crucified Him on the cross, but the darkness has not overcome Him for He rose again from the dead to send out His light and His truth to those who believe in Him, and bring them to His holy hill, that is, the kingdom of heaven – His holy dwelling which is so full of light, and peace, and charity, and wisdom, and glory and honesty, and sweetness, and loving kindness, and every unspeakable and unutterable good.

In the kingdom of the Lord Jesus, His holy hill, His dwelling, we shall see infinite Goodness as He is in Himself, and fills so perfectly our capacity of love that it attracts us irresistibly more than any ecstasy that can be had on earth. Our other heavenly friend, St. Cyprian of Carthage has this to say: "What glory and joy to be admitted to see God, to be honored with Christ Our Lord! This is the joy of salvation, this is eternal life: to live with the just, with all the friends of God in the kingdom of immortality. When God shall shine upon us we will rejoice with inexpressible gladness, sharing forever the kingdom of Christ."

We are all invited to ascend to the holy hill of God – His dwelling, we are called to see Him not only in the mirror of creatures, however perfect, not only by His radiations in the world of angels, but rather, we are called to see Him without

the medium of any creature, to see Him as He is, far better than we see those to whom we speak on earth, because God, being spiritual, will be most intimately present in our intelligence which He fortifies with power to see Him.

Just as the eyes are the light of the body and when the eyes are healthy and sound, then the whole body is enlightened, so also on the contrary, if anything should happen to render the eyes darkened, then the whole body is in darkness. Hence, we are called and ordained to be the eyes and the light of the world. For this reason the Lord said: "If you, who are light of the world, will persevere and not turn away, behold, then the whole body of the world will be enlightened. But if you, who are light, should be led into darkness, how great is that darkness, which is nothing less than the world." Thus we, who are made light, brought light to those who believed and enlightened their hearts by the heavenly light of the Spirit by whom they themselves had been enlightened.

The English writer John Ruskin has given us a good picture of what the Lord wants us to be in our world. In the olden days before electricity, the streets were lighted by gas lamps. Each evening a lamplighter would go around with a little flame and light one lamp after another. One evening, Ruskin was sitting in his house looking out the window. Across the valley was a street on the hillside. There Ruskin could see one lamp after another being lighted by the lamplighter as he went along. Because of the darkness, Ruskin could not see the lamplighter, only his burning torch and the trail of lights he left behind. Seeing that, Ruskin turned to the person sitting with him and said, "There's a good illustration of a Christian. People may never have known him, they may never have met him, they may never have seen him." [This story is told by James A. Feehan]

The psalmist, too, tells us that the word of God is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Therefore, following the Lord Jesus who is the word of God made flesh brings us to the kingdom of heaven, His own dwelling place, where He will be Our God and we will be His people; there at the altar of His divinity we will adore God for all eternity with inexpressible and overflowing happiness. Inevitably, with gladness of heart we joyfully say: →

Icon # 447 = Going to the Altar of God: Adoration

"Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise thee with the lyre, O God, my God."

Our good friend, St. Paul, tells us that we have to give each person their due, "... respect to whom respect is due, honour to whom honour is due." Since the Lord Jesus is Our God, therefore, justice demands that we should give Him what is His due, that is, our adoration for it's the highest form of rendering honor and respect to an infinite Supreme Being, the Word by whom, in whom, the whole

universe was made and everything that is in it and outside it, both seen and unseen, and all created intelligence both angels and men.

For this reason, we go to the altar of God to worship Him and to adore Him, for by its very nature, as human being beings, adoration is our first attitude acknowledging that we are a creature before our Creator. In doing so, we are exalting the greatness of God who made us and the almighty power of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who sets us free from the bondage of evil.

Because the Lord Jesus Himself is present in the sacrament of the altar, therefore, He is to be honored with the worship of adoration. "To visit the Blessed Sacrament," says Pope Paul VI of venerable memory, "is a proof of gratitude, and expression of love, and a duty of adoration toward Christ our Lord." Prayer, too, is an expression of adoration, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: "Lifting up the mind toward God is an expression of our adoration of God: Prayer of praise and thanksgiving, intercession and petition."

The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity inform and give life to the moral virtues. For this reason, charity leads us to render to God what we as creatures owe Him in all justice. The virtue of religion disposes us to have this attitude, for the first act of the virtue of religion is adoration. To adore God is to acknowledge Him as God, as the Creator and Savior, the Lord and Master of everything that exists in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth. Hence, we have to worship the Lord Our God and serve Him, trying the best we can to purify our conscience from works that bring spiritual death to our soul.

To adore God is to praise and exalt Him and strive to humble ourselves, like the Blessed Virgin Mary, confessing with gratitude and praise what He has done in our world and in our lives, setting us free from the slavery of sin and self-centeredness. Thus unfettered from the shackles of the forces of darkness we go to the altar of God – the fountain of super abundant joy, praising Him with all our heart and mind.

However, since we are still in this present world and the gate of hell is still open and Lucifer is still permitted to roam around the world dragging human beings with him to his abysmal abode where they will be locked up for all eternity without the slightest hope of getting out from there, and since unprecedented wickedness is so rampant in our world, wickedness as such that would certainly spin the imagination of Abraham and Moses whose worry about Sodom and Gomorrah and the Israelites worshiping and dancing before the golden calf made their hearts sink, so, we too, are sorrowful upon seeing the moral decadence of our present world which opted to rally with Lucifer and his nefarious angels in dissenting against the sovereignty of God. Consequently, we could not help but say: →

Icon # 448 = The Agony of Love

"Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

On the day before His passion and death, the Lord Jesus and the disciples went to the garden called Gethsemane and He began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And He said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death...." He prayed three times that, if it were possible, the hour of His passion and death might pass from Him. And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible to thee; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what thou wilt."

It is not unreasonable to think that the feeling of fear is not off the premises in Christ's emotion at this time because He is a true human being like us in all things which, of course, includes the feeling of fear when we perceived that we are to be tortured and then put to death. But is also very likely that the feeling of intense love played a very consequential role in His emotion. It is not implausible to say that this feeling of intense love is the most dominant feeling in His emotion during His agony in the garden. The reason why I say this simply because Christ is LOVE incarnate. All the loves of fathers and mothers toward their children, all the loves of young men and women, and of friends toward each other is a gracious participation of this LOVE. But this LOVE is also perfect JUSTICE, because He is perfectly JUST.

Suppose there is a very loving father who has many children and this father is also a Judge who is just. They live in a society where the influence of evil is incredibly rampant. Of course, he gives instructions to his children how to live good lives, setting himself a good example for them to follow so that they too might live a happy and peaceful life with their own family when they got married. But in a very mind boggling way some of his children did not give heed to his instructions because they find them very restrictive to their freedom in pursuing happiness according to what the society inculcated on them, that is, unbridled freedom to do what they want when it feels good irrespective of its consequences.

Some of them openly rejected the values that he taught them, even going so far as to have a head collision with the law. His name was in disgrace because of them. Even though it pained him so much to see them colliding with the law, yet he administered justice. On the other hand, he was also consoled that his other children maintained their integrity and did not allow themselves to be influenced by the standards which the society imbued upon its populace.

Of course, I have to admit that this scenario is not a comprehensive description of what was going on in the heart, mind, will, and soul of the Lord Jesus during

His agony in the garden, for we cannot fully do justice to describe it, but at least it opens up a small hole to allow us to peep into the agony of LOVE, what it is like for LOVE to be in agony.

In His agony in the garden Christ's divinity sees everything that will happen until the end of time and how some of the human race, who are his children by virtue that he is the supreme Creator and the Father of the world to come, freely rejected the values He taught and collided with the supreme Law: to love God with one's mind, heart, soul, and strength; and to love one's neighbor as one's self, heading to their eternal ruin without the slightest hope of seeing Him again who is infinite Good and the fountain of eternal bliss.

This sorrow shook his whole being to the point of death so much so that His body bears the brunt of this unfathomable suffering to such an extent that he sweated blood. Medically, this is called haematidrosis. It occurs when fear is piled upon fear, when an agony of suffering is laid upon an older suffering until the highly sensitized person can no longer sustain the pain. At that moment the person ordinarily loses consciousness. When it does not happen, the subcutaneous capillaries sometimes dilate so broadly that, when they come into contact with the sweat glands the little capillaries burst. The blood exuded with the perspiration and, usually, this occurs over the entire body.

This gives us a little idea of what it is like for LOVE to be in agony. He sees too His crucifixion where thoughts and intentions of the heart of every human person will be weighed in the scale of justice. He prayed three times that this crucifixion will pass from Him, that is, justice will not be administered. There will neither be redemption nor condemnation, no accountability at all. Both good and evil thoughts, words, and actions will have no value at all. No one will either go to hell or to heaven; purgatory will be shutdown for there is no use of purifying souls when they could not go to heaven.

In other words, men and women will no longer be judged according to what they have done in their bodies. But this is a soft kind of LOVE, for it excludes the human race in the ultimate drama of salvation and damnation. Hell will be only for the demons and heaven will be exclusively for the angels. In this scenario human beings will be just like animals – no morality at all. When they die – that's the end of it. But of course, this is not worthy of the dignity of a human person who is made in the image and likeness of God and endowed with a never ending existence, whose soul is immortal.

The thoughts that some human beings, whom God loved so much, will be lost forever bring about an ineffable sadness in the heart of Christ. But the thoughts that other human beings too will be with Him forever and share in His eternal happiness without any danger of losing Him assuaged the throes of His sorrows.

Hence, the words of the psalmist are applicable to Him: "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God."

We have a good picture of this in the book of Revelation where John saw those who had conquered the beast, that is, the devil, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, "Great and wonderful are thy deeds, O Lord God Almighty! Just and true are thy ways, O king of the ages! Who shall not fear and glorify thy name, O Lord? For thou alone art holy. All nations shall come and worship thee, for thy judgments have been revealed." In another passage, it says: "Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great." "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory....Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just...."

This has been recounted and written for our instruction and edification, so that we will always remember the deeds of the Lord, how He laid His life on the cross for our salvation, and how by believing in Him and receiving Him into our lives we are granted the privilege to become children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ Jesus Our Lord. The four Evangelists, St. Paul, the fathers and doctors of the Church, the writings of the saints, and countless men and women from age to age have told us of the wonderful deeds that the Lord has done for us. Therefore, with attentive ears and open hearts, let us hearken to the following incontrovertible testimony: →

Icon # 449 = Declaring the Deeds of the Lord: Mutual Delighting

Psalm 44 (43)

"We have heard with our ears, O God, our fathers have told us, what deeds thou didst perform in their days, in the days of old: thou with thy own hand didst drive out the nations, but them thou didst plant; thou didst afflict the peoples, but them thou didst set free; for not by their own sword did they win the land, nor did their own arm give them victory; but thy right hand, and thy arm, and the light of thy countenance; for thou didst delight in them."

Most of what we have known about the Lord Jesus is derived from the Scriptures, especially from the four Evangelists. In truth, they are our fathers in faith. They have told us the deeds the Lord had done in their days – too many to be counted that if all of them had been written down the whole world would not be enough to contain the books that would be written. Of course, this sounds baloney to the unbelievers because even with the invention of the printing press, and hundreds of hundreds of publishers of books, and thousands and

thousands of writers around the world writing and publishing books of all stripes from carpentry, mechanics, economics, law, engineering, ethics, physics, metaphysics, cosmology, astronomy, theology, philosophy, etc., there are still lot of space for more books to be published.

So, how can the evangelist John says that if all the deeds of the Lord Jesus had been written down the whole world would not be enough to contain the books that would be written? If we believe that the Lord Jesus is the WORD of God made flesh, and by this WORD God created all things, seen and unseen, and that nothing exists came to be without Him, and that our world is just like a tiny dot in the chart of the whole universe, then, it makes a reasonable sense that our world would not be large enough to contain the books that would be written.

Hence, the things we have heard what our fathers, in faith, have told us of the deeds which the Lord Jesus had performed in their days are only sizable segments of the entire deeds of God which no tongue could fully delineate. Even our good friend, St. Paul, who was caught up to the third heaven – into paradise, had testified that he has heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter, for no eye has seen nor ear heard nor it enter into the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him.

Many people, from age to age, have told us of the deeds the Lord had done in their lives – how their lives were transformed when they encountered Him. Some of them were persecutors like St. Paul, some were prostitutes like St. Mary Magdalene, some were fornicators like St. Augustine, some were robbers like Abba Moses the Black, some were cheaters like Zachaeus, some were gamblers like St. Camillus de Lellis.

In the Gospel of John, the Lord Jesus said: “My Father is working still, and I am working.” His work now is for our sanctification, for it is the will of God that we should be holy as He is holy: like father – like son. This work will continue until the end of time, as long as there are still human beings to be purified and are receptive to the grace of God, for “as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God.”

These are the people who have told us what deeds the Lord had performed in their souls, renewing their minds, strengthening their will in all that is good, right, and true; driving out vices from their lives and planting virtues. Once they were darkness, but now they are light in the Lord. Their older self, of course, experienced affliction by the very process of inner purification, but their new self was being renewed everyday, emerging as young, vigorous, and free, to pursue righteousness all the days of their lives declaring the wonderful deeds of God

who called them out from the darkness of ignorance into the marvelous light of knowing God in their day to day lives.

They have told us that they were delivered from the bootless fashions of this present world not mainly by their own efforts, though they have part to play, but primarily by the hands of the Lord Jesus which He freely stretched out on the cross for the salvation of the world. Not by their own merit did they win their souls, nor did their own strength give them victory over their profligacy, but solely by the grace of God, and His mercy, and the light of His countenance, for He takes delight in them. Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practice steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord."

Just as the Father takes delight in His only begotten Son, Our Lord Jesus, so our Lord takes delight also in the created world, especially the human race, as it is written, "...when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him. like a master workman; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the sons of men."

In particular, the Lord takes delight in the men and women who repented their sins; and not the Lord only but also the angels take delight over a sinner who deplores his/her sins, as is shown in the parable of the lost sheep where the owner rejoices when he has found it, saying to his neighbors and friends: "'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost.' "Just so," the Lord said, "I tell you there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

The parable, too, of the lost coins conveys the same sentiment, that is, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Thus the Lord takes delight in us, too, if we bemoan our sins. "Mourning is a sorrowful thing," said our heavenly friend, St. Augustine, "for it is the sob of one who is sorry. Does anyone mourn, except for one who is dead? But, every sinner ought to mourn for himself, since there is nothing else so dead as a man in sin. Yet, how marvelous! If he mourns for himself, he comes to life again. Let him mourn through repentance, and he shall be comforted through forgiveness."

When we experience forgiveness through repentance of our sins we will notice that we start taking delight in God, too, and in the things of God. Hence, there develops a mutual delighting in each other. This mutual delighting, of course, will be culminated in the life to come where we will join with all the angels and saints in their delight in seeing the infinite goodness, the eternal wisdom, the unsurpassable knowledge, and the inexpressible beauty of God. God, in return,

gives everything to us, for He sees in us His own image brought to perfection in us. What God is by nature we will be by grace. This is not our own doing, but owing to God's predilection over us. That is why not by our own sword did we win the salvation of our soul, nor did our own arm give us victory over our vices, but by the grace of God alone because apart from Him we can do nothing. Wherefore, with boldness we acknowledge Him, saying: →

Icon # 450 = The Kingship of the Lord Jesus and the power of His Name

"Thou art my king and my God, who ordainest victories for Jacob. Through thee we push down our foes; through thy name we tread down our assailants. For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me. But thou hast saved us from our foes, and has put to confusion those who hate us."

When the Lord Jesus was brought to trial before Pilate, Pilate asked Him, "Are you the king of the Jews?" The Lord answered him: "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?" The Lord goes on to say, "My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews; but my kingship is not from the world." Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" The Lord answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice."

Christ was king by birth, and He wanted to show us His royalty, establishing His title by right and conquest. He ransomed us from the slavery of sin and gave us His own Spirit, that Spirit of which our good friend, St. Paul, said, "Where the spirit of the Lord is there is freedom." No one who is attached to and enslaved by the world can understand His dominion, because His dominion is not like the dominion of men.

Our king and God, the Lord Jesus, was born in a cave at Bethlehem where animals were kept. There was no room in the hearts of men, and so Our God had to lie in cold stable for the sake of love. His beloved mother, the Queen of the Universe, wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and placed Him in a manger. Why did God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the same God who made us out of nothing and sustains us in being, choose to be born in a manger, and not in a palace more fitting for royalty? He, who had everything, the Omnipotence, who is infinite wisdom and mercy, stripped Himself of everything to give us all, so that out of His poverty we will become rich, and out of His humanity we will be raised into His divinity. God, who is the same Love who fills all, was transformed and made flesh, born poor to teach us what is true, the truth about the kingdom of God on earth in the heart of every human person who received Him and believed in His name.

The Lord Jesus wanted to be for us a real and living exemplar, to give us an example of struggle and victory. He wanted to leave us a complete life's series of human actions, done by Him, so that we may ponder them in prayer, since Christ is God became man: a complete, perfect man. And through His human nature, He shows us what His divine nature is. Recalling this human refinement of the Lord Jesus, who spent His life in the service of others, we are doing more than describing a pattern of human behavior; we are discovering God.

Everything the Lord Jesus did has a transcendental value. It shows us the nature of God and beckons us to believe in the love of the God who created us and wants us to share His intimate life, and kingship too, for He Himself says: "He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne."

The Lord Jesus is explicit of what His kingdom is all about when He says, "Behold, the kingdom of God is within you." This is where His kingship is. It is not of this world; its nature is not worldly; it is a kingdom within every human person, an interior castle, set upon in our heart and conscience. Its riches spiritual; its power spiritual, and its glory within. The citizens of this kingdom are those that are of the truth; all who by the grace of God are rescued from the power of the father of lies, and are disposed to receive the truth, and submit to the power and influence of it; all who follow its guidance like a beacon of light.

This will have a great impact in our lives and lead us to true freedom if we continue to keep the word of Our Lord and king, as He says: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." This is the voice of our conscience. Hence, the Lord says: "Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." In other words, we must be men and women who seek always to be truthful. By being truthful we will be able to hear and understand His message. We will become His loyal subjects. We will want Him as our king and proclaim His universal dominion in these words of our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux: "I call upon my Lord Jesus; for His sake I defend myself, because I acknowledge myself to be wholly His possession. I hold Him as my God and my Lord, and I declare that I have no other king except the Lord Jesus."

Through Our Lord Jesus we are given the power to push down Lucifer and his allies and all their seductions, because the Lord who is in us is greater than Lucifer who is permitted to rule the world. Through the name of the Lord Jesus we tread down evil desires, for when we name the Lord Jesus we set before us a man who is meek and humble of heart, kind, prudent, chaste, merciful, flawlessly upright and holy in the eyes of all; and this same man is the all-powerful God whose way of life brings healing, and whose support is our strength. All these re-echo at the sound of the name of the Lord Jesus.

No other name has a commanding power to push down our foes and tread down our assailants than the name of the Lord Jesus. Let us listen to this counsel of our heavenly friend, St. John of the Ladder, "flog the foes with the name of Jesus; for there is no stronger weapon against them either in heaven or on earth. Let the memory of Jesus combine with your breathing; then will you know the profit of silence."

The feelings of the saints toward the name of Jesus Our Lord charm us like the fragrance and blossom of virgin forest. What prayer and longing; what devoted, glowing zeal; what flaming, passionate love, this name awakens in such souls, for the name of the Lord Jesus is the symbol of glory, and the blessed bear it written on their foreheads like a crown of victory. In the power of this name we can overcome all obstacles!

At the name of Our Lord Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Christ Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. The name of the Lord Jesus has intrinsic power to heal, for by this name a man lame from birth was healed in the temple. "I have no silver and gold," Peter said to him, "but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." And Peter took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

The demons are allergic to this holy name and are subdued by it as the seventy disciples recounted after their first missionary journey when they returned with joy, saying: "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name." Hence, this name has power to subdue the demons within us, such as the demons of pride, of envy, of lust, of covetousness, and of unclean desire, for nothing so curbs the onset of anger, nothing so allays the upsurge of pride than the name of the Lord Jesus. It cures the wounds of envy, controls unbridled extravagance, quenches the flames of lust, it cools the thirst of covetousness, and vanishes the itch of unclean desires (cf. St. Bernard of Clairvaux).

Does any of us fall into sin? Does his/her sadness urge him/her to commit suicide? Let him/her invoke the name of the Lord Jesus and his/her will to live be at once renewed. The tears clamped up by the barriers of our pride, have they not burst forth again with sweeter abundance at the thought of the name of the Lord Jesus? For not in our bow of purely human strength do we trust, nor can our sword of merely will power save us, but the Lord Jesus has saved us from the hegemony of vengence over our lives, and has put to confusion those who hate us because of our newfound life in Christ Jesus. They are surprised that we no longer join them in their wild profligacy, and they abuse and hated us, but the

Lord put them in confusion, for He who is with us is greater than he who is in the world. For this reason we can say: →

Icon # 451 = Boasting 2

“In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to thy name for ever.”

Ordinarily, it is very likely that we feel uneasy to live or work with someone who is in the habit of boasting, for boasting is a breed of self exaltation, and every self-exaltation is a species of pride; and we normally dislike proud people. If only they would boast once in a blue moon it would not be a hard pill to swallow, and probably, we will be edified by it because, in all likelihood, there's a morsel of truth in what they say, for they are just recounting their august achievements; but if they do it habitually irrespective of place, or time, or people to which it is recounted, without modicum of prudence, then, it becomes very counter-productive. Instead of being edified we feel more ill at ease about it.

In all probability, we feel the same with self styled people of religion even if they boast about God chronically irrespective of what the situation is and who the audiences are. Take for example if a person is boasting about God but the people are hungry, it is very likely that they would find it hard to absorb what he says. If it seldom happens they might even consider it as a virtue to bear the pang of their hunger for it is surely a wholesome sacrifice that they can offer to God, but if it is done often by that same person without any regard of the condition of the people it is very likely that it would be counter-productive. They might not show up the next time unless they have the determination of the martyrs or the navy seals.

With a laser perception, Christ Himself had ushered the principle of the necessity of taking care of the basic human need in order for any discourse about God to be effective. It is also an indication of the preacher's concern with the people he serves as is shown in the Lord Himself when, in one occasion, a multitude was coming to Him. He said to Philip, “How are we to buy bread for this people to eat?” In another occasion, He expressed the same solicitude by telling His disciples that He doesn't want the people to go away empty for they might collapse on the way. We see this same concern in the letter of James where it says: “If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace, be warmed and filled,’ without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?”

On the other hand, the person who is doing the discourse about God has also to exercise discernment whether the people are really interested in God or

whether they are just interested in food as exhibited by the people who were looking for the Lord Jesus after the feeding of the five thousand. The Lord emphatically told them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves." Then the Lord uses this occasion to rectify their motivation by raising their awareness to a more substantial food which is potently nutritious that even just a bite of it, eaten worthily, has the capacity to preserve life forever. Hence, He tenderly admonishes them, saying: "Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal."

Since it is the only food in the whole universe, heaven and earth, given to men which endure to eternal life, hence, it is just common sense to be proud of it, boast about it. Take for example a very poor man who could even hardly find food to eat, or if he can the taste of it is so bland; then, by an act of sheer charity of the king, was brought to his palace and served with food which never enter even in his most wildest dream. Will he not boast about it? Ninety nine point nine percent he would likely boast about it, and if this man has a modicum of goodness he will even wish that the king will also invite the other poor men so that they, too, can at least, even once in their life time, can taste the incredibly delicious food of the king. If this is true in the natural level, more so in the spiritual level. In this case, we can boast safely about God as our good friend, St. Paul, says: "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Boasting about God is pleasant to the ear if the gap between one's word and deeds is so slender to the extent that it doesn't cause disedification among the hearers. We could never be free from faults and misdeeds while still in this present life but if these are relegated to a very rare and sporadic occurrence they probably would not be labeled as despicable. Hence, it is still very likely that we are in the safe level of boasting about God. Otherwise, if we have to wait until we are impeccable to be able to boast about God we might wait in vain until we die.

Really, we have thousands of grounds to boast about God when we come to realize that he is an infinite super natural Being that exceeds the limit of our imagination, who fashioned all things out of nothing, whose wisdom, knowledge, goodness, power, etc., is boundless. Much more if we consider His riches, grandeur, majesty, kindness, humility, and everything that is attributable to Him; and still He is far beyond all these things. Therefore, in Him we can boast continually and give thanks for all He has done in our lives and in our world.

Probably, gratitude is one of the most fitting responses we can reciprocate to God for all He has done for our salvation: how much pain He endures to redeem us, how much insults and humiliations He bears to deliver us from a

never ending shame, how much torture He underwent to rescue us from eternal anguish and distress.

However, we have to be realistic that no matter how able we are to continually boast about God and are thankful for all He has done for us, these are not guarantees, so long as we are still in this present world, that we will never be abased, in whatever form it may take, and our practice of virtues will never dwindle, because whether we like it or not we, too, are subject to the inevitable law of alternation. For this reason, we can say: →

Icon # 452 = Abased

"Yet thou hast cast us off and abased us, and has not gone out with our armies. Thou hast made us turn back from the foe; and our enemies have gotten spoil."

To fall into sin is comparable to being abased, because sin is a form of degradation. Every time that we commit sin we lower our dignity as a free human being, children of God by adoption, destined to surpass the rank of angels in virtue of our sonship, because whoever commits sin is a slave to sin, and slavery is a debasement of human dignity. No wonder, then, that in order to set us free from the slavery of sin God made the Lord Jesus to be sin, that is, "sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh," so that in Christ Jesus Our Lord we might become the righteousness of God.

If God has not become a human being like us we will be held less accountable of our sins, but since He has become a human being and has spoken to us in the very person of Our Lord Jesus we will have no more excuse for our sins, for what can be known about God has been made plain to us, because God has revealed them to us in the person of His Son.

In the days of His flesh, the Lord Jesus did signs and wonders and referred to them as the basis of His credential that God the Father has sent Him, that the Father is in Him and He in the Father, that He can do nothing of His own accord but only what He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, that the Lord Jesus does likewise.

In other words, the deeds of the Lord Jesus are the deeds of the Father Himself. Hence the Lord Jesus is the arm of the Father reaching out to humanity. Thus the Lord says: "If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father."

It is for this reason that human beings will no longer have any excuse; for although God has revealed Himself to us there are still human beings who does not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools because they set their minds only on the things of this world and despising the things of God, awfully indifferent to the well-being of their souls. They loved falsehood more than truth, indecency more than modesty, dishonesty more than integrity, chicanery more than veracity, infidelity more than fealty.

“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie....” For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. Women exchanged natural relations with men, and men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passions for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own person the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and improper conduct.

In this scenario the demons who are really the immortal enemies of the soul have gotten spoils: morality has been trampled to the ground, the body which is the Temple of the Holy Spirit has been desecrated, the human soul which is far more precious than the whole world has been sold to slavery of sin. The soul can no longer liberate herself. Her former virtues which can be considered as the armies, whose duty was to defend her, are now too weak and impoverished to protect her.

However, God who is infinite in mercy and who does not desire that the human soul will perish forever, while at the same time respecting her inviolable freedom, continually stretch out His offer of reconciliation to the soul. God is making appeal that the human soul be reconciled to Him. What does the soul feel like when it accepted this offer of reconciliation, when it begins to encounter the grace of God? Assuredly, the soul feels itself in predicament.

On the one hand, there is a profound sense of one's own helplessness and, on the other hand, an equally certain conviction that God alone can supply what the soul lacks. The soul experienced a tug-of-war, with the soul on one end of the rope and God on the other end. There must be in the soul the conviction that one is in the grip of and swayed by a higher control than one's own will; that, opposing the ego, there is a Presence whom one feels happy in doing good and before whom one shrinks away for have done evil.

It is relatively less important whether the predicament, which results in a feeling of duality, is sudden or gradual. What matters is the struggle between the soul

and God, with the all powerful God never destroying human freedom. This is the greatest drama of human existence. There is an impression that one is being sought by Someone – the “Hound of Heaven” – who will not leave us alone but ceaselessly stretched out His hand to us. Once we stretch our hand to Him, too, then no matter what will happen to us will certainly turn out to our own good and will redound to His greater glory. Thus we are willing to accept what He would like to do with us, even if: →

Icon # 453 = Sheep For Slaughter

“Thou hast made us like sheep for slaughter, and has scattered us among the nations. Thou hast sold thy people for a trifle, demanding no high price for them.”

The image of “sheep for slaughter” evokes a notion of suffering, but since the soul is now reconciled to God this suffering takes a sacrificial mold. It has now a salvific value. Its price is not that high, so that it will be affordable to all, that is to say, no matter how small and insignificant our suffering and sorrow maybe, even if it would just be a headache or a toothache or mild frustration or disappointment or the little pinpricks that other people inflict on us either knowingly or unknowingly, has now significance, for it is a participation in the sufferings of Christ.

When we grow in sanctity and intimacy with Christ, it is very likely that we will also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed, because this slight and momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond comparison. The sufferings of this present life are not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us.

Struggle does not mean unhappiness. Yes, it brings with it pain and suffering. Of course, it does. But for the converted Christians, to undergo sorrow and tribulation for love of God and in union with the Lord Jesus is to win. It is translated into peace and Christian love, into victory, because Christ, too, was like a sheep being slaughtered on the cross to gather the children of God who are scattered among the nations of the world.

“When I am lifted upon the cross, I will draw all men to myself,” He said. As a sacrificial sheep the Lord Jesus is the most expensive sheep ever known, because not even heaven and earth combined together is sufficient to pay its price, for its value is priceless but He lowered its price almost “for a trifle, demanding no high price” for it, even to a price of cold water, because He wanted that human beings may attain salvation and come to the knowledge of God, as He Himself said: “And whoever gives to one of these little ones even a

cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he shall not lose his reward."

We, too, as followers of Christ and believers of His Most Holy Name, are sacrificial sheep to be immolated at the temple of our body, in the altar of our heart, so that the life we now live will no longer be lived for ourselves but for Christ who loves us to the point of shedding His blood as a sheep for slaughter. Every sacrifice has its effect. Pain and sorrow are as active as any other act. What grace is meant to do is to help us, not to evade our pain and distress, but support our affliction with a stout heart, with a fortitude which gets its strength from faith.

Like sheep for slaughter, the Lord Jesus did not avoid pain, as we try to. He did not ignore it. He did not insulate Himself from it. He received it into His heart, that we, too, might follow in His steps.

Sorrow and distress which can block all acts of piety that give us God, now becomes the means that unites us to God. It is no longer a question of hopelessly trying to overcome our weakness, but it is a question of accepting fully the means He has given us of actually being united to Him in His sacrifice, "like sheep for slaughter."

This participation in Christ's sufferings continues, as we say: →

Icon # 454 = Derided and Scorned

"Thou hast made us the taunt of our neighbours, the derision and scorn of those about us. Thou hast made us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples."

Unequivocally, it is meritorious to remember that the Lord Jesus, too, was derided and scorned, and became a laughingstock among those implicated in His passion and crucifixion. "He saved others," they said as the Lord was hanging on the cross, "let him save himself if he is the Christ of God, his chosen One!" The soldiers also mocked Him, coming up and offering Him vinegar, and saying: "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself!"

By constantly remembering the passion of Our Lord, keeping it in our heart and mind, we will notice that our own suffering and humiliation will become bearable. Many of us don't have servants at home, or if we have, maybe just one or two. Many of us don't have Real Property at home, or if we have, probably not that much. Certainly, many of us are not of noble birth, many of us are not well educated, and many of us are not that wise and knowledgeable. Hence, when we are taunted, derided, scorned, and became a laughingstock

among the peoples because of our deficiency of these seemingly good things, the pain and humiliation that we feel will be manageable when we keep in mind the torment and ignominy which the Lord endured for our sake.

In His unfathomable love for us, the Lord even raised these derision and disparagement to the altitude of Beatitude which never crossed the horizon of our imagination: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you...on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven..." Thus bearing our trials and suffering for the sake of Our Lord Jesus has an incomparable value, for blessed will we be if we endure trial because when we had stood the test we will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him.

Of course, this trial will come in many forms. For instance, we will be derided and taunted when we speak about God, in a godless society, as though topic about God is no longer relevant and even considered archaic. They will make fun of us as if we are alien people outdated in our views of the modern world. They don't want to be "contaminated" with anything which pertains to God. In this case, we can humbly and pleadingly say: Lord forgive them for they do not know what they are doing, because if they have known that the virus that we have is "eternal life," they would eagerly draw near to us to be "infected" with hope of a never ending, never sagging, and a never boring Life and Happiness – an eternal Beatitude!

However, in the present state of affairs it seems that they are "unbelievably" resolved not to be "defiled" with anything that belongs to the realm of religion. Following their own passions they will taunt us, 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"; "isn't it that the coming of your Christ will bring peace to the world? But violence and acts of terrorism are looming around the world, wars had been carried out in the name of religion, divisions are tearing apart churches, religious fanatics won't blink their eyes in slitting the throat of their perceived enemies."

It is apparent in this "derision and scorn" that they had ignored the fact that Christ did bring peace to the world as demonstrated in the lives of those who sincerely admitted Him in their hearts, most especially in the lives of the saints. These are they who had tasted the peace that surpasses all understanding which the world had seemingly tried to duplicate but could not truly give. They also passed over the evidence that Christ's kingdom is not of this world, because if His kingdom were of this world, His followers would be fighting but kingship is not of this world, "for all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world."

They also disregarded the truth that violence and acts of terrorism and divisions are not of God but of the world. "What causes wars, and what causes fightings among you?" asks our good friend, St. James, "is it not your passions that are war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war. You do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions. Unfaithful creature! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God."

Of course, they will not be convinced with this apologia, for they deliberately set themselves in bad blood with God. Hence, whether we like it or not they will continue their campaign in taunting and reviling us. This can cause grief in us, because we desire that they will come to the knowledge of God and see how good God is. Therefore, in our sorrow we grievously say: →

Icon # 455 = Disgrace: Shame

"All day long my disgrace is before me, and shame has covered my face at the words of the taunters and revilers, at the sight of the enemy and the avenger."

To be mocked, taunted, and reviled brings with it a concomitant shame and disgrace, for it is a despondent expression of hoisting down one's dignity. This, too, was experienced by the Lord Jesus at His trial before Pontius Pilate. At the instigation of the chief priests and the elders, the people were persuaded to demand the release of Barabbas who was convicted of insurrection and murder. It is an unimaginable humiliation and unutterable shame that a criminal and a bedraggled person be preferred than the God of heaven and earth whose holiness, purity, and majesty is such that even the cherubims and the seraphims has to cover their faces because of the magnitude of its splendor.

Thus disgrace was before the Lord, and shame has covered His face at the words of the taunters and revilers who cried out together: "Away with this man and release to us Barabbas." Though in a very lesser degree, many of us has probably experienced that someone was being preferred instead of us. In all likelihood, it created a ripple in our heart. Of course, its magnitude varies according to the purity of our heart; but no matter what its intensity is, its proportion compared to the case of Barabbas and the Lord Jesus beggars analogy, because in our case, the person who was preferred instead of us might be, in reality, more deserving than us, for s/he might have more qualifications than us.

Even if we think that we are the one who is more qualified, but still both of us are creatures. In the case of the Lord Jesus and Barabbas the creature was opted for while the Creator was condemned. Both of them, in all probability, have not gone to a formal school but nothing was said of Barabbas that he had spoken words of wisdom, nothing was said of him that he was knowledgeable; whereas the Lord Jesus spellbound His hearers, they marveled, saying: "How is it that this man has learning, when he has never studied?" Even the officers who were sent by the chief priests and Pharisees to arrest Him were dumbfounded at His words, so much so, that they went back; and when asked why they did not bring the Lord with them, they answered: "No man ever spoke like this man!"

Barabbas has no record of inventing anything. It is very likely that he was not the one who made his own weapon: knife or sword, or both. He might have bought it or at least let someone made it for him; whereas the Lord Jesus, as the Word of God who is in the bosom of the Father, has a record of creating everything – both seen and unseen, as it is written: "He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through Him, and without him was not anything made that was made."

He is the only Creator and inventor who does not borrow His materials from someone else in order to do a project. His most stupendous project is Life*⁴ itself. The magnificence of this project is such that it took more than four billion years to see its realization on earth. All the materials needed were gathered first such as helium, oxygen, hydrogen, carbon, etc. Humans and animals require oxygen. Yet scientists tell us that it took 2 billion years for enough oxygen to be produced to allow all animals on earth.

Today in astrophysics, even those who resist the idea of cosmic design now tells us that the laws and constants of the cosmos are finely tuned to an almost unimaginable degree, such that even small changes to them would render any sort of complex life* impossible. Such is the grandeur of the Lord Jesus- the Word of God who created the whole universe, who was beside His Father like a master workman. Again, scientists tell us that the universe, rather than being devoid of meaning, is, like a great work of art, full to overflowing with meaning: complex, integrated and intelligible order, rather than senseless pile of gibberish. Contra nihilism, the universe has more meaning than we can imagine – layers of meaning that scientists, among others, continue to discover (cf. Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt).

If only the chief priests, the Scribes and Pharisees, and the elders of the people have known that the man whom they have brought to trial is the Word of God made flesh – coeternal with the Father, by whom the whole universe was created, they would not have Him condemned; if only Barabbas have known

⁴ *animal and human.

who the Lord Jesus is, he would have protested the demands of the people that he be released and have Christ crucified.

Since life is the most stupendous project of God, and it is not farfetched to say that it is really miraculous, hence, unjust destruction of human life is so disgraceful and shameful, most especially the unborn children who are so defenseless and innocent. An added value of human life is that God, too, was once an unborn child in the womb of His mother.

As long as the murder of innocent human beings continue, all day long our disgrace will be before us, and shame will cover our face, “at the words of the taunters, and revilers” who are crying out: “Abortion on demand, no apology! Abortion on demand, no apology!” They are chanting this like the crowd who demanded the condemnation of Christ – the Innocent One: “Crucify Him, crucify Him!”

This is very mind boggling, but not really surprising knowing that Satan hated with all his being, his strength, his mind, and his will, life itself and the Author of life who is God. Hence, all who rallied to his standard hated life too. They prefer death than life, lies more than truth, “for they loved not their lives even unto death.” This brings disgrace and shame in us, for if they had known that Christ the Lord came to our world that we may have life and have it abundantly for all eternity, and that Satan the supreme robber of eternal life is roaming around in our world in order to kill, to steal, and to destroy, they might have re-think their choice. But it seems that they willfully hardened their hearts and closed their minds lest they would understand with their hearts and perceive with their minds then turn to the Lord that He may heal them.

Of course, we have our share of the pain and sorrow in seeing our fellow human beings opting for death than life, evil than good. We are derided, taunted, scorned, reviled for choosing life, for what is right, good, and true. Thus we humbly say: →

Icon # 456 = Subjected to Suffering yet still Clinching to God

“All this has come upon us, though we have not forgotten thee, or been false to thy covenant. Our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from thy way, that thou shouldst have broken us in the place of jackals, and covered us with deep darkness.”

It is true to say that it is quite challenging, and soul searching as well, when we are subjected to suffering, especially without our understanding of the reason why it happened to us. We know that it is painful even to those people who

knew why it happened to us. We know that it is painful even to those people who knew the cause of their suffering; for instance, those who lived a promiscuous lifestyle and were diagnosed with AIDS. It is excruciating but, at least, they can trace its cause.

But what about those who are innocent? Of course, it can provoke frustration with God for allowing such suffering. But what about the Lord Jesus? Hence, when we think about frustration with God we might pause at Gethsemane, Pilate's palace, the scenes of Christ's arrest and trial, and execution at calvary, for in those places God learned what it feels like to be a human being. Whatever we feel, God felt. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer scribbled on a note in a Nazi camp, "only the suffering God can help." Because of Christ Jesus we have such a God.

If the Lord Jesus had brandished a sword in Gethsemane, or call on His legions of angels, or yielded to Satan's challenge to dazzle the world, He would have failed in His most important mission: to become one of us, to live and die as one of us.

All through the Bible, especially in the prophets, we see a tension raging within God, for on the one hand He passionately loved the people He had made; on the other hand, He has a terrible urge to destroy the evil that enslaved them; but on the cross, God resolved that inner conflict, because there His Son absorbed the destructive force and transformed it into love.

Job, too, was innocent person, yet he was also subjected to a grueling ordeal, a terrible grief, and a bewildering pain. All this has come upon Job though he has not forgotten God nor has he been false to His covenant or departed from His way.

Our suffering may not be acute as that of Job, and in all honesty we are not innocent as Job was, for if we do not deceive ourselves we should know without equivocation that at some point in our life we had forgotten God and had been false to His covenant and had departed from His way, hence, we are qualified to be broken in our misery and covered with deep darkness of sorrow; but, instead of wondering where is God when we are experiencing pain and anguish of heart, we might ask the reverse question: where are we when it aches? Do we still trust God or deny Him? How are we responding? We hope and pray that we may have the grace to have our faith in God intact even though it might have been wounded, so that when hundred of conflicting thoughts offer their ideas, which add more to the thickening darkness of sorrow and confusion, we will still clinch to the God who never fails, who loves us beyond our wildest imagining, who promises us a crown of eternal life, as the Scripture says: "Blessed is the man who endures trial, for when he has stood the

test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love him.”

Although pain is dreadfully irksome, it can lead us to ultimate victory if accepted rightly and used properly. It has an amazing potency to unfasten us from the non essential in life and help us to zoom in on what is substantial. It is also competent in molding us into the kind of person we are meant to be.

God has suffered and we, too, have our portion in human suffering whether we wish it or not, but it takes another meaning when seen in the eyes of God, that is, taken and accepted with faith in His goodness and mercy for us. Hence, even if we walk in the dark valley of pain and covered with deep darkness of suffering we fear no evil because God is with us like a morning star, for even as the stars shine brightest when the night is darkest, so God seems to speak the most burning words to the heart when everything seems to be darkness and gloom; as it is often the case that when darkness is the deepest then the dawn is about ready to break through.

We have to assert though that it is solely owing to the grace of God that we are still able to remember Him in spite of our trials and sufferings, that our heart has not turned back, nor have our steps departed from His way, because apart from Him we can really do nothing. What have we that we did not receive? Can we ever think of anything in us that did not come from someone else? Hence, it is right and fitting to express gratitude to God for giving us the grace to not forget Him nor depart from His way in spite of the negative things we have experienced. On the other hand: →

Icon # 457 = Debacles emanated from Forgetfulness of God

“If we had forgotten the name of our God, or spread forth our hands to a strange god, would not God discover this? For he knows the secrets of the heart. Nay, for thy sake we are slain all the day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”

One of the many debacles that emanated from forgetfulness of the name of our God is the spreading forth of one's hands to a strange god, that is, to a false god. This false god is so strange because at the outset it manifests itself as seemingly good and attractive but once its devotee is hooked to it, it can be very domineering and enslaving.

Take for example, the god of money. Putatively, it is a universal god and has its worshiper from all kinds of peoples, cultures, tongues, and religions. Young and old, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, and religious people are familiar with it even

though it is called by different names in different countries. Those who have less of it or don't have it are generally considered as the pariah of society. In religious parlance they are dubbed as infidels. These are the people who have less care about it.

Those who are very devoted to it – who worshipped it day and night, whose thoughts are not far from it, are the ones who are likely to have more of it. They are considered as the blessed ones in the world, the chosen ones, because this god is so close to them whenever they recourse to it. They even wake up early in the morning, before dawn, to think about this god. Like the true God, this strange god has incredible power too.

It is very influential and can pressure legislators. It gains a notorious reputation of deceiving judges and lawyers who love it. In other words, it is the rise and fall of many in the world so that the thoughts of men and women might be revealed.

Whether we like it or not we are exposed to this god, but our Christian faith demands that we should not love nor worship this god because “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 evil; it is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced their hearts with many pangs.”

Of course, the god of money is just one of the many other gods which can be rightly dubbed as cousins, such as the god of self-love, of prestige, of power, of celebrities, of self-image, and etc.

If we will blot out the remembrance of God from our minds and if we don't examine ourselves closely – monitoring our thoughts what we are habitually thinking, we will certainly gravitate toward spreading forth our hands to, at least, one or two or more of these strange gods. If this happen, do we think God would not discover this, He who knows the secret of the human heart, who knows every single person inside out, who created our being and knit us together in our mother's womb, who fashioned us in secret and molded in the depths of the earth, who knows our resting and our rising, and discerned our purpose from afar – discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart, who even before a word is on our tongue He knows it already through and through, and who before Him no creature is hidden but all are open and laid bare to His eyes with whom we are all accountable?

God knows that stretching forth our hands to any of these gods cannot and will not bring us eternal happiness, because these gods are false gods, hence, illusory. It is true that any of these gods can induce satisfaction, but it is also true that this self-satisfaction is so ephemeral like a flower in the field which today

blossom but on the marrow withers away. God created us to be happy with Him forever, but out of the devil's envy and jealousy we were swindled by these false gods promising us happiness and freedom if only we spread forth our hands, lifting up our hearts and minds to any or all them.

The end of this, of course, is the death of our souls, that is, deprivation of divine life. "We are slain all the day long, and accounted as sheep for the slaughter," but not for the sake of the true God. Hence, this kind of death is a disaster.

If our end, the ultimate end of every human person, is to have been created and raised to the order of grace in order to give glory to the majesty of God, it is just logical and natural that whatever earthly goal we may seek, there is nothing that can give us supreme happiness except God. No one can enjoy eternal happiness unless God reigns within that person. The human heart yearns for happiness, and God wants us to be happy. But we only experience this happiness when we are conforming ourselves to the desires of God, when we are growing, transforming, developing to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, becoming more like Him and through Him becoming what God wanted us to be, that is, what He is by nature we will be by grace.

If we hope to ever have our desire for happiness satisfied it is essential that we spread forth our hands not to a strange god, but to the true God, that we turn our attention toward the acquisition of virtue, for right living is the only way to be happy.

Thus life and death are set before us and we will get whatever we choose. If we choose death by spreading forth our hands to any of the strange god, this strange god would be so eager to help us become more greedy, dishonest, insincere, unfaithful, lustful, and the like, which ends to ruin and death of our souls. In this case the true God will be like "sleeping." However, we should not lose hope for we are given a chance, that is, prayer. Therefore, we should cry out with all our might, saying: →

Icon # 458 = God Awoke from Sleep

"Rouse thyself! Why sleepest thou, O Lord? Awake! Do not cast us off for ever! Why dost thou hide thy face? Why dost thou forget our affliction and oppression? For our soul is bowed down to the dust; our body cleaves to the ground. Deliver us for the sake of thy steadfast love!"

In one of His maritime trips with His disciples, the Lord and His disciples were caught in a great storm, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was

already filling. But He was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they awoke Him and said: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish?" And He woke and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea: "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm. He said to them: "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" And they were filled with awe, and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even wind and sea obey him?"

The description of the Lord Jesus asleep on a cushion in the stern of the boat reminds us of the prophet Jonah. Given the fact that, at least, four of the disciples were professional fishermen and must have experienced such storms before, their terror indicates the severity of the incident. The tone of the accusation: "Teacher, do you not care if we perish," also parallels the story of Jonah, where the captain charges Jonah with not caring about the destiny of those in the ship.

Despite their privileged position of being with Christ, the disciples are unable to grasp the significance of Christ's words and deed and do not understand who the Lord really is. When they show a lack of trust in God's power working through Christ and even accuse Him of not caring, we too are challenged to examine our own faith, because merely repeating the confession that Jesus Christ is the Son of God means little if He does not represent God for us.

The suspicion that God does not really care what happens to us will corrode our religious life. The results of such sentiments are familiarly apparent in daily life. Human relationships die when we sense that others do not care what happens to us.

The weaknesses exhibited by the Lord's disciples teach us a lesson that we should persist in prayer despite doubts about God's saving presence. It should reassure us that the Lord Jesus has the power to save us even in the worst circumstances. How can He not care? He even cares for the sparrows! Are we not more value than they? Besides, He is in us as He was in the boat with the disciples. Are we not aware that our body, like a boat, is a temple of the Holy Spirit within us?

By faith we trust the Lord is still with us. He would be a source of calm in the middle of the storm. Whether our storms are exterior or interior – the Lord is with us to bring peace and tranquility in the storm, because though He is in the stern and is asleep, He is trustworthy of His promise to be with us until the end of time.

In the words of one of our heavenly friends, Bishop Fulton Sheen: "The things that happen to us are not always susceptible to our minds' comprehension or our wills' conquering; but they are always within the capacity of our faith to accept and our will's submission." So, when a storm is blowing in our lives, let us

persevere in prayer and know that the Lord Jesus is opening our eyes to see His love for us.

In the end, we will discover and know by our own experience the One whom the wind and sea obey. He woke up and come to our help! He delivers us for the sake of His steadfast love! "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ,?" ask our good friend, St. Paul. "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword?"

Then he gives a crystal clear and sonorous negation which reverberates throughout Christian history and will last until the end of time: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loves 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."

Hence, when our soul is bowed down to the dust by the affliction of trial and tragedies, and our body cleaves to the ground by the oppression of debilitating illness and anguish of heart, Our Lord deigns to remember as He kept to heart the humble plea of the thief who was crucified with Him: "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power." Of course, the Lord remembers him. "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. Behold, I have graven you on the palms of my hands...." Certainly, these words gave consolation to our soul and peace to our heart which surpasses all understanding. Consequently, we can gladly say: →

Icon # 459 = Out of the Abundance of the Heart

Psalm 45 (44)

"My heart overflows with a goodly theme; I address my verses to the king; my tongue is like the pen of a ready scribe."

In one of His skirmishes with the Pharisees the Lord Jesus had indicated that what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, for out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks. Aside from God, no one really knows what is in our heart until we express it in words or deeds. Hence, words and deeds are very indicative of the inner life of a person.

We may not fully know who and what kind this person is but his/her words and deeds reveal something of what is in her/his heart. Take for example a person who mocks God or religion, though we don't really know the interior life of this person, but the fact that s/he mocks God or religion manifest what is in his/her

heart, that is, a certain dislike or even hatred of God or religion because we normally don't mock someone whom we like and love. The same is true, too, of person who die for someone. Although we don't fully know the inner life of this person, but the fact that s/he died for someone tells us that there must be love in his/her heart.

Take a somewhat identical example of a person who keeps using foul language, though we don't really know the internal being of this person, but the fact that s/he keeps on using filthy words tell us that there is a certain defilement in his/her heart, as the Lord says: "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a man." The same is true, too, of a person who always expresses his/her gratitude. Although we don't really know the interior life of this person, but the fact that s/he is very grateful indicates that there is a certain admiration in her/his heart.

Many of us are not poets or singers, but if we know a song, especially a song of praise to God or any spiritual song, and we may also jot down even just one sentence of appreciation for all the things God has done in our lives and in our world, especially His works of redeeming and purifying us this, I believe, is very pleasing and acceptable to God simply because He is our Father and we are His children.

Consider this quite modest example. Around the year 2008 or 2009, I could not remember exactly the date; the 3 yr. old daughter of one of our employees came with her mom to see her dad, Michael. She was handed a set of crayola and a bond paper by one of our other employees, and before she began to jot down anything she said to Michael, "Dad, this is for you!" In all honesty, I could hardly figure out what she was drawing, but Michael was so proud of it that he posted in on the office door and never removed it for about two years.

Though many of us does not have a degree in psychology, but it is not hard to see that Michael is interested more of his daughter's act of offering her drawing to him than by the drawing itself. The same with God too. Although many of us does not have a good voice, but the song of praise that we offer to God is delectable to Him by the very fact that we consecrate our whole lives to Him far more than the song of a Pavoretti or a Domingo or a Carrera though they are very good singers unless they, too, will consecrate their lives to God.

In one occasion the Lord Jesus used an image of a fruit-tree to make the point about the source of a person's actions. He pointed out that the fruit tells whether a tree is good or not. It verifies the quality of the tree. Thus the inner worth of a person is to be assessed by his/her words and deeds, just as the orchard where the tree grows is to be evaluated by its fruit. Wherefore, not only

in deeds but also in words does a person truly reveal himself or herself, “for out of the abundance of one’s heart the mouth speaks.”

Hence, we need to be steadfast and persevering in good deeds and words knowing that at the end of the road is life immortality where our hearts will be overflowing with joy and happiness, with songs of praise and thanksgiving, and our tongue will be like the pen of a ready scribe nimble to proclaim the glory and majesty of God, Our Lord Jesus who is the image of the invisible God. For this reason, we could not help but admire Him, saying: →

Icon # 460 = The Fairest of the sons of Men

“You are the fairest of the sons of men; grace is poured upon your lips; therefore God has blessed you for ever.”

We cannot fully do justice even in imagining the beauty and grandeur of the humanity of our risen Lord much more to describe it, for even His hand alone or His neck is so beautiful, says St. Teresa of Avila in her autobiography when she saw the Lord in one of her visions of Him, that it alone causes an inexpressible rapture for the soul, that no matter how brilliant the intellect is and will spend thousands of years to find words to express it – still what will be said is just a tiny part of what it really is, because even the brightness of our sun in noonday is just like looking at a muddy water on a smoggy day.

Since He is the fairest of the sons of men, the Incarnate Love of God in the person of the Lord Jesus drew countless men and women to Himself who reciprocated to His love by pouring out all their beings to Him as He pours out all His being to them in the Holy Spirit as the bond of union between Him and them which can never be broken.

The inestimable beauty of the glorified body of the Lord Jesus, once revealed to us in all its splendor, absolutely ravishes our affection, because what would we think of us, mortal, to whom it would be given to contemplate pure beauty, simple, without any mixture and other perishable vanities, but the very divine beauty itself?

Our souls, too, will participate in this indescribable divine beauty of the Lord Jesus, as our Lord once showed St. Catherine of Siena the soul of a woman named Palmerine, whom St. Catherine saved from hell by her prayers and fasting. This soul, though suffering in purgatory, was yet exquisitely beautiful. St. Catherine’s biographer, blessed Raymond of Capua, states: “It was so brilliant that she told me she could find no words capable of expressing its beauty. It was not yet admitted to the glory of the beatific vision, but had that brightness

which creation and the grace of Baptism imparts." If such is the radiant splendor of a soul in purgatory, what will be its radiance in Heaven? And this soul renders the risen body likewise glorious and radiant.

We are told by the Scripture that the Church is the bride of the Lord Jesus. Of course, the Church is composed of individual soul, hence, the individual soul can be rightly said to be the spouse of Christ. Since Christ is the fairest of the sons of men, thus it is just logical that the redeemed individual soul should be so beautiful because it is unthinkable for a very handsome person to marry a very ugly woman.

Though it happened that a good looking man married an unsightly woman but if you tracked the evidence you will find out that what motivated the man was the wealth of the woman. Wherefore, if an ugly woman has no wealth her chances of marrying a handsome man will be extremely narrow, below zero.

In all likelihood, this is reflected in the case of the soul. If a soul is in a state of sin, she is so unsightly in the eyes of God, However, if she has the wealth of humility to repent God will marry that soul but if not the chances are filamentous.

It is also true to say that a very handsome man marries a very beautiful woman whose beauty is lesser in magnitude and splendor than his. In the same way a very beautiful woman marries a very handsome man but whose beauty is lesser in magnitude and splendors than hers. This is what transpired in our eternal union with God and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Even though our soul with its glorified body is incredibly beautiful and handsome yet it is far lesser in magnitude and majesty than that of the Lord Jesus and of the Blessed Virgin Mary, because all beauty is intrinsically a participation of the infinite beauty of God.

Just as stars differ in brightness from one another, so the beauty of the soul with its glorified body vary in resplendence and magnificence from one another. Of course, the beauty of the Lord Jesus surpasses all other beauty because He is God Himself taking human form. His beauty far exceeds what we could ever imagine or conceive, greater than all report, better than all praise, more perfect than every conceivable grandeur.

Since Christ Jesus is the fairest of the sons of men so, it follows, that the Blessed Virgin Mary, too, who is raised above the angels and saints, the Queen of heaven and earth, is the fairest among all women. Aside from the beauty of the Lord Jesus, no other beauty among all other women exceeds the beauty of the Mother of God, because if there's still another woman who surpasses the beauty of the Blessed Virgin Mary God will absolutely choose that woman to be His Queen and to be the mother of His only begotten Son. In the words of St.

Bernadette when she saw the Blessed Virgin: "She is so beautiful that you are willing to die to see her again."

Just as children resemble their parents, in a lesser or greater degree, either to the father or the mother or both, so the redeemed soul with its glorified body will resemble the Lord Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary in a lesser or greater degree either more to Christ or to the Blessed Virgin or both. For instance, we can deduce that St. Francis of Assisi resembles more to Christ and yet have some feature of the Blessed Virgin too. On the other hand, St. Louis de Montfort resembles more to the Blessed Virgin and yet have some feature of the Lord Jesus. We can also reason that St. Teresa of Avila, St. Ignatius of Loyola, St. Francis Xavier have a greater degree of resemblance to Christ and yet take up a certain countenance of the Blessed Virgin. On the other hand, we can also infer that St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Blessed Pope John Paul II take up both the countenance of the Lord Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary to a certain degree; and so on. The same is true, too, with the other saints in heaven and to those who were just fresh from purgatory and are now admitted to heaven.

Since the beauty of the redeemed soul with its glorified body is so breathtaking, so once we entered heaven we will be sucked by one another's beauty and will be filled with infinite love which is the Holy Spirit, for we are made to drink of the One Spirit. Just as the Father poured out all His Being to the Son and the Son poured out all His Being to the Father in the Holy Spirit, so we too will pour out all our being, all that we are, to one another without withholding even an atom of our affection and love. Thus the redeemed love one another as they love God. In this manner the command of Our Lord Jesus to love one another as He loves us is perfectly fulfilled.

We begin this in the present life but imperfectly because the constituents that can contribute to the dwindling of this love are still hanging around. But this is not the case once we see the Lord face to face and the other saints and angels in Him. Nothing whatsoever can diminish nor dwindle our love for God and all the citizens of heaven.

Ever since God became incarnate, we have been absolutely certain of one thing: Grace does not destroy nature, but ennobles and perfect it. Grace intimately penetrates man's self, his reason, his will, and all his faculties and potencies, reaching deep into the very roots of his being, so that grace and nature are not two opposing forces in the supernatural activity of man, but instead aid each other and together form a homogeneous whole, as body and soul form one indivisible unity in complete human being. Therefore, the Lord Jesus is the consummate paradigm of what we will be when grace begins operating in us. We start to become the best possible people we can be.

Just as the divinity of Christ does not destroy His humanity nor overwhelm it but in total harmony with each other in the hypostatic union, so grace does not destroy our own human nature but builds on it as its foundation. We too will participate in the divinity of Christ who humbles Himself to share our humanity. We will be divinized without losing our human nature, just as iron when put in fire becomes fire itself without losing its nature, that is, iron.

Let us listen to these words of our heavenly friend Bishop Fulton Sheen: "Only life can give life, and only life can come from life. The life of God that is grace is a pure gift of God to which we have no right whatever. It was given to us in the first Adam, and restored to us by the merits of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. The whole order of creation affords us an analogy of the gift – quality of grace. If a stone, say the Rock of Gibraltar, should suddenly break out into bloom, it would be something transcending its nature. If a rose one day would become conscious, and see and feel and touch, it would be a supernatural act – an act totally undue to the nature of the rose as such. If an animal would break out into a reasoning process and speak words of wisdom, it would be a supernatural act, for it is not in the nature of an animal to be rational. So too but in a far more rigorous manner, if a human, who by nature is a creature of God becomes a child of God and a member of the family of the Trinity, and a brother or sister of Jesus Christ, it is a supernatural act for the human, and a gift that surpasses all the exigencies and powers of human nature, even more than blooming surpasses the nature and powers of marble. Grace makes a person more than a new creature, and infinitely higher than his former condition, than an animal would if it spoke with the wisdom of Socrates. The difference between mere human life and human life rendered deiform by grace is not one of development, but of generation. The source of life in both cases is as different as human and divine parenthood. The distance that separates some minerals from the vegetable kingdom may be only a hair's breath – but the distance that separates human life and divine life is infinite. 'That which is born of the flesh, is flesh; that which is born of the spirit, is spirit' (Jn3:6). Being born of the flesh incorporates us into the life of Adam; being born of the spirit incorporates us into the life of Christ. The children of God are twice born; the children of men once born" (The Life of All Living).

Hence grace communicates to us a participation in the intimate life of God, the very vitality of God. In Christ Jesus, then, God has blessed us forever. For this reason, we are now ready to do spiritual combat with Our Lord Jesus as our captain and king, taking the whole armor of God that we may be able to withstand in the evil day. Therefore: →

Icon # 461 = Truth

"Gird your sword upon your thigh, O mighty one, in your glory and majesty! In your majesty ride forth victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend the right; let your right hand teach you dread deeds. Your arrows are sharp in the heart of the king's enemies; the peoples fall under you."

This passage, too, is an apt image of the Lord Jesus and His followers, from generation to generation, who are fighting for the cause of truth and righteousness, for they are, in a spiritual sense, the soldiers of Christ. In his letter to the Ephesians our good friend, St. Paul, summons us to have our loins girded with truth and put on the breastplate of righteousness. We have also to take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Our Christian faith tells us that Christ Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. Hence, we His disciples who are united with Him in Spirit and in truth, have a sword upon our thigh, that is, upon our human nature, the word of God – no other than the Lord Jesus. Thus we, too, participate in His glory and majesty, and above all in His divinity as He humbles Himself to share in our humanity.

If we persevere faithfully to the end, of course, by His grace, we will also ride forth victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend whatever is right and just. Consequently, it will lead us to the freedom of the children of God.

In the Gospel of John, the Lord said to the Jews who had believed in Him: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." No doubt that it is a great privilege to know the truth; to know the particular truth we are to believe, and the grounds and reasons of our belief.

This passage from St. John, quoted above, gives us a panorama of what the "soldiers of Christ" or discipleship meant to be. Discipleship begins with belief. Its beginning is the moment when a person accepts what Christ says as true, all that He says about the love of God, the terror of sin, and the real meaning of life. Discipleship means constantly remaining in the word of God. It involves constant listening to the word of Christ. It involves constant learning from Christ. The disciple is literally the learner. All his life a Christian should be learning more and more about Christ.

Discipleship involves constant penetrating into the truth which the word of Christ bears. It involves constant obeying of the word of Christ. We read it not simply for academic satisfaction or for intellectual appreciation, but in order to find out what God wishes us to do. The disciple is the learner who learns in order to do.

The truth which the Lord Jesus brought is designed for action. It is meant to set us free.

To learn from Christ is to learn the truth. There are many possible answers to what this truth is, but the most comprehensive way to put it is that the truth which He brings shows us the real values of life. And finally, discipleship results in freedom, freedom of the children of God. For freedom Christ has set us free. Freedom to listen and to obey. It is a freedom that heals and nourishes the heart of those who abide in it. Thus Our Lord says: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free."

Hence, if we are united with the Lord and persevere faithfully to the end we, too, will ride forth victoriously for the cause of truth. We are granted the power to defend what is right, true, and good. We know that these have been attacked by the malice of men from time immemorial, but never as vigorous and intense as in our own time. Men and women make use of mass media, radio, and television, books and periodicals, and articles to attack the teaching of the Church which is the pillar and bulwark of the truth, but truth, goodness, and right cannot be attacked directly, hence the only thing they can do is to discredit the messengers.

The Church teaches objective truths, that is, true propositions that correspond to reality. They are true whether a person recognize them as true or not. For instance, the pro-life advocate makes a moral claim that s/he believes is objectively true, namely, that elective abortion unjustly takes the life of a defenseless innocent human being. Pro-life advocates don't oppose abortion because they find it distasteful; they oppose it because it violates moral principles.

Imagine if someone say, "If you don't like slavery, then don't have one." If s/he said that, we would immediately realize that s/he did not certainly comprehend why people believe that slavery is wrong. It is not wrong because someone doesn't like it, it is wrong because slaves are intrinsically valuable human beings, endowed with the same human nature as other people are; hence they are not by essence property which can be owned. Whether someone like slavery or not is not relevant to the question of whether slavery is wrong.

Many people today jumble objective truths with subjective truths. Subjective truths are personal in nature, preferences if you will. They apply to the individual subject but may not apply to anyone else. For instance, someone said: "Chocolate ice cream is better than vanilla." You might rightly reply, "Well, that's true for you and your taste, but I like vanilla better." In this case, what s/he really saying is what s/he prefers or feels, not what is right or wrong, true or false.

A good number of men and women, especially in our world today, where moral relativism is incredibly flagrant, muddle claims about ice cream with claims about truth. For this reason, it is crucial for the soldiers-disciples of Christ to follow Him more closely and to continue in His word that we may know Him, by our own experience, who is truth Himself. By so doing, we too will be united with Christ in bearing witness to the truth.

At the hour of His trial in the presence of Pontius Pilate, Pilate said to Him: "So you are a king?" The Lord Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Every one who is of the truth hears my voice." Pilate said to Him: "What is truth?" Pilate is in the presence of truth itself but did not recognize it.

Moreover, truth is not only a proposition to be assented but also a person to be believed: "I am the Truth," says the Lord; a Way to be followed: "I am the Way," and a life to be lived: "I am the Life." Therefore, every one who is of the truth is one of the sheep of the Lord who hears His voice, as the Lord 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." To give us eternal life and to protect us that we would not be snatched out of His hand are certainly "dread deeds" of the Lord which we have to value all the days of our lives.

Unequivocally, His arrows too are as sharp as a two-edged sword, for they have the power to pierce the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and to discern the thoughts and intentions of the heart, so much so, that all His enemies who did not want Him to be their kings fall under Him, as the Lord said: "But as for these enemies of mine, who did not want me to rule over them, bring them here and slay them before me."

For the Lord Jesus must reign and ride forth victoriously in majesty until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" The sting of death is sin. But only those who died in a state of unrepented grievous sin will have the sting of death forever, a sting that penetrates every fiber of one's being.

Since the Lord Jesus is an eternal king and of His kingdom there will be no end, therefore, we absolutely say: →

Icon # 462 = In the Presence of the Divine Throne

"Your divine throne endures for ever and ever. Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity; you love righteousness and hate wickedness."

It is just logical that the throne of the Lord Jesus endures for ever and ever because it is not just an ordinary throne but a "divine throne." The angel Gabriel himself gives testimony to this when he appeared to the Blessed Virgin Mary and said to her: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."

The kingdom of the Lord Jesus will have no end, because it is a kingdom of human lives that have been healed, restored, forgiven, and renewed into the image and likeness of God. It is not a place on a map that we can locate through GPS (global positioning system) from a satellite, but it is a condition of soul; it does not belong to any particular era, it spans all times and centuries. The citizens of this kingdom are those that are disposed to righteousness and hate wickedness.

His divine throne endures for ever and ever not only because the Lord Jesus reigns from above but also because He reigns from within our life. He was explicit of what His kingdom is all about when He says: "Behold, the kingdom of God is within you." This is where His kingship is. It is not of this world; its nature is not worldly; it is a kingdom within the heart and conscience of every human person. Its riches spiritual; its power spiritual, and its glory within.

This is where He sits in His divine throne with His scepter of equity rendering every human being what s/he has done in the body. There will be glory and honor and immortality to all who love righteousness and hate wickedness, for it will be clearly seen that their deeds have been wrought in God. The ways and standards of His kingdom are not ways and standards of the world around us.

The kingship of the Lord Jesus is manifested in His taking a wooden cross and making it a throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in times of need. The Lord Jesus seems to be at His weakest on the cross but is really at His strongest because on the cross He does what no one else can do on earth, namely, forgiving the sins of the human race and giving us eternal life and entry into His kingdom – the kingdom of God: "Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing," and "Today, you will be with me in paradise."

The word paradise – παράδεισός (paradeisos) in Greek is derived from a Persian word meaning a walled garden. When a Persian king wishes to do one of his subjects a very special honor he made him a companion of the garden which means he was chosen to walk with the king in the garden. Hence it was more than immortality that the Lord Jesus promised the repentant thief. He promised him the honored place of a companion of the garden in the courts of heaven.

This, too, will be our lot if we will not be totally depleted of humility to repent of our sins. The story of the repentant thief tells us above all that it is never too late to turn to Our Lord Jesus. As long as there's still a beat in our heart and in the heart of every human being, the invitation of the Lord Jesus still stands.

The Lord was crucified between two thieves, one of course is wise and the other one is foolish; in them were represented the different repercussions which the cross of Christ would have upon all humanity. We are all transgressors of the supreme law of love, all guilty before the divine throne of God. Now the cross of Christ is an aroma of life unto life to those who are humble enough to acknowledge one's sins, but a fragrance of death unto death to those who are extraordinarily proud enough to hold on to their sins.

The wise thief is a powerful image of conversion, but this should not be an encouragement to anyone to put off repentance to one's death-bed, for though it is certain that genuine repentance is never too late, it is as certain that late repentance is seldom true. The wise repentant thief teaches us never to despair in God's mercy, but lest it should be abused by adding sin to sin till one's last breath, it is contrasted with the awful state of the foolish thief who has no oil of repentance in him, who died hardened in unbelief though also with a crucified Savior and king before his eyes. He loves what Christ hates and hates what Christ loves.

Yet Christ did not utter a reviling judgment against him because He did not come to judge the world but to save the world. However, He is emphatic in saying that whoever rejects Him and does not keep His saying will have a judge: the very word that He has spoken will be the judge of every man and woman on the last day. This very word discerns the thoughts and intentions of every human heart, so much so, that nothing covered which will not be revealed, or hidden which will not be made known. Hence, this very word serves as a transcendently brilliant and clear mirror which every human person, both living and dead, has to face and see for themselves what their soul looks like. Does it have a feature of righteousness, or wickedness?

Therefore, in the presence of this "divine throne" no one can ever waggle their tongue to deny the evidence! There will be an interminable glory and honor and thanksgiving and gladness of heart to all who have a feature of

righteousness, for they will participate in the infinite gladness of Him who is seated on His divine throne no other than the Lord Jesus. Thus it is pleasant to hear: →

Icon # 463 = Oil of Gladness

“Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows; your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia. From ivory palaces stringed instruments makes you glad; daughters of kings are among your ladies of honour; at your right hand stands the queen in gold of Ophir.”

Our Catholic faith teaches that Christ Jesus is truly God and truly human, fully human and fully divine. Hence, the words “Therefore God, your God has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows...,” refer to His humanity; and since he is king, thus the words “your fellows” refer to other kings. Again, Our Catholic faith teaches that in our baptism we, too, participate in the kingship of Christ. For this reason, we, too, were anointed with the oil of gladness because of the surpassing dignity which has been bestowed on us to be elevated to the grandeur of kingship.

Of course, Christ’s oil of gladness is infinitely above us and all other kings because he Himself is the inexhaustible source and fountain of gladness, whereas ours is only a participation. His gladness is His’ from eternity to eternity, without beginning or end, whereas ours came in moment of time. Where are we before we were born? Where are we before the world was made? But the Lord Jesus, as the Word of God, already existed even before the whole universe came to be.

As God, the Lord Jesus is gladness itself. He is also Love because God is love. In becoming a human being like us in all things, except sin, the Lord Jesus wanted, with all His being, to share His gladness to us. Since we are made in the image and likeness of God, hence we have the capacity for God and to be receptive to this gladness.

The more we love, then, the more this gladness expands because, by nature, love brings with it an instinctive gladness as our experience bears witness when we are in the presence of the person we love. It is plausible to say that this gladness keeps on expanding and expanding without foreseeable limit because it is a participation of the gladness of God itself which is infinite.

We are created with a purpose to take part of the happiness of God forever. It is described as “oil of gladness” because of its resemblance to the properties of oil, that is: it gives light, it nourishes, it anoints; it feeds the lamp, nourishes the

body, and it relieves pain. It gives light to our soul when we walk in the dark valley of suffering and fear, it nourishes our heart to give us enough energy to persevere in doing what is right and just, it anoints our head to remind us that we have to set our mind to things that are above where Christ is seated at the right hand of God; it feeds the lamp of good works that it may give glory to Our Father in heaven, it nourishes the body that it may be a worthy temple of the Holy Spirit, and it also relieves pain to assuage the pangs of a wounded conscience.

God, who is rich in mercy and goodness and gladness, wills that even before attaining eternal life, souls who loves Him and strive to keep His commandments should receive some portion of this "oil of gladness." The other thing we have to do in order for our heart to continually dispose to receive this oily gladness is to renounce, sincerely and fully, the other kind of gladness that the world offers which is bogusly deceptive, because it has no oil in it, that is, it doesn't last forever.

Besides, it's a dangerous kind of gladness for it brings with it a concomitant malediction: "woe to you that laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep." In other words, this kind of gladness has the inherent potentiality to break the human heart just as running a machine without oil will eventually break the machine.

On the other hand, the true gladness which has "oil" in it, although it is not exempted from mourning and weeping while still in this present world, is finely lubricated, so much so, that it maintains its stability to be content in whatever condition we find ourselves: either in abundance or want. Having this oil of gladness in us is really an amazing grace, for it makes us grateful for all the Lord Jesus has done for our world, in general, and in our individual life, in particular; always and for everything giving thanks in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice."

Faith and religion are substantial to supply this oil of gladness; they are effective aids in transforming pain into joy and suffering into gladness. "Rejoice in so far as you share Christ's sufferings," says our good friend St. Paul, "that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed."

"Your robes are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia." It is intriguing that the robes of the Lord are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia, and not, say, of pure nard or a chanel 5. His robes are fragrant **with myrrh**, because they bear witness to His labors, mortifications, and sacrifices which are fragrant to those who are going to be saved; **with aloes**, because they have the qualities to purge, to invigorate, to restore, to refresh, and to stimulate; to purge us of our vices and evil desires, to invigorate our mind to think of "whatever is true,

whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious," any excellence, and anything worthy of praise; to restore our confidence in the people who have hurt our feelings, to refresh our drooping spirit that we may again renew our piety and devotion, and to stimulate our heart to rise again every time we fail to put into practice the teaching of the Lord Jesus; **with cassia**, because they have the effects of lessening our pride and vanity. Cinnamon supports sugar and fat metabolism, thus, it helps to control diabetes and cholesterol which are images of pride and vanity – too dangerous if they are not regulated well.

Hence, we have an idea why the robes of the Lord Jesus "are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia," because He is meek and humble of heart, prudent, chaste, merciful, flawlessly upright and holy in the sight of all; although He is truly man, but He is also the All Powerful God whose way of life brings healing and whose support is our strength. All these are in the fragrant of His robes.

"From ivory palaces stringed instruments make you glad." Without any slightest shadow of a doubt, Our Lord Jesus is a lover of music. With creative imagination He sees to it that the halls of heaven are equipped with heavenly minstrels with their varied string instruments, and of which the redeemed humanity is blissfully destined to join. Even while we are still on earth we have already a foretaste of the heavenly songs when we attend Mass or participate in the Divine Office, especially if what we utter in our mouth is in harmony with what we think in our mind. Thus the Lord Jesus is glad not only because of the sound of the stringed instruments, but above all because of the active participation of the members of His mystical Body who are doing the singing and playing the musical instruments.

Since in our baptism we share in the kingship of Christ, so we are kings too. Therefore, the daughters of those who are married among us are Christ's ladies of honor. They are among His loved ones. There are thousands upon thousands of them; for instance, St. Gertrude, St. Mechtilde, St. Hildegard, St. Clare, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Therese, St. Bernadette, Blessed Maria Gabriela, St. Rose of Lima, St. Kateri, St. Josephine Bakhita, and etc.

At His right hand, of course, stands the queen – the august queen of the universe in gold of Ophir no other than the glorious Blessed Virgin Mary. She is the Mother Queen, the beloved daughter of the Eternal Father, the admirable Mother of the Son, and the beloved Spouse of the Holy Spirit. Her beauty surpasses that of all the angels and saints combined together; she is the joy of the angels and glory of the saints. In her the Church has arrived where she is destined to be. She is the pride of the human race. She is the physical

embodiment of the feminine side of God. In her we have a Mother just as in God we have a Father. This is not our own doing.

God as Father has only One begotten Son – Christ Jesus the Lord who is consubstantial with His Father in His divinity. The ever glorious Blessed Virgin Mary has only begotten Son – Christ Jesus Our Lord who is consubstantial with His Mother in His humanity, true God and true man, begotten not made. Hence we belong to a family which has a Father and a Mother not just single parent.

Christ Himself who is a TRUTH bears witness to this on the cross and in His resurrection; on the cross when He gave His own mother to be our own mother, too, saying: “Woman, behold your son!” Then He said to the disciple, that is, to all who follow Him till the end of time, “Behold, your mother!” He called His mother woman to show to all humanity that His own Mother will no longer be exclusively His own but belongs, too, to all His disciples; in His resurrection, when He told Mary Magdalene: ...”go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

Thus TRUTH itself gives testimony, therefore, bound to be accepted without reservation. It is for our own good, really, to accept it in order to progress in spiritual childhood. We need to have a mother and a father to develop maturely. Christ, too, in His humanity grows in wisdom and age. He could just have a Father only and no Mother, anyhow He is the Word who existed from eternity to eternity, but in the fullness of time He was born of a woman; hence, we have a mother.

In accepting, then, His Mother to be our mother and His Father to be our father, we are just doing what He said and fulfilling His will. It was He who took the initiative. Our part is to respond. He gives us an example to follow. Since He did it Himself, why not we? We are invited to follow and to assent to His testimony, but not forced. If we do, then we will be in a fairly good position to listen to these words: →

Icon # 464 = Vocation

“Hear, O daughter, consider, and incline your ear; forget your people and your father's house; and the king will desire your beauty.”

Certainly, this counsel is for all people which represented by the daughter. This is an echo of the counsel addressed to Abraham when the Lord invited him to go from his country and his kindred and his father's house to the land that the Lord will show him. In other words, it is a calling to leave one's home and set off, with open heart, to a holy place where one can meet God.

It is Abraham's response to this call, after his encounter with God, that marks the beginning of the whole history of salvation. God, so to speak, planted the incipient seed of religious vocation which blossoms thousands of years later when men and women from one generation to the next left their families, and some their homeland to consecrate their lives to God.

The Desert Fathers and Mothers left the tumult and allurements of the world to seek purity of heart, for once the heart is purified the breathtaking pristine beauty of the soul begins to emerge. No wonder, then, that the king, no other than the Lord Jesus, will desire its beauty and will even go so far to make her His bride, saying: "And I will betroth you to me for ever; I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness; and you shall know the Lord."

The word "know" in this passage can be elucidated as referring to profound intimacy, that is, union of spirits which begets virtues that lead to eternal regeneration, just as Adam "knew" Eve and she begets a child.

Thus the person who left home and family to consecrate one's life to God is unimaginably regarded as the bride of God. This is the difference between the people who do not enter religious life or the priesthood but still serve God. We can say that the people who serve God without joining religious life or the priesthood are having affair with God which, in all probability, is likely to beget virtues, but since they do not make public vows to consecrate their lives to God they would not be considered, in a technical term, bride of God because they married a man or woman to be their husband or wife. Whereas, the people who entered religious life or the priesthood took God as their spouse. This they do in a public ceremony much in the same way as people who got married in the Church.

Someone may ask, 'how about those people who do not enter religious life or the priesthood but make private promise to God to live chastely and in simplicity outside the cloister/convent?' In this case, they are cohabiting with God which, again, is likely to bear children, that is, virtues which are the fruits of the soul just as the human children are the fruits of the womb.

We mention somewhere that there is a healthy distraction in prayer and there is also a healthy or good cholesterol in our body. Hence, "having affair with God" or "cohabiting with God," that is, serving God and following His commandments, in a state of life one finds him/herself without joining the priesthood or religious life, is a healthy, good, and holy form of "affair" and "cohabitation."

Our heavenly friend, St. Basil the Great – the pride of Cappadocia, pointed out that “whatever we give up for a good purpose is not lost but is merely deposited in a safer place. So when we give up father, mother, brothers and sisters, and relatives, we merely transfer them from our unsafe hands to the all protecting Hand of God.”

God's call makes itself heard in the depths of the heart. External signs are only indications of an interior vocation. Everyone has a vocation, and finding it truly is the single event that will cause more happiness in our lives than anything else. The vocation of every human being is to be deified by the Spirit of God, to become holy as God is holy, to become more and more conformed to the Lord Jesus, in order to give glory and honor to God. What God is by nature, we will be by grace. Life, therefore, is about vocation; it is about seeking and finding what God has created us for, and then doing it. It is through this process that God will transform us into “the best version of ourselves.”

Our other heavenly friend, St. Mary Magdalene of Pazzi understood so well that every vocation to the cloister is eminently a vocation to the apostolate for souls. “God has not put us in this place for ourselves,” she says, “but so that we may help others....Just as the Word constituted the apostles to be fishers of men, so also has He appointed His bride to capture souls. Jesus has thirst, thirst which demands that you offer His blood for the salvation of souls and that you beg mercy for sinners.”

No one is called to the life of prayer unless s/he has first prayed earnestly for the gift of so great a calling. The mere desire to pray for a vocation to the priesthood or religious life may be a sign that God has already decreed a favorable answer to one's prayer. “Marriage” is a vocation, too, as well as “single blessedness.” What each one has to do is to listen attentively to one's heart and find out what is best suited to her/him.

Some people are best suited to marriage; some are best suited to priesthood, some to religious life, and others to single blessedness. Each one has to incline one's ear, forgetting one's people and one's father's house, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus Our Lord.

The very fact of departing from our kindred and our father's house is already a victory; it is a break with all our customary mediocrity, a decision to set out on a path less travelled, carrying one's cross to follow Christ more closely, sharing in His suffering that we may also share in His glory; and once glorified, what would that beauty be?! Certainly, the king is ravished by its beauty, and people will seek its favor.

With the exquisite blend of humility, for it has gained self-knowledge, and of sublimity, for people are seeking her favor, the soul listens graciously the admonition and commendation: →

Icon # 465 = Seeking the Favor of the Blessed Virgin Mary

“Since he is your Lord, bow to him; the people of Tyre will sue your favour with gifts, the richest of the people with all kinds of wealth.”

We believe with all our heart, with all our mind, with all our strength, and with all our soul, that Christ Jesus is God; therefore, we are bound to bow down to Him. In His name every knee should bow, in heaven, and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confessed that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Christ the Lord was a king by birth; wherefore, like the three wise men from the East who bowed down before Him offering their gifts, we too are wise to bow down to Him in homage of His royalty offering what we have, that is, our body and our soul because these are the most precious gifts we can possibly offer to Him.

If we feel unworthy to present these gifts to Him because of our sinfulness, then, we have to offer them through the Blessed Virgin Mary who will present them to Him. St. Bernard of Clairvaux said that if we want to offer something to God and don't want to be refused, we have to offer them through the Blessed Virgin. Can God refuse her offering? Absolutely not! Hence, people from age to age seek her favor to have their prayers and petitions answered favorably by God.

We have to assert though that in seeking her favor we do not worship her but pray to her, and not in the same way we pray to God. Take this example: If I got sick and asked you to pray for me, you would. This does not make you uniquely Catholic, or even uniquely Christian. There are many non-Christians who believe in the power of prayer. If you ask your non-Catholic Christian friends whether they pray for their spouse or their children, they will say yes. If you ask them to pray for you, they will say yes.

This is the same principle when people from one generation to the next seek the favor of the ever glorious Blessed Virgin Mary. Though she died to this present life, yet we believe that she lives on in the next life. And we believe that her prayers are just as powerful – even more powerful than all the angels and saints combined together. Therefore, when we seek her favor we are essentially saying to her: “We have problems down here. You know what it is like because you have been here; pray for us!”

We have also to affirm that the mediation of the Blessed Virgin Mary is only an intervention, whereas that of the Lord Jesus is an immolation. The Blessed Virgin is an advocate who intercedes, whereas the Lord Jesus is the mediator who pays. However, the intervention of this Virgin Most Blessed, even as advocate, is a potent force; a vigorous power for us because she excels in lifting us. No wonder, then, that the saints, formally canonized or not, are the most assiduous in pursuing her gracious favors with gifts of their own lives and the richest of their virtues and the wealth of their weaknesses for when they were weak, then, they were strong because the Lord's grace was sufficient for them.

We, too, have to seek her favor because never was it heard that anyone who plead to her protection, implored her help, or sought her intercession was left unaided. In doing so, it is very likely that we will arrive at our final destination, that is, the kingdom of Our Lord Jesus where we will be decked with glory and honor and immortality. In utter joy and happiness, we will see with our own eyes:
→

Icon # 466 = Different Kinds of Relationships: Virgin Companions

"The princess is decked in her chamber with gold-woven robes; in many-coloured robes she is led to the king, with her virgin companions, her escort, in her train."

Just as the robes of the king are all fragrant with myrrh and aloes and cassia, so the robes of the princess are woven with gold in varieties of color.

Since the Blessed Virgin Mary is the daughter of the Father and the Father is God and also a king, thus the word "princess" can be rightly attributed to her. It is likely that some people will find these different kinds of relationships quite confusing; just imagine her relationship to the Blessed Trinity: She is the daughter of the Father, since the Father is king, so she is a princess; She is the mother of the Son, and since the Son is king, so is rightly to be called Queen; She is also the spouse of the Holy Spirit, and since the Holy Spirit is king, too, so she is truly a bride.

Added to these seeming complex relationships is our own relationship to her. Just think that she is our Mother, too, our sister, our spouse, our loving mistress, our powerful sovereign, our Queen, our advocate, our helper, our sweetness, and our hope. We can also rightly say that she is our love. All these many colored relationships sound intricate to us because of our human limitation, but even in its own apparent limitation it is adorned and woven with the gold of truth, for it is

simply a foreshadow of our relationship with God which sounds complex, too, and yet utterly simple.

Take for example Our Lord Jesus: He is Our Father, too, because He is the Father of the world to come: He is our brother, for He is the Son of God and we are children of God; He is also our friend, our king, our advocate, our Good Shepherd, the spouse of our soul. All these are One in Him, totally unified in its varieties, though for us they are many but one reality, because we move from one relationship to the other according to the sentiment of our soul in a given moment.

Take for example, He is our advocate when our conscience accuses us, for He is at the right hand of God pleading on our behalf; He is our Good Shepherd when we felt that we were led astray, but guided back to Him; He is our brother when we hear the word of God and put it into practice. All these kinds of relationships, like “many-coloured robes” are applicable to our interrelation with the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Father, and the Holy Spirit.

It is like a one Highway but many lanes, and though many lanes and yet one Highway. The same with the body, too; though have many members, yet one body. It is the same with the varieties of gifts and varieties of service in the Church, though many kinds yet it's the same Spirit who is the source of all and who inspires them all.

It is indicative of tremendous freedom to be able to relate to the Blessed Virgin Mary, to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit in many and varied ways, because, in this case, we can go in and out to either one of them, or all at once, and find pasture for the nourishment of our souls. We are happy and at peace in their company.

Notice also that when she was led to the king, she was “with her virgin companions, her escort, in her train.” Certainly, we are not crazy to say that these “virgin companions” are really wise virgins just by the very fact that they were her escort, because if they had been foolish they would not have been her escort, in her train, unless the princess itself is foolish, God forbids!

On the other hand, these “virgin companions” can be truly called foolish to the things of this world, but verily wise to the things of God. Take for example ST. Teresa of Avila, St. Cecilia, St. Lucy, St. Agnes, St. Kateri, St. Clare, St. Scholastica, St. Gertrude, St. Hildegard, St. Mechtilde, St. Therese, St. Josephine Bakhita, St. Maria Goretti, ST. Margaret of Costello, St. Bernadette, etc., are they not foolish in the things of the world, but erudite in the things of God? Absolutely they are!

Hence they are in the retinue of the princess, no other than the Blessed Virgin Mary. Whether we will be considered wise or foolish to avow that these “virgin companions” are also “princess” it’s up to those who listen to us to weigh the evidence and then decide for themselves, for we cannot but speak of what we have heard and know.

Are they not daughters of the king of heaven? If daughters, then, they are also princess. It would be less confusing to understand this if we bear in mind the extremely simple complexity of the different kinds of relationships we have with the mysteries of our faith: The Blessed Trinity, the Incarnation, the passion and death and resurrection and ascension of Christ, the Holy Eucharist, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary into heaven – Body and Soul, and the communion of saints.

All these are One in God, which we truly participated here and now, even while still in this present world, and will be fully perfected when we see the king – God Himself in all His splendor and majesty. This is what we call the irreversible “Beatific Vision” – a seeing which brings an eternal rapture of joy and happiness. No wonder, then that: →

Icon # 467 = Entering the Palace of the King

“With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king.”

We will be breathless to attempt to imagine their joy and gladness once they saw the king! Just think of the queen of Sheba when she saw the glory and magnificence of king Solomon, the house that he had built, the food of his table, the seating of his officials, and the attendance of his servants, their clothing, his cupbearers, and his burnt offerings which he offered at the house of God; she was absolutely breathless!

If this is the case to see the grandeur of a king in this present world, what would be the Joy and gladness of the saints in heaven when they saw the unimaginable, unutterable, breathtaking glory and splendor and power and honor and majesty, and etc. of the king of Heaven! Truly, the closest description that we can paint to portray this undelineable joy and gladness of the saints in heaven is the picture which our good friend, St. Paul drew: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him. Their joy and gladness to have seen the interminable beauty of the king, is indeed, exceeds the boundary of our imagination.

Here’s another testimony of one of these virgin companions, no other than our beloved St. Teresa of Avila the pride of Spain when she was granted to gaze a

little portion of the infinite glory and grandeur of this king: "If I were to spend years and years imagining how to invent anything beautiful, I could not do it, and I do not know how I should try, for, even its whiteness and radiance alone, it exceeds all that we can imagine. It is not a radiance which dazzles, but a soft whiteness and 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 the brightness and light now revealed to the eyes that, by comparison with it, the brightness of our sun seems quite dim and we should never want to open our eyes again for the purpose of seeing it. It is as if we were to look at a very clear stream, in a bed of crystal, reflecting the sun'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 into 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 kind, indeed, that no one, however powerful his intellect, could, in the whole course of his life, imagine it as it is."

These "virgins companions" began to nibble a tiny portion of these joy and gladness even while they were still on earth when they first glimpsed the Lord in the ordinary events of their daily lives, in their interpersonal relationship with their fellow human beings, and in their contemplation of the humanity of the Lord Jesus – the king of kings; and then, go on to the consummation of their eternal joy and gladness in Heaven as they entered the palace of the king, in an unending contemplation of the All-in-All, Divine beauty, face to face with God. They are counted worthy to be led with joy and gladness to the palace of the king, because while they were still on earth they found their joy and gladness in whatever the king wills, hence they are admitted into the joy of the king.

In the palace of the king there is not the least pain or sadness; for every aspiration of the human heart is finally realized. The will of all who are in this palace is in perfect harmony with the Divine will, that is, the will of the king. They rejoice greatly in the company of the King and Queen, the angels, and the other saints and all who are dear to them while still in the world.

In the palace of the king every good abounds and there is nothing evil; there shall be life without death, truth without falsehood, gladness without shadow of unrest. Seeing one another in the king, they love one another with the same love as the king loves them. Each rejoices at the degree of gladness which others have received.

Each of them have a twofold joy; firstly, the joy of love by which they rejoice over the boundless gladness which they see in the king Himself, precisely because it is the happiness of the king Himself whom they love with all their

heart, soul, strength, mind, and will; and secondly, the joy springing from love by which they rejoice in God because He is the fountain of their own supreme gladness. Every wish of their heart is inspired by the purest love of the king. They rejoice over sanctifying grace and the supernatural virtues that adorn their souls.

In the palace of the king they see Him by direct intuition, clearly and distinctly. Here on earth, that is, before they entered the palace, they have no immediate perception of the king; they see Him but indirectly in the things created by the king, like a dim mirror. They got their first and direct knowledge from creation, and then, by reasoning from these, they are led to a knowledge of the king according to the imperfect likeness which creation bears to their creator.

But once they entered the palace of the king no creature stands between them and the king. The king Himself is the immediate object of their vision, exceedingly clear and distinct, like the brightest of mirror.

Even though they had entered the palace of the king, but they never have forgotten their families: their fathers and mothers, their nephews and nieces, their relatives, and their brothers and sisters, who hasn't entered yet the palace. The king, too, desires that they enter His palace that they may share His own joy and gladness.

They left their own families to enter the palace of the king, but once inside they found out that they have a new family which included the members of their own families and all the other families in the world, for everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of the king shall receive a hundredfold and participate in the happiness of the king Himself. They will be honored by the king, for everyone who serves Him will be glorified by the Father. Therefore: →

Icon # 468 = Dignity

“Instead of your fathers shall be your sons; you will make them princess in all the earth.”

It is truly mind boggling to see the dignity in which the king has elevated them, for the king Himself considered them, by adoption, as His sons and daughters; hence they are princess. Really, greater dignity has no one than this, that we human beings are invested with and participate in God's infinite dignity because of the divine filiation we share with king, Jesus Christ Our Lord.

Since we are endowed with an utterly stupendous dignity, thus it follows that we have a greater responsibility and are held in stricter accountability, because “every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required....” Therefore, it

is not enough to be considered as princess; we must be authenticated to be princess, we must manifest it even if only to prove it to ourselves.

In this case, our veritable testimony is our conscience that we have behaved in this world with dignity that befits the children of the king, with holiness and godly sincerity, not by worldly wisdom but by the grace of God. It is the Spirit Himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are truly princess and if princess, then heirs of the king, provided we suffer with Him, because He, too, suffers for us that we may be glorified with Him.

As sons and daughters of God, Christ Our Lord relives His own life again; first as a child, then as a mature and responsible adult. He lives and grows in each of us. He is formed in us by the joint venture of the Queen, no other than the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the Holy Spirit, that our faith may increase, our love may be strengthened, and our dignity as princess constantly deepened.

To the extent that we grow into mature manhood of the stature of the Lord Jesus – the king, we will no longer be childish people, tossed to and fro and carried about by every wind of doctrine and philosophy devised by the cunning of men, in their craftiness, according to their false sophistry. Rather in union with the king we are able to practice the truth in love, for this king is Himself both Truth and Love, and so grow up in all things in Him who is both Our Father and king.

How we wish that there would be many sons and daughters who shall come to the fullness of faith and knowledge of their heavenly king and Father, who shall live their lives in truth, in simplicity, in charity, and with sincerity of heart!

Oh, if only we know our own dignity! It is not yet apparent what we shall be, but both our hope and faith bear witness with luminous certainty that when the king appears, as He promised He will come again to save those who eagerly wait for Him, we shall be like Him because we shall see Him as He is. Hence, every one of us who does hopes in Him need to purify ourselves as He is pure.

In the order of nature, the first virtue of piety is to honor one's parents, to requite the toils of those who begot us, and with all our power to provide for their comfort, for though we make the greatest possible return we will never be able to repay them for the gift of life. In the order of grace, the first virtue of piety is to adore the Lord Jesus who is both Our King and God, to offer Him sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for all He has done in our lives and in our world, to console His sacred Heart which is so wounded by the sins of men, and to live a life worthy of sons and daughters of God no longer by human passions but by the will of God, for no matter how great we made, and even deliver our body to

be burned we will never be able to repay the gift of salvation and the largesse of eternal life which He has bestowed on us.

One of the world's most insidious maneuvers against the sons and daughters of God is to rob us of our inherent dignity as princes by swindling us to live only for this present life, to lower the standard of our morality, and to obliterate the remembrance of God from our consciousness. In this case, our ability to perceive truth about ourselves, truth about God, and truth about the world in which we live, is being muffled; our consciousness will be so saturated with tangible employments that its capacity to absorb the things that are above, where the king is, is highly inhibited.

Heedlessness our dignity as sons and daughters of God inevitably brings forth death to our soul. Obliterating the memory of God from our consciousness certainly issues in death. Unless we are roused by the sharp sting of compunction, our spiritual senses atrophy, decreases, wasting away, and salvation itself is place in jeopardy.

Remembrance of God is very close to the notion of the filial fear of the Lord; it connotes a seriousness in the ordering of our life and a care to live within the limits fixed by His commandments. As we make progress, it becomes an active effort of mind and heart to retain and enter into the riches of revealed truth through meditation; then, finally, it becomes part of our consciousness in which every thought and word and deed take place within the context of the divine.

In his rule, our father St. Benedict pointed out that the first step of humility is that, having the fear of God always before his eyes, the monk entirely flees from forgetfulness of God and is always mindful of everything that God has commanded. A life characterized by forgetfulness of God is often not obviously sinful. However, its danger lies in its capacity to engender sins of omission coupled with an unseeing sense of complacency.

On the other hand, it is our mindfulness of the ultimate values in our lives and our own personal precariousness which make us tireless in doing good and in avoiding evil. The first requirement for upright living is an upright understanding; if our mind has lost the capacity for distinguishing truth, then behavior inevitably deteriorates.

Forgetfulness of God causes us to degenerate and opens the door to all sorts of aberrations. Evagrius notes that "it is often from the undisciplined memory that sin begins, making us restless and dissatisfied and inclining us to instinctual behavior." Therefore, the effective negation of sin must begin with the countering of instinctual thoughts and memories.

The best means of doing this is to fill our mind with loftier contents as our good friend, St. Paul, advises us to look at the things that are above where the Lord Jesus is seated at the right hand of the Father. Psalms and hymns and spiritual canticles invite our spirit to the constant memory of virtue by cooling our boiling anger and extinguishing our lusts.

If these things are ours and abound they will cooperate with us in preserving our dignity as sons and daughters of the King, Our Lord Jesus Christ who lives and reigns for ages unending.

Although we are not expecting to be canonized saints, but it is our hope and prayer that we will be counted worthy to be among them. They serve the Lord in this present life, so in return, the Father honors them saying: →

Icon # 469 = Honor

“I will cause your name to be celebrated in all generations; therefore the people will praise you for ever and ever.”

Truly, God could never be outdone in generosity. Whoever serves, He also honors by causing their names to be celebrated in all generations and peoples praising them from age to age. Many of them were not wise according to worldly standards, for example: Juan Diego, Bernadette Soubirou, the three little children of Fatima; many of them were not powerful, for instance: Maria Goretti and Josephine Bakhita; many of them were not of noble birth, for example: Lorenzo Ruiz and Pedro Calunsod, but God cause their names to be celebrated year after year in all languages and nationalities; and as far as the horizon of our faith can see it will last for ever and ever. See how generous God is!

The world honors their men too, but only the great ones! – For example: Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. Does the world commemorate those who have no achievements or no education? By no means! Although the names of Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. are celebrated every, and of course, in every generation, but are only celebrated in the United States! They are not celebrated in the Philippines or India or in Germany or Poland or in neighboring countries such as Mexico and Canada!

Whereas Juan Diego, Maria Goretti, and the other canonized sons and daughters of God are celebrated not just in their own particular country but all over the world, in the Universal Church. In them is realized what the Lord Jesus says: “If any one serves me, the Father will honour him.” Really, there is no work on this earth greater or higher than the service of God. The least servant of God

is far greater and richer than all the presidents and governors, unless they also are in the service of God and are friendly to religion.

Notice that it is the Lord who causes their names to be celebrated. The initiative comes from the God and they whole-heartedly respond. The effect is that people from generation to generation praise them and give glory to God. Their light of holiness, of sanctity, of piety, shine among men, thus people see their good deeds and glorify their Father in heaven.

They simply do the ordinary things but extraordinarily well for the glory of the Father in heaven and love of His other children. They are aware that sanctity does not consist in always achieving great and difficult things but in repeatedly and always putting the love of God in every unnoticeable act, in living with the simplicity and naturalness of the sons and daughters of God in the actual reality of the moment.

Their holy lives were the most trustworthy argument for the truth. It has abundant power to muffle the mouths of the blasphemous men. It needs no defender, it speaks for itself. God has highly exalted them and caused their names to be celebrated in all generations, for they follow closely the Lord Jesus whose Name is above every other name, in heaven, on earth, or under the earth. Hence, in uniting themselves to the Lord they share in the glory of God the Father.

The process of sanctification must also continue and be completed in the life of each of us individually. By no means does this happen automatically. One of the documents of the 2nd Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 13, says: "Man is split within himself. As a result, all of human life, whether individual or collective, shows itself to be a dramatic struggle between good and evil."

For this reason, the canonized saints whose names are already celebrated from age to age, and those whose names the Lord will still cause to be celebrated in every generation, take refuge in God who is their strength and helper in their struggle against sin and protector in all their trials and challenges in the nitty-gritty of life. Therefore, we, in union with them, trustfully cry out: →

Icon # 470 = God: Our Refuge, Strength, and Help

Psalm 46 (45)

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

No one can easily deny that if we are caught in a storm and we take refuge in a strong fortress or hide in a big rock we feel relatively safe, how much more if we take refuge in God who is infinitely strong and incredibly big, immeasurably

larger than the whole universe! Thus we don't have to run in order to take refuge because He is everywhere. We have only to enter our heart and pray to Him in secret, and He who sees in secret understand our sighs and groaning even though we are not able to articulate them well, because His own Spirit scrutinizes the thoughts and intentions of our heart.

God is our refuge and strength inasmuch as He provides us help in our distress and defends us when we take shelter in Him. By doing so, we will be amazed that our inner strength grows stronger, for strength does not primarily come from physical capacity but from indomitable will – the will to cling to God no matter what.

Even animals have built-in instinct to take refuge, in whatever proper to them, when they sensed imminent danger. Take for example what our heavenly friend, St. Francis de Sales observed about bees. He pointed out that “Bees preserve their balance in the air when caught in a storm by holding fast to little stones and so prevent themselves from being carried away, so we, by holding fast to the love of God, will preserve our balance in the midst of the storm of change, whether temporal or spiritual, whether within us or about us.”

In other words, when we take refuge in God by holding fast to prayer it is very likely that our soul will be strengthened in the midst of the storms of trials and difficulties. It stabilizes our trust in Him, for we believe that all things, whether pleasant or unpleasant, work together for good to those who make God their refuge, that is, God becomes their home.

When God becomes our home, then, we can go in and out and find rest for our troubled soul. “Come to me,” He said, “all who labor 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 right to say that the key to this home is prayer. Just as we carry always the key to our home, so we have to pray always, in whatever state of life, or whatever circumstances we are in. If our key is lost, then, we could no longer enter our home! Much in the same way with prayer. A person who no longer prays has lost his key to the heart of God. S/he would find it extremely difficult to take refuge in God.

However, s/he should not lose hope so long as s/he is still in this present life because there's always ways of entering if s/he is really determined. One way we can do when we lost our key and the door is locked is simply to break the door. Thus we have to do a little bit of violence; hence, the kingdom of God has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force. In other words, we have to do violence to our bad habits, one of course, is neglecting our prayer life,

others include our vices especially the penchant for sinful pleasures; we have to do violence to our vanity in order to enter the simplicity of God, to do violence to our pride in order to enter the humility of God.

Cultivating the practice of the presence of God is also tantamount to having God as our refuge and strength, because awareness of God's presence is already a form of prayer even if we don't utter any word, and prayer has an astounding power to give strength to our soul. We feel safe and strong when we are in God's presence much in the same manner as children feel in the presence of their loving parents.

If parents, by nature, have instinct to take care and protect their children how much more of God who loves us beyond all telling to the extent of laying down His life for us on the cross. Hence, gazing on the cross and meditating on the life of the Lord Jesus is a safe refuge, a powerful strength, and enduring help in times of trouble.

Sad to say, many people, when they are in trouble, seek refuge in something else rather than God. They seek refuge in drugs or alcohol or sex or pornography or any unhealthy pleasures. But doing so is tantamount to just putting band aid to a very deep wound. It aggravates their problems instead of solving them, it worsens their wounds instead of healing them, and it makes them more miserable than being truly happy and at peace.

On the other hand, those who take refuge in God renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run in the path of God's commandments and not be weary, they shall walk in the way of righteousness all the days of their lives and not faint, for God is the fountain head of their strength, the unfailing source of help in times of trials. They are like a house built on rock which remains stable even when buffeted by the waves of calamities and distress because God is their strength. With amazing fortitude they arrived to a gallant conclusion: →

Icon # 471 = Overcoming Fear

"Therefore we will not fear though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult."

It is orthodox to say that as our love of God increases our fear of men or our fear of any change on how things are done or our fear of any failure, tragedy, humiliation, sickness, or suffering, also decreases. We have to assert that this does not happen overnight.

As human being, fear is part of our feeling. We normally are afraid when invaded by something supernatural. For instance, the Blessed Virgin was afraid when the angel Gabriel appeared to her even though he greeted her with such blissful salutation: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" To calm her fear the angel has to assure her, saying: "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God."

The shepherds, too, were afraid when an angel of the Lord appeared to them even though the glory of the Lord shone around them. Again, they have to be assured by the angel, saying: "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people..." Again, when the disciples saw the Lord Jesus walking on the sea they were terrified for they thought it was a ghost. The Lord has to assure them thus to calm down their fear, saying: "It is I; do not be afraid." John the Evangelist told us that the disciples were glad to have Him into the boat.

People who have experienced conversion in their lives gratefully affirmed how glad and peaceful they are for having the Lord enter their lives. Their fears of the future and the unknown subsided as they walk with Him day by day. Their fears of looking at their own selves and their past lives are greatly diminished, for they have tasted the mercy of God and found it to be very wholesome to their souls.

If these sentiments are ours and abound they will keep us from being fearful, and our trust in God grows because we know now by experience that He will not forsake us no matter what. The Lord Jesus is so good that He could not trace it in His generous heart to abandon us if we surrender ourselves completely to Him.

When it happens that we do not find consolations in our dealing with God, when our practices of piety and devotion leave us dry in spite of our efforts, we should not give up the struggle. If we want to love and serve God we have to arm ourselves with courage. We have only to take courage and do manfully. With the cross as our banner, we trustfully proclaim: "Though an army encamp itself against me, my heart will not fear; though war be waged upon me, even then I will trust."

We develop a certain confidence that Our Lord is with us wherever we go, with whomsoever we are, and whatever we are doing; for virtue is bold and goodness is never fearful. When we are fearful or always feel threatened it suggests some selfishness in ourselves. Take for example Herod. He is fearful of losing his earthly kingdom. The root of this kind of fear is one's own selfishness which undercuts the integration of one's own personal integrity. If we have not been trained to recognize such fear and to let go of it; we will feed it.

On the other hand, when the Lord becomes our refuge and strength we will be receptive to His assurance: "Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand." "For I, the Lord your God hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, 'Fear not, I will help you.'"

When awareness of God's presence or the Blessed Virgin's presence or any of the saints we are devoted becomes our second nature, that is, a perpetual consciousness of their company especially during our waking hours, we will be astonished to notice that there's in us a quiescent power to forestall the entrance of fear into our heart.

I know a man about 30 years ago (1983) who was really fearful of darkness and of being by himself at night. He could hardly go to the toilet by himself at night because of fear. The same is true whenever he goes home by himself at night from the plaza where, from time to time, there will be some events. In retrospect, he was able to trace the cause of this fear.

He remembers that when he was a little boy, he listened to a horror radio program at 8:00 by night, just a time to go to bed, entitled: "Anay nga nag bakya." Literally, it means "a pig wearing a wooden sandal." In short, it's a story about a man who will turn into a pig, at night, and will threaten or harm other people.

Even in our limited knowledge of psychology it would not be hard to understand why this little boy when he was growing up was afraid to be by himself at night.

He finished college and worked in government agency next town (a city). This agency is in charge of irrigation, mainly of rice paddies, in his country. He worked most of the time in the project site, but sometimes went to their office. This man confided that he was not a religious person when he was growing up, nor his family. However, by the mercy of God this man had a conversion experience. He started going to Church and receiving the Sacraments.

Whenever he reports to their office he always goes to Mass in the afternoon after work. However, one afternoon he missed the last trip going to his own town. Know that he doesn't have a car and the most common means of transportation is by public utility vehicle. It was getting dark, so he has to decide whether to stay overnight in the rectory, the house where the parish priest reside, or to walk about 10 kilometers to his home at night.

He remembers that the weather at that time was not good. Flashes of lightning scribbled in the sky from time to time, but it was not raining. The man decided to walk that night.

Along the way, there were light posts in some places, especially those parts of the city, but most were dark with only the sporadic flashes of lightning as his light. Of course, the inner light was shining within him from the time he had his conversion experience. The presences of Christ and of the Blessed Virgin Mary were so tangible enough to give him courage to trudge those dark places.

While walking he just say unceasingly the Hail Mary. He recognized too that, from moment to moment, fear attempted to intrude into his heart but could not enter because the Hail Mary was amazingly potent to block it. Although fear was really dismayed but it was so shameless and bold to conduct an intermittent visit, especially when the man reaches the part of his town where it is known to be prone of accident.

Several accidents happened in this place at night. Rumor spread that a little child suddenly crossed the street, so, by instinct, the driver tried to evade the child but in so doing the vehicle ended up in the ditch.

It was at this place that fear became so aggressive to gain intrusion into his heart. It was pounding so hard that the man noticed that his heart was beating fast, but he just continue saying the Hail Mary interiorly until he traversed this place. From that time on the man was no longer afraid of darkness or being alone at night.

Hence, he knows by experience what it means to have the presence of Christ and the Blessed Virgin at one's side, as the Psalmist says: "I keep the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved."

Truly, those who keep the Lord or the Blessed Virgin or any saint, or all of them, always before them will not only be delivered from fear but will also be like a tree planted near a running streams which bears fruits that gladdens the heart. Thus with a bird's eye view they saw it and declared: →

Icon # 472 = Underground River

"There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God will help her right early."

During His last year of ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus went up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Tabernacles. On the last day of the feast, the great day, He stood up and emphatically proclaimed: "If any one thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

Of course, the Lord said this about the Holy Spirit whom those who believed in Him were to receive. It is very understandable that He is speaking of the Holy Spirit because common sense clearly tells us that there is no "physical" river in our heart. We know that there is water in our heart and in or entire body, but a "physical" river is just too big for our heart. For this reason it becomes comprehensible that the Lord is referring to the Holy Spirit.

It is noteworthy to notice that the Lord uses "river" in plural form: "out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water." This is to indicate that when the Holy Spirit enters our heart He brings with Him His seven gifts: wisdom, knowledge, understanding, Counsel, piety, fortitude, and fear of the Lord.

It also shows that, as human beings made in the image and likeness of God, we have an unsurpassing capacity for God. No wonder, then, that when a person sincerely believe in the Lord Jesus and allows Him to influence his/her life, rivers of living water starts to flow, that is, the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit; and the other virtues commence to activate and makes one's life more peaceful, happier, and meaningful.

The Holy Spirit deigns to make our body His dwelling place, a city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High, as our good friend, St. Paul says: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?"

Our other good heavenly friend, no other than St. Teresa of Avila, bore witness too, saying: "I know perfectly well that I had a soul, but I did not understand what that soul merited, or who dwell within it, until I closed my eyes to the vanities of this world." Consequently, a spirit oriented life and detachment from transitory happiness and the vanities of this present world will free us to know everlasting happiness in the city of God, the new Jerusalem, the holy habitation of the Most Blessed Trinity.

Just as a blacksmith can do nothing without the help of fire, however skilled he may be in wielding his tools, so too we cannot attain eternal gladness in the city of God without the action and presence of the Spirit. Hence, when we follow the stimulus of the Holy Spirit, we will be able to discover good everywhere, which can make us glad, even in the most unlikely situations.

The human souls longs for gladness, and God wants us to be glad but the only way to be truly glad is to live uprightly. Therefore, if we hope to ever have our desire for gladness fully satisfied it is of paramount importance that we turn our attention toward the acquisition of virtues.

Virtues work together for our perfection, incline us to a good end, make of us not a good singer, a good painter, a good artist, but a good person. They really manifest more clearly the grandeur of the human soul, for they proceed from sanctifying grace which is received in the very essence of the soul as a divine root.

It is true to say that no human being, except, of course, Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary, is born virtuous. Good and upright habits are not infused. Virtue, therefore, must be sought out and can be acquired only by continual practice. For instance, we learn to swim by actually swimming. We don't learn to swim by attending lecture about swimming although lecture about swimming is certainly helpful. Hence, we become virtuous by practicing virtue. For example, we learn to be patient by practicing patient.

Moreover, we have to assert that it is only in our relationship with Christ that we will grow in virtue, because apart from Him we can really do nothing, as He says. When we live a virtuous life, then, we will participate in Christ's own joy even while still on earth although this joy is not yet perfect when we put it side by side with the eternal gladness which God has planned for the human race; but it is a joy that issues from our union with Christ through our pains and sorrows, as He says: "So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

The thought of the world to come, the city of God, the habitation of the Most High and the holy angels and saints, and to be with them forever without the slightest shadow of separation, will always make us glad.

Living with faith in the Lord Jesus is a veritable certainty to be truly happy. To real temporal happiness there corresponds a great eternal gladness, since, to be truly glad on earth means living our life intimately with Christ. Here's a testimony of our other heavenly friend, St. Therese of the Child Jesus: "the only happiness here below consists in always finding joy in whatever Jesus gives us."

To buttress our hope for the world to come, the city of God, the habitation of the Most High and all the holy ones, Divine Revelation abundantly supplies us with witnesses, for by doing so we are allowed to have a foretaste of the gladness of this city and to taste, once again, the fruit of the tree of life.

Here's an unequivocal witness of our eminent heavenly friend, John: "Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations." The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let him who hears say, 'Come.' And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price."

It is consoling to think that aside from the Lord Jesus, the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of course, the angels, all the residents of this city were formerly wounded by sin but by the grace of God were able to find healing for their souls mainly through repentance and by making use of the sacraments, or any sacramental sign available to them.

Both the Old and the New Testaments bear witness to this river and its life giving water. Let us listen to the testimony of the prophet Ezekiel who describes what the Evangelist John had seen and see how their testimonies are in harmony with each other: "As I went back, I saw upon the bank of the river very many trees on the one side and on the other...And wherever the river goes every living creature which swarms will live, and there will be very many fish; for this water goes there, that the waters of the sea may become fresh; so everything will live where the river goes...And on the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing." Notice that both the prophet Ezekiel and the Evangelist John observed that this river flows from the sanctuary, from the throne of God. For this reason it becomes a life giving water.

The Lord Jesus refers to Scripture that out of the heart of all who believes in Him shall flow rivers of living water welling up to eternal life. It wells to eternal because wherever the Holy Spirit touches every corner of our life it brings freshness and healing. It cures the wounds of our past life and its painful memories. It gives us courage to begin a new life in Christ and with Christ; it refreshes our soul and lightens the burden in our heart; it enables us to say, "Thank you Lord for everything." Like newborn men or women for the second time, we long for the pure spiritual milk of Christ's teaching that by it we may grow up to salvation – to spiritual person and to a mature manhood in the fullness of the stature of Christ; for we have tasted the kindness of the Lord.

Those who knew our former way of life are both surprised to notice our change: some abuse us for not joining them in their wild profligacy, but others are edified by us and gave glory to God for the new life we have in Christ.

Since Christ is in our midst, we shall not be daunted by those who abuse us, for Christ Himself will help us at the dawning of the day, that is, beginning in the early morning as we commence our day in prayer, for prayer is a shield against all evil and a rampart in times of distress. Therefore, if we watch and pray we will not be dismayed to hear: →

Icon # 473 = A Kingdom that Cannot Be Shaken

"The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."

The Acts of the Apostles tell us that after Peter and John had cured the crippled man in the Temple they were arrested by the rulers and elders of the people and were charged not to speak or teach at all in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people; for all men praised God for what had happened.

When they were released they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. When their friends heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who by the mouth of our father David, thy servant, didst say by the Holy Spirit, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the people imagine vain things? The kings of the earth set themselves in array, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed' – for truly in this city there were gathered together against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever thy hand and thy plan had predestined to take place."

These words had been uttered for about 2,000 years ago and still ringing in our own days in those who unabashedly hated Christianity. But this is not really surprising because the Lord had already forewarned His disciples, saying: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you." In other words, their hatred for Christianity has its roots in their hatred for Christ, and since Christ is God; therefore, their hatred for Christianity is really hatred for God.

The Lord goes on to say: "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, it is very apparent that there is a conflict between the values of the world and the values of Christianity, because all that is in the world, namely: "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life," is not from God but from the world.

On the other hand, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" is not from the world but from God.

In this obvious opposition between the standards of the world and the standards of God, Christ wanted His disciples to be the salt and light of the world so that if the nations of the world rage because life in this world is unpalatable due to degradation of moral values, Christ's true disciples will serve as condiment to make life in this world reasonably delectable; and if the kingdoms of this world totter because its foundation is laid on the sandy ground of the darkness of falsehood, Christ's disciples will serve as a radiant effulgence of truth.

The world's ideology which is sweepingly dyed-in-wool secular is like a roaring lion raging to bend religion to the will of the state. Their solons and politicians are unabashedly proud anti-clerical who are not just incredibly allergic of religion but really hated religion thoroughly, especially Catholicism – the pillar and bulwark of truth.

One of the world's beloved sons, Francois Marie Arouet Voltaire, whose writings enflamed anti-Catholicism sensibility, boldly raged and thundered out: "Crush the Infamous One." The sound of this thunder, of course, not only reverberated in France but throughout the world in the hearts and minds of those who do not want God to have part, even a little slice, of their lives.

In Germany, too, another beloved son of the world, Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, was raging and cried out his most quoted phrase: "God is dead." Of course, his rebellion was a way of saying that no great meta physical force governed human life and a framework of meaning. Again, it resounded not only but throughout the world in the hearts and minds of those who thrust God out of their lives. Hence, they built their own kingdoms: the kingdom of "self" whose king is the "I." But, how long will this kingdom last? Is the king of this kingdom powerful enough to fight against another king whose kingdom lasts forever?

It would be the height of folly and the pedestal of pride for a weak king to tussle against a very powerful king who has power not only to kill the body but also to cast the soul in Gehenna, and whose legion of armies no one would dare breath of resistance; and whose sight alone is enough to make a person though dead. Here's the testimony of John when he saw this king: "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, "Fear not,

I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.”

The kings and kingdoms of this world when put side by side with the kingdom and the king whom John saw, unequivocally, beggars comparison because the kings and the kingdoms of this world are ephemeral whereas the kingdom and the king of this kingdom whom John saw is eternal. Here's a veritable testimony of one of the citizens of this kingdom when he appeared to the would-be mother of this king; he said: “Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

Since this kingdom has no end, therefore, it is unshakable. It is infinitely unlike the kingdoms of this world that easily totter, as the Scripture says: His voice then shook the earth; but now he has promised, ‘Yet once more I shake not only the earth but also the heaven.’ This phrase, ‘Yet once more,’ indicates the removal of what is shaken, as of what has been made, in order that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken....”

In this kingdom that cannot be shaken “The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our refuge.” Undoubtedly, it is a very safe refuge because nothing whatsoever can shake it. From this vintage point we can behold the works of Our Lord Jesus in our world, the redoubtable deeds He has done. For this reason, we can winsomely say: →

Icon # 474 = Works of the Lord

“Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has wrought desolations in the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear, he burns the chariots with fire!”

The prophet Isaiah, in seeing the works of the Lord, foretold of the day when nations will not learn war anymore. The Lord “shall judge the nations, and shall decide for many people; and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

A rabbi⁵ said that “the reason why the Jews do not believe that the Lord Jesus is the Messiah is that when the Messiah comes he will usher an era of peace in

⁵ Rabbi Charles Arian. My professor in rabbinic.

the world but, until now, wars are still going on in our world." This disbelief can even be compounded if they hear the Lord Jesus – the Messiah, says: "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against her mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law."

He also said: "You will hear of wars and rumours of wars...nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginning of the sufferings."

Add to this is another kind of war going on in our heart: the flesh with its evil desires waging war against the spirit; "what causes wars, and what causes fightings among you?", says the letter of James, Is it not your passions that are at war in your members? You desire and do not have; so you kill. And you covet and cannot obtain; so you fight and wage war."

Considering all of the above, it is very true to say that the Lord Jesus is the Messiah and that He ushered an era of peace on earth but it is a peace which is so different from what the world gives. It is not something diplomatically contrived but the effort of self-surrender to God from the heart. There can be no world peace unless there is peace in the soul. World wars are only projections of the conflict waging inside the hearts of human beings, for nothing happens in the external world that has not first happened within the human soul.

Peace is liberation from passions which cannot be achieved without the action of the Holy Spirit. 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. Of course, all people desire peace, but those alone enjoy it who are completely dead to themselves, to their ego, to their passions and evil desires; and love to bear all things for Christ.

In the lives of the saints we can see that in the thick of wars, that is, in the struggles between the flesh and the spirit, they experienced a remarkable peace because the flesh is under the control of the Spirit; they have crucified the flesh with its obsessions and fascinations.

The concupiscence of the flesh, of course, still remains; it is to their advantage that it remains because it stabilizes their humility and makes them vigilant in prayer, but it no longer have dominion over them for the Lord Jesus who is with them is greater than the cravings of their concupiscence. What the Lord Jesus asked of them is only to: →

Icon # 475 = Be Still and Know that the Lord Jesus is God

"Be still, and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth!"

We have to be still and know that the Lord Jesus is God made visible and accessible, for it is in stillness that God reveals Himself as He revealed to the prophet Elijah not in the wind nor in the earthquake nor in the fire but in the still small voice.

God cannot be perceived in the midst of disturbance which we use to hide from the truth about ourselves and of God. When we are unhappy it is because we cannot stand our own company; we run from silence, quiet, and solitude.

To be at home with stillness is to be at home with God. He created everything in the stillness of His heart. We too need stillness of heart in order to grow in spiritual manhood, in the fullness of the stature of Christ, and to walk in the path of His commandments. To sit mindfully in a quiet place until stillness suffuses our whole being may provide the healing and holiness we so desperately need.

We have a fairly good reason to be still because the Lord is on our side, leading us beside still waters to restore our soul, giving us patient to carry our cross and to bear patiently every grief and pain that come our way. In Our Lord Jesus we have a heavenly friend who will always remain faithful in every change in our life and will lead us to a happy end though we have to pass through thorny ways.

It is true to say that it is possible to find stillness in God even though the world seems to be racing all around us and so many things are competing to capture our attention and focus. Stillness in God is not a passive activity, rather something that we need to work continually.

Our human nature does not naturally bend toward resting in God and be still, but we have the warrant that as we make progress in this discipline, He will guide our paths. And when we see God's faithfulness displayed as we learn to trust in Him, then our soul begin to be still. The book of proverbs explains it this way: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."

A love of Christian stillness is an affirmation that we make it our chiefest delight to be occupied on God, and find it our primary happiness to be with Him. This is a foretaste of paradise. Stillness enhances the reflective quality of our life and allows prayer to pass easily into awareness: "Be still, and know that I am God."

When we are still, and know that the Lord Jesus is God became man, then we are in a fairly good position to know that He is “exalted among the nations,” “exalted in the earth!”

The rationale for this is that the Lord Jesus is king not only of earth but also of the whole universe, that is, of heaven and earth. All the nine choirs of angels, the Seraphim and the Cherubim adore His majesty; all the saints bow down in worship of His splendor; even those possessed by demons confessed that He is the Son of the Most High. He is exalted among people of good will and by all who received Him in their hearts.

The Lord Jesus was explicit of what His kingdom is all about when He says: “Behold, the kingdom of God is within you.” This is where His kingship is, where He is exalted among the angels in heaven and among the believers over all the earth; “and I,” He said, “When I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” He is exalted among the citizens of His kingdom – those that are of the truth, all who are disposed to receive the truth and submit to its power and influence and follow its guidance like a beacon of light.

He is exalted, too, among the lowly and humble of the earth, for the only people who grow in truth are those who are humble and honest. “My soul glorifies the Lord,” says the Queen of all the humble ones, “and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.” “He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly.” “To be humble in abjection is nothing very great;” says our father St. Bernard of Clairvaux, “but it is great virtue indeed, and as rare as great, to be humble like Mary in the midst of honor.”

By and large, the Lord Jesus is exalted among those who live a virtuous life, for to live a life of virtue is to move beyond the chaos and restlessness that agonize the human heart, and embrace a life of consistency and harmony. By the way they live people can obviously see their good work, and thus give glory to God the Father, for virtue is “a habitual and firm disposition to do good.”

And it is in our relationship with the Lord Jesus that gives us the strength, the grace, and the wisdom to grow in virtue, for as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can we unless we abide in Him. He is the vine and we are the branches.

Truly, only those who abide in Him, and He in them, are the ones that bear much fruit, that is, good work because apart from Him we can really do nothing. It is only by our bearing the fruits of virtues that the heavenly Father is glorified in our lives, and will obviously prove that we are Christ’s disciples.

In particular, the Lord Jesus is exalted among those who are honest, among those who are faithful to their commitment either to their vows in religious life or to married life, or faithfulness and honesty in their daily duties either in work or in their family. Perhaps, apart from love, nothing so characterizes the followers of the Lord Jesus as faithfulness.

And apparently nothing fundamentally stalwart than the day by day fidelity to our commitments, no matter what the climate or our conditions or our other choices are. Faithfulness to husband or wife, to obligations, to our duty and promises, to religious exercises and prayer, and to daily routine. In all this the Lord Jesus is exalted among the nations, exalted over all the earth!

He is exalted among those who carry their cross daily, among those who bear their suffering patiently, for it is by patience that they share in the suffering of Christ and certainly will rejoice and be glad when His unspeakable glory will be revealed. With serene confidence born of trust, we gratefully say: →

Icon # 476 = The Lord is With Us

"The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge."

Since the Lord Jesus is with us, and promised to be with us till the end of the world, hence, we have a ready access to seek refuge in Him when trials and difficulties come our way. Genuine and stable peace is to be found when we seek refuge in the Lord Jesus. He would not reduce us to the state of being unable to walk, if His divine goodness were not carrying us in His arms.

The Lord Jesus understands our needs and desires much better than we do and that His dispositions of events in regard to us are advantageous even when we do not understand them. He is sufficiently wise, good, powerful, and merciful to turn our trials and difficulties to our own benefit so long as we have the humility to take refuge in Him and to believe that He is with us.

He can never forsake those who seek refuge in Him and who trust themselves utterly to His infinite mercy, for nothing happens in our lives that are outside His divine Providence which turns all things to our profit and exceeding advantage.

It pleases the Lord Jesus to turn our greatest weaknesses into victories for His grace, for when we are weak, then, we are strong because His grace is sufficient for us; His power is made perfect in our weakness.

We do well to reflect that there are many others who bear a heavier cross than ourselves, but we need to remember that consciousness of its heaviness does

not hinder us from being submissive to the Lord and to make Him our refuge. We have to hold for certain that what happens to us interiorly and exteriorly is for our good. We have only to take refuge in Him for, indeed, this loving and merciful Lord who consoles everyone who takes shelter in Him gives them, in the midst of their greatest affliction, an intimate assurance that we have nothing to fear provided we allow Him to act and abandon ourselves completely to Him.

Since the Lord Jesus is the supreme good, therefore, love of Him must take precedence of the love we owe to ourselves, to our family, and to everyone else. As He promised to love all who love Him and to love them the more as they love Him, we can be certain that in exerting all our strength to love Him for Himself, we shall discover again and more abundantly all that we seem to have sacrificed to Him.

We do well if we make it a habit to accepting everything that the Lord's hand offered us, and to bless and thank Him unfailingly in all things and for all things. In this way we welcome His designs, and our greatest difficulties will profit us most. He is not trying to convey to us some sort of abstract knowledge that does not concern us profoundly. He has to lead us to the mystery of the triune God – to the unapproachable light that our eyes cannot bear and that we therefore try to escape.

In order to make it accessible to us, He shows us how the divine light shines through in the things of this world, in the nitty-gritty, and in the realities of everyday life. Through everyday events, He wants to show us the real ground of all things and thus the true direction we have to take in our day-to-day lives if we want to go the right way. He shows us God: not abstract God, but the God who intervenes in our lives, and wants to take us by the hand. He shows us through everyday things who we are and what we must therefore do.

He conveys knowledge that makes demands upon us; it not only or even primarily adds to what we know, but it changes our lives. It is knowledge that enriches us with a gift: The Lord Jesus – Emmanuel is with us; the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is our refuge. Christ is not only the Creator of the world, but also one who takes responsibility for our salvation once we take refuge in Him. Hence, with unrestrainable gladness we cry out: →