

Confidence In Prayer

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From "The Great Means of Salvation and of Perfection."

On the Confidence with Which We Ought to Pray.

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 15:27-28.)

'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 Constitutions for Monks 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.
