

Hell! Why Talk About It?

A Plain talk on a vital subject for all.

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ONE EVENING last summer I was travelling towards the city of Melbourne along a very dangerous highway. The highway lived up to its reputation that evening by claiming three people in death. I saw the wreckage of the car that had side-swiped a semi-trailer. It was top down in a narrow but deep ditch.

“Anybody in there?” I said to a man who was poking the beam of a torch through the wreckage.

“No. Nobody in there.”

“Anybody hurt?”

“They took two into Melbourne in a police car and there’s three dead ones there in the ambulance.”

Nobody used any words just then, because, I suppose, all of us felt the same way: dryness in the mouth, tightness across the chest and shoulders; helplessness in general; and forgetfulness of all things outside that little circle where death had claimed three lives so quickly.

When such things happen, our reactions are always the same. We are stunned, stupefied, speechless. Then we begin to talk; say the same things over and over until the shock begins to wear off.

But there is something much worse than fatal traffic accidents, something more horrible than plane crashes and hospital fires, and something more terrible than unexpected death in the night; something that can truly be called the greatest and saddest misfortune of all; it is that any human beings should go to hell where they will suffer horrible punishments forever and ever and ever and ever. And can you name any three persons on whose face you ever saw the effect of shock because of the thought of even one soul going to hell? Have you ever experienced any emotional disturbance because you thought of a soul in hell forever?

Maybe it is because we have never seen hell; maybe it is because we have never seen a soul go to hell; maybe it is because we do not think enough about hell.

It is true that nobody ever went to hell because he thought about heaven. But many people have gone to heaven because they thought about hell. And it is just as true that many people are on the road to hell right now because they refuse to think about hell.

For some years a sort of silent agreement has been growing and spreading among otherwise sensible people, even among Catholics, that you must not make mention of the fact that there is such a place as hell; that if you do, personally, believe in a place of eternal punishment for those who die in unforgiven mortal sin you must not speak of it even to those who, like you, believe in hell. It’s not being done. In fact, this practice of frowning upon an open declaration of a belief in hell has been so generally accepted that any priest, who is so far behind the times as to preach a

rousing sermon on the eternal punishments of hell, runs the risk of being swept out of his pulpit by a wave of indignation. To put it mildly, he faces the possibility of never being the people's choice as a preacher.

But the fact remains that human beings on their way through the world need the thought of hell to help them get to heaven, they need to be reminded of the existence of a place of eternal punishment so that they will remember that there is a place of eternal reward

Business men need hell in business to keep business honest; married people need hell in their homes to help them live a family life that is true to the law of God; young couples need hell in their company keeping to help them keep it straight and clean; the criminal needs hell beneath his feet to show him the way back to God; and you, even you, need hell on the table before you, if it will keep you from eating a piece of meat on a day like Good Friday when it is forbidden. All the world needs hell and the thought of it to bring it back to a sense of sin.

For the world has lost its sense of sin and is playing a child's game of living in a world of make-believe. And that is the worst sin in the world to-day; the sin of hypocrisy; the sin of pretending that things are not what they are. People used to commit sin and admit that it was sin; now they commit sin and pretend that it isn't sin; that everything is all right. That, in great part, is due to the fact that they learned to pretend there is no hell. Would a man commit mortal sin and continue to live in that condition week after week, for months, if he really believed in hell? But if he succeeded in convincing himself that for him there is no hell, because he will not die suddenly and unexpectedly, that he will repent and obtain forgiveness for his sin before he dies, what is he doing but pretending that for him there is no hell? Our Lord has told us very plainly that there is a hell and that in hell the devils and all members of the human race who die in mortal sin will suffer eternal punishments. On the day of general judgment, He tells us, the judge will say to the wicked, "DEPART FROM ME ACCURSED ONES, INTO THE EVERLASTING FIRE WHICH WAS PREPARED FOR THE DEVIL AND HIS ANGELS."

All denying of hell and all the pretending that there is no hell will never change the meaning nor destroy the truth of that statement.

Any man who chooses mortal sin and by mortal sin rejects God and His friendship and fully gives himself over to something less than God (which is done in the commission of every mortal sin), and keeps on making that choice until the last moment of life has passed, will keep on making that choice for all eternity. For after death the will cannot change or make another choice. The time for choosing has passed. Forever that man will continue to reject God and God must respect that choice as He respected man's free will during life. God will give that man just what he wanted; an eternity of punishment in hell.

The punishment of hell will last forever because only in the fact that it lasts forever can hell be the punishment deserved by the man who dies in unforgiven mortal sin. Mortal sin is an offence against God Who is infinite and the offence is measured against the one who is offended; and if mortal sin is therefore infinite or without measure in its guilt then the only way in which punishment without measure can be administered to the creature who is guilty of such an offence is to make the punishment last forever.

The damned in hell realise that they have lost God forever. This realisation, which is called the pain of loss, is the most terrible of punishments of hell.

The damned in hell suffer also what is called the pain of sense. This pain is inflicted upon them by the fire of hell. The damned in hell suffer this pain not only in their souls, but after the day of resurrection and judgment this punishment of fire will be extended to their bodies.

There, in sketchy outline, you have the fundamental doctrine about hell and its punishments. It does not make delightful reading, even in cold theological language. Certainly, it does not fill the mind with happy, carefree thoughts. If we really think it over seriously, it makes us, to say the least, a bit uncomfortable. I suppose that is why people who want to be comfortable, even in the sins they commit, begin to deny hell, or pretend there is no hell, or simply refuse to think about hell in one way or another. God in His heaven is well aware of the fact that men have lost their sense of sin; that they have lost the sense of hell; that they are pretending there is no hell. Isn't it true that He permitted the Blessed Virgin to appear to the children of Fatima and show them hell open at their feet? And the Mother of God said to the children:

“YOU SEE HELL WHERE THE SOULS OF POOR SINNERS GO.” It was not for the children's sake that she showed them hell. She told them they were going to heaven. It was a warning to the world to stop committing sin and to stop pretending there is no hell. We could conclude these reflections right here by saying, “Let's think more about hell.” But there is an important thought to be added, it is good to let the thought of hell help us fulfill our destiny, but our destiny is to love God. We need hell to keep us from sin, not only because sin means punishment but also because sin is an assertion of self, and a denial of love of God. We need hell to help us keep the commandments, but we must remember that the greatest commandment is this: “YOU SHALL LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD, WITH YOUR WHOLE HEART AND WITH ALL YOUR STRENGTH.”

It is a beautiful thing to let the thought of hell drive us out into the desert so that we are far from all things that can tempt to sin; but let us not run away from something. Rather let us run to Someone. Let us give ourselves to Him. The sacrifice is not complete unless above that offering we place ourselves and our heart with all its love before the very altar of God.

Yes, it is good to say to ourselves often, “There is a hell,” and to think about the terrible punishments of hell. But let us always begin and conclude our meditation on that place of eternal punishment by saying: “ALL IS VANITY, EXCEPT TO LOVE GOD AND TO GIVE YOURSELF TO HIM.”

On the Confidence with Which We Ought to Pray. “Deliver us from Evil.” By Saint Alphonsus Liguori.

The condition which Saint James insists on, as most indispensable for the efficacy of prayer is, that we pray with a secure and unhesitating confidence of being heard. ‘But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering.’ – (Saint James 1:6.) Saint Thomas teaches, (Summa Theologica 2. 2. Question 83, article 2) that ‘prayer derives from charity its virtue to merit a reward, and from faith and confidence, its efficacy to obtain the objects of our petitions.’ The same doctrine is inculcated by Saint Bernard, who says, that ‘confidence alone obtains mercy from the Lord.’ (Saint Bernard's Sermon 3, ‘de Annunciation’.) Confidence in God's mercy is exceedingly pleasing to His divine Majesty, because it is a tribute of homage and praise to His infinite goodness, - the attribute which He wished particularly to manifest to the world, by the creation of man. ‘Let all them,’ said the Royal Prophet, ‘be glad that hope in you: they shall rejoice for ever, and you shall dwell in them.’ – (Psalm 5:11-12.) God protects and saves all who confide in Him: ‘He is the protector of all that trust in Him.’ –

(Psalm 17:31. It is Psalm 18:30 in the Hebrew.) ‘You who save them that trust in You.’ – (Psalm 16:7. It is Psalm 17:7 in the Hebrew.)

Oh! What splendid promises are made in the Holy Scriptures, to all who hope in the Lord! Whosoever trusts in Him will not transgress the divine law. ‘And none of them that trust in Him shall offend.’ – (Psalm 33:23. In the Hebrew, it is Psalm 34:22.) The Almighty keeps His eyes constantly fixed on those who confide in His goodness, to preserve them from the death of sin. ‘Behold,’ says David, ‘the eyes of the Lord are on them that fear Him, and on them that hope in His mercy, to deliver their souls from death.’ – (Psalm 32:18. It is Psalm 33:18 in the Hebrew.) And again He says, ‘Because he hoped in me I will deliver him: I will protect him: I will deliver him, and I will glorify him.’ – (Psalm 90:14-15. In the Hebrew, it is Psalm 91:14-15.) Mark the reason why God promises these favours: because, says the Lord, he confided in me, I will protect him; I will deliver him from his enemies, and from the danger of offending, and I will give him eternal glory. Isaiah, speaking of those who put their trust in God, says, ‘But they that hope in the Lord, shall renew their strength, they shall take wings as the eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.’ – (Isaiah 40:31.) They shall lay aside their weakness, and put on the strength of God; they shall not faint, nor even be fatigued in treading the rugged ways of salvation, but shall run and fly like the eagle. ‘In silence and in hope shall your strength be.’ – (Isaiah 30:15.) The holy prophet tells us, that all our strength consists in placing our entire hope in God, and in silence, or in reposing peacefully in the arms of His mercy, casting away all confidence in our own efforts, or in human means.

And has it ever happened that he who trusted in God was lost? ‘No one has hoped in the Lord, and has been confounded.’ – (Ecclesiasticus 2:11.) David’s confidence gave him a security of eternal life: ‘In You, O Lord, have I hoped, let me never be confounded.’ – (Psalm 30:1-2. It is Psalm 31:1 in the Hebrew.) Is it possible that God should become a deceiver, and that after having promised support in their dangers to all who trust in Him, He should forsake them when they invoke His assistance? ‘God,’ says Saint Augustine, ‘is not a deceiver, who offers His protection and afterwards withdraws Himself from us, when we place our trust in Him.’ ‘Blessed is the man,’ says David, ‘that trusts in You.’ And why? Because, says the Psalmist, ‘mercy shall encompass him that hopes in the Lord.’ – (Psalm 31:10. It is Psalm 32:10 in the Hebrew.) He is surrounded and protected on every side by the Almighty, and is secured against his enemies, and the danger of eternal damnation.

Hence, the apostle exhorts us so earnestly, not to suffer our confidence in God to be impaired: ‘Do not therefore lose your confidence, which has a great reward.’ – (Hebrews 10:35.) The graces which we shall receive from God, will be proportioned to our confidence: if it be strong and free from wavering, they shall be abundant: ‘Great faith deserves a great reward.’ Saint Bernard compares the divine mercy to an immense fountain, which gives out its salutary waters in proportion to the magnitude of the vessel of confidence in which they are to be carried: ‘You, O Lord,’ he says, ‘do not pour the oil of mercy, unless into vessels of confidence,’ – (Saint Bernard Sermon 3, ‘de Annunciation’.) ‘Let your mercy, O Lord,’ says the prophet, ‘be upon us, as we have hoped in You.’ – (Psalm 32:22. It is Psalm 33:22 in the Hebrew.) This was verified in the centurion, whose confidence was praised by the Redeemer: ‘Go,’ said our Lord to him, ‘and as you have believed, so be it done to you.’ – (Saint Matthew 8:13.) Our Lord once revealed to Saint Gertrude that they who pray with confidence, do violence to Him in such a manner, that they must be heard, and obtain whatever they ask. ‘Prayer,’ says Saint John Climacus, ‘piously does violence to God.’ Yes, prayer does violence to the Almighty; but it is a violence which is pleasing and acceptable to Him.

‘Let us go, therefore,’ says Saint Paul, ‘with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace in seasonable aid.’ – (Hebrews 4:16.) The throne of grace is Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of His Father, not on a throne of justice, but of grace, to obtain pardon for sinners, and perseverance for the just. To this throne, we must always approach with confidence, but with that confidence which springs from a lively faith in the goodness, and in the veracity of God, who has promised to hear those who pray with a secure and stable confidence. He that prays with diffidence, need not expect to be heard; ‘for,’ says Saint James, ‘he that wavers is like a wave of the sea, which is moved and carried about by the wind. Therefore, let not that man think that he shall receive any thing from the Lord.’ – (Saint James 1:6-7.) His prayer will not be regarded: the unjust diffidence by which he is agitated, renders the divine mercy deaf to his petitions. ‘You have not asked rightly,’ says Saint Basil, ‘because you have asked with diffidence.’ David said, that our confidence in God should be like a mountain, which receives unmoved the blast of the tempest. ‘They that trust in the Lord shall be as Mount Zion: he shall not be moved for ever that dwells in Jerusalem.’ – (Psalm 124:1. It is Psalm 125:1 in the Hebrew.) The Redeemer strenuously exhorts us to pray with a firm confidence of obtaining what we ask: ‘Whatsoever you ask when you pray, believe that you shall receive; and they shall come unto you.’ – (Saint Mark 11:24.) Whatever favour you ask, have confidence that you shall receive it, and your prayer will be heard.

But you will say, on what can I, a miserable sinner, ground a secure confidence of obtaining whatever I ask? I answer, on the promise of Jesus Christ. ‘Ask,’ He says, ‘and you shall receive.’ – (Saint John 16:24.) ‘Who,’ says Saint Augustine, ‘can fear deception, when truth promises?’ Can we entertain any doubt of being heard, when the God of truth promises to grant whatever we ask. ‘He would not,’ says Saint Augustine, ‘exhort us to ask, if He did not intend to give.’ Now He constantly entreats and command us in Holy Scriptures, to pray, to ask, to seek, to knock, and adds that ‘whatever we will, it shall be done unto us.’ – (Saint John 15:7.) To induce us to pray with suitable confidence, the Redeemer in the ‘Pater Noster’, the ‘Our Father’, the prayer which He Himself composed, has taught us to call God our Father, rather than Lord or Master, when we petition for the graces necessary for salvation; thus exhorting us to ask God’s grace, with the same confidence, as a destitute sickly child, asks for food and medicine from a tender parent. If a father be informed of the miserable condition of a beloved Son who is dying from hunger, will he not instantly provide food for his starving offspring; if he be told that the child was bitten by a serpent, will he not make every effort in his power to apply the proper remedy.

Trusting then in the divine promises, let us pray with a confidence not wavering, but strong and firm. ‘Let us hold fast the confession of our hope, without wavering, for He is faithful that has promised.’ – (Hebrews 10:23.) Since it is of faith that God fulfills His promises, we should pray with a secure confidence of being heard, and should never be deterred from persevering in prayer by the absence of sensible confidence arising from spiritual dryness, or from the agitation produced by the commission of some fault. On the contrary, in the time of dryness and agitation we should even force ourselves to pray: for then, our prayers being accompanied with diffidence in ourselves, and proceeding from a confidence in the goodness and fidelity of God, who has promised to hear all who invoke Him, they will be very acceptable to Him and will be very readily heard. O how pleasing it is to the Lord, to see us in the time of tribulations, of fear and temptations, hope against hope, or against that feeling of distrust which naturally springs from a state of desolation. For this reason, the apostle praised the confidence of the patriarch Abraham, ‘who against hope believed in hope.’ – (Romans 4:18.)

Saint John says that he who places a firm confidence in God, will certainly become a saint: 'And every one that has this hope in him sanctifies himself, as he also is holy.' – (1 John 3:3.) For God pours His graces abundantly on those who trust in Him. This confidence enabled so many martyrs, so many tender virgins, and so many helpless children to withstand the savage cruelty of tyrants, and overcome the torments which had been prepared for them. We sometimes pray, but God appears not to heed us. Let us, on such occasions never abandon prayer, but let us rather redouble our confidence, saying with holy Job, 'Although He should kill me I will trust in Him.' – (Job 13:15.) O my God, though you should turn your face from me I will not cease to pray, and to hope in your mercy. Let us act in the manner, and we shall obtain from God whatsoever we desire.

It was by perseverance in prayer, after her petition had been repeatedly rejected, that the Chananian woman obtained from Jesus Christ the object of her desires. Her daughter being possessed by a devil, she besought the Redeemer to deliver her, saying, 'Have mercy on me, O Lord, you son of David: my daughter is grievously troubled by a devil.' – (Saint Matthew 15:22.) Our Lord answered that He was not sent to the Gentiles, but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The woman was not dispirited by this reply, but came and adored Him, saying with confidence, 'Lord, help me.' He again answered, that 'it is not good to take the bread of the children, and to cast it to the dogs.' But she said, 'Yes, Lord: for the whelps eat of the crumbs that fall from the tables of their masters.' The Saviour seeing her great confidence, said to her, 'O woman, great is your faith: be it done to you, as you will.' – (Saint Matthew 25-27.) 'And no one,' says Ecclesiasticus, 'has ever invoked the Lord without obtaining relief. Or who has called upon Him, and He despised him?' – (Ecclesiasticus 2:12.)

Saint Augustine called prayer the key which opens heaven to us; so that the favours we ask descend upon us the very instant our prayers ascend to God. 'The prayer of the just man,' he says, 'is the key of heaven; his petition ascends, and God's mercy descends.' – (Saint Augustine Sermon 216, 'de temp'. According to the royal prophet, our supplications and the divine mercy are inseparably connected. 'Blessed,' he says, 'be God, who has not turned away my prayer nor His mercy from me.' – (Psalm 65:20. It is Psalm 66:20 in the Hebrew.) It is for this reason, that Saint Augustine tells us, whenever we pray, to have a secure confidence of being heard. 'When,' he says, 'you see that you persevere in prayer, rest assured that the mercy of God is not far from you.' – (Saint Augustine 'on Psalm 95 {96}). For my part, I never feel more consoled in spirit, or more confident of salvation, than when I am employed in prayer, and in recommending myself to the divine mercy. I am sure the same may be said of all Christians. For it is a truth as certain and infallible as that God cannot violate His promises, that he who prays with confidence will be heard; but all other marks of our salvation are uncertain and fallible. When we perceive our own weakness, and our inability to overcome some passion, or to surmount some difficulty, we should be careful not to imitate those pusillanimous souls who say, I cannot resist this temptation, I cannot discharge this duty, I cannot trust myself; but we should be animated by the example of the apostle, and say with him: 'I can do all things in Him who strengthened me.' – (Philip 4:13.) Of ourselves we certainly can do nothing, but, with the divine assistance we can do all things. If the Almighty said to any of us, 'Take this mountain on your shoulders and carry it; I will assist you;' would it not be folly and impiety to answer, I cannot move such an enormous weight; I will not attempt a task which I have not strength to perform. When, then, we see that we are poor and miserable and wretched, and that we are encompassed with temptation, let us not be disheartened, but let us raise our eyes to heaven, and say with holy David, 'The Lord is my helper: and I will look over my enemies.' – (Psalm 117:7. In the Hebrew, it is Psalm 118:7.) With the assistance of my Saviour, I will overcome and despise all

attacks of my adversaries. When we are in danger of offending God, or about to engage in any affair of importance, and know not what course to adopt or how to act, let us recommend ourselves to the Lord, saying, 'The Lord is my light and salvation; whom shall I fear.' – (Psalm 26:1. In the Hebrew, it is Psalm 27:1.) And the Almighty will infallibly dissipate our darkness, and preserve us from every evil.

You will perhaps say, I am a sinner, and I have read in the scriptures that 'God does not hear sinners.' – (Saint John 9:31.) Saint Thomas answers, with Saint Augustine, that these words were spoken by the blind man, before he had been enlightened. 'That,' says Saint Thomas, 'is the word of the blind man not as yet perfectly illumined, and therefore is not ratified.' – (Saint Thomas Summa Theologica, 2. 2. Question 83, article 16, answer to objection 1.) The angelic doctor adds, that God indeed does not hear the supplications of sinners when their prayers proceed from a desire of persevering in sin; as, for example, when they seek from God assistance to take revenge of their enemies, or to execute any other criminal design. The same may be said of sinners who, while they pray for the means of salvation, have no desire to quit their sinful habits.

There are some unhappy souls who even love the chains by which the devil keeps them in slavery. Their prayers are rash and abominable in the sight of God, and are therefore rejected. And what greater temerity can be conceived, than to ask favours from a prince whom you have not only frequently offended, but whom you are determined still to offend. It is for this reason, that the Holy Ghost says by the mouth of the wise man, that the prayer of him who rejects the proffered knowledge of the divine commands, is odious and detestable before the Lord: 'He that turns away his ears from learning the law, his prayer shall be an abomination.' – (Proverbs 28:9.) To such sinners the Almighty declares that their prayers are unprofitable, that He will turn away from them, and will not attend to their supplications: 'And when you stretch forth your hands, I will turn away my eyes from you: and when you multiply prayer, I will not hear.' – (Isaiah 1:15.) It was thus He treated the prayer of Antiochus, who besought the Lord, and promised great things. But his promises were insincere, his heart was hardened in sin, his prayers proceeded from a fear of the chastisement with which he was threatened, and were therefore rejected by the Almighty. And he died a miserable death, eaten by worms that swarmed out of his body. 'Then this wicked man prayed to the Lord, of whom he was not to obtain mercy.' – (2 Macc. 9:13.)

There is another class of sinners, who fall through human frailty, or through the violence of some passion; who ardently desire to shake off the yoke of the enemy, and fervently beseech the Almighty to burst the chains of death by which they are bound, and to deliver them from the miserable slavery of hell, under which they groan. If they persevere in prayer, their cry will be infallibly heard by Him who has promised, that 'every one that asks receives: and he that seeks, finds.' – (Luke 11:10.) The author of the *Opus Imperfectum in Matthaeum* (the *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew*, of the 5th century), in his commentary on this passage, says, that all, sinners as well as saints, receive what they ask, and find what they seek. (See section 18) The Redeemer says, that what cannot be obtained from a friend for friendship's sake, may be extorted by importunity: 'Yet if he shall continue provoking, I say to you, although he will not rise and give him because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise, and give him as many as he needs. And I say to you, 'Ask and it shall be given to you,' and so on. – (See Luke 11:5-10.)

Thus, persevering prayer obtains mercy from God, even for those who are not his friends. Saint Chrysostom says, that 'friendship is not so powerful before God as prayer: and what friendship has not accomplished, prayer effects.' – (Saint Chrysostom, Homily 56.) Saint Basil teaches that

‘sinners obtain what they ask, if they ask with perseverance.’ (Saint Basil Cons. Mon. chapter 1.) Saint Gregory says, ‘Let the sinner cry aloud, and his prayer will reach the most high.’ – (Saint Gregory, on the 6th Penitential Psalm.) Saint Jerome observes, that after the example of the prodigal child, who exclaimed, ‘Father I have sinned,’ every sinner may address the Almighty as his father, provided he pray to be received again amongst the children of God. – Saint Jerome, Epistle to Damasus, about the Prodigal Son.) Saint Augustine says, that ‘if God does not hear sinners, in vain would the publican have said, God be merciful to me a sinner,’ – (Saint Augustine, tract 24, On John’s Gospel.) Now the gospel informs us that the publican, by his prayer obtained pardon: ‘This man went down into his house justified.’ – (Saint Luke 18:14.)

The angelic doctor who has examined this point more minutely than any other writer, does not hesitate to assert, that God hears the prayers even of sinners; that, though their prayers are not meritorious, still, since impetration, (that is, of obtaining what we ask) depends on the goodness of God, and not on His justice, they have sufficient efficacy to obtain favours. ‘Merit,’ says Saint Thomas, ‘depends on justice, but impetration depends on grace.’ – (Saint Thomas, Summa Theologica, 2. 2. Question 83, article 16, answer to objection 2.) Hence, Daniel implored the divine mercy, saying, ‘Incline, O my God, your ear and hear: open your eyes and see our desolation: for it is not for our justification that we present our prayers before your face, but for the multitude of your tender mercies.’ – (Dan. 9:18.) To obtain then by prayer the graces we ask, it is not necessary to be the friends of God; by prayer, we are restored to His friendship. ‘Prayer,’ says Saint Thomas, ‘makes us friends of God.’

Moreover, Saint Bernard observes that the prayers of a sinner to be cleansed from his sin, proceed from a wish to return to God: now a desire to be converted to God is certainly the gift of heaven. And ‘why,’ says the saint, ‘would God inspire the sinner with such a desire, if He did not intend to hear him.’ Hence, so many examples recorded in the Holy Scriptures, of sinners delivered from their sins by humble prayer. Thus King Ahab, (in 3 Kings 21:27, though it is called 1 Kings in the Hebrew,) thus King Manasseh, (2 Chronicles 33:12) thus King Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4:31) and thus the good thief, (Luke 23:43) were restored by prayer to God’s favour. O how wonderful is the efficacy of prayer. Two sinners die with Jesus Christ on Calvary; one begs of the Redeemer to remember him and he is saved; the other does not pray and he is damned.

In fine Saint Chrysostom says, ‘No sinner has with sorrow asked favours and the benefits of God from Him, without obtaining what he wished.’ – (Saint Chrysostom, Homily ‘de Moysi’.) But why seek further reasons or authorities, when Jesus Christ has said, ‘Come to me all you that labour and are burdened, and I will refresh you.’ – (Matthew 11:28.) Saint Jerome, Saint Augustine, and others say, that by them who ‘are burdened,’ the Redeemer meant sinners who groan under the weight of their iniquities and, that if these invoke the Lord, they will, according to the promise of Christ, be refreshed, restored to His friendship, and saved through the divine mercy. ‘Ah,’ says Saint Chrysostom, ‘you do not desire so ardently the forgiveness of your sins, as God desires to grant it.’ The saint adds, that ‘there is no favour, which the most abandoned sinner may not obtain by fervent and assiduous prayer.’ – (Saint Chrysostom, homily 23, on Matthew.) Mark the words of Saint James: ‘But if any of you want wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men abundantly and upbraids not.’ – (Saint James 1:5.) The Lord, then hears all who pray to Him, and enriches them with his graces: ‘Who gives to all men abundantly.’ The words, ‘and upbraids not,’ signify that God does not act like men, who when asked for a favour by one who had offended them, immediately upbraid him with his misconduct. It is not thus that the Almighty treats those who ask His mercy. Though

their sins be as numerous as the sands of the sea, or as the stars of the heavens, He will not reproach them with their iniquities, when they ask any favour conducive to their eternal salvation; but, as if they had never insulted His Majesty, He will instantly receive and console them; He will hear their supplications, and will enrich them abundantly with all His gifts. To animate our confidence the Redeemer says, ‘Amen, Amen, I say to you, if you ask the Father any thing in my name, He will give it to you.’ – (John 16:23.) As if He said, sinners be not disheartened, let not your sins deter you from invoking my Father, and hoping to obtain from Him eternal salvation. You indeed have no claim to the graces which you require; you deserve nothing but everlasting torments. But, notwithstanding your unworthiness, go to my Father, in my name, and, through my merits, ask the graces you stand in need of, and I promise, I even swear, to you, (‘Amen, Amen, I say to you,’ is according to Saint Augustine, a species of oath,) that my Father will grant whatever you demand. O God! Can a sinner have a greater source of consolation, than to know with certainty that he will receive all he asks in the name of Jesus Christ.

I say that he will obtain every thing which appertains to eternal salvation; for with regard to temporal goods, I have, elsewhere, already said that the Almighty does not always hear us when we pray for them, because He knows they would be opposed to our spiritual interests. But His promise to hear our prayers for spiritual favours, is absolute and unconditional; and therefore Saint Augustine exhorts us to ask, with confidence of receiving them, the graces which God has promised absolutely. ‘What God has promised, ask with security.’ – (Sermon 354 and the Glosses from Augustine on 2 Corinth 13.) And, how can God refuse what we ask with confidence, when He is more desirous of dispensing His graces than we are of obtaining them. ‘He,’ says Saint Augustine, ‘is more willing to bestow His benefits on you, than you are to receive them.’

Saint Chrysostom says, that God’s wrath is provoked against us, only when we neglect to ask His gifts. ‘He is not angry except when we do not ask.’ Is it possible that God will not hear a soul imploring favours agreeable to His will? When a Christian says, Lord, I do not ask from you goods of this earth; I do not seek riches, honours, or pleasures; I only beg your holy grace: deliver me from sin; grant me a good death; inflame my heart with your holy love; (which, Saint Francis of Sales says, should be more fervently asked from God, than any of His other gifts;) infuse into my soul a spirit of resignation to your holy will; can the Almighty refuse to hear such a prayer? ‘What prayers, O Lord,’ says Saint Augustine, ‘will you hear, if you reject those that are according to your own heart?’

Our confidence, when we pray for spiritual favours, should be animated by the words of Jesus Christ. ‘If you, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father from heaven give the good spirit to them that ask Him.’ – (Luke 11:13.) If you, says the Redeemer, who are so full of self-love, and therefore so much attached to your own interest, cannot refuse your children what they ask, how can your heavenly Father, whose love for you exceeds that of the tenderest parent; how, I say, can He deny you the spiritual blessings which you seek from Him by humble prayer.
