

CLIMBING HEAVEN'S STAIRS *(Sainly Aspirations)*

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Imprimatur

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS FOR CLIMBING HEAVEN'S STAIRS

In a world where people's attention tends toward material gains and self-gratification; where the core values of humanity and spiritual edification are ignored and trampled upon, Fr Emmanuel comes with this masterpiece on holiness and saintliness to remind us of our ultimate purpose on earth which according to the Baltimore Catechism is to know God, love Him, and serve Him in this world in order to be happy with Him forever. This book draws our attention to the reality of our Christian calling and what we need to do in order to make Heaven. The language is very simple with a sense of directedness that is indeed captivating and insightful.

*The title **Climbing Heaven's Stairs** is exciting, but the content is deep and satisfying. Using different stories of the saints, this book takes us on a self-provocative spiritual journey. A journey that helps us to realize how much we need to do in order to really be God's people as Isaiah 43:1 emphasizes. Anyone who desires to be a Saint will find in this book the inspiration they need. I strongly recommend this book and hope that those who have lost their way will find in this book the guide they need back to the path of holiness. This book is worth reading!*

Rev Fr. Dr Peter Ife Morkah m.ss.cc
Vicar General, Missionaries of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus
and Mary, Diocese of Leeds, United Kingdom.

Fr. Emeka Emmanuel Ekwelum combines his skills in philosophy, theology, and education discernible in his thought pattern, which moves from the things we can know from nature or experience; and therefore, discernible by all humanity to arguments that are scripture-based which any Christian can relate to and to the example of the saints. This book is a beautiful read, as informative as it is educative and a humble accompaniment for our spiritual journey.

Rev Fr. Chidi Onwuka m.ss.cc
Pennsylvania, USA.

*In this book, **Climbing Heaven's Stairs**, Fr. Emeka Emmanuel Ekwelum gave all of us who aspire to good living and sainthood, a well-researched, easy-to-practice, and reader-friendly *treatise* that will enable us to be numbered amongst the Saints. We would be able to do so by courageously following the steps enunciated in this book. This is one of the most inspirational books of our time that will aid us as we make our spiritual journey to Eternity. I recommend it to both the young and the elderly who still thirst for sanctity. This book is a *vade mecum*.*

**Fr. Emmanuel Ifeanyi Ibeke,
St. Georg Hopsten, Deutschland.**

***Climbing Heaven's Stairs (Sainly Aspirations)** is a book that gives the basics in our journey to God. Through Scriptures, examples of many saints and anecdotes, Father Emmanuel shows how to climb the stairs to God just as the saints did. He stresses throughout the book how the saints were human, just as we are human, and they completed their journey to heaven just as we humans can achieve this goal. He not only names the saints, but also describes how they lived their lives. Father Emmanuel does an outstanding job of presenting how we are to live as humans to become saints. I highly recommend this book to anyone looking to spend eternity in the presence of God.*

**Michelle B. Conner, Retired Teacher and Administrator,
Parishioner of Our Lady of the Valley Catholic Church,
Gloverville, South Carolina, USA.**

Reading this book is like taking a drive down the highway of life in a vehicle driven by the saints. Father Emmanuel has done a masterful job in creating that human awareness that exists between every human being and the saints. Like the saints, we have the where with 'all', it's what we with it 'all'. His approach is very simplistic but very meaningful. He emphasizes that each of us has the tools, just like the saints. We just have to learn how to use them. the steps on the stairway are ours for the climbing. Give them a try. You won't be disappointed. Enjoy your ride throughout the saintly pages of this amazing book.

**Ronald & Barbara Dixon
Aiken, South Carolina, USA.**

When I saw the title of this book, it took me back to my childhood days when I started nursing the desire for Heaven. However, sometimes, the distractions of this life often take our minds away from the very essence of our existence which is to know God, love Him, worship Him in this life so as be happy with Him forever. This book opened my eyes once again to the example and life of the saints, and on how they lived and struggled just like we do today. It is filled with inspirations on how we can model our lives after Christ and the Saints. It also brought to light how we can utilize the graces available to us which is our greatest help in this salvific journey, and on how our consistent little efforts can have an overall impact on our spiritual transcendence. This book is worth reading and I sincerely recommend it to anyone who really wants to climb Heaven's stairs.

**Chinelo Cecilia Ejeziem BSc, CFE, Ava.
Jersey, Channel Islands, United Kingdom.**

It was with great pleasure and an honor having the opportunity to read your book. The book indicates to the reader the many questions and explanations of the multitude of the many paths you take in your journey through life. The details and efforts from Father Emanuel to author this book is truly extraordinary. The choices and decisions we all make in life should be humble and with reverence to our Lord and Savior. Thank you again Father Emanuel for sharing your wonderful God-given talents!

**Judge Sheridan L. Lynn
Aiken County Magistrate, State of South Carolina, USA.**

*To all those who despite the difficulties
and challenges the world and its
distractions pose to holiness, still make
daily efforts to live saintly lives, this work
is dedicated to you.*

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	iii
GRATITUDE.....	viii
FOREWORD.....	i
INTRODUCTION.....	5
DISCOVER GOD.....	9
KENOSIS (SELF-EMPTYING).....	15
BE HUMAN	19
EMBRACE TEMPERANCE	23
LIVE HUMBLY.....	27
EMIT KINDNESS.....	31
UTILIZE GRACE.....	35
PRAY UNCEASINGLY	39
BE MERCIFUL AND FORGIVING	45
LIVE OUT THE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES.....	51
CONCLUSION.....	65

GRATITUDE

Henry Ward Beecher said that “Gratitude is the fairest blossom which springs from the soul.” In a spirit of gratitude, we acknowledge the impact others make in our lives. I sincerely thank God for bringing this work to fruition. He is the beginning and end of all things. I also thank the Saints whose holy and exemplary lives that became the inspiration for this work. I acknowledge the Holy Mother Church, the Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church in her universality and particularity. The saints we venerate were fed and nourished by her teachings, and with the graces that She gives through the sacraments and pious activities, the saints were strengthened and encouraged as they climbed Heaven’s stairs.

I deeply appreciate my biological family as well as my religious family. To my parents and siblings who inspired me to read the life of the Saints at a very young age and helped raise me in the way of God, and my religious family, “The Missionaries of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary” who gave me the opportunity to serve the Church as a Religious priest, I give my deepest gratitude. I humbly acknowledge the Superior General of the Missionaries of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, Very Rev Fr. Angelo Terraciano m.ss.cc who gave his approval of this book and permission to print in the form of *Imprimi Potest*; The Vicar General, Very Rev Fr Dr Peter Ife Morkah m.ss.cc, and the General Councilors. I also acknowledge the Delegate Superior of the Missionaries of the Sacred Hearts, North American Delegation, Very Rev Fr Frederick Clement m.ss.cc for his great fraternal support and encouragement, and the entire members of the North American delegation.

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Nihil Obstat, and presenting it to the bishop for approval and *Imprimatur*. Your kindness is deeply appreciated. I acknowledge sincerely also, Rev Fr Dr Cornelius Izuchukwu Okafor m.ss.cc for reading through this work and writing the second foreword for this book. May God bless you with more wisdom.

I humbly applaud the great and scholarly corrections, proof-reading and recommendations of Rev Fr Dr Peter Ife Morkah m.ss.cc, Rev Fr. Emmanuel Ifeanyi Ibeke, Judge Sheridan L. Lynn, Ronald and Barbara Dixon, Pam Rawson, Fr Chidi Onwuka m.ss.cc, Fr Kentigern Aririguzo M.ss.cc, Fr Solomon Evidence Kaanan, Chinelo Cecilia Ejeziem, and most especially Dr Anthony V. Longobardo and Michele Conner who really did a great job at editing this book. Thank you all so much.

To all those that encouraged the scripting and production of this work especially Mary Brown and the Phoenix Printing Group, may God be there for you always.

FOREWORD

With delightful stories, the example of the Saints, and a deep understanding of the human situation, “Climbing Heaven’s Stairs” touches on the ingredients of a healthy spiritual life.

In a gentle spirit, Fr. Emmanuel offers the insights of a spiritual director formed in the Hearts of Jesus and Mary.

I recommend this book as a trusted help to those, touched by the Holy Spirit, aspire to holiness, happiness, and friendship with God.

Msgr. Ronald R. Cellini, V.F., V.P.
Diocese of Charleston.

FOREWORD

In the face of the growing secular humanism and nihilism in our contemporary society, the question of belief in the objective truth, morality, values, knowledge of God and His existence, life beyond this world, have continued to lend itself to a lot of criticism both constructive and destructive. Consequently, these overwhelming criticisms make the subject matters in consideration apparently hanging in the balance. However, the whole critique may not be all dicey because growth and maturity in life entails a continuous questioning and search for a deeper understanding, meaning and goal of our existential realities of life. It was St. Augustine (354-430) and St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) that taught us about *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding). It is a philosophical and theological thought that helps us understand things related to faith, in order to comprehend properly and without doubt, what we already believe.

It is against this backdrop that Fr. Emmanuel Ekwelum, the author of this book, argues therein that climbing heaven's stairs entails fundamentally a discovery and acknowledgment of God's existence. He critically recapitulates in a simple and understandable terms, the positions of some saints, philosophers, and theologians of different schools of thoughts to bring us to the knowledge and awareness of the Supreme Being who made all things, and Who continues to sustain in His wisdom all His creation. The knowledge and belief in this Supreme being opens up a relationship that is expressed and validated in what we say, what we do and how we live our lives. With respect to how we respond to this personal and loving relationship with God, the author takes us through litany of saints and their faith-based experiences of life. In the bid to explicate the right way of discipleship and Christian witnessing, the author references the exemplary Christian attitudes and dispositions of the saints, acknowledging their heroic virtuous lives and positions as role models of Christian living.

Furthermore, the book challenges us to follow the footsteps of our Master Jesus Christ, manifest in His sense of humility, self-emptying, detachment, prayer life, charity, and forgiving spirit. Nevertheless, it also invites us to take cognizance of the companionship of these our brother and sister-saints who from their own experiences of struggles,

fears, doubts, tribulations, endurances, and victories we can draw wealth of inspirations and strength for our own journey to our heavenly home. The Council Fathers aptly captured this important role of the saints when they said, “When we look at the lives of those who have faithfully followed Christ, we are inspired with a new reason for seeking the City that is to come and at the same time we are shown a most safe path by which among the vicissitudes of this world, in keeping with the state in life and condition proper to each of us, we will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is, perfect holiness” (Lumen Gentium, no. 50).

Therefore, would you want to climb the heaven stairs in companionship with the saints? Would you want to understand the exigencies of Christian discipleship? Would you want to be guided in living out your Christian calling? If the answers to these questions are in the affirmative, then this book is meant to serve you towards achieving these goals.

Rev. Fr. Dr. Cornelius Izuchukwu Okafor m.ss.cc
Naples, Italy.
Author of “*THE FIRE THAT KEEPS BURNING*”
and “*THE STANDARDS OF CHRIST, VOLUMES 1 AND 2*”

INTRODUCTION

*God never said the journey would be easy, but He did say
that the arrival would be worthwhile.*

~Max Lucado~

One might, on seeing the title of this book, be tempted to ask, “Does heaven have stairs?” “Where are these stairs to heaven located?” These questions indeed are not out of place because we ask in order to know. However, since heaven is a spiritual domain where God and the Saints with the host of angels’ dwell eternally, we cannot see the stairs with our physical eyes. We can be sure that we are ascending these stairs if we keep doing what benefits our salvation. This book, comprised of ten chapters, is meant to be one of the many guides and voices urging us on in our journey toward God.

In this book are some instances of the lives and examples of the saints we venerate in the Church who have gone before us and whose examples serve as models worthy of emulation. Why do we look up to them? We do not look up to the saints because they were perfect humans. Like us, they also had their weaknesses and limitations, but they pushed through their weaknesses with the crown ever in their sight as they pulled down the barriers and obstacles that stood in their path to salvation and kept their eyes and heart and mind on God.

We look up to them because like us, they were humans who lived and tread the earth as we do today but chose to let their footsteps be directed toward Heaven as they conquered the world. One may ask, “Why look up to the saints when Christ is our model?” Christ remains our model because His life on earth was a living guide on how we are meant to live. However, in their own way, the saints followed Christ and, through their unique paths to salvation, encourage us not to think that there is a stereotypical path which we must follow to attain perfection. But even in our state of life, whether married or consecrated or single, we, too, can achieve holiness and dwell eternally with God.

We have saints who were wives and mothers - Our Blessed Mother Mary, St. Monica, St. Gianna Beretta Molla; some were husbands and fathers - St. Joseph, St. Thomas Moore, St. Manuel Morales; others were

celibates – St. John Vianney, St. John Chrysostom, St. Pio of Pietrelcina; while some followed the path of consecrated life – St. Catherine of Siena, St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi. Some were children, while others were teenagers. There were also young adults among them.

This dynamism is not found in the life of Christ our model because He never married nor had children but devoted His time on earth preaching the good news of the kingdom and doing good deeds in love. Jesus lived to adulthood, but we have people who lived holy lives but died as children either through virtuous lives or through martyrdom such as Saints Jacinta Marto (9 years), Francisco Marto (10 years), Panacae de Muzzi (5 years), Lorenzino Sossio (8 years), Antonietta Meo (6 years), Maria del Carmen Gonzalez-Valerio Saenz de Heredia (9 years), Odetta Vidal Cardoso de Oliveira (9 years), Anne-Gabrielle Caron (8 years) etc. These and more children saints serve as examples to children in the path to sanctity.

We also have teenagers who are examples of holiness and virtue today: Saints Dominic Savio (14 years), Maria Goretti (11 years), Jose Sanchez de Rio (14 years), Blessed Imelda Lambertini (11 years), Laura Vicuna (12 years), Blessed Carlo Acutis (15 years), Galileo Nicolini (14 years), etc. These and many other teenagers are venerated in the Church as saints or blessed due to their heroic lives of virtue.

The Church also honors saints who were very social and entertaining – St. Martha, St. Genesius of Rome, St. Cecilia; saints who had good sense of humor – St. Philip Neri, St. Pope John XXIII, Blessed Miguel Agustin Pro Juarez; and saints who were intellectuals – St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine, St. Albertus Magnus.

One of my favorite saints during my teen years was Saint Dominic Savio. As a child, his love for God and the Church was seen in everything he did, such as saying grace before meals and refusing to eat with those who did not say grace. He had this sweet way of encouraging people to pray. He was so devout, that wherever he found the opportunity to pray, he would go on his knees right away - whether in front of the tabernacle or outside the Church, even if the ground was covered with mud or snow, he knelt and prayed anyway.

When he received his first Holy Communion, he wrote four promises in which one of them said, “I will rather die than sin.” Dominic desired to be a priest and went off to the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales, founded

by St. John Bosco for boys. His speech during his stay there was one of the things that endeared me to him and made me love him genuinely. He said, "It is God's will that we all become saints, it is easy to become a saint, and there are great rewards in heaven for saints." The faith and love of this young boy moved me to think about my journey toward salvation. His life motivated me to read more of the saints and see how they lived. Although he died at a young age of 14, his last words still echo in my heart, "Goodbye, Dad, goodbye. Oh, what wonderful things I see!" These words uttered by a fourteen-year-old who at that age understood God and had touched so many lives in the Oratory founded by St. John Bosco moved me to think about how my last moment will be.

With these thoughts in my mind, I came to the realization that Heaven is more real than we can ever imagine, and it is folly to assume that it does not exist. It is a beautiful place prepared for those who love God, and its splendor is such that eyes have not seen nor ears heard about its glory. (cf. 1 Cor. 2:9). It is with these thoughts that I invite you to journey with me in this book.

These ten chapters are not exhaustive of all that we need to do while climbing heaven's stairs, but they give us an insight on some basics which we need to adhere to as we make our journey toward God. In humility, I present this simple book to you, hoping that you, my dear reader, will be inspired by the brief instances of the life examples of the saints scattered throughout this book with some anecdotes, short stories, and the words meant to exhort us to keep striving towards our heavenly goal. I hope and pray that we all get there someday.

DISCOVER GOD

As soon as I believed there was a God, I understood I could do nothing else but live for Him.

~St. Charles de Foucauld~

The first practical step towards realistically building a house is finding a plot of land. Even if the architect or the builder has the most beautiful design of a house at hand, yet, without a real land upon which to build, the plan remains only but a blueprint. Having the land where the house will materialize and enough capital is essential and sets into motion the building of that which is sketched out in the plan. To be a saint, one must first discover God. This discovery of God becomes the foundation upon which the edifice of holiness is built.

However, there is often this tension between the atheists, agnostics, and the theists on the issue of God. Recall that atheists uphold that God does not exist, the agnostics doubt His existence and the theist affirm His existence. So many assertions, debates and scientific efforts often tend to negate the possibility as well as the probability of God's existence. One of the most notable but completely misunderstood statements ever made in history was uttered by Friedrich Nietzsche in the words, "God is dead." If you take this statement outside its context and content, it will have a different connotation which is entirely negative. However, Nietzsche was trying to bemoan the ills of humanity, and how humanism eventually tries to enthrone itself at the expense of God.

Another well-known and highly interpreted assertion was made by Karl Marx when he stated that, "religion...is the opiate of the masses." This statement has been used and misused, but there was a reason for it. Karl Marx saw religion as harmful to his revolutionary prospects, since according to his ideals, it prevents people from seeing the class distinction and oppressions that they experience and hang on to God and religion like opium sedating them from social revolution which for him was vital for social emancipation.

Despite these utterances, which at first appear un-theistic and can provoke the mind of a firm theist to debate, is a fundamental truth: “God is!” The very fact that the idea of God is in the mind of both the atheist and agnostic is an affirmation of His existence. God does not need anyone to prove that He exists because whether or not we affirm it does not in any way affect His very existence. Both philosophy and science unintentionally and intentionally affirm His existence.

A critical look at the scientific evaluations and deductions about the observable and non-observable universe affirms inadvertently the existence of a dark energy holding the systems and galaxies in place and affecting the universe on the largest scales. However, the unsolved mystery of this dark energy, which scientists affirm to be responsible for the expansion of the universe, invariably points to the fact that there is a higher Being that is ever creating and recreating the universe. That is to say that Something or Someone superior must be responsible for this energy since there is no effect without a cause.

The term “dark” ascribed to this mysterious energy connotes the unfathomable nature of this force which eludes and transcends the rational scope of man. It is called dark, not because it is dark, but because it is unknown and mysterious.

As dark energy still poses a serious mystery to the scientific world, there is also another aspect of their discovery that remains undiscovered which is the “dark matter.” This matter like dark energy, is not dark literally, but it does not exist in the form of stars and planets which are observable and at the same time cannot be referred to as antimatter. If this is the case, then one can comfortably affirm that there is a Being out there greater than humanity, who is responsible for all these mysteries. That Person is also Mystery Himself.

Evolutionists often tend to displace the role of God by affirming that everything is evolving. The theory of evolution does not serve to displace the place of God but serves to illustrate the different stages of development and changes that tend to occur as organisms progress based on environmental and physiological factors. If there was a first organism from which every latter organism evolved, then there must be a Cause responsible for that organism in the first place. Even the big bang theory also promotes indirectly the existence of a Cause responsible for the bang itself.

For the agnostics that doubt, the ability to doubt is rational and not out of place, but doubting continuously is in itself irrational. In the end, one must believe in something. At least, we believe that we are, and we exist. If we are and we exist, then there must be a Cause that is responsible for our existence. Different religions call this “Cause” by different names but whatever title that is given to Him, the fact remains that He is.

Aristotle, despite his philosophical credibility, affirms the existence of an unmoved Mover and an uncaused Cause. St. Thomas Aquinas further affirms that this unmoved Mover and Uncaused Cause is God who is responsible for the order in the Universe.

How can we discover this God? While some religions try to reach God through meditation, some others try to do so through constant pursuit of knowledge. Few others try to discover Him through His effects on nature, and many others believe that He can be discovered through peace and acts of love. Christianity, as a religion, affirms His existence through the revelation made by His Son Jesus Christ, the Word that became Flesh and dwelt among us (cf. John 1:14). In order to climb heaven’s stairs, we must first identify ourselves with and seek to discover the One whose dwelling place is in Heaven.

There is this story about a barber who doubted seriously the existence of God and one day, he met a cleric who came to have a haircut in his shop. He started arguing against the existence of God stating that if God exists, why would there be so much suffering in the world? He made his point, but the cleric was quiet throughout.

However, after having his haircut, the cleric paid him and left his shop. As he was about to leave his shop, he remembered that there were many people who are out there in the streets who could not have a decent haircut like him. He turned to the barber and said to him, “If there were barbers like you, why would there be so many people on the streets with unkempt hair styles?” He went further to say; “By this we can assume that there are no barbers in existence.” The barber never saw this coming and said to the cleric, “How can I barb them if they do not come to me? We only barb those that make themselves available.” The cleric smiled and said to him, “You can only discover God if you make yourself available to Him.” The Barber was thrilled but the message was already communicated. (Source Unknown) In the life of such great saints like St.

Augustine, we see a mother, St. Monica, who travelled the world while praying for his conversion. When he finally was converted saw that he had wasted so much of his life pursuing vanities. So much so that in his autobiography entitled "Confessions", he exclaimed, "*Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new; late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world, and in my unlovely state, I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you... You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness... You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.*" (Lib.10,26.37-29,40: CSEL 33, 255-256).

St. Mary of Egypt started living an immoral life from the age of twelve and for seventeen years led a life of sin until she encountered God's mercy. At the age of twenty-nine, she was converted while praying before an icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary and fled to the desert east of Palestine where she sought the face of God through penance and lived as a hermitess for forty-seven years. Today, she, who was once notorious in the life of sin, is venerated as a saint in heaven. There is no one too far away that God cannot reach, and when the moment comes, the discovery of God tastes better than any vanity one may have enjoyed in the past. The same is the case with St. Margaret of Cortona and some others who discovered God later in their lives and savored the sweetness that accompanies serving Him.

These saints felt God touching them, and they went in search of God who was already waiting for them. This is why, in order to discover something, one must make a move towards that thing and use all available means to achieve this discovery. Hence, we cannot discover God if we are static. Although God has discovered us first, we must make efforts to discover Him too.

St. Augustine distinguished between operating grace and cooperating grace. He opined that God operates His grace in us, but we must cooperate with that grace. We cannot just remain with folded arms waiting for God to carry us on. We must reach out to Him as He reaches out to us. God is always waiting for us just like the prodigal father in the story of the prodigal son (cf. Luke 15:11-32) who kept waiting for his son's eventual return. It is left for us, like the prodigal son, to turn around and seek God while He may still be found.

God also hopes; because He made us in His own image and likeness and does not want any of us to be lost. But we must turn our gaze away from that which distracts us at the moment and focus our gaze on Him. The moment we turn toward Him and get a glimpse of His light in the midst of the darkness of these transient realities, we will be moved to follow His light and comfortably gain access to the ladder that will take us to Him. In Him are the joy and peace and satisfaction that the world, despite its beauty and glory, can never give. Seek first to discover God and every other thing shall be added unto you. (cf. Matthew 6:33)

KENOSIS (SELF-EMPTYING)

I believe firmly, that the moment our hearts are emptied of pride and selfishness and ambition and self-seeking, and everything that is contrary to God's law, the Holy Spirit will come and fill every corner of our hearts; but if we are full of pride and conceit, and ambition and self-seeking, and pleasure and the world, there is no room for the spirit of God; and I believe many a man is praying to God to fill him when he is full already with something else. Before we pray that God would fill us, I believe we ought to pray Him to empty us. There must be an emptying before there can be a filling; and when the heart is turned upside.

~D.L. Moody~

In order to travel far, travel light. Have you ever felt the burden that comes with carrying a lot of luggage while embarking on a journey? It can be so frustrating and delaying. Modern day technologies have made things that were heavier to be lighter. For instance, in the past, computers were very big and difficult to move, and mobile phones were very bulky and difficult to carry. But now, we have laptops and desktops that are lighter and moveable as well as phones that can be easily carried about in pockets. Recent innovations are made in such a way that many items are smaller, lighter, and accessible.

Furthermore, there was a time when being heavy (even overweight) was the order of the day. One was considered healthy by how big and fleshy one was, but these days, gaining weight is seen as a sign of an impending danger and almost everyone wants to be moderate or slim. Some even go to the extent of placing themselves on dietary restrictions, while others engage in regular exercise just to lose or maintain their weight. These changes are as a result of the fact that people are beginning to discover that it is better to be light than to be heavy.

Workers who use the ladder make sure that their hands are free as they climb the ladder so as to have a firm grip on the rungs and not slip off.

They also make sure that they are not holding on to anything unnecessary that can constitute a distraction or load as they ascend. Their aim is to reach the desired end safely without falling. While climbing our spiritual ladder, we also need to empty our hands (and ourselves) of anything that would constitute a burden or distraction that could make us lose our grip on the ladder of salvation.

In order to do this successfully, we must free ourselves of all that weighs us down and makes us cling to the world. If Jesus had not emptied Himself, taking up the cross for our salvation, He would not have actualized his salvific mission on earth. Leaders who empty themselves and become one with their subjects are more successful in their leadership styles and roles than those who hold on to their status and see themselves as more privileged and higher than other persons. By emptying himself of all glory and power as God, Jesus willingly accepted to be one with us. As a man, he felt what we feel and lived as we live. His human experience was not easy, but it made him grow because now, He understands us and confidently advocates for us before His Father.

We cannot climb heaven's stairs with so many spiritual burdens and loads. We must empty ourselves of whatever it is that holds us down and let God fill us with the necessary graces we need to advance towards Him. Self-emptying should not be understood in terms of forgetting ourselves and losing ourselves aimlessly. Rather it should be understood in terms of letting go of those things that make us too full of ourselves, thereby entrusting our will and self to God who knows the best for us. In kenosis, divine providence is affirmed. Kenosis is embracing the true freedom that comes with faith and hope in God and complete self-abandonment to Divine Will.

Holding on to ourselves hinders the possibility of our soul-connection to the Divine. We are all made to tend towards God. St. Augustine affirms this when he said that we are made for God and our souls are restless until they rest in God. The saints we revere today had to undergo this process in order to incline more to God.

The saints exemplify this self-emptying in the most vivid way. St. Francis of Assisi denounced his father's wealth and embraced a life of freedom from material things in poverty. St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta abandoned a life of comfort and preferred the slums in Calcutta where

she could easily reach out to the poor and the infirmed. St. Theresa of Lisieux remained a novice for years even unto death so as to be subject to authority. St. Theresa of Avila underwent all sorts of antagonisms and contempt in order to do what Jesus wanted her to do which was to reform the Carmelites.

Blessed Carlos Acutis lived a simple life despite his family's affluence and preferred to be an apostle of the Eucharist through social media and willingly accepted death through cancer when it came upon him. St. Gaetano Errico abandoned himself to the influence of God's love and went from door to door preaching the love of the Sacred Hearts, converting those who had strayed from godly paths and spurned relaxation for availability in the confessional on behalf of the penitents. Through their examples, they instruct us on the need to let go and let God. We cannot be filled with God if we are filled with ourselves.

A young boy was listening to his uncle who was a pastor as he preached on the need to let God into our lives and let Him take control of our lives. This little boy kept imagining how God could inhabit us even though God is said to be bigger than anything the eyes can see. After the service, the little boy walked up to his uncle-the pastor and asked him, "How possible is it to let God into our lives?" The Pastor was confused at first because he didn't understand what his nephew was trying to ask. And so, he asked him what he meant. The little boy looked at him and said, "How can God fill me when I'm so small and He is so big?"

At this, the pastor laughed and placing him on his lap, said to him: "If God must fill you, you must first of all empty yourself to Him and when you do that, He will come into you and overshadow you making His hands and feet and mind bigger than yours so that His hands and not yours, His feet and not yours, His mind and not yours will direct all that you do and speak." The little boy chuckled and then smiled and said to his uncle, "Now I understand."

Christ, being the perfect example of kenosis, invites us always to follow His lead. He emptied Himself and took our humanity so that we may be filled with Him and share in His divinity. We, too, are encouraged to follow His example (cf. Philippians 2: 5-11). In self-emptying, we are made pure. Imagine a well or swimming pool that lets in water from a good source and expels the stagnant water. Think of how fresh and clean

it always is? So it is with a person that has learned and mastered the art of self-emptying.

In kenosis, the mind and the will are united to the One with the power to fill them. Just like a lover empties himself or herself before his or her beloved, giving him or her the power over them, so is the will of the one who empties himself or herself before God and is at the disposal. In His life and death, Jesus never held on to anything but allowed His Father's will to prevail over His own. He is our perfect example of self-emptying. No other authority can be compared to the one He had before He came into the world and no other authority can be compared to the one; He gained after His mission on earth. In order to ascend heaven's stairs and be united with the One whom our souls long for and desire to connect with, we must learn to let go of ourselves and let God fill us with Himself allowing His will to become our will. Embrace Him. Hand over everything to Him and He will give you rest (cf. Matthew 11:28). This is the way of the saints and we cannot become one if we follow a different path.

BE HUMAN

*Think well. Speak well. Do well.
These three things, through the mercy of God,
will make someone go to Heaven.*

~St. Camillus de Lellis~

We are not created as angels and no one becomes a saint at birth. We are made in God's image and likeness as humans. If this is the case, in order to make heaven, we must strive to be more human in the image of the One who created us. I have always made it known to my audience that being human is acknowledging our limitedness before an unlimited God, our imperfections before a Perfect God and our dependence on an Independent God. Coming to grasp with this reality sets in motion our complete reliance on the mercy of God. Being human is being God's true image. An image reflects its original source and as images of God, our goal must be to reflect all the qualities and attributes of the One whom we reflect without any contradiction.

Part of being human is not getting hung up on the fact that we are imperfect as many tend to argue. But we must realize our imperfections and make efforts towards being perfect. Perfection is not realized on earth, no human is perfect, but by making efforts to be perfect, we are imbued with the grace that will usher us into that eternal light where Perfection dwells.

The values of humanity are the same as that of holiness. This is the reason why we cannot advance in holiness if we do not advance in humanity. There is a serious distinction between humanity and humanism: while the former acknowledges the imperfections of human nature and its dependence on God, the latter over-emphasizes and enthrones human nature, thereby deifying it.

To be human is not to neglect the spiritual dimension of humans but to affirm its indispensability in the light of the pursuit to be perfected. As humans, we have both the material and the immaterial component.

The material aspect comprises of our body which according to physiology, anatomy and biology is made up of such elements like oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, calcium, phosphorus, potassium, sulfur, sodium, chlorine, magnesium etc., as well as muscles, blood, tissues, skeletal framework, cells, veins, arteries, and other constituents. In fact, the human body is inarguably the most complex in nature and structure with billions of microscopic parts structured together and working harmoniously to sustain the whole body.

Beyond this complex physiological reality called the human body are the human mind, will, soul and spirit which are immaterial. It is within this domain that the conscience which is the moral guide of every human person dwells. It is this immaterial domain that often controls our actions, thoughts, and words, though they do so through the material body in a psychosomatic interactive process. For instance, we do not just speak because we have a mouth, but we think and then speak out that which we have thought to be worth spoken. Our behaviors are also reflections of what we feel within. We act out what we have internalized. This does not negate the fact that our body remains the temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1st Corinthians 6:19-20), because whatever it is that is reflected in, expresses itself visibly through the body.

Being more human is becoming more and more the image of God. If God is love, then to be more human is to live in love and harmony with one another. If God is peace, then we are called to be instruments of peace. If God is mercy, then we have an obligation to show mercy to those who wrong us. If God is generous and kind, then we cannot be stingy and selfish. We need to reflect His qualities and be godly in thoughts, words and deeds towards ourselves and others.

It is human to fear but to be more human is not to be more afraid but to have a deeper fear (awe, as some also call it) and reverence for God our Maker. It is human to make mistakes, but we should not define ourselves by our mistakes, rather we should see them as stairs we need to climb and as tools aiding us in becoming better in life. It is also human to die, but death should not be seen as the end, but as the doorway through which we enter into eternal communion with God.

Humanity is made manifest in kindness, understanding, empathy, sympathy, compassion, love, sincerity, generosity and other good

qualities one can ever imagine. Although humanity is beset with flaws, these flaws are not its essential characteristics. It is these flaws that uplifts the soul and makes it yearn for the grace that comes from the Almighty. It is these faults that make one person not to condemn the other because of their mistakes, but creates an opening for an understanding that we all are weak and depend on God's strength to push on.

The saints understood and affirmed their humanity and it really went a long way in keeping them on the track of sanctity. For instance, it was the humanity of St. Maximilian Kolbe that ennobled him to take the place of a fellow prisoner in Auschwitz who happened to be a family man and gave him the courage to die in his place. It was humanity that pushed St. Oscar Romero to voice out his displeasure at the social injustices of his time and leading to his martyrdom.

Why do we still call on St. Anthony of Padua to help us find lost things, if he was not human enough to feel for others when he was on earth; and I must tell you that he has often found lost things for anyone who calls on him despite the fact that he is no longer here on earth physically with us (Let us not forget that on his feast day, St. Anthony's bread for the poor is being shared.)

It was also humanity that made St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta attend to the poor and establish a religious order whose work is charity. An order whose mission to the poor and the sick continues vibrantly even after her demise. It was also humanity that made St. Pius of Pietrelcina to take up the construction of the hospital "*Casa Sollievo Della Sofferenza*" where the sick may receive medical attention and cure. It was humanity that made St. Monica never to give up on her son St. Augustine, but kept praying that God may make him a better person, a prayer which was answered in her lifetime.

Embracing their humanity became the channel through which their holiness flourished. Every saint in heaven was once a human on earth. They were all confronted with the limitations of human nature but they chose to rise above them and become more human in God. In fact, they became saints because they cherished their humanity and used it to advance in the spiritual life. This is the reason the Church in her wisdom condemns any form of self-flagellation or extreme mortification against the human flesh. In saving the soul, the body is also saved and

not demolished. It is one thing to empty ourselves and another to allow ourselves to be filled with God in order to fill others too.

When God fills us, He sends us to fill others with the same goodness He has filled us with. In this goodness is the quest to make other people whom we encounter better persons and better images of God. We cannot do this unless we become improved versions of ourselves and that is what becoming more human entails. We can only be holy when we become more human.

Our fundamental call on earth is not to become or gain anything more, whether it is in the form of wealth, fame, beauty, status etc., because wealth is nothing if it cannot be used in the service of others. The word of God makes it clear that anyone who oppresses the poor to make more for himself or herself will only come to poverty (cf. Proverbs 22:16); fame is useless if it is not used to advance the greater project and prospect of bettering humanity; beauty is nothing if it does not reflect in our character and actions towards others; and status or position does not matter if it is not used in making the lives of others and ourselves better.

It is through being more human towards others and aspiring to make others better that we can ascend Heaven's stairs with courage. Never play down your humanity or that of others in the name of acquiring sanctity because only humans can be saints eventually. The way up is down.

EMBRACE TEMPERANCE

*Temperance is moderation in the things that are good
and total abstinence from the things that are foul.*

~Frances E. Willard~

Virtue is found in moderation and those who desire to live a virtuous life must embrace both moderation and abstinence. Temperance is one of the cardinal virtues both in Christianity and Greek philosophy and as a cardinal virtue, temperance incorporates both self-control and self-restraint. Other religions also emphasize the importance and vitality of this virtue in attaining this beatitude and in living a good life. Human experience attests to the fact that “too much of everything is bad” and “virtue lies in the middle.” A balanced life is always seen as a good life.

Most times, we hear such words like “control your temper; don’t lose your calm; keep your temper in check etc.” and more often, these words are used to bring calm to heated situations. The ability to remain calm during crisis and adversity is a gift, but not everyone is gifted in that sense. However, through constant practice, one can acquire such virtue. Different religions try to encourage their members to embrace this quality if they truly want to have a good life.

The Buddhists, for instance, view temperance as a vital part of their eightfold path moderating between the extremities of sensual indulgence and self-flagellation/mortification. When practiced, this noble eightfold path leads to freedom from earthly bonds and liberation from the world and wandering (*Samsara*). They, however, affirm that temperance is a necessary virtue if one wants to truly defeat the concupiscence of the flesh and rise above the mundane in total freedom of the self.

The Hindus, on the other hand, use the concept of “*dama*” to describe the virtue of temperance. This concept implies self-control or self-restraint. This virtue of temperance is essential for anyone who truly desires to live a moral (*dharmic*) life. This *dama* is against any form of action that: injures others; brings calumny to others; vandalizes others

properties; engages in sexual promiscuity; fosters avarice etc. In fact, for Hinduism, at the base of a good and authentic moral life is the sincere practice of temperance (dama) or self-control/restraint.

The Muslims value temperance and moderation since their religion enforces the practice of virtuous living. They teach the need to imbibe the principles of moderation and uprightness on the path of Allah who has gifted humanity with self-control both in material and spiritual things. As a religion, Islam encourages moderation in faith, worship, legislation, manners and conduct. This virtue must manifest in every aspect of life: eating, drinking, spending, dressing and concupiscence of the flesh.

Christianity upholds this virtue as of utmost importance if one must advance not only in moral life but also in the path of sanctity. Christians are always exhorted to cultivate and exercise self-control and moderation in life. For instance, in his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul states that there is no law regarding self-control (cf. Galatians 5:23); and in his letter to Titus, he encourages Christians to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions and to live a life of self-control. (cf. Titus 2:12).

The Bible is filled with many instructions on how best to live in such a way that encourages moderation, self-restraint and control, austerity, abstinence, self-discipline, sobriety, continence, asceticism, frugality, self-denial, abstemiousness, forbearance, and condemns anything that is in the form of intemperance, overindulgence, prodigality, immoderation, excess, extravagance, wildness, rashness, carelessness etc.

In the face of anger and when we feel provoked to react to others when their actions give us cause to be violent and harsh, the virtue of temperance comes in to restrain us and help us not to respond to our instincts but in conscience and for posterity's sake, let the anger subside. The saints we venerate and recommend their lifestyles were true and living examples of the practice of temperance. Although, like every normal human being, they had the temptation to indulge in vices that militate against the virtue of temperance, they restrained their concupiscence, mastered their appetite and preferred to live in moderation and self-control.

Consider that many of these saints had everything they wanted. Some were Kings and Queens like Sts. Charles the Good, Henry, Helena, Louis of France, Margaret of Scotland, Edward the Confessor, Elizabeth of Hungary, Oswald of Northumbria, Wenceslaus of Bohemia etc. Some

were born in great affluence like Sts. Francis of Assisi, Agatha of Sicily, Peregrine Laziosi, Thomas Moore, Katharine Drexel, Vladimir, Nicholas, Blessed Pier Giogrio Frassati, etc.

In the face of their great wealth and royal status, they chose to eschew vanity and embrace self-denial. They had all the gold and money needed to live extravagantly, but they preferred to live in moderation and use their wealth in the service of God and humanity. The challenge to be like Christ, who had all the power to crush those who crucified Him, but instead felt pity for them and forgave them is one that the saints imbibed and adopted, and one that every Christian should take up and emulate. When we are confronted with excess and we choose moderation, when we are tempted with extravagance and we prefer frugality, when we are faced with wildness and we choose restraint, then, we are really climbing the stairs of heaven.

There is this story about a poor man who was seen every morning before the gate of a rich man with a placard which read, "God, why me?" The rich man saw him every morning pointing accusing fingers to God as the reason for his misfortune. One day, the rich man took pity on him and decided to invite him in and to take care of him. He took his rags and clothed him with good clothes, but he gave him an instruction not to enter a particular room in the house. This poor man obeyed the instruction as long as the rich man was around.

One day, the rich man decided to travel and reminded this poor man of his caveat, which is, never to enter that particular room. The poor man promised to do that, and the rich man embarked on this journey and left the house in his care. The first three days passed without the poor man thinking about this room. However, after the fourth day, the poor man became inquisitive and started thinking so many things about this room. He felt that the rich man may have some skeleton in his closet.

His suspicion grew as days went by and one day, he decided to open the door to that room. He took the key and opened the door and at that moment, a rat escaped from the room. All he could see in the room was the rags he wore in his destitute days which lay at the middle of the room. But there was a rope attached to the rags that made it so that if the door was opened, its original position will be changed. This was the rich man's plan to know whether the poor man would adhere to his instructions.

That very day, the rich man came back from his journey and sensing the guilt in the eyes of the poor man went straight to the room. The rat was missing and the rags were disturbed. He turned to the poor man and said to him, "Now you know that God is no longer responsible for your misfortune but yourself." He threw him out of his house and gave him back his rags. This poor man went back to the streets, picked another placard, and wrote on it, "Oh, what I've done to myself."

Sometimes, when we are pushed to do something which we know is not right and the voice of our conscience condemns it, our ability to follow our conscience makes us formidable against temptations. The saints were very conscious of the deceptive and relentless yearnings of the appetite, but ultimately, they did everything on their part to resist and squelch the urge. To be saints, we must follow the same path and be willing to make the same sacrifice. The stairs to heaven are not easy to climb but people of temperance carry on.

LIVE HUMBLY

Humility is the mother of many virtues because from it, obedience, fear, reverence, patience, modesty, meekness, and peace are born. He who is humble easily obeys everyone, fears to offend anyone, is at peace with everyone, and is kind to all.

~St. Thomas of Villanova~

The richest part of the best soil into which anything planted on it flourishes is called humus soil. Unlike the sandy soil which is grainy and cannot hold water, or the clay soil that is sticky and thick but hardly absorbs water, this humus soil is dark and is formed as a result of the decay of plants or animal matter. Despite its richness, it remains dark and almost hidden. It is not found everywhere like the sandy or clay soil but is found in specific regions where living things decompose. It accepts whatever it receives and transforms it into something valuable. To attain sanctity, we must be like the humus soil.

The ancient Greek philosophers saw humility as a meta-virtue because it is the basis for all other virtues. The term humility is derived from the Latin word “*humilitas*” and can be translated as “*low as the ground or from the earth.*” This is one of the reasons why those who are humble are often said to be “down to earth.” However, while emphasizing the need to be humble, it is important that we understand what humility is not. There are lots of misinterpretations on what it means to be humble. These misinterpretations are seen almost daily in the actions of those who fake humility in order to create a good impression about themselves.

The virtue of humility can never be faked. It flows from within the person and as such reveals itself in the actions of the person. This is one of the reasons why Our Blessed Virgin Mary proved her humility through the way she carried herself despite knowing that she was the mother of the Savior of the World. Her humility was so manifest that she never even for once identified herself with royalty. Even when Elizabeth showered her with praises, she redirected the praise to God and through her words,

we have the Magnificat (cf. Luke 1: 41-56). These humble words are prayed by the Church during vespers, in homes where the rosary is said, in churches, and on daily basis by all members of the Legion of Mary. She chose to remain simple and quiet and for her children exemplifies the greatest model of humility among the saints.

A humble person may not even be aware of the fact that he or she is humble. What then is not humility? Humility is not self-debasement or humiliation; humility is not shying away from responsibilities; humility is not false or pretentious modesty; humility is not the lack or absence of self-confidence etc.

A humble person does not go about telling others that they are humble; a humble person, when acknowledged for doing something good does not resort to denial, but accepts the praise and thanks the person who acknowledged him or her properly. A humble person always acknowledges God as the source of his/her strength. A humble person does not lose themselves entirely because of others, rather he or she tries to love others and treat others the way they want to be treated. A truly humble person is a free person whose attitude towards others shows that they are truly valued. In the words of C. S. Lewis, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is rather thinking of yourself less."

Humility is seen as the foundation of holiness, in fact, sanctity is impossible without humility. The saints took the path of humility and every other virtue fell into place in their pursuit of perfection. They knew that only the humble soul can show compassion, forgiveness, love, servitude, perseverance, patience, temperance, prudence etc. St. Augustine validated the necessity of humility in our pursuit of perfection making it clear that the way to Christ is first humility, second through humility, third through humility. He went further to ascertain that it was pride that changed angels into devils but it is humility that makes men to become angels. St. Vincent the Paul applauding this virtue said that, "Humility is the best weapon to conquer the devil; for, as he does not know at all how to employ it, neither does he know how to defend himself from it."

Humility as a virtue is often difficult to practice. As humans, we have this pride within us and a desire to exalt ourselves making it difficult to properly manifest humility. We want to shine; to be noticed; to be exalted;

to be first; to be honored; to be praised; to be at the center of everything; to be acknowledged; to be recognized, to be valued etc. These inner yearnings are not bad in themselves but when they are pursued at the detriment of the good of others and when we must bring others down in order to climb up, then they open the way to pride and lack of charity.

Humility is a beautiful form of kenosis. It was humility that made Christ take up the human nature and undergo His passion in order to re-establish us in that pride of place which we possessed initially as children of God in creation. His humility brought us honor. Christ remains the perfect example of humility and anyone who must follow Christ must embrace that same virtue that made Him share in our humanity for our salvation. Death on the cross is the most humiliating death sentence given by Romans at the time, but He willingly accepted this shameful death in order to heal our relationship with the Father. Those who humiliated Him never knew they were instruments through which He is exalted because the cross which initially was considered a shameful object is now seen as an exalted object.

Some of the best leaders the world has ever known both political and religious were remarkably humble. For example, Jose Mujica, a one-time president of Uruguay, after his election to the presidency, shocked the world by donating his wealth to charity and instead of living in the magnificent presidential mansion chose to live a life of simplicity with his wife on a farm.

Great leaders are known for their ability to lead by example through the path of humility, carrying everyone along and acknowledging the importance and essential roles of their subjects in the success of their government. They value every single individual and place their needs and demands before every other thing. Their style of leadership is always one of service to others and they are quick to admit their mistakes and apologize to their subjects with ease. We have such examples of these leaders and the world still remembers them after their deaths. Many are recognized as Saints in the Church and within Christendom and they are often idolized in their own countries.

People can easily fall in love with humble people. The kind of peace one experiences even within a short moment with them is out of this world. They are mostly cheerful, calm, attentive, sweet, attentive, and

almost angelic. As humans, we love to associate ourselves with people who are down to earth. By contrast, proud people can be really irritating. No reasonable person enjoys the presence of someone who is narcissistic, vain, conceited or agitates a lot. Even the proud themselves do not tolerate having another prideful person as friend. The ills of false pride are such that people who indulge in it irritate those around them.

I remember an encounter I once had with an individual at a conference. During the break period, he had sat next to me and I decided to get to know him. I quickly regretted that decision. From the beginning of the conversation to the end, he only praised himself, his achievements, his great expeditions, how indispensable he was and how much of a treasure he was to his Company. I sat speechless at such a being who saw others as irrelevant and himself as the best. The funniest part of it is that he occupied 99.9% of the conversation and all I could do was nod in affirmation and listen. He condemned and criticized the invited lecturers saying that they were not properly prepared. I prayed to God to give me an excuse to leave him, and it was really a very big relief when the break time was ended. I immediately changed my position and sat elsewhere with the excuse that I needed to see the illustrations clearly. It was indeed a memorable experience.

The beauty of humility is made manifest in the fact that as a virtue, it makes the one who practices it attractive, loveable, desired, and needed by those who encounter them. and most importantly, they are appreciated by God who treasures them. No one can love truly, serve joyfully, live peacefully with others, or climb the stairs of heaven if the virtue of humility is not given its first place. In humility, God's greatness is exemplified and manifested. It is never too late to try. Start now and see how beautiful and attractive you will be. Live humbly and heaven is sure.

EMIT KINDNESS

Three things in human life are important:

The first is to be kind.

The second is to be kind.

And the third is to be kind.

~Henry James~

A lot of things are mistaken for kindness these days. There is this current trend going on in the social media where people go out to show kindness and then travel about with their cameras or even do live feeds. Afterwards, they upload it to social media, anticipating likes and getting likes, comments, more followers, and praises. As much as the act of giving to people in need is good, making a show of it destroys its beauty. Christ made it clear that when you give alms, your left hand must not know what your right hand is doing (cf. Matthew 6:3). The greatest misdeed of our time is found in the reason why some people give. What happened to blessing peoples' lives without them knowing who did so? It is not just about the giving, but the intention for the giving.

Christ gave His life to save us from sin and death in the most unexpected way. Who would have known during His time on earth that the reason why He accepted to die amid two thieves was to steal that which cripples our salvation and bring paradise to the doorstep of St. Dismas who was one of the thieves whom He was crucified with? He made no show about it and willingly offered His life. Even when He did good deeds or performed miracles, He always told His beneficiaries to say nothing, be silent. In our time, some people do good deeds and tell their beneficiaries to announce it on the roof-tops (metaphorically speaking). Kindness as an act flows from a beautiful and loving heart. When St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta was helping the needy, many Media and News Agencies wanted to sing her praises and make her popular. But she always told them that her priority is not in being known, but in what she does for Christ, being felt in the hearts of those that benefit from it.

When we give, we are not just giving out of our own hands to be seen and revered. We give ourselves also because God has given to us and He expects us to spread and share what He has given us. We can truly be kind when we see the face of Christ in everyone, we render a helping hand to. It was this desire to reach out to those in need that inspired St. Damien of Molokai to serve the lepers in the islands of Hawaii for sixteen years. In this period of time, his selflessness made him their servant and in the course of this, he lost first his health becoming one with them in sickness and then his life in order to make them feel the warmth and kindness of God and humanity. While with them, he made sure that the world outside the leper colony understood that the lepers were also humans and images of God through so many letters he wrote to the Board of Health in Honolulu.

Kindness should be distinguished from philanthropy. In kindness, God is the reason for the act. It has a spiritual foundation unlike philanthropy. Those who indulge in good deeds do so because they want others to feel the impact of the goodness of God in their lives through them. Such people are channels through which God's graciousness is felt among us. However, one need not be rich in order to give. Beyond gifts, one can be kind with words and thoughts.

It takes a good heart to touch lives generously because kindness flows from the goodness of the heart. So many individuals today are passing through depressive and despairing moments and only kind words can heal their souls and restore their minds. Kind thoughts also go a long way. When people who are downcast feel the extension of others' kind thoughts, it helps to lift their spirit. In this sense therefore, there is no reason why someone who desires to live eternally with God cannot live kindly with others while on earth.

Beyond wealth and words and thoughts, many individuals have shown the world that kindness keeps the world going and life better. When we reflect on the life of St. Maximillian Kolbe, we see kindness in action. As a Catholic priest, captured and kept in the concentration camp at Auschwitz, he willingly gave his life in place of Franciszek Gajowniczek. He spent the remaining days of his life in the camp in a starvation bunker and was later killed by lethal injection. He is seen as a martyr of charity and kindness. He had nothing to give at that moment but his life for another, and that made him outstanding and for the sake of his sacrifice, Franciszek's life was spared.

What does this teach us? We are made to know through the examples of these individuals that there is no excuse for being stingy with our gifts. In the absence of money, give words of comfort; give thoughts that uplift; by all means give something. The world needs kind people, therefore be one. No one is too poor that they have nothing to give.

In the academic field, one can be kind by sharing what one knows with others. Some students indulge in free tutorials, while others befriend those in class who are not doing well in studies so as to help them become better. Sometimes, we have an excess of good clothes and shoes and other commodities. Instead of throwing them away or letting them hang idle in the wardrobes, one can look for someone in need and give them away. When done so with love, we all have something to give.

The saints followed the path of kindness and it led them to dwell eternally with God. Climbing the stairs of heaven alone is impossible. We can only climb heaven's stairs by touching the lives of others positively. No one really succeeds by putting others down but by helping others up. The language in heaven is "WE" and not "I". When we understand that we all need to treat each other with dignity and respect no matter how poor or rich, clean or dirty, weak or strong, famous or insignificant, white or black, beautiful or not, sick or healthy, then we realize that just like us, every other person is marked with the signature of God and has His light within.

It is this mindset that encourages us to give without our cameras turned on; to love without expecting anything in return; to value and not use others; to appreciate and not depreciate others; and to bless and not curse others. No one is worthless, and in the eyes of God, no one is better than the other. We can only give from what we have and as such we should give as if everything depends on giving. Come to think of it, what do we have that has not been given to us? Our breath is a gift from God, and our life is a gift from God through our parents. If not for others, we would not be who we are today. No one makes it to the top alone.

Our first bath was given by others (probably our parents or nurses) and our last bath will also be given to us by others. Our birth came through someone (Mother); we were not just thrown into the world. Our education came through others; our homes were built through the

services of others. When we were born, others carried us and when we die, others will carry us to the grave.

As an engineer, you need a doctor when you are sick; and as a doctor, you need a mechanical engineer when your car breaks down. As a lawyer, you need a contractor to build your home; and as a contractor, you need a lawyer when any case or charge is brought against you. We need others to live and the best we can do to and for others is to be kind to them. It will be in our best interest if we truly desire to make Heaven to stop advertising our good deeds so that our Father in Heaven who sees in secret will reward us (cf. Matthew 6:4).

It is sometimes very difficult to practice kindness in a world where greed, envy, and jealousy all so strongly prevail. But we must remember that Jesus Christ our model never let the ingratitude of people distract Him. He kept doing good deeds even on the cross by forgiving His persecutors; handing His mother over to John to care for and accepting the good thief into paradise. He is the way to heaven and if we truly desire to climb heaven's stairs, we must be willing to do just as He did and live like Him in love and kindness towards others despite their ingratitude. In kindness, our lights shine the brightest because we light the candle of life and love in others. A candle loses nothing of its light by lighting another candle. Emit kindness!

UTILIZE GRACE

What was the first rule of our dear Savior's life? You know it was to do His father's will. Well, then, the first purpose of our daily work is to do the will of God; secondly, to do it in the manner He wills; and thirdly, to do it because it is His will. We know certainly that our God calls us to a holy life. We know that He gives us every grace, every abundant grace; and though we are so weak of ourselves, this grace is able to carry us through every obstacle and difficulty.

~ St. Elizabeth Ann Seton ~

Just like a car without an engine is useless and cannot achieve the purpose for which it is made; a meal without its proper ingredients is tasteless, so is a spiritual journey without grace considered futile. Grace is the foundation stone upon which our spiritual journey as well as saintly aspiration is anchored. Whether we accept it or not, our Christian life is baseless if we do not have this divine gift of God in us. Every effort made to love God is possible because God has given us a special gift which enables us to discover Him and serve Him better. It is that divine factor in us that influences and propels us to a life of sanctity. It is grace that gives us fortitude in the face of trials and challenges and ennoble us with the resources needed to conquer the deceptions of the immortal enemy of our souls.

In the face of this truth, it is necessary that we understand that although this grace is given by the same God, yet He looks at our differences and gives us graces that are unique to us. God's grace comes in different packages. When we figure out what our special call is and work towards it, God blesses us with the grace that is unique to our special call. As children of God, we are on the road to salvation but our paths to God may differ.

There is no one streamlined path to heaven. A doctor makes heaven not by being a good cook, but by being faithful to the ethics of their medical profession, thereby becoming an instrument of life to his/her patients while acknowledging the influence and authority of God the

Divine Physician in his/her daily practices. In the uniqueness of this profession, God endows the individual with the grace to thrive both professionally and spiritually. The same is applicable to every profession. Some professions need patience, while others need accuracy; some need technicality, while some others need accountability. God understands the uniqueness of these varieties and gives His grace accordingly.

This is also the case with vocations. While some are called to the fruitfulness of marital life, others are called to the splendor of celibate/religious life. The graces given to each state of life is unique to them. To the married, God bestows the grace of true love, fidelity, patience, understanding, and commitment coupled with responsible parenting. To those who are committed exceptionally to God through the priestly life or consecrated life, God also uniquely blesses them with the grace that will keep their whole mind, heart and body focused on serving Him and leading souls back to Him.

However, not all saints were priests or religious. There were many saints who never saw the walls of the seminary nor convents nor monasteries. They attained sanctity by taking advantage of the grace God gave to them even in the busy and noisy aspects of societal life. They refused to be corrupted by the world and in the face of the darkness that consumes worldly aspirations, they became the light that refused to be put out, like the candle in the breeze that remains undimmed. And with this graceful strength, they persevered till the end.

Pope Francis emphasized the need to utilize the grace of God for our sanctification in whatever state of life we find ourselves in. He is of the opinion that every state of life leads to holiness; at home, on the streets, at work, at church. By living the state of life that we have, a door is opened on the road to sainthood. As such, we should not be discouraged to travel this road because God has given us the grace to do so.

Understanding the uniqueness of grace paves way for a better understanding of how we can use these graces for our personal sanctification as well as in reaching out to others as images of God. We are the hand through which God touches souls.

One of my favorite saints is St. Zita. She became a saint through the way of servitude. In the confines of the home where she worked as a servant, she utilized the grace of servitude immersed in love and patience

and attained sanctity. St. Therese of Lisieux attained sanctity within the confines of the monastic walls. It is in that monastery that she planted herself as a little flower whose sight pleased the Lord's eyes and became a model to all those that desire to serve God through little things.

The confusion that often arises among Christians who desire to make heaven flows from the assumption literally that they need to abandon everything in order to serve God. Can we sustain the society and our human lives by abandoning everything? Our Christian call prompts divine submission but not at the detriment of our responsibilities. In fact, we serve God better when we remain committed to where He has placed us. Many saints did not spend all their time in the Church, but through their daily activities whether at home or in the workplace made God felt among others.

As children of God, though we need to create and map out quality time every day for God, because no time spent with God is a waste, but we should not do so in such a way that affects our state of life irresponsibly. A married woman owes her commitment to her husband and children because it is in the way she relates with them that defines how committed she is to God. Any married woman who ignores the needs of her husband or children in the name of God and spends more time in the Church at the detriment of her family life is not doing the right thing and is misusing the grace God operates in her. This is because God dwells in every Christian home and desires that every home be made a sanctuary where peace and love dwells. A married woman discovers God not just in the Church but most especially in the confines of her home. The same is applicable to a married man.

Saints Louis and Zelig Martin are the first married couple to be canonized together. What is so special about them? They appreciated the grace of marital life and used it in training their children in the way of God. Their exemplary parental lives became an inspiration that motivated their daughters into religious life. The fact is that it was never an easy road for them. They passed through the difficulties of life and faced tremendous challenges. Out of nine children, they lost four and only five survived. Yet through it all, they held on to grace and while trusting God completely raised holy children. One of their children was St. Therese of Lisieux.

St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine never took the grace of motherhood for granted. She knew the power of the grace she had over her son as his mother and with that grace persistently brought her son to the path of God. Even while practicing the politics of this world and being in an exalted position, some saints never allowed the material reality to overshadow their spiritual journey.

St. Thomas Moore was a father, husband, lawyer, and political figure. He was condemned to death because he preferred to stand with God and His Church against the will of King Henry VIII. Through his heroic sacrifice and martyrdom, he became an example to those who have saintly aspirations irrespective of their political ambitions. The same is the case with St. Elizabeth of Hungary and other great politically placed men and women who are venerated today as saints in the church.

Many great saints knew the power and vitality of grace and they held on to it even when the world wanted to disgrace them. They held on the truth that grace is always efficient in every situation and circumstance of our lives. Grace makes our spiritual journey and saintly determinations possible. With grace, we are never alone in our journey to God. Since we are all endowed with grace (cf. Ephesians 4:7), we now have an obligation to re-channel our energy towards God the source of our existence. The word of God makes it clear that our redemption and forgiveness of sins is possible because of the riches of God's grace (cf. Ephesians 1:7). Grace in itself is a priceless pearl no treasure on earth can afford. It is a gift given to us out of love from God who alone freely gives it.

In the face of our imperfections, grace becomes that medicine which we need to take in order to be healed of and rise above that which draws us down towards damnation. It gives us the power of spiritual transcendence; a transcendence into the metaphysical as we aspire to be one with God. We have more than enough grace within our reach because God is never stingy with His gifts. To be a saint, we must work with the grace God gives us each day and grow daily in holiness. Without God's grace, we are nothing because we are who we are because of grace. The saints knew this, and they took advantage of it.

PRAY UNCEASINGLY

*A soul arms itself by prayer for all kinds of combat.
In whatever state the soul may be, it ought to pray.*

*A soul which is pure and beautiful must pray,
or else it will lose its beauty; a soul which is striving
after this purity must pray, or else it will never
attain it; a soul which is newly converted must pray,
or else it will fall again; a sinful soul, plunged in
sins, must pray so that it might rise again.
There is no soul which is not bound to pray,
for every single grace comes to the soul
through prayer.*

~St. Faustina~

Can there be a lasting relationship without a healthy communication? Is it possible to have a conversation when only one person is talking? A distant relationship survives and is ever new if both parties make time every day to interact with each other. The communication involved here is not the routine checking up on one's partner, which often does not yield any romantic fruit, but a deep and intimate conversation where both parties find joy in hearing each other's voice and anticipate their conversation like the deer that yearns for running stream. This is also the case in our relationship with God. Just like any happy relationship is characterized by effective communication and we cannot have a good relationship with God if we do not communicate with Him in prayers.

In communication, there is correspondence of ideas, sharing of information and an outpouring of emotions. In prayer, we not only talk to God, but we also listen to Him as He responds to us, and we are connected to Him deeply. The reason why so many people pray and do not feel the effect is because their prayers are monotonous and routine based. They go into the house of God and unveil their minds and desires and petitions before God, but they often do not have time to listen and discern what is God's will for them in their petitions. They say the Rosary, Divine Mercy

Prayers, participate in the Holy Sacrifice of Mass because it is an obligation expected of a good Christian without any sense of deep commitment and involvement.

To say the least, it is also unfair to pray to God only when we need something. Lovers and friends do not talk to each other only when the need arises but they check up on each other every moment. As humans, we feel bad when someone reaches out to us only when they need a favor. There is this unusual feeling of being used that accompanies only being remembered when something is needed from us. And most often, we try to ignore and avoid such a friendship or communication since it is entirely utilitarian. In our relationship with God also, it is entirely unfair to God our Loving Father to call on Him only when we are in need of something. This is often the case. Have you ever paused to ask how God feels about it?

Sometimes, people come into the church to worship when they are troubled about a need. Sadly, if their prayers are answered, they can unthinkingly abandon God only to come back when another problem arises. Sometimes too, when prayers are not answered, we see people giving up on God without stopping to reflect on whether that favor they are asking for is really in accord with God's will or not. Prayer is a form of communication with God and it is effective only when it is offered consistently and unrelentingly with humility, sincerity, openness, and love.

In humility, the person who prays recognizes their dependence on God to whom the prayer is addressed. Prayer is not meant to be offered with a sense of entitlement but with a sense of dependence. Imagine a situation whereby someone comes to you to ask for a favor and instead of affirming their lack in the face of that need, tries to blackmail you into understanding that they are not asking because they do not have but because they felt like you must give them when they ask. Isn't that mind-blowing? Sadly, some do just that when they come to pray.

Since God is God, sometimes He overlooks our pettiness and pride in prayer and grants what we desire because He wants to, and not solely because we asked. He already knows our needs before we ask them. We pray truly when we acknowledge our total dependence on God in humility and are disposed and willing to accept whatever His response is to our prayers.

A sincere prayer is characterized by our acceptance of our unworthiness and need in the face of God. When we go on our knees in prayer to God, we do well to realize that the One whom we are praying to truly cares for us and knows what we are asking for. However, we should not take for granted God's love in our prayers by being greedy but by asking for that which we truly need.

A prayer that flows from the heart pierces the Heavens. This is why most saints when they prayed had their prayers accompanied with miraculous signs. More than words, the heart plays a major role in prayer. A sincere heart moves God's hands and draws His gaze on the one praying and the intentions being prayed for. This is so because prayer moves the Hand that moves the world just like a sweet and loving conversation moves the heart of the lover to do anything for their beloved.

There is also a great need to be open to possibilities when we pray. Prayer is not a command unto God but a conversation, and a request unto Him. When the disciples asked our Lord to teach them how to pray, Jesus taught them the "Lord's Prayer" not only as a prayer but also as a pattern of all prayers (cf. Matthew 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4). One important aspect of that prayer is the aspect of acknowledging that "God's will be done." This implies that whenever we pray, we should have in mind that though man proposes, it is God who disposes. (cf. Proverbs 19:21-23).

While praying, it is not our will that should prevail but God's will in what we are asking for. This is because, as difficult as it may be to accept God's will in most situations, yet it is God's will that always works for our good. Sometimes, what we are asking for may bring harm instead of good unto us. The saints understood this aspect of prayer and that is why they willingly allowed God's will to prevail in any given circumstance.

Prayer also is more effective when we pray with love. Have you discovered that you are most distracted when you pray? The enemy of our soul does not want us to focus on God or interact with Him and that is why sometimes, we find it difficult keeping our minds attentive when we pray.

This was also the case with the saints. St. Theresa of Avila, after joining the Carmelites at the age of twenty, found it difficult to pray with love. In fact, during her prayer time, she was so distracted and impatient to the extent that she preferred even the most difficult punishments to praying. Enduring prayer was a big torment to her. However, when she started

falling in love with God deeply, she found so much comfort and peace. Imagine a saint who did not value prayer became so disposed to prayer that she never allowed herself to be distracted by the world whenever she was in communication with the One to whom her heart now belonged to.

St. John of the Cross also faced difficulties in prayers, and it is for this reason that he described what we face when we pray as “The Dark Night of the Soul.” According to him, sometimes, we feel such spiritual dryness when we pray that it seems as though God has abandoned us. But God allows these dark nights in order to help us keep away from those things that replace Him and distracts us when we pray. God wants our undivided attention and loyalty to Him when we pray.

To be deeply in love with God makes praying unceasingly a grace filled delight. To pray unceasingly does not mean we should abandon our responsibilities for prayer. It is rather converting everything we do into prayer wherever we are and in whatever we may be doing. St. Zita made her servitude a prayer unto God. St. Theresa of the Child Jesus did little things and offered them up to God as prayers. Have you ever seen people who are deeply in love get tired of being in each other’s company and talking to each other? If prayer irritates us, then something is wrong somewhere.

In the face of the many distractions which the world and its technological prowess carries, anyone who truly values someone will surely reach out to that person regularly. This is the reason why when such excuses like: “I’m busy,” “I had a very hectic day and as such could not call,” “I will visit you when the chance comes up,” becomes normal in a relationship, that becomes a red alert indicating that the love is faltering.

People in love often make time for themselves despite their busy schedule. This is also our situation with God. When we start making excuses for prayer, that means our love for God has decreased. To those who love God, praying is a delightful exercise. They make out time for God and try to be available for Him as they give back to Him the time, He has given to them.

Sometimes in the Church, before the Holy Mass ends, we see people receiving communion and exiting the Church. This act is a shameful sign of lack of commitment to God. (This is especially true in cases where there is no emergency). Often, I am left to wonder on how we want to go

to Heaven but find it difficult spending time in God's house. Being in a hurry to leave God's presence is a thoughtless sign of our desire not to dwell perpetually in His presence in Heaven. How can we dwell eternally with God in heaven if His presence and house on earth irritates us? How can we be relaxed in heaven if we feel irritated in God's holy place on earth? Honestly, how busy can we claim to be for God?

When people go to stadiums to watch soccer, football, baseball, tennis games etc., they willingly put up with hot or cold weather and spend hours upon hours enjoying the games without looking at their watches or complaining about time. Yet when they come into God's presence in the Church, they are too quick to run out of the Church when they feel the worship is a little too long. Some even go to the extent of timing God while in His presence. These are signs of lack of interest and unwillingness to commit ourselves, humbly, sincerely, unceasingly, openly, and lovingly to God in prayers.

Despite their busy schedules, the saints made time to ascend to God in prayers. They knew that without prayers, we are lost in our spiritual pursuit. They knew that prayer is that gear that holds us firmly to the Divine, and they never took for granted their prayer life.

We cannot climb Heaven's stairs if we do not make out personal times to communicate with the One who dwells in Heaven. If St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta could make out time despite her busy, charitable schedules to pray, or Pope St. John Paul II or Jesus Christ Himself, what excuse do we have not to do the same? Fan into flame that spirit of prayer which you have lost touch with and watch how holiness becomes a new way of life for you.

BE MERCIFUL AND FORGIVING

“If a man finds it very hard to forgive injuries, let him look at a Crucifix, and think that Christ shed all His Blood for him, and not only forgave His enemies, but even prayed His Heavenly Father to forgive them also. Let him remember that when he says the Pater Noster, every day, instead of asking pardon for his sins, he is calling down vengeance on himself.

~ St. Philip Neri~

One of the most difficult but necessary aspect of our journey to Heaven is forgiveness. As humans, when we are hurt, there is this inner drive and burning desire to get back at the person who wronged us. This desire is human and normal. It is human because it is not sinful to be angry when provoked. Even Jesus Christ had His angry moments (cf. Matthew 21: 12-13; Mark 11: 15-17; John 2: 14-19). If anger is a normal human response to external or internal stimuli, our affective maturity is determined by how we react when we are angry. When we let the anger linger too much, it breeds grudges, malice, prejudice, and resentment to the extent that it makes the person or persons responsible for our anger become targets of our vengeance. Such prolonged anger is not only harmful to our spiritual growth, but it also has its physical negative effects on us.

On the dangers of suppressed anger, webmd.com has this to say,

“Suppressed anger can be an underlying cause of anxiety and depression. Anger that is not properly expressed can disrupt relationships, affect thinking and behavior patterns, and create a variety of physical problems. Chronic (long-term) anger has been linked to health issues such as high blood pressure, heart problems, headaches, skin disorders and digestive problems. In addition, anger can be linked to problems such as crime, emotional and physical abuse, and other violent behaviors.” (Felson).

This gives credibility to the health benefits as well as spiritual merits of letting go of grudges and malice and having a merciful and forgiving spirit. In chapter two, I emphasized the need to empty ourselves and

travel light. Forgiveness is a necessary part of letting go and letting God accompany us on our pilgrimage to Heaven. Forgiveness is, however, made possible when we acknowledge God's unlimited mercies in our lives and through God's mercies bestowed on us, extend such a merciful disposition unto others. We are imperfect beings, broken and full of mistakes. Realizing our own imperfections and the need to be forgiven should open the door of our hearts toward showing the same mercy to others when we, too, are wronged.

The saints realized how vital forgiveness is for our spiritual growth, and did not waste time in gifting it to those that mistreated them. St. Maria Goretti, even though her life was cut short (eleven years old) as a result of the sinful lust of Alessandro Serenelli (who stabbed Maria fourteen times for refusing to satisfy his sexual request), not only forgave him, but also expressed her desire to have him with her in heaven. Her forgiveness of Alessandro became a saving grace to him. He not only repented of his sins but also went on to join the Capuchin Franciscans where he worked in their garden until his death at the age of eighty. St. Maria Goretti knew that holding on to that anger would deter her place in heaven, and she chose to follow the path of Our Lord who forgave those that crucified Him.

Many other saints inspire us by their willingness to forgive even when it was most difficult. St. Louis IX reigned as king of France for thirty-five years. He was remarkable in his merciful gestures to the extent that he forgave the members of the nobility who unsuccessfully rebelled against his rule. St. Philip Benizi de Damiani despite being attacked by Peregrine Laziosi chose to be merciful and forgiving to him. This action of St. Philip Benizi touched Peregrine so deeply that he eventually turned to God and is today one of the saints of the Church. St. John Gualbert was so embittered when his elder brother Hugh was murdered by someone whom he thought was his friend. He took an oath to kill the man who took his brother's life but when he was face to face with his brother's murderer, he chose forgiveness and friendship over retaliation and revenge because his enemy reminded him of Christ who forgave His enemies while on the Cross.

A most interesting story of forgiveness is that of St. Philip of Zell, a hermit. He had his oxen stolen one night and the thieves, while trying to cart away with the oxen could not find their way out of the woods. By sunrise, they found themselves back at St. Philip's hermitage. The saint,

knowing what they had done and seeing how terrified they were, forgave them. amazingly, he brought them in and fed them before sending them on their way with the proper exit out of the woods.

What motivated these holy men and women to forgive? It was basically their love for God and their neighbor as well as a loving desire to be free of every unholy bitterness. Above all, it was their acknowledgement of God's mercies in their lives that drove them to extend the same merciful gaze on others. Sometimes, when we insist on holding on to a particular resentment or malice, we find ourselves being drained of the graces that God sends us each day as well as the energy to push on in life. Unforgiveness makes our hearts unhappy and weak. It makes us slaves to those we have refused to forgive. In the face of the many problems that life presents, holding on to a wrong not only increases our chance of sadness, but it also plunges us deeply into the dungeon of restlessness.

Imagine being happy and then suddenly, you are face to face with someone you have resentment for? At that very moment, there is a mood swing and that initial happiness evaporates, subjecting you to unforeseen sorrows. This could be avoided if we make the choice to go over and above the hurt and forgive the offender even when they have not asked for forgiveness. When we forgive, we liberate ourselves from the chains of depression and heartache that are the price for holding a grudge.

I once encountered a man who had this deep sadness in his heart about his wife. He kept a diary of the wrongs the wife did to him all through their years of marriage. He made it a habit to read this diary often. When I learned of the situation, I tried to talk him out of holding on to the book of injuries and reminded him of how God forgives. I soon discovered, however, that he had no desire to let go of his diary.

I tactfully asked him to recite the Lord's Prayer and listen deeply to the words. Being a very devout and religious man, he recited it with so much confidence but when he got the part that says "and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us," he paused, looked at me for a while, brought his face down and said, "I've been so unfair to God for not being faithful to what I say in prayers!"

What he did next amazed me. He asked to have a lighter brought to him and fuel. When he got hold of these items, he asked me to

accompany him outside the church and in a dry spot, he poured the fuel on this diary and burned the diary. Afterwards, he requested to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, he had his confession, wept bitterly for his mistakes, and left the Church for his home with the promise to be a better Christian and a loving husband toward his wife.

The next Sunday, I saw him sitting with his wife in their usual spot and he looked much younger than he was the day he came to see me. He had liberated himself from the shackles of hardheartedness, and had found the peace that accompanies forgiveness. (He permitted me to share this experience)

Sometimes, the only thing that makes it difficult for us to forgive is our pride and the unhealthy resolve to feed our ego. We feel that by forgiving, we are made weak. This is not the case. Forgiveness makes us stronger. There is freedom and peace in forgiveness. Sometimes too, even when the one that wronged us has asked for forgiveness, we become more prideful and stubborn in our resolutions not to forgive. We intentionally hold on to the grudge so as to deal with and completely cut off the one who wronged us.

Forgiveness does not mean we should allow ourselves to fall back into becoming victims again. We can forgive someone and at the same time give that person the space they need for us to heal properly. Forgiveness is not running back into the arms of someone whom we know will hurt us again. It is freeing ourselves of the hurt and making sure that we do not allow such occasions to present itself again.

However, we cannot show mercy to others if we do not have mercy within us. We cannot forgive others if we have not first forgiven ourselves. So many people still hold on to their past mistakes and in their unwillingness to let the past be gone, live a life of misery while replaying repeatedly their past misfortunes.

Some penitents, after receiving absolution in the confessional still have this feeling that they have not been forgiven and as such, they keep confessing the same sin repeatedly. When we realize that God has no time to keep the record of our sins and embrace His forgiveness wholeheartedly and without any doubt whatsoever, then we too become ambassadors of His mercies to others.

In forgiveness, we abandon ourselves and our will to God as we do what pleases Him. As difficult as it may be, the saints still did it. The saints were humans like us and by embracing forgiveness and mercy, they inspire us to follow in the footsteps of Christ who went to His death having forgiven those who crucified Him. Consider the freedom of heart that accompanies pure forgiveness in its profundity.

St. Stephen did the same as well as St. James the Lesser. St. Ignatius of Loyola did the same as well as St. Edmund Campion etc. They knew the importance of forgiveness and they aligned themselves to it.

Have you forgiven someone today? Some sons and daughters have not communicated with their parents who are elderly for weeks, months, years because of a quarrel which they had. For the sake of our quest for salvation, reach out to them today and feel the relief that comes with it. The same is applicable to siblings, relations, friends, co-workers, classmates, etc. Be the one to reach out in love and forgiveness because we have limited time on earth. Tomorrow may be too late.

Just as it is difficult to have a peaceful trip when we are burdened with too much baggage, so it is in our spiritual journey. We cannot climb heaven's stairs if we keep holding on to wrongs done to us by others. If the saints could do it, we too can do it if we cooperate with the divine grace which God blesses us with each day.

LIVE OUT THE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

*In the garden of the soul, the virtues of faith,
hope and love form the centerpiece.
Traditionally called theological virtues,
they come as free gifts from God and
draw us to God. We cannot earn these virtues;
God has already freely planted them in our soul.*

~Robert Morneau~

As a child, one of the very first prayers I learned outside of the Rosary (and I believe this was the case with many others born during the 20th century era) were the Acts of Faith, Hope and Love. I wonder how many Christians still remember these prayers.

Act of Faith: *O my God, I firmly believe that you are one God in three divine Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. I believe that your divine Son became man and died for our sins and that He will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe these and all the truths which the Holy Catholic Church teaches because You have revealed them Who are eternal truth and wisdom, who can neither deceive nor be deceived. In this faith, I intend to live and die, Amen.*

Act of Hope: *O Lord God, I hope by your grace for the pardon of all my sins and after life here to gain eternal happiness because you have promised it who are infinitely powerful, faithful, kind, and merciful. In this hope, I intend to live and die, Amen.*

Act of Love: *O Lord God, I love you above all things and I love my neighbor for your sake because you are the highest, infinite, and perfect good, worthy of all my love. In this love, I intend to live and die, Amen.*

These Acts are expressions of our intention and deep desire to continuously live up to our Christian commitment not only for God but also for ourselves and our neighbors' good. But come to think of it; How many people still say these prayers these days? How many of us still make it our daily duty to always make a recommitment to God in faith, hope and love by reciting these acts?

You may be surprised to know that many Christians do not remember these prayers anymore. In order to live out something, it is important to first make a commitment toward that and then strive daily to be faithful to that commitment. We see this in almost all the facets of life. For instance, doctors do not just take up the medical profession. There is always a process of induction typically at graduation where the new physician swears the Hippocratic Oath. Lawyers also take up an oath to promote, uphold and defend the Constitution of their countries before they are admitted to practice law. Leaders of nations and states, on the day of their inauguration, also take the “Oath of Office” where they make a commitment to good governance and the welfare of their citizens.

The same is applicable to those that intend to enter marriage. They vow fidelity and undying love to one another and seal it with the ring which they give to each other. This is also the case with those called to the priestly life or consecrated life. There is always a public act of commitment which must be vocal, and which expresses genuinely what the individual is about to undertake.

Christian life is of no good if we do not live out the theological virtues of faith, hope and love. Without these virtues, we cannot have access to God. It is these virtues that aid us in climbing heaven’s stairs. In faith, we believe; in hope, we anticipate; and in love, we are made whole and one with God.

There is this question that normally comes up whenever these virtues are discussed. We see people asking why they are called Theological Virtues. St. Thomas Aquinas, a medieval catholic philosopher and theologian affirmed that they are called theological virtues because they have God as their object, both in so far as by them we are properly directed to Him, and because they are infused into our souls by God alone, as and also, finally, because we come to know of them only by Divine Revelation in the Sacred Scripture. (cf. *Summa Theologiae, prima secunda, q.62, art. 1; obj. 3*) However, it was St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians that vividly brought to light the importance and connection of these virtues, while giving the highest place to love. (cf. 1 Corinthians 13: 1-13).

THE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE OF FAITH

On the virtue of Faith, the hagiographer/author of the Letter to the Hebrews in the Sacred Scripture tells us that it is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen. He went on to say that without faith, it is impossible to please God because one cannot approach God without first believing that He exists and rewards those who seek Him. (cf. Hebrews 11: 1,5).

Ordinarily, to look up to something or someone implies that we have faith in that thing/person. Children look up to their parents because they have faith and believe they care for them unconditionally and will protect them no matter what. That is the reason why when a parent throws up a child in the air, the child smiles because of the confidence that the parent will surely catch him/her. Almost every child believes that their father is the strongest man in the world even if it is not true while their mother is the best cook in the world.

In matters of faith, we are very confident that God exists, is responsible for our existence and cares for us unconditionally. It is for this reason that no matter how bad the situations around us may become, our faith in God remains unshaken. It is in faith that we pray and are convinced that our prayers are and will be answered. Faith expresses itself not just in belief, but also in actions because it is one thing to have faith but so much more to be a person of faith.

Many saints suffered martyrdom for their faith in Christ and in the Resurrection. If not for the virtue of faith, they would not have given up their lives willingly. It was faith instead of fear that encouraged them during such cruelties like beheading, stoning, crucifixion, burning at stake, etc., that lay before them, that everything is going to be fine because God will not let their sacrifices be in vain.

Here are just but a few examples:

***St. Lawrence** had his body put on a giant gridiron and roasted alive over hot coals.*

***St. Antipas** was roasted alive in a brazen bull statue as he was put inside the large, hollow, bronze statue of a bull set over fire.*

St. Aphian who was only eighteen was tortured, thrown into the dungeon, had his skin torn with iron claws and was slowly burned for three days, after which he was finally killed and thrown into the sea with stones tied to his feet.

St. Euphemia was made a food for the lions.

St. Romanus had his tongue cut out because he was a fervent preacher who never stopped glorifying Christ even amid torture.

St. Lucy had her eyes plucked out.

St. Stephen, the very first Christian martyr, was stoned to death.

St. Sebastian was first tied to a tree and shot with arrows and later was clubbed to death after which his body was dumped into a Roman Sewer.

St. Margaret Clitherow had a sharp stone pressed on her back with a door on top of her that was supported with 800-pound-weight for fifteen minutes. The weight on top of her crushed her to death.

St. Cassian was hacked to death by children with penknives, styluses, and tablets.

St. Dymphna was beheaded by her own father as well as St. Barbara.

St. Valentine was clubbed, stoned and beheaded.

St. Agnes suffered martyrdom through decapitation.

St. Agatha had her breast cut off, was stripped naked, rolled over hot coals mixed with sharp objects.

The apostles, too, suffered martyrdom but even in the face of death, they held onto their faith because they knew that the sufferings of this life are nothing compared to the glory that is yet to be revealed to them. (cf. Romans 8:18)

The Sacred Scripture is also filled with great examples of faith:

Abraham's faith was tested, and he stood in obedience to the extent that his faith was credited to Him as righteousness (cf. Gen. 15:6) and for that purpose, God blessed him beyond measures (cf. Hebrews 11:8-12). It was faith that made Daniel, even at the threat of being thrown into the Lion's den, not to give up on God. It was that same faith that

invoked the power of the Divine to tame the lion, and we see how the lion instead of harming him, protected him. (cf. Daniel 6).

It was faith that protected Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue from the fiery furnace. They came out without a scratch. (cf. Daniel 3:13-100).

The Exodus story of the rescue of the people of Israel from the clutches of Pharaoh in Egypt would not have been possible if Moses was not a man of faith.

The miracles and signs which Jesus performed in the Gospels were accompanied by the faith of the recipients of those miracles. We see this in the case of the healing of blind Bartimaeus (cf. Mark 10:46-52); the woman with the issue of blood (cf. Matthew 9: 20-22; Mark 5:25-34; Luke 8: 43-48); the healing of the Paralytic (cf. Matthew 9: 1-8); the Synagogue official's daughter (cf. Matthew 9: 18-19, 23-26).

The apostles responded to the call of Christ and abandoned everything because they had faith in Christ. Faith in the eyes of the world is a risk because it involves tremendous amount of sacrifice and commitment, but to those who believe in God, faith becomes a priceless treasure. Every religion needs faith in order to prosper but to the Christian, faith is a protective armor, a shield. It is for this purpose that one cannot have a good knowledge of God and have saintly aspirations if faith is taken for granted. In faith, the saint takes one step at a time on the journey up the stairs of Heaven. In faith, there is neither fear nor doubt, because the one with faith does not give room to doubt nor let fear creep in since God is always within.

THE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE OF HOPE

In secular terms, hope is seen as optimism. To the Christian, hope goes beyond being positive about things into having complete trust and recourse in God. Hope is often the candle that brings to light other virtues when their lights are dimmed. The worst thing that can happen to anyone is losing hope completely. As a virtue, hope is a weapon which must be held on to. The reason why the saints welcomed martyrdom with open

heart and cheerful countenance is because of their hope of eternal life with God. The light of hope is the main reason why things can remain stable and firm. Hope is like the foundation of a house without which the whole house crumbles.

There is this story about the four candles.

The four candles burned slowly in a room with such a soft ambiance that you could hear them speak. The first candle said, "I am Peace, but these days, nobody wants to keep me lit." Then the flame of peace slowly died off. The second candle said, "I am Faith, but these days, I am no longer indispensable." Its flame died off too. The third candle spoke up, "I am Love and these days, people no longer value me or see my worth. They mistake me for other things. They no longer care for those even nearest to them. I don't have the strength to keep burning anymore." With these words, the flame of love died off too.

Suddenly, a child entered the room and seeing that the three candles no longer had flames on them, began to cry. In between his tears, he said, why are you not burning anymore? You are supposed to stay lighted till the end!" While he was still sobbing, the fourth candle spoke up gently and said to him, "Do not be afraid, for I am Hope, and while I still burn, we can re-light the other candles." Wiping off his tears, the child stood up, took the candle of Hope and lit the other three candles. The room was filled with the light of peace, faith and love once again because hope held on to its light. (Source Unknown).

As a virtue, hope is very vital not just for the Christian life but for human existence. Life begins, revolves around, and ends in hope. A pregnant woman willingly endures the stress of pregnancy and the pangs of childbirth in the hope that a new life will spring forth. Similarly, people go to school in hope that they will graduate and secure a better life for themselves. Journeys are taken in hope that one will reach their destination peacefully; people go for job interviews in hope of securing the job of their dreams. Couples embark on a life of love in marriage in the hope of eliminating loneliness and enjoying companionship. Most people take up tasks in the hope that they will complete it. Most people, irrespective of their fear of death, submit to it when the time comes in the hope of a better afterlife. In fact, the Church's entire eschatology is built on hope. In hope, our expectations are given concrete existence because even though it is infused into us by God, it only becomes active and vital when we will it.

Hope by its very nature anticipates; it looks toward the future, to a good which we desire. The saints lived lives worthy of emulation in imitation of Christ, eschewing worldly inclinations and anchoring their attentions on that which lies beyond because they had the hope of spending eternity with God. If not for hope, why would someone leave their comfortable zone to go into the desert or monasteries to know God better amidst the good and pleasurable things which the world presents?

St. Anthony of Egypt, one of the desert fathers and the father of Monasticism, left the wealth he inherited from his late wealthy landowner parents in Coma, Egypt. In order to follow the gospel exhortation of Matthew 19:21, he gave away some of the lands to his neighbors, sold the remaining property, donated the funds to the poor, placed his sister in the care of a group of Christian virgins and went on to live the life of a hermit.

Afterwards, he inspired monastic life by organizing his disciples into communities and through his life example drew many souls to God in monastic life. He did this because he knew that there is a better place that awaits those who serve God who is the greatest Treasure anyone can have. We see so many others who left the comfort of this world for a more enclosed life in the hope of securing eternal life. Such saints like Sts. Pachomius, Basil, Benedict, Scholastica, Bernard of Clairvaux etc., continue to inspire so many who embark on monastic living.

If not for hope, why would a young adult embark on a journey into the priestly or consecrated life with the knowledge of the sacrifices of worldly goods that are involved? If not for hope, why would the martyrs willingly submit themselves to be killed when they could escape such cruel way of dying? In the face of the many challenges, difficulties, tragedies, sufferings, trials, and storms of life, it is hope that helps us not to give up but push on until the end and hold on to God knowing that He will bless our perseverance fruitfully.

Although faith is very vital for Christian living, it is hope that sustains us in the trials of faith. Hope enriches and sustains faith as well as exalts it. Hope takes it beyond the ambient of the present into a future with God the Ultimate Good. It is in hope that the souls that desire Heaven hold firmly to, as they climb the stairs that leads to God. When we sin, we do not give in to despair because we hope and believe that when we approach

God in the Sacrament of His mercies, He forgives and absolves us and blesses us with His peace.

In hope, we rely not on our own strength to serve God but on the grace of God which we receive through the power of the Holy Spirit already at work in us. The saints received the blessings of what they hoped for and we celebrate them in the Church. One day, hopefully, the church will celebrate us as we remember the saints today because our hope in Christ Jesus will never fail us. (cf. Romans 5:5)

THEOLOGICAL VIRTUE OF LOVE

Why did St. Paul refer to the virtue of love as the highest of all in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:13)? As a virtue, love is the main virtue that connects us directly with the object of our faith and the subject of our hope. In love, God is made visible. The Eucharist is the sacrament of love and the evidence of God's desire to always be present among us in the aura of His unconditional love. It was in love that God made humans in His own image and likeness and out of love for humanity gave them dominion and power over all that He created. In love, He blessed them and authorized them to be pro-creators in love. (Genesis 1:26-30).

Even the Sacred Scripture tells us that, "God is love and anyone that dwells in love dwells in God" (cf. 1 John 4:16). There is never a place where God is said to be faith or hope, rather the only virtue used to describe God is "Love". Does this mean that the virtues of faith and hope are less important when compared to love? No, this is not the case.

However, faith and hope are only needed for the pilgrim Church on earth. Their relevance ceases once earthly life is over because in heaven, we do not need faith nor hope again. In heaven, we are now face to face with the object of our faith as all our hopes are now fulfilled. The only virtue that is eternal is love. The love we possess is possible only because God loved us first (cf. 1 John 4:19). And we know what love is because God has infused this holy virtue in us.

As the highest of all virtues, love is the engine of every other virtue. Without love, both the cardinal virtues as well as all other virtues have no firm foundation. The main aim of living a virtuous life is to live in

harmony with ourselves, others and then God eternally. The binding force and the gluing factor to this life of virtue is love.

But how does love affect the cardinal virtues? Without love, the virtue of prudence is unfounded. Since the virtue of prudence aims at discerning the appropriate course of action to be taken in a given situation at the appropriate time, it is love that inspires this virtue to seek what is right and when to do it.

Justice cannot prevail in the absence of love. The state of nature was characterized by selfishness and lust for survival. In that state of nature, man became wolf unto man (cf. The *Homo Homini Lupus* of Thomas Hobbes, 1588-1679) and the only factor that could put things in place was the virtue that enthrones giving each one what is their due in all fairness. Justice found its greatest expression and value in love since fairness is not possible where love is lacking.

The virtue of fortitude is strengthened by love because it is love that pushes an individual to fight fear, uncertainty, and intimidation. In love, strength is found and built, and love is the platform upon which endurance can linger, for even when one feels like giving up, love comes in garnished with hope to fortify the mind and will.

The virtue of temperance which was already discussed in chapter four of this book focuses on self-control, abstinence, moderation, and self-restraint especially as it pertains to our appetites and emotions. It is in love that an individual decides to seek for his/her own good while moderating excesses, controlling one's desires, and restraining oneself when provoked to react badly. Within the virtue of temperance is the virtue of patience employed, and we can only exercise patience when something that pleases our heart is involved.

These days, the virtue of love has been misunderstood and misrepresented with such misnomers like lust, obsession, possession, infatuation etc. There is a reduction of love to mere feelings, utility, affections, desire, wants, unimaginable jealousy, petty emotions and gratification of sexual impulses. This has become so bad that it is sometimes difficult to see people of the opposite sex who are just friends. Even those of same sex often relate well only when there is some perceived benefit attached. This sometimes rises to the level of intimate possessiveness that arouses a desire to protect someone like an

object. This impulse is predominant among many teens, young adults, and adults as well.

This unruly passion is so unhealthy to the extent that any suspicion of infidelity or sign of emotional relapse on the part of one's partner could inspire a desire to give up and move on. This is one of the reasons for the many cases of divorce and separation in our time. Modern love is hollow replica. It is the opposite of love and it sadly enslaves those who get trapped in it. Any love that is not grounded in freedom is not love. God gave us free-will and blessed us with the gift of choice because He loves us. If not for love, we would all have been robots with no will of our own. If God in His love gave us freedom, why enslave one another in the name of love?

In our journey to salvation and as we climb heaven's stairs, the only thing that can keep us going irrespective of our faith and hope is the love. Love, not just for God, but also for ourselves as we aspire for our own salvation, and for others as we pray and encourage them on this journey too. No one goes to heaven alone. This is the reason why the Church does not canonize someone and declare them a saint just because they lived a virtuous life, but more because of the beautiful and loving effect the individual to be canonized had on those who encountered them (*Vox populi, vox Dei* – The voice of people is the voice of God).

The saints we venerate today lived a life of love to the best of their ability. They understood the need to love God first and then with the love we have for God, love ourselves and then others. This prompted them to live out the type of love not characterized by eros, but a love which is both filial and most of all agape. This is one of the reasons why most martyrs even in the face of their tormentors and executioners pray that they be forgiven and have repentance.

St. Stephen made a prayer to God not to hold the sin of his executioners against them as they stoned him to death (cf. Acts 7:60). Among his executioners was Saul who later encountered Christ and became one of the greatest of the apostles in evangelization. It is believed that Stephen's intercession from heaven must have been the reason for Paul's conversion.

St. James the Lesser's feast is celebrated alongside that of St. Philip. He was one of the apostles of Jesus and one of the Church's first martyrs.

As he was being beaten with a club, he asked God to forgive his enemies. He was ultimately thrown from the pinnacle of the temple mount to the rocks below. When St. Polycarp was brought face to face with those who would lead him to martyrdom, he set a table for them to eat and drink while he went to offer his final prayers.

These saints remind us of what love is. They teach us that love is exemplified in sacrifice. To love is to not hold grudges or bear malice, but to forgive. We must bear in mind that the person who wronged may be ignorant of what they are doing. We must also bear with the failings of others; to accommodate them, care for them and help them as much as we can. This is true even when they mean us grave harm. We cannot give up on people because we are wronged; rather we must love them for the sake of God. When we love others, we seek for their own good more than any other thing.

In order to truly love others, we must first love ourselves. Self-love in this context is not to be understood in the modern-day sense. Rather, it should be understood and interpreted in the language of Christ who commands it. One may ask, “What’s the difference?” The difference is found in the goal of love. In the modern-day language, self-love implies maintaining distance from others, caring for only one’s needs; ignoring others. That is empowering “selfism”.

This is not what Christ meant when He said that we should love our neighbor as ourselves (cf. Mark 12:31). Jesus meant that we cannot love others if we do not first love ourselves. This is because the love we give to others must flow from the love we have first received from God who dwells in us. It is with this love (in us) that we can share with others what we have received (Just like the “candle of hope” in the story above). No one gives what they don’t have.

Love when put into practical use becomes charity. In charity, we reach out to others in love with the conviction that love is the extension of our will towards the other. Although love cannot be seen, but it is felt and expressed most by our actions.

Many saints perfected their love through their heroic sacrifices in charity. St. Vincent de Paul is known for his charity and compassion for the poor and the needy. It was St. Vincent that said, “Go to the poor and you will find God.” St. Elizabeth of Hungary devoted her life to the

care of the sick and the poor, and we see many hospitals and charitable agencies named after her.

St. Nicholas was known for his gift-giving. In fact, when we talk about Santa Claus, we are referring to this great saint who put smiles on the faces of people especially children. St. Mother Theresa of Calcutta is well known for her charitable cause, and this led her to establish a religious community called the Missionaries of Charity whose main charism is to serve and attend to poorest of the poor.

St. Damien went out of his way to minister to the lepers in Kalaupapa Peninsula in Hawaii and even contracted leprosy himself. He gave his life in service to these people whom the world pushed away. St. Martin de Porres just like St. Francis of Assisi was not only loving to the poor and the destitute, but also was caring to animals. St. Cajetan, who is the patron saint of the unemployed, devoted his life to preaching and tending to the sick and the poor;

St. John Bosco, seeing that so many boys in his time were imprisoned, established an oratory in order to train these boys and help them stay out of prison. He founded the Salesians of John Bosco whose main mission is to do charitable works and help young men with their faith formation in order to stay out of trouble. He is the patron saint of juvenile delinquents.

St. Louise de Marillac, who was the co-founder with St. Vincent de Paul of the daughters of Charity, emphasized and practiced the need to take good care of the poor. She not only cared for the poor but also expanded their scope of service to include taking care of orphans, building homes for the elderly, the infirm and the mentally ill.

St. Katherine Drexel who was the daughter of a wealthy American banker and philanthropist spent a great deal of her inheritance on missionary and charitable work with Native Americans and African Americans.

St. Isabella of Portugal, the widow of King Diniz of Portugal, gave away nearly everything she inherited from her husband the King to the poor in Portugal.

These and many other saints through their charitable endeavors brought God to others as they reached out to the poor in whom they saw the

face of Christ. They understood their divine assignment which is to love. And in that love, to give until there is nothing else left for the sake of God. They inspire us to follow this same path if we truly desire to meet God.

Everything we have and possess are gifts from God. They are gifts meant to be shared with others in order to make the world a better place and make God's kingdom manifest on earth. When we do not share them with others, we lose them. We become richer not by what we have but by what we share. This is the reason why the last judgement will not be based on how pious or devout we were on earth, but on how loving and caring we were to others, "When I was hungry, you fed me... naked, you clothed me..." (cf. Matthew 25: 31- 46). However, we do not just give for the sake of giving; this type of giving is not charity. We give because we are agents of God's love on a mission to salvage humanity and make the face of God and the light of Christ shine forth in abundance in the world.

To summarize, the theological virtues of faith, hope and love invite us to always trust in God and believe in Him no matter what the world may do or say. This can only be done if we have God's love in us, and through our love for God, love ourselves and our neighbors. As difficult as it may seem, God has put into our hearts the gift of His Holy Spirit. With the graces that flow due to the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, our salvific prospects and endeavors are made possible as we keep putting one foot in front of the other in Heaven's stairs. Without God, we can do nothing. (cf. Joh 15:5).

CONCLUSION

*And though we don't know a great deal about heaven now,
we can be sure its reality will exceed our wildest dreams.
We will see the Lord and we will see one another. And all of
the mysteries will be solved.*

~Greg Laurie~

Once, while I was preaching a homily during the Lenten season within the celebration of the Holy Mass, I asked the people of God in the Church a question, "Who wants to go to heaven?" Everyone raised their hands up and I saw a mother seriously using her other hand to signal her toddler to raise his hand. And then, I asked the next question, "Who wants to go to Heaven now?" No one dared to raise their hands but the toddler whom the mother signaled to raise his hand initially did not understand what was happening. Immediately, he raised his hand up again thinking that it was what was expected. The speed with which the mom brushed his hands and brought it down made me smile.

The truth is that we all want to go heaven but how many of us are ready now? There is this desire to live more even when life presents us with so many reasons not to. I once heard a woman of 92 praying for continued long life. I was surprised that at her age, she would still want to live longer. The fear of the unknown which characterizes death in this world is a reality many do not want to face. We believe that there is Heaven but we do not know what it is like and so we hold on to this life which we are sure of. In the face of these uncertainties that haunt our very existence, we are called upon to keep doing our best in pursuit of our salvation.

Someone once asked me during my seminary days, "What if there is no heaven or hell?" "What if there is no God?" I only smiled and said to him, "If there is heaven, I have nothing to lose because we are already moving in that direction through the sacrifices, we make in order not to be carried away by the world; but if there is no heaven, I also have nothing to lose because as a Christian, I am doing my best despite my imperfections to be good." Then turning to him, I said, "But what if there is heaven, what will you do?" He was never expecting that question, and

then for a few seconds he gazed up into the skies and said, “Maybe, God will understand if He exists!”

Even without being aware of it, gradually, a lot of people are losing their focus on eternity. There is a wave of modern materialism and humanism that is sweeping across the world that blots out the immortality of the soul and the eternal. So many belief systems distract and take away the focus of modern humans from God and re-channel it into themselves in constant pursuit of worldly goods. Efforts are continuously being made to distort the thinking of people about the existence of God and heaven. The message generated and propagated through these efforts is that religion is harmful.

Despite these machinations, the enemy of our souls keeps failing. This is mainly because each argument he brings up in order to nullify the supremacy of God is countered by people of faith who rise with their testimonies of divine encounter and experiences which proves that God truly exists. We also see how those who have lost touch with God despite the magnitude of their wealth keep searching for fulfilment and peace in material things which until now have not satisfied them, while those who have God find peace and fulfilment in the face of much less. We see Jesus before His ascension giving his apostles the gift of peace, a peace the world despite its glamour and glory can never give. (cf. John 14:27).

The peace that the world gives is momentary, temporal, and unfulfilling. It is for this reason that nothing satisfies the one who has no use for God even if they have the greatest wealth. Many on their death bed see the vanity of this world by having a vision of the torments that await them and they weep, wishing that they embraced God. There is no greater treasure one could possess other than God. There is a confidence that strengthens the soul of those who love God. It is unshakeable even when enduring death's horrible stare.

I remember going to offer the last rites and give Viaticum to a lady by name Theresa. And when I asked her; “Are you afraid?” she smiled and said, “No, Father, I’m not!” And I felt a deep sense of joy and satisfaction because she was not afraid even though her time was near. She was ready to take her leave from this beautiful world borne upon the wings of angels. How many of us can boast of such courage in the face of death?

Every action we take on earth helps to determine where our eternity will be. Having this book in your hand is not by chance dear Reader, because God desires that you hear these words, and in this way prepare yourself as I prepare myself for our eternal dwelling place. The saints understood this. In their stories, we see how fervent and persistent they were in their resolutions to eternally be with God. On the question of what Heaven will be like, the Sacred Scripture made it clear in the first letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians that the “eyes have not seen, not ears heard nor has it entered the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love Him.” (cf. 1 Corinthians 2:9).

It was in view of this glorious place that St. Francis of Assisi left his father's mansion in order to become a mendicant and form a community of those who are willing to follow Christ in holiness, poverty, and simplicity. St. Anthony of Padua spent his life preaching the gospel, organizing relief efforts for the poor, abolishing debtors' prison and advocating for the release of prisoners of war.

St. Christopher made his shoulders a place of support and strength as he carried people to safety across a dangerous river. His conviction was that he was serving God, until he was privileged to carry the King of kings on his shoulder. It was this that led to his name “Christopher” meaning “Christ-Bearer or Christ-Carrier”.

St. Padre Pio, despite the ill-health he suffered his entire life, offered himself as a victim for poor sinners and souls in purgatory and despite the stigmata which he received at the age of thirty-one, worked tirelessly in the service of the church and in hospitals for nineteen hours a day without ever being known to have taken a vacation day in all of his fifty-one years;

St. Kateri Tekakwitha for the sake of Christ was treated like an outcast in her community and received threats because of her faith and had to travel two hundred miles for two months through woods and rivers on foot in search of a community that would welcome her faith practices. When she found one in Canada, she lived with them devoting her life to God and promoting the cause of the gospel. She preferred to serve God than to please her people.

So many other saints whom we have heard their stories and read about never gave up on the journey as they climbed heaven's stairs. Today, we

celebrate them because they have reached their destination and attained their salvific goal. These Saints were sinners who believed in God's mercies and worked towards an exceptional degree of holiness, likeness, or closeness to God. We, too, can be saints. We are encouraged to follow their lead in imitation of Christ as we continue our pilgrim journey on earth.

This book is given to you not as a complete course in the journey to heaven but as a simple guide among many others to inspire and encourage you on your road to salvation. Hopefully, our efforts and sacrifices to meet God face to face will not be in vain. Keep climbing Heaven's stairs and remember that others are coming up with you. May God be with you as you navigate the rest of your life.