

A photograph of a person from behind, wearing a light-colored, patterned shirt and a white face mask. They are looking at a large, illuminated stock market ticker board. The board displays various stock symbols and prices in yellow and orange light against a dark background. The text is overlaid on the top half of the image.

RISING FROM THE ASHES (PART 2): LIVING THE CHRISTIAN HOPE WHEN THE WORLD FAILS

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As I have mentioned in the first part of this writing, the Christian hope is something to be embodied, to be lived, not something to be left simmered in our minds as a mere conceptual dream. The Christian vision is concrete because the kingdom of God in which we participate is a reality in the present, even if it has not yet fully materialised in its most visible sense. Therefore, the hope that God offers to His children is present in the here-and-now whilst we are still awaiting the fullness of its actualisation.

PRAYER, ACTION, AND JUDGEMENT

In his encyclical *Spe Salvi* (2007), the Holy Father Benedict XVI stipulates that our Christian hope is to be practised within three settings, that is, prayer, action, and Judgement. Let us consider each of these three settings.

Prayer refers to the personal encounter that we cultivate with God as a regular habit. In prayer, we internalise the love that we share with God and experience being drawn

into His perfect communion. This love that we experience is what ignites the sense of hope within us. A good example of a man who lived in intimate union with God because of his prayer is Saint John Vianney who prayed like this:

I love you, O my God, and my only desire is to love you until the last breath of my life. I love you, O my infinitely lovable God, and I would rather die loving you, than live without loving you. I love you, Lord, and the only grace I ask is to love you eternally... My God, if my tongue cannot say in every moment that I love you, I want my heart to repeat it to you as often as I draw breath.

It is in prayer that we can know we are heard by the infinite and all-powerful God when we can depend on no one else to hear or to aid us. It is also in prayer that we begin to listen to the heart of God and start being shaped by our relationship with Him as opposed to being formed by values outside of our relationship with God and His Holy Church which may contradict His self-giving

goodness. This is when we begin to ask God for that which is truly good for the world and for others in accordance with His holy will, no longer being fixated on our self-centred trivialities. For prayer to have this effect on our lives, the Holy Father counsels us to be guided, not by self-focused free-flowing prayers (that many contemporary Christians call “spontaneous prayers” which are frequently birthed from a momentary sensational high), but by the “the great prayers of the Church and of the saints, by liturgical prayer, in which the Lord teaches us again and again how to pray properly.” (*Spe Salvi*, 34)

Action refers to the work to which we are called to do in our lives for the constructive benefit of a better human civilisation, basically, for the good of our neighbour. But the more dedicated we are to this endeavour, the greater the propensity there is for us to be frustrated when our actions seem to be nullified by events that appear to invalidate our intention. The safeguard that we have against despair is found in being “enlightened by the radiance of the great hope that cannot be destroyed even

by small-scale failures or by a breakdown in matters of historic importance.” (*Spe Salvi*, 35)

Embracing the Christian hope through action comes partially through working to reduce the suffering found in the world today. However, it is never possible for us to totally eliminate this suffering. And yet, totally abandoning this action in order to avoid suffering would cause one to enter into a meaninglessness that one cannot overcome on his own. Our hope is found in embracing the suffering that cannot be eradicated, by growing through it, and finding meaning in it by uniting ourselves to the sufferings of Jesus Christ who embraced suffering with everlasting love. It is this hope that enables us to endure our own sufferings and to also participate in the sufferings of others. Understandably, this spiritual posture contradicts our culture of convenience today that does not so much as tolerate the most minor of annoyances.

Judgement refers to the hope of the Final Judgement during which all of creation is presented to Christ the

Judge who presents His final verdict on the history of creation. For Christians, it is an event to which we look forward, for in this divine action the justice of God will triumph over the injustices of sin. Rather than being a judgement of terror, it is God's loving act of restoring all things into eternal perfection (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1042).

This hope for the final restoration of creation and the human society can be successfully fulfilled only by God, and everything that humanity undertakes for the betterment of creation provides only a vague foreshadowing of the finality of divine action. While humanity does its utter best to provide healing to a hurting world, even the sins and imperfections of the most noble initiators would contribute further to the imperfection of the state of things. Every imperfection we experience on this side of our eternal life and our accompanying desire for the perfection of creation merely reminds us that our deepest longings are actually for the light of the heavenly kingdom. And for the Christian, this very desire is in itself an experience of hope.

THE SUMMARY EMBODIMENT OF HOPE

As has been demonstrated in the previous as well as in this part of my writing, there is much that we can synthesise from the encyclical *Spe Salvi* in our sustained reflection on the current predicament of society. (To be sure, we must realise that the human crisis has been present long before the pandemic. One may say, in fact, that it is the human crisis that has led to the current pandemic. But all this has already been demonstrated in the earlier part of this writing, albeit in very limited ways, and I shall not further belabour it, for we must proceed to a practical response.)

Further to that, inasmuch as the encyclical *Spe Salvi* provides us with such a great sense of consolation through the current times of political, economic, and social breakdown, its counsel needs to be unpacked into a very practical course of action for the common Christian. I wish to propose in this writing that the very prayer handed down to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, commonly known as “the Lord’s Prayer” or “the Our Father”,

provides us with the very basis and framework for the transposition of the Church's counsel into a concrete way of life.

The Lord's Prayer, when properly reflected upon, instructs us on how to live through the trials confronting us in this life by bringing us back to the most basic aspects of our human existence. It guides on the way of life we need to embrace to make visible the gradual coming of the kingdom of God as a sign of hope for both ourselves and for others. That way of life that our faith demands of us, even during critical times, is no more and no less, the Gospel life to which our baptismal promises call us. And the Lord's Prayer, in the words of Tertullian, is that very "summary of the whole Gospel" that we need as our guiding light in times like these.¹ Saint Augustine of Hippo, in explaining how all the prayers of the Psalms can be found in the petitions of the Lord's Prayer, thus taught, "Run through all the words of the holy prayers [in Scripture], and I do not think that you will find anything in

¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2761.

them that is not contained and included in the Lord's Prayer."² I invite you therefore to reflect slowly and thoughtfully on what the petitions of this prayer might mean for us in these crucial times when we as Christians are called to visibly embody the faith that points to our belief in the life of the world to come.

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name

This prayer begins by turning our hearts from the idols of this world to the rightful Ruler. In our baptism and in this prayer, we have renounced the work of the devil and his cause to harm all of creation, and we have voluntarily submitted ourselves to the lordship of God over us. This commitment is once-too-often forgotten in the face of other voices calling out for our subservience, whether intentionally or otherwise.

² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2762.

A crisis of life can be perceived as a moment of grace for us to return to the call to belonging, to know Whose we are and Whom we serve. While we continue living in this world and are awaiting the return of the King, a fact of which we are annually reminded when we commemorate the feast of Christ the King at the conclusion of every liturgical year, we live here as nothing more than aliens and strangers in a foreign land (cf. 1 Peter 2:11) whose values often contradict those of the kingdom to which we now belong.

We are reminded now in this prayer that we belong to a kingdom whose Ruler is benevolent, Who cares for His subjects above all else and has made us His children. It can only be expected that His agenda is often antithetical to the agenda of earthly kings and governments and supersedes the latter. For all the times that we have strayed away from this belonging, it is a time of grace for us to return to a commitment to the absolute lordship of God in our lives. We have spent much of our lives rendering lip service to God without a true dependence and need of him. We might have consigned some

relatively insignificant compartment in our lives for His habitation but not given Him the throne that is truly befitting of His kingship in our lives. Today we return to Him and call Him "Our Father".

In calling Him "Father", we are also at once acknowledging that He is sovereign and all-powerful. A deep belief in the sovereignty of God is essential if we are to make sense of the pain of humanity in the present. This is not to say that the sovereignty of God deprives humanity of our freewill; for in fact, believing that to be so would be to severely limit the extent of God's sovereignty. Time and again, the work of God in salvation history has shown Him to be so sovereign that even human freewill is incorporated into the materialisation of His sovereign will. More than that, even the work of evil itself can and will be used by God for the actualisation of His ultimate plan for creation, as is evident in the salvific work of Christ His Son. Truly, His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are higher than our ways (cf. Isaiah 55:8-9). When everything seems out of control and the world as we have known it crumbles before our eyes, we can trust in His sovereignty

to keep, not necessarily the current world, but His plan together. And He does this for “those who love him, those who have been called in accordance with his purpose, and turns everything to their good” (Romans 8:28). For remember,

The Church is the goal of all things, and God permitted such painful upheavals as the angels' fall and man's sin only as occasions and means for displaying all the power of his arm and the whole measure of the love he wanted to give the world.³

Thy kingdom come

We must not forget that God is the Source of creation which he placed under the dominion of humanity at the first making of mankind. This dominion was handed over to Satan when our First Parents were deceived into a willful rebellion against the sole authority and lordship of

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 760.

God. For this reason, the Gospel of John records that Jesus – for at least three times – identifies Satan as the prince of this world (John 12:31-32; 14:30-31; 16:7-11). In the fall of humanity, creation had now come under the legal dominion of the devil. Of course, this did not mean that God had lost control, for He had plans of which the devil knew nothing (since the adversary can only know that which God permits him to know).

Meanwhile, at the Fall, we see from Sacred Scripture that God seemed to have “changed” the human habitat. In order to constantly keep humanity aware of our need to be saved from our fallenness, God “cursed” creation in order to create a discomfort in our living environment. This was so that humanity would long for the restoration of the perfection that had been lost.

To the man he said, “Because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat, accursed be the soil because of you! Painfully will you get your food from it as long as you live.”

(Genesis 3:17, *New Jerusalem Bible*)

In God's divine plan, the restoration of the kingdom that had been taken over by the dominion of Satan became the very mission of Jesus Christ, His Eternal Son. In other words, Jesus came to inaugurate the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Heaven. References to the "kingdom of God" are found 72 times in the New Testament, and the "kingdom of heaven" found 32 times (all in the Gospel of Matthew). Both terms are used interchangeably by New Testament writers.

Evidently, the presence and coming of the kingdom of God or heaven was the central message of Jesus. All His teachings were designed to show people how they might enter into the kingdom of God. His mighty works were intended to prove to His audience that heaven had come upon them. All His parables illustrated truths about this.

When Jesus taught His disciples to pray during His Sermon on the Mount (recorded in Matthew 5-7), at the heart of their petitions were the words, "Thy kingdom

come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). We who live in this modern world might perhaps find the use of the word "kingdom" a rather strange expression, since there are few absolute monarchies left in the modern scheme of international politics. Perhaps, a more familiar word for us to express what Jesus taught is *government*. Just as Jesus was teaching His disciples to pray for the materialisation of a government that was bound to come, so too we are petitioning for the reign of God to become increasingly apparent in the state of the world today.

In the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus, He had already paid the spiritual ransom to restore His authority and dominion, his *government*, over creation and every human heart. His excruciating sacrifice was going to be the efficacious price for the restoration of God's rightful dominion over creation (cf. Matthew 26:17-30). This is why the main thrust of His message all throughout His public ministry was that "the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Mark 1:15), for the moment His work

on earth was done, this dominion of His Godly kingdom had now taken over (cf. John 19:30).

In praying “Thy kingdom come”, we are expressly recognising the legitimate Ruler of creation and over humanity. We recognise that it is only in Him that humanity can find the true meaning and purpose of our existence. The restlessness that humanity has experienced in our separation from God is the very disease that has brought about our sinful inclinations to inflict so much suffering on ourselves and on one another, notwithstanding that the adversary himself has gladly capitalised on our propensities to do so. We confess that it is only under the governance of God that absolute justice and peace can once again be fully restored, thus bringing humanity into its most desired state of restfulness. As Saint Augustine of Hippo rightly prays, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.”⁴

⁴ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions* (Lib 1,1-2,2.5,5: CSEL 33, 1-5).

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven

As people who are fully devoted to the lordship of God and the purpose of His government, our utmost desire and motivation must be for His will to be done on earth in accordance with His holy design for creation. In fact, we know that since He is sovereign, His will can and will be done. But at the same time, the visible materialisation of God's reign on earth remains in large part invisible and continues to be under diabolical attack; this will be put to rest only at the coming return of Jesus Christ.

Though already present in his Church, Christ's reign is nevertheless yet to be fulfilled "with power and great glory" by the King's return to earth. This reign is still under attack by the evil powers, even though they have been defeated definitively by Christ's Passover. Until everything is subject to him, "until there be realised new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells, the pilgrim Church, in her sacraments and institutions, which belong to this present age, carries the mark of this

world which will pass, and she herself takes her place among the creatures which groan and travail yet and await the revelation of the sons of God." That is why Christians pray, above all in the Eucharist, to hasten Christ's return by saying to him: *Maranatha!* "Our Lord, come!

(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 671)

But as we pray and continue to await the return of Christ the King, part of our prayer must consist in our action of cooperating proactively with His work in building His reign on earth. In our baptism, it has become our personal vocation to discover for each of ourselves how we are to cooperate with God's will, to the best of our limited abilities, to direct all the affairs of the world towards His kingdom and His will.

This means that we need to be focused on the will of God for the world and for our lives. Perhaps when life was far more convenient than it is now, we have for far too long been fixated on our own banal desires and ambitions. The

current sufferings are an opportune time, perhaps even a divine appointment, for us to come back to a life that constantly discerns His heavenly will and to act in accordance with it. After all, modern humanity, in having forgotten not just the primacy of God but also the very existence of God itself, had long ago ceased to consult the will of God in all our undertakings.

This resolve to desire and to cooperate with the will of God must be visibly witnessed and experienced by the people whom we encounter in our daily lives. Through our actions – our words and deeds – they must encounter the reign of the living God in this world. This principle must become the guiding force for how to live and how we treat others. The hope of which we have been speaking in this writing can become real to others only when their encounters with us become catalysts for the love of God to pierce through the darkness that they currently experience in their lives. The kingdom of God certainly cannot be spread through force or coercion, let alone through violence, all of which contradict the nature of heaven itself. It spreads through the orientation of the

human spirit towards all that is true, good, and beautiful. Jesus Himself sums up our required course of action best through the commandment to love God and our neighbour (cf. Matthew 22:36-40).

Give us this day our daily bread

With the first couple of petitions dealing with our mindset, attitude, and resolve, this petition turns our attention to one of the most fundamental concerns of our existence in this fallen world, that is, survival. At the most basic level, we need to eat in order to live, clothing to cover our bare bodies, and physical shelter to protect us from the extremities of nature. But in the fallenness of humanity, our work for the fulfilment of these basic needs has spiraled into a pursuit of material excesses and covetousness that seems to have no end point.

Materialism is no longer a mere bad habit; it has become a global culture, a way of life into which our children and grandchildren are born. Materialism is a worldview. In fact,

the effective governance of a country today is very much measured by how its government consistently intervenes in the country's economic vitality through their fiscal policy so as to stimulate spending. Basically, our governments want money to circulate (since, by economic definition, the circulation of money is a sign of a healthy economy), and in order to do that, they need us to embark on a momentum of ever-increasing spending. In order to make that happen, the economy revolves around creating perceived needs and unnecessary wants so as to make consumers out of us all. The current economy has therefore encouraged us to covet much more than the daily bread that we need for our survival.

We have all been made victims out of this system, and the consequences of this has become even more apparent now compared to before, since the entire world is diving into a serious economic depression caused by the shutting down of industries as a result of the pandemic. On the side of employers, paycuts and layoffs are already taking place at the point of this writing. The Malaysian Employers Federation (MEF) indicates that more than 500

thousand Malaysians have already lost their jobs, with a total of two million expected to be in this predicament as a result of the ongoing pandemic.⁵ On the side of wage earners, many of whom will comprise the two million Malaysians bound to lose their jobs, it has been announced by the chief executive officer of Malaysia's Employees Provident Fund (EPF) that "71.4% of those who are self-employed have less than one month's worth of savings, while 82.7% of those working in the private sector have only saved enough to support themselves for less than two months".⁶

No further elaboration is needed to assert the conclusion that many people are either already caught in or find themselves at the brink of a financial crisis because in the

⁵ Hakim Hassan, "More Than 2 Million Malaysians Might Lose Their Jobs Due to Covid-19", *The Rakyat Post*, 24 April 2020, accessed 25 April 2020, <https://www.therakyatpost.com/2020/04/24/more-than-2-million-malaysians-might-lose-their-jobs-due-to-covid-19/>.

⁶ Ahmad Naqib Idris, "Don't exhaust EPF savings despite Covid-19 crisis – Alizakri", *The Edge Markets*, 22 April 2020, accessed 25 April 2020, <https://www.theedgemarkets.com/article/dont-exhaust-epf-savings-despite-covid19-crisis-%E2%80%94alizakri>.

past several years they have mired themselves in huge debts with the assumption that their income levels and employment would remain in perpetuity. Now that they have suddenly lost gainful employment or have had their salaries reduced, even a 20 percent reduction in their salaries has affected them drastically. This is not how we should have lived even if society told us it was so.

It is hopefully not too late for us to willfully release ourselves from the trappings of materialism. It is understandable that the modern life poses a need for us to have sufficient clothing, a decent shelter, and convenient access to transportation. However, we need to quickly return from the paradigm of excesses to one of moderation. This paradigm calls for an attitude of gratitude, for we must be thankful for the average resources that we have managed to acquire without putting too much of a financial strain on our limited earnings. We must never wish to have more than we need. This does not mean that we need to settle for poverty, which is another extreme that only a fool would romanticise. We each need to honestly determine what

our real needs are and live with accordance to those needs, always remembering that the God who has provided these basic needs will continue to tend to us in the coming days. But if we have got ourselves stuck in a crisis of debt because of our excessive acquisition, spending, and owing, this is certainly moving beyond the will of God for our lives. He has remained committed to our sufficiency when we happily overtook Him and accelerated ourselves towards excessiveness.

The correct Christian attitude in this regard is to trust God to provide for all that we need each day. Trusting God to provide certainly does not negate the need for us to work to earn our keep as if Christians are resigned to a pitiful fatalism. We are counselled to “pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you”.⁷ But at the same time, we need to return to a level of realism in regard to how much it is that we actually

⁷ Attributed to St Ignatius Loyola, cf. Joseph de Guibert, SJ, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1964), 148, n.55.

need each day of our lives. The times call for us to purge ourselves of ostentation and excesses.

Whatever it is that we find ourselves having in excess must necessarily be seen as a share that belongs to someone else who suffers a lack during this time. This means that we need to recognise that there are those of us who are endowed with more than we actually need on a daily basis. Instead of hoarding and amassing, there is a rightful Christian duty for us to look at our neighbours with our eyes wide open and to share with those who suffer insufficiency as a matter of Christian charity and obligation. Alas for the modern man who is fixated on hoarding, utterly simple but not necessarily convenient deeds such as sharing water and food and clothing with the needy has everything to do the kingdom of God (cf. Matthew 25:34-40). In the face of these difficult days, the baptismal call to Christian charity is even more intense and relevant than it has ever been before. Those of us who willfully ignore the sufferings of our neighbour do so at the peril of our own eternity.

If we trust God to provide for us daily, then we must also be willing agents of His providence for others who need to experience this same blessing. This commitment must go beyond a complimentary token as an expression of nominal mindfulness just to ease our self-congratulatory conscience. In times like these, our solidarity with a common humanity must be real, concrete, and sustained. If you find yourselves having more than you need, it is wise counsel to get in touch with an organisation with which you can collaborate, through financial resources or time and effort, to tend to the needs of the less privileged. If you are Catholic, organisations such as the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul and the Office for Human Development in your parishes and dioceses would be in urgent need of assistance with immediate effect.

From a Sacramental perspective, this petition for our daily bread perhaps has never been felt in a more concrete way in many of our lives than it is now as we go through a season of fasting from the Sacraments as a result of the prohibition to gather in public worship. But at the same time, we can trust that even if we are deprived of the

bread from heaven, God will not permit for us to be deprived of the graces derived from the bread that we are unable to partake. Remember, whilst God binds our salvation to the Sacraments, “He Himself is not bound by His Sacraments”.⁸ We must patiently and eagerly await the day when we can once again be fed.

However, the prohibition to participate in public Masses does not mean that are deprived of living a sacramental life, for that is necessarily a choice. Many of us have been receiving the Sacraments all our lives, and a momentary fast from the Sacraments does not make us any less the Sacraments that we have received. Perhaps the temporary prohibition from the reception of the Sacraments grants us the opportunity to be the Body of Christ that is broken and the Blood of Christ that is poured out for the life of the world. Pray for those in need and do whatever you can to render assistance to them as a penitential act of charity and mercy that “make[s] up all the hardships that still have

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1257.

to be undergone by Christ for the sake of his body, the Church" (Colossians 1:24).

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us

All of us have come from an "old world", an "old kingdom", under the devil that is characterised by greed and covetousness. Many of us have continued to remain in that world despite having begun our Catholic journey; we have just never intentionally transitioned into a life of heaven. Somehow, despite the verbal and ritual commitments we have made to live the Catholic life, the trappings of the old world remain compelling to us. In trying to please both God and material wealth (cf. Matthew 6:24), we have trespassed against the First Commandment to have "no strange gods" before the True and Only God.

The current pandemic is a trumpet call to Christians to return to our identity as People of God. It necessitates

deep and honest reflection on how much we have negotiated our Christian identity with the old world and how far we have departed from the kingdom of God in the pursuit of self-benefit. It is time for remorse and repentance. We are called to repent not as a matter of being emotionally downcast, but to act out the true meaning of repentance itself, which comes from the Greek word *metanoia*, meaning a “change of mind” and therefore a “change of life”. It requires a rather intentional and ongoing, and even a drastic, bending of ourselves towards the will of God even if it brings with it a sense of loss and subjective insecurity within ourselves. If God is truly our Father, and if we are truly bound for the kingdom of Heaven, then we cannot find our security and assurance in other gods that promise us the world of comfort and convenience. We must return in attitude and action to the only Source of immortality.

The kingdom of God is not so much about awaiting our possession of a mansion with infinite riches and streets of gold (note how even eternal realities are defined materialistically by many Christians). Rather, it is about the

state of our relationship with God, our communion and union with Him in perpetuity. It is about entering into friendship with Him and continuously deepening ourselves in this Divine Friendship that is bound to last for an eternity of never-ending and inexhaustive oneness. Obviously, for this to happen, nothing must stand in the way of God's utter primacy in our lives. Ultimately, receiving God's forgiveness for our trespasses boils down to a matter of our priorities in life. This is not to say that there cannot be other matters of urgency or importance in life, but that none of these matters – no matter how consequential – can match with the supremacy of God's place in our preoccupations.

It is difficult for anyone of us to claim that we have conducted our Christian lives perfectly. In fact, the self-claim to perfection would itself already constitute a betrayal of one's true imperfection. And because we have not treated God correctly, it must mean that we have often not been able to treat our neighbour correctly as well. The pardon that we need from God therefore pertains not just to the way we have handled our

relationship with Him but also our relationship with our neighbour. For all those times that we have worked for our own advantage at the expense of other people, or worse still, deliberately put others at a disadvantage in a spirit of self-preservation and self-profit, we need to be sorry by turning the situation around and now paying due attention to the wellbeing of others around us in a spirit of true repentance. Without this, our verbal confessions are but meaningless.

To acknowledge one's need to receive forgiveness is a mark of humility. And there is something about needing forgiveness from a fellow human being that makes it more difficult than acknowledging our need of forgiveness from God. It is somehow easier to say sorry to God whose perfection we respect. But to acknowledge that we need forgiveness from a fellow human being who is equally, if not even more, imperfect and sinful requires even greater humility of us. We must be sorry to all those whom we have hurt, abandoned, neglected, betrayed, and ignored, by now giving the best of ourselves to them.

It is only when we can humble ourselves enough to receive forgiveness from God and from others that we can internalise the magnitude of grace sufficient to forgive others who have also trespassed against us. If we have not allowed for the vigour of forgiveness received to cleanse us from within, we cannot possibly understand why it is also necessary for us to forgive others so that they too may experience the cleansing effects of forgiveness.

Forgiveness has nothing to do with how we feel about those who have wronged us. Misdeeds of other that have violated us will always hurt and it is unlikely that we will ever forget them. Every time our minds come back to the events that have scarred us emotionally, there tends to be a compulsion to desire that the perpetrator be punished, violently if possible, for that which has been done to us. It is when we have decided to stop desiring punishment for the offender, even if this decision comes at an emotional cost of more pain and hurt, that we have actually forgiven him. Naturally, forgiveness is not a decision that can be made in an instant. More often than not, it requires a series of many repeated decisions to no longer desire to

inflict punishment on the offender, and the duration of this process can be proportionate (or even disproportionate!) to the magnitude of the offense. But essentially, forgiving does not mean that it will no longer hurt. Forgiving others also does not mean that we are innocent; it does not put us on a higher moral ground than others. It is our way of acknowledging that we all have failed and need chances to be given to us in order to begin again. To refuse to forgive someone is to claim that offenders do not deserve another chance, and this conclusion would inflict the same condemnation upon ourselves who are in equal need of a chance to start anew.

The preoccupation of heaven is relationship and communion. Receiving and giving forgiveness is all about setting ourselves right with God and our neighbour. It may be less about who has been right or wrong, especially with regard to our fellow human beings; the offender may not even necessarily have done wrong in fact! The appropriate focus is to be placed on entering into a proper relationship with others who may or may not now be committed to the same heavenly life to which we have

given ourselves. To receive and to grant forgiveness is our way of beginning again and giving others an opportunity to do likewise.

As human beings, our lives are inseparably intertwined. We would do well to realise how many of us have become rather restless as the Movement Control Order in Malaysia (or whatever else it is termed elsewhere) is extended. It is a restlessness of being confined in a space with the same few human beings each day and not being able to place ourselves in a larger social setting among other people. This is how God has designed us to exist from the time of Creation. In the Incarnation when the Word took on flesh, God became human for the very same purpose of becoming intrinsically united to mankind for eternity. To live our lives without conscious acknowledgement of this interdependence on our neighbours and our mutual need for one another is to go against the nature of what it means to be human. For this very reason, forgiveness is necessary, for being forgiven and to forgive is to acknowledge our need of one another and our common need of God who is the Source of the communion shared

by the human family. In his catechesis on the fatherhood of God during the General Audience on 16 October 1985, the Holy Father Saint John Paul II explained God's divine paternity and fatherhood over all humanity through His Son Jesus Christ. To that end, we turn away from instances when we have acted against the wellbeing of our relationship with God and neighbour and now turn to a life of constant consideration for others above ourselves, with God first.

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

As we commit ourselves to a new way of being by resolving to abandon ourselves daily into the loving hands of God, to be forgiven of our old way of life, and also to cancel the debts of others who have offended us while we were all striving in competitive the old world, there will be inevitable temptations for us (at least occasionally) to regress into our old selves together with all its accompanying behaviour patterns that the new self is

obligated to renounce. The thing is, we are habitually used to the old way of doing things, and this whole endeavour of reconditioning the self to think and act differently gets increasingly more challenging, especially when we are attempting to gravitate towards goodness. Our sinful ways remain, even if we have been cleansed of Original Sin by baptism, because we continue to be plagued by concupiscence.⁹

Furthermore, the new way of being often comes with much inconvenience and suffering, and it causes us to sometimes wonder if we might not be too foolish for having chosen to follow the way of God's kingdom. This is especially so when we find ourselves at a disadvantage in that we lose privileges and profits because we bind ourselves to the economics and the politics of heaven. The way that yields more desirable and immediate results is often the way that is evil. And we often find ourselves struggling to resist the temptation to choose that very way which offers almost immediate gratification.

⁹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 405.

To be sure, it is not God but the devil who tempts us. God desires for us only that which is good and holy even if it comes at the cost of suffering, while Satan sets out to develop entrapments around us to once again enter into his lair. In all these our endeavours to turn away from the deceptions and trickeries of the devil in order to turn towards the new life in the kingdom of God, the adversary constantly attempts to set us back. And we must be constantly aware that he is no fool, for he knows exactly how to craft temptations that we find appetising (they would otherwise not be temptations!)

To those who inherently love evil and are committed to it, the devil blatantly offers them offensive prospects. However, he is not so stupid to advance the same propositions to those who claim to love holiness. Saint Ignatius of Loyola, in speaking of the necessity of discerning the spirits in his *Spiritual Exercises*, instructed for caution against the manner in which Satan disguises himself as an angel of light especially for the “benefit” of those who have advanced themselves in their intimacy with God. In endeavouring to do God’s will for our lives,

the devil goes so far to even distract us with things that seem good and holy – “spiritual favours” – but which may be things that God neither desires for our immediate attention nor gain. Temptation, therefore, is more than just about resisting that which is wrong or immoral, for it is also as much about resisting the tendency to desire that which is good to be delivered outside of God’s appointed timing or will.

The devil is good at presenting us with dilemmas and problems, and then proposing what he knows would come across as the most apparent and immediate, even holy, solution that is hard to refuse. He tempts us to take control of situations and to make ourselves gods again through the employment of that which we often construe as “common sense”. Although we are to intentionally depend on God for help and solutions in the scheme of His kingdom, God is not inclined to quick-fix solution and immediate reprieve for the simple reason that temporal sufferings and waiting are materials that He often uses to prepare us for the fullness of heaven. And because of our impatience and tendencies to avoid pain, Satan

constantly tempts us to take matters into our own hands when we feel that God is not acting in accordance with our programme. But more than just doing that to us, he even proposes what seems to be just moral reasoning for our course of action.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his explication of Matthew 4 pertaining to the temptation faced by the fasting and hungry Jesus to turn stone into bread for His immediate reprieve, explains how the devil engages Jesus in moral posturing. After all, hunger and the need for bread is only natural for a human being, and if one does have the power to turn stone into bread without waiting for divine intervention, why should one continue to wait pointlessly for God as though one was entirely dependent on Him? This makes good sense especially considering that Jesus the Man was indeed God Himself in the flesh!

Moral posturing is part and parcel of temptation. It does not invite us directly to do evil – no, that would be far too blatant. It pretends to show us a better way, where we finally abandon our illusions

and throw ourselves into the work of actually making the world a better place. It claims, moreover, to speak for true realism: What's real is what is right there in front of us – power and bread. By comparison, the things of God fade into unreality, into a secondary world that no one really needs.¹⁰

Satan always seems to know and to propose “the better way”. He tempts us to go back to the old way of making our choices in life because his solutions are much more immediate and therefore compelling. He even speaks through people around us who often insist that we must do something for ourselves without necessarily having to wait for God’s divine permission. The justifications are many: “We must not carry the demands of the Gospel too far”; “Even Jesus Himself says we must be as innocent as doves but as shrewed as serpents’; “God helps only those who helps themselves”; “God will understand”.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Doubleday, 2007), 96-7.

At the heart of the matter, Satan is the prince of darkness and while he may often project himself to us as offering noble solutions to our predicaments, there can be nothing good about him or from him. He threatens to pull us back into the darkness of this world, to feel overcome by it when we should be the ones overcoming this darkness. And very often, by choice, we allow him to do so by giving him power over us, and we must resist his deception by reminding ourselves that any form of evil, be it bitter or sugar-coated, is evil. We must neither speak with him nor engage with him, let alone make any agreements with him, for he is certain to always ensure that we are dealt the short end of the stick. Satan never gives; he only takes; and even when he seems to be giving, he will ensure that we eventually lose everything.

In these times of economic difficulty, no one is spared as a potential victim of the devil. People will be driven towards unscrupulous choices citing survival as their justification for doing so; we will increasingly witness this reality come to pass in the days to come. Even now, many corporations around the world are already doing so by

forcing their employees into disadvantaged positions and losses when all this while they had acted only for the benefit of their shareholders without due regard for the security and wellbeing of their employees.¹¹ It is an easy opportunity for moral posturing when the law stands on their side or when it is not possible for the law to be effectively enforced; but we know that being legal does not necessarily mean being moral. Further to that, as people are hit with the horrors of unemployment, they in turn begin to be confronted by the dilemma that places them between moral choices and the reality of survival. In this light, we therefore pray with all our hearts that the Lord will deliver us from the snares of the devil and not allow him to overcome all the godly efforts that we have invested into the holy kingdom of God.

¹¹ FMT Reporters, "Sarawak MTUC criticises employers body for prioritising profits", *Free Malaysia Today*, 26 March 2020, accessed 28 April 2020, <https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/nation/2020/03/26/sarawak-mtuc-criticises-employers-body-for-prioritising-profits/>.

RESILIENCE AS A FRUIT OF OUR HOPE

As we allow the Lord's Prayer to accompany us throughout this journey of challenge and struggle – perhaps of suffering and darkness – there is strong reason to believe that we can overcome this time of difficulty. The history of the Church has been a testament that she was not born in a privileged time, but rather, in a time of persecution and suffering. Remember that all the Apostles of Christ our Lord were brutally murdered for their faith (except Saint John who miraculously escaped but was eventually still incarcerated on an island with other fugitives).

Almost two thousand years later, here we still stand, a resilient People of God. From one civilisation to another, one epoch of human history to another, there is little that the Church has not seen and suffered; yes, even pandemics. And yet no one has succeeded in their attempts to snuff the life out of this Living Bride of Jesus Christ who continues to find her life through her sacred and eternal union with her Groom. We have done it

before, and we will conquer this hardship as we steer ourselves steadily through these difficult times in our fallen world, but not without hopeful suffering and much prayer and resilience.

The early Christians used to employ many imageries of animals to describe various aspects of the Church's life and faith. There was great catechetical value in this pedagogy. One of these animals frequently used was the mythical bird called the phoenix. As told by the myth, towards the end of its life, an old phoenix catches fire and crumbles into ashes; but this would not be bad news, for out of the ashes would be birthed a new baby phoenix. Just like this phoenix, we too are a resilient people because of the hope that we have in the resurrection of our Lord. For all that befalls us from one era of human history to another, even death cannot overcome us, for WE WILL RISE FROM THE ASHES.



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