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THE LAW OF PRAYER.

“Prayer moves the Hand that moves the universe.”

GURNALL'S *Christian Armor*.

“Hast thou not learn'd what thou art often told,
A truth still sacred, and believed of old,
That no success attends on spears and swords
Unblest, and that the battle is the Lord's?”

COWPER.—*Expostulation*.

“More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of.”

TENNYSON.—*Morte d'Arthur*.

I.

SOME years ago, in a Southern city, I was requested by a Catholic lady to call on her husband, who was suffering from a fatal distemper, though his mental faculties were unimpaired. This gentleman had been brought up by his father in the school of Voltaire and his associates, whose infidel teachings he had imbibed, and he avowed himself not only an unbeliever in Catholic faith, but even a skeptic, as far as all revealed religion was concerned.

Knowing the bent of his mind on the subject of religion, I endeavored, at some length and by every argument at my command, to remove his objections to Christianity, and to prepare him for the rational acceptance of our holy religion.

After listening to me with great patience and close attention, he

courteously, but frankly informed me that my remarks had made no impression on him whatever, and that between him and me there was an impassable gulf, which no reasoning of mine could bridge over.

Although mortified and discouraged by his candid reply, I did not despair, but resumed the conversation, which was, in substance, as follows :

"You certainly acknowledge," said I, "the existence of a Supreme Being, the Author of creation, and the living Source of all life?"

"Every man," he replied, "that uses his brains, must concede that truth."

"You will further admit," I continued, "that, as the Author of all being is omniscient and all-seeing, He knows our condition; as He is omnipotent, He has the power to succor us; and, as He is infinitely good, He is not indifferent or insensible to the wants of His creatures, especially of those whom He has endowed with an immortal soul and an intelligent nature. He does not cast them off from His thoughts, as the loosened fragment is thrown off from a planet and hurled into space. He, from whom all paternity is derived, must have, in an eminent and perfect degree, those paternal sentiments which a father has for his child."

"That truth," he answered, "irresistibly follows from our conception of a Being supremely intelligent, powerful, and beneficent."

"Is it not reasonable to suppose," I added, "that a Creator so benevolent and paternal, will be moved by our entreaties, and that He will mercifully hearken to our petitions?"

"I cannot deny," he said, "the reasonableness of your conclusion."

"Then, you admit," I observed, "the utility of prayer, and I ask you to promise me to offer up to this Supreme and Providential Ruler this short supplication: O God, give me light to see the truth, and strength to follow it!"

He made me an earnest promise to repeat this prayer day after day, with all the fervor of his heart.

Some days later, I received a pressing message from my invalid friend to visit him again, as soon as possible. I did so, and, on entering his room, I was sensibly impressed with the glow of enthusiasm which shone on his face, and which had succeeded his former forlorn and desponding expression. Before I had time to address him, he burst forth into an eloquent profession of faith in the divinity of the Christian religion, and spoke in language at once so simple and connected, so luminous and penetrating, that I have never lost the impression which his words made on me. He begged, then and there, for the grace of baptism, if he were deemed

worthy of receiving it. Some weeks afterward he died, fortified and consoled by the sacraments of the Church.

Here is a striking instance of the power of prayer and of the direct interposition of God in the conversion and illumination of a soul without the help or agency of man. One ray of divine light had effected what no force of reasoning could accomplish. In his tribulation, he sought God and found Him, and with Him he found light and peace and rest.

The yearning voice issuing from this man's heart, was but the echo of the voice of humanity. It was the expression of a sentiment indelibly engraved on the soul of mankind. This divine spark may lie smouldering for years, buried under the accumulated weight of pernicious maxims and worldly preoccupations; but it needs only calm introspection and a ray of divine grace to rekindle it into a flame.

As the world has never yet beheld, and never will behold a nation of atheists, so will the sun never shine on a nation that does not worship God. And prayer is an essential element of divine worship. No people have ever existed, whether ancient or modern, savage or civilized, Jew or Gentile, Pagan or Christian, that have not poured forth supplications to the Deity.

Just as the first cry of infancy is a wail of sorrow, and the last expression of expiring old age is a sigh of grief, even so do we hear the voice of prayer at the very source of human life; and its plaintive notes have never ceased, but grow louder and louder as the stream of life advances, and this voice will continue till the human stream has run its course, and is swallowed up in the ocean of eternity.

The forms, indeed, of worship and supplication have differed widely among men, but the language of the heart has always been the same.

The Holy Scripture, which contains the history of God's people from the days of Adam till after our Saviour's Resurrection, records their abiding faith in the efficacy of prayer. And the most ancient authors of Greece and Rome attest the belief of the Pagan world in the duty of propitiating the Deity by prayers and sacrifice. The language of Homer represents the sentiments of all ancient heathen writers:

“The gods (the only great, and only wise)
Are moved by offerings, vows, and sacrifice;
Offending man their high compassion wins,
And daily prayers atone for daily sins.”¹

The practice of prayer is not less strongly commended by the philosopher Pythagoras:

¹ Iliad, B. ix.

"In all thou dost, first let thy prayers ascend,
And to the gods thy labors first commend :
From them implore success, and hope a prosperous end."¹

How are we to account for the practice of prayer, so widespread, so uninterrupted, so deeply-rooted in our nature? This universal aspiration springs from a sense of our misery and utter dependence, and from an innate conviction of God's infinite power and mercy. Let us analyze our soul by the light of reason and faith :

1st. As to our intellect : its light, in the best of us, is very dim, and that light is obscured by passion and prejudice, by pride and presumption. Our judgment is so easily biassed and warped, especially where our personal interests or predilections are concerned. The famous Electoral Commission is well remembered. It was organized with the view of determining which of the two candidates was duly elected President, in 1876. The members of the Commission were chosen from the Senate, the House of Representatives, and the Supreme Court of the United States—the most grave and exalted deliberative bodies in the country. Seven members of the Commission belonged to one political party, and eight members to another, each member invariably voting for his party candidate. Was this the result of accident, or of honest conviction, or political bias? Let the reader decide for himself. If neither the restraints of senatorial and judicial decorum, nor the momentous issues involved, nor the spectacle of a whole nation anxiously awaiting the decision, could divest this illustrious court of partisan bias, how are we to escape the dangers of a perverted judgment, when we have no monitor to guide us save the voice of duty, which is often silenced by the clamors of self-interest? How many of us are like that blind man, mentioned in the Gospel, after his sight was partially restored by our Saviour: "I see men," he says, "as it were trees, walking."² We magnify the things around us, we exaggerate the importance of passing, petty scenes, and we are blind to the great, everlasting truths, confronting us like the stars of heaven in their immovable splendor. There is no truth, no matter how evident and luminous, which men have not denied or doubted, even though it be the existence of God, or their own very existence. There is no error, how monstrous and absurd soever it may be, which men have not espoused; they have bowed down and worshipped as gods the work of their own hands.

2d. Our heart is as much influenced by outward impressions as the thermometer is affected by the fluctuations of the weather. What is man's unregenerate heart but a tumultuous sea continually tossed about by the winds of conflicting passions? To-day, it is transported by impetuous, capricious, criminal, ambitious desires,

¹ Golden Rule (Rowe's Trans.)

² Mark viii. 24.

which rapidly succeed one another, like wave rushing on wave. To-morrow, it is disquieted by vain, frivolous fears and anxieties, tormented by the dread of some impending calamity, or oppressed by the weight of cares, despondency, sorrow, and tribulation. At intervals, it enjoys a treacherous calm, lulled to sleep and fancied security by the soft breath of some unlawful gratification, or some fascinating intrigue. Then, again, it is agitated by the furious storms of anger, bitterness, jealousy, hatred, revenge, and remorse.

3d. Our will is so weak and vacillating. We are so prompt and generous in forming good resolutions, and so remiss in keeping them; so courageous when no enemy is at hand, so cowardly when the tempter confronts us. We glide so readily down the slippery path of vice, we ascend with such faltering steps, the steep hill of virtue and self-denial. What is the history of each day, but a record of pledges broken, of vows to God unredeemed, and of humiliating defeats on the battlefield of this world!

Where shall I find light for my intellect, comfort for my heart, strength for my will? In vain shall I look for them in the writings or conversation of men who eliminate the Providence of God from the moral government of the world, and who, consequently, reject prayer from their system of philosophy, who declare that man is all-sufficient for himself. These men may dazzle me by their glittering generalities, but they convey no truth to my mind; they may captivate me by their specious declamation, or entertain me by their curious speculations, but they do not heal the wounds of my heart. They may arouse in me a momentary enthusiasm and excite some emotional feelings, but they give no energy to my will, they do not inspire me with heroic or generous resolutions, because they furnish me with no exalted motives of action. I rise from the perusal of their works with a bewildered mind, a sadder, though not a wiser man.

This light and consolation and strength are to be found only in God, the Source of all intelligence, the Father of all consolation, the Lord of strength, and prayer is the great channel through which this spiritual illumination, comfort, and strength are communicated to us.

In prayer we are led like Moses up the holy mountain, away from the noise and bustle and tumult of the world. There God removes the scales from our eyes; He dispels the clouds of passion, or prejudice, or ignorance by which our mind was obscured; He enlarges our mental vision. A flood of heavenly light is shed upon us, which enables us to penetrate the hidden things of God. Hence, the Psalmist says: "Come ye to Him and be enlightened."¹

Standing on that mountain, we see the shortness of time. How

¹ Ps. xxxiii. 6.

it passes before us like a fleeting shadow! We contemplate the immeasurable length of eternity. We are penetrated with a profound sense of the majesty and greatness of God, and of the littleness of man; or, if we observe anything good and noble in man, it is because, like the atom in the sunbeam, he basks in the sunshine of divine grace.

We see how paltry and contemptible are all things earthly and, like St. John, we get a glimpse of the Heavenly Jerusalem. In prayer, we are struck by the hideousness of sin, when it is presented before us in its naked deformity, stripped of its specious attractions and false charms. We become enamoured of virtue when we discover how graceful and beautiful a queen she is. So attractive are the charms of virtue as she reveals herself to us in prayer, that we can say of her in the words of Wisdom: "I preferred her before kingdoms and thrones, and esteemed riches nothing in comparison of her. Neither did I compare unto her any precious stone: for, all gold, in comparison of her, is as a little sand, and silver, in respect to her, shall be counted as clay. I loved her above health and beauty, and chose to have her instead of light; for her light cannot be put out. Now all good things came to me together with her, and innumerable riches through her hands."¹

Sometimes God is even pleased to reveal to His saints in prayer a knowledge of His mysteries without noise of words or the labor of study. It was in response to prayer that God revealed to Daniel the mysteries of the future.² It was during the ecstasy of prayer, that He revealed to St. Paul the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven: "I know a man in Christ above fourteen years ago. . . . He was caught up into Paradise, and heard secret words which it is not granted to man to utter."³

St. Thomas Aquinas was, perhaps, the most profound thinker the world has produced since the dawn of Christianity. His vast mind ranges over the entire field of philosophy and theology. His writings are an inexhaustible storehouse to which the secular, as well as the ecclesiastical student, has recourse in every age. This great divine, being asked whence he drew his knowledge, declared that he learned more in silent meditation than in the study of books.

It is true, indeed, that God vouchsafes to very few those extraordinary illuminations with which He favored the Prophet Daniel, the Apostle of the Gentiles, and the Angel of the Schools, because these gifts are not essential to man's happiness. But He will give to all of us in prayer that which is essential, the light necessary to deliver us from the illusions of our senses, our imagination, and false judgment; He will grant us that practical wisdom which is

¹ Wisd. vii. 8-11.

² Dan. ii. 19.

³ II. Cor. xii. 2-4.

needed to guide us in the duties of our daily life. If, like Moses, we consulted God's mercy-seat every morning, and offered to Him the sacrifice of supplication, we would stumble into fewer pitfalls in the course of the day. We are often surprised and worsted by the enemy, as Josue was deceived by the Gabaonites, because, like him, we "consulted not the mouth of the Lord."¹

In prayer, our heart is inflamed with devotion and dilated with joy, because we feel that we are in the presence of the God of all consolation, whose Spirit, like the sun, warms while it enlightens. In prayer, the agitation of the heart is quieted, because, in communion with our Maker, grace is imparted to us not only to subdue our inordinate ambition, but even to moderate our laudable and legitimate desires and aspirations. St. Ignatius dearly loved the illustrious Society of Jesus which he had founded. Being once asked whether he could survive its extinction, he replied: "I would need but a quarter of an hour's meditation to reconcile me to its dissolution."

Those earthly things which we so eagerly crave, appear small and trivial when calmly weighed in the scales of the Sanctuary, and the sufferings and trials we endure seem short and momentary when measured with the line of eternity.

It is as easy for our Lord, in answer to our supplication, to heal the hidden wounds of our soul, as it was to cure the corporal maladies of those that appealed to Him. It is as easy for Him to calm our tumultuous passions, as it was to say to the winds and waves: "Peace, be still." When Peter was afraid of sinking on the lake of Galilee, he cried out: "Lord, save me,"² and our Saviour enabled him to walk on the waters and reach the boat in safety. And, if we implore our God with the faith of the Apostle, and in the fervent words of the Psalmist: "Out of the depths I have cried to Thee, O Lord," we shall walk triumphantly on the troubled waters of our heart which threaten to engulf us.

We are told by St. Luke that, while Jesus was praying in the garden of Gethsemani, "there appeared to Him an angel from heaven strengthening Him."³ What a touching symbol was this heavenly messenger of the angel of consolation whom God sends to us in prayer, to pour some soothing drops into our bitter chalice!

In communion with God the energies of our will are braced and invigorated, and our moral courage is strengthened. Observe with what confidence the child, when conscious of danger, rushes into the arms of its mother. There it reposes as in an ark of safety. The mother's warm heart banishes all sense of fear, and her entwining arms brace the child with courage. And so, when we flee with confidence to the arms of our Heavenly Father, we go forth

¹ Josue ix. 14.

² Matt. xiv. 30.

³ Luke xxii. 43.

from His presence renewed in strength and resolved to do what human weakness could not of itself accomplish.

With the Apostle of the Gentiles, the man of prayer can exclaim: "I can do all things in Him who strengtheneth me."¹

Before entering the Cenacle, in Jerusalem, to pray, the Apostles were weak, timid, vacillating men. In the supreme hour of trial, they all fled from their Master, leaving Him in the hands of His enemies. Their leader, when questioned by a maid, denied with an oath that he knew his Master. But, after spending ten days in prayer, these same Apostles are armed with superhuman courage. They boldly proclaim themselves the disciples of Him whom they had before forsaken or denied, and they go "from the presence of the council rejoicing that they were accounted worthy to suffer reproach for the name of Jesus."²

It was after fervent prayer that Judith undertook the hazardous mission of entering the camp of Holophernes, and rescuing the children of Israel from impending danger. It was after prayer and fasting, that Esther, at the risk of her life, saved the Jewish race from the sentence of death pronounced against them by King Assuerus. It was prayer that inspired the foundation of every religious Community that has existed in the Church, and these Communities have usually encountered at their birth poverty, privations, and formidable opposition.

The same spirit of prayer which has inspired apostolic men and women in every age to undertake herculean works in the cause of religion and humanity, has also nerved the soldier with martial prowess and endued him with superhuman courage. He knew that "the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong,"³ and that God is called "the Lord of hosts," or armies as well as "the God of peace," because it is He that gives victory to the warrior, as well as peace to the troubled spirit. Josue and Gedeon and Judas Machabeus were men of military renown, and they accomplished deeds of valor superior to human strength, *because* they were men of prayer and invoked the Lord of hosts.

Who was more daring and courageous in war than David? David, who, when a boy, strangled a lion and a bear; who, when yet a young man, slew the giant Goliath; David, of whom the daughters of Israel sang: "Saul slew his thousands, and David his ten thousands;"⁴ David, who conquered the Philistines, the Amalecites, the Syrians, the Moabites, and the Ammonites, and who crowned his victories by conquering his resentment and sparing the life of his unrelenting persecutor Saul.

And who surpassed David in piety and the spirit of prayer? He habitually invokes the God of battles before engaging in war. He

¹ Phil. iv. 13.

² Acts v. 41.

³ Eccles. IX. 11.

⁴ I. Kings xviii. 7.

blesse the Lord who nerved his arm for the contest: "Blessed be the Lord my God, who teacheth my hands to fight, and my fingers to war."¹ And when his enemy is overcome, he humbly ascribes the victory not to his own prowess, but to the Lord of hosts.

Many Christian heroes have emulated the devotion of the pious King of Juda. From a host of Christian warriors, I may select one representative, John Sobieski. In 1683, the city of Vienna was besieged by a Turkish army numbering 300,000 men. After a siege of forty-five days, the city was on the eve of surrendering, and a secret message was sent to Sobieski, urging him to hasten to the relief of the beleaguered city. His troops together with the German allies numbered about 70,000 men. Before descending from the heights of Calenberg, the army of Sobieski assembled to pray, the leader himself serving the Mass. So successful was the attack that the besiegers were utterly routed, leaving 20,000 Moslems dead outside of the walls. The next day, the *Te Deum* was sung in thanksgiving for the victory, Sobieski intoning the anthem. His letter to the Pope announcing the victory, was a modest paraphrase of the memorable words of Cæsar: "I came, I saw, God conquered."

Happening to be in Paris at the opening of the Franco-Prussian war, I was grieved to hear some of the French soldiers so far forgetful of the faith and chivalry of their heroic forefathers as to avow that their god was the mitrailleuse. They soon discovered to their cost that their idol proved as impotent and treacherous to them, as Dagon was to the Philistines. The German Emperor, on the contrary, was accustomed to invoke the aid of Heaven on the eve of an engagement, and to thank God for victories won. On the evening before the battle of Sedan, the chant that filled the air from every German camp, was not the song of ribaldry, but the glorious hymn, "Now let us all thank God." They prayed, they fought, they conquered.

The light, comfort, and strength which prayer imparts to our intellectual and moral nature, is not the only benefit resulting from this exercise; its blessing is still more enhanced by the assurance of our Saviour that God will grant us what we fervently ask, provided that the object of our petition redounds to our spiritual welfare. If a man of unbounded wealth, of large benevolence, and unimpeachable veracity, pledged himself to do you a great favor, how gladly would you have recourse to him! But here you have the Giver of all good gifts, the Father of all consolation, the God of truth, promising in the most formal manner to grant you all your reasonable petitions: "Ask," He says, "and it shall be given you: seek, and you shall find: knock, and it shall be opened to you.

¹ Ps. cxliii. 1.

² Nun danket Alle Gott.

For every one that asketh, receiveth : and he that seeketh, findeth : and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened. Or what man is there among you of whom if his son shall ask bread, will he reach him a stone? Or if he shall ask him a fish, will he reach him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children ; how much more will your Father, who is in heaven give good things to them that ask Him ?¹

Again, He solemnly inculcates the duty and advantage of prayer : "Amen, amen, I say to you : If you ask the Father *anything* in My name, He will give it to you." He even reproaches His disciples for their neglect to pray : "Hitherto you have not asked anything in My name : Ask, and you shall receive, that your joy may be full."²

The obligation to pray becomes still more imperative and its neglect is more inexcusable, when we consider the sovereign majesty of Him whom we address, and the facility with which we can have recourse to the throne of grace.

To have a private audience with a distinguished crowned head is always deemed a great honor and privilege, although certain formalities must be observed before the audience can be obtained. You are required to appear in court-dress ; you must hand in your card, or present a letter of introduction, stating who you are and the object of your visit ; you must await the monarch's good pleasure in the ante-room, till he appoints the time and place for the interview. He can spare you but a few moments, he may be secretly bored by your presence, and he will dismiss you with a formal bow and a faint smile, whilst you esteem yourself exceptionally favored if he bestows some gift upon you. And so elated are you by the interview that you devour every word uttered by royalty with as much avidity as Lazarus desired to be filled with the crumbs which fell from the table of Dives, and you treasure up the gift he bestowed with as much care as you would preserve a saintly relic.

But how much greater is the honor to be admitted into the presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords, to converse familiarly with Him, and to present to Him your petitions !

And to be favored with an interview with the Divine Majesty you have not to appear in court-dress. The garment He desires you to wear is the robe of innocence, or the sackcloth of humiliation. You are not obliged to be furnished with a letter of introduction, for no one knows you as well as your Creator. You are not compelled to wait till the place of interview is appointed, for He is everywhere. He restricts you to no time, because He is never engaged, or preoccupied, but always at home, always ready

¹ Matt. vii. 7-11.

² John xvi. 23, 24.

to receive and hear you: "The eyes of the Lord are upon the just; and His ears unto their prayers."¹ And when you enter His holy presence, you need not have your petition engrossed on vellum or satin, expressed in choice language and well-rounded periods. Those eloquent and impressive prayers of which we sometimes read in the papers, reach no farther, I fear, than their authors intended them to go. They tickle men's ears, but do not pierce the clouds. To such prayers we can apply the words which God saith in Job: "Who is he that wrappeth up sentences in unskilful words?"² The prayers which move the heart of God are those which flow directly from the soul, such as the prayer of the publican when he cried out: "O God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

You are not ordinarily required to clothe your prayers in any words at all. It is sufficient to express them in thought; for thoughts are acts in the sight of God, who is the searcher of the hearts and the reins of men. Nay, there are times when your prayer may be most acceptable in the sight of God, though your mental conceptions may assume no definite shape, and though they formulate no particular need. Your prayer will be most salutary, if you place yourself in the attitude of a suppliant, like Magdalen speechless at the feet of her Lord, humbly bewailing your misery, adoring the loving-kindness of your God, and patiently awaiting the action of divine grace on your soul, like the infirm multitude that lay around the pool of Bethsaida, waiting till the angel descended into the water.³

To sum up: Prayer is the most exalted function in which man can be engaged, because it exercises the highest faculties of the soul,—the intellect and the will; it brings us into direct communication with the greatest of all beings,—God Himself; it is the channel of Heaven's choicest blessings; it excludes no one, it embraces all in the circle of its benedictions; it gives us access to our Heavenly Father at all times, in all places, and under all circumstances. In a word, prayer renders us coöperators with our Creator in the moral government of the world, since many of the events of life are shaped in accordance with our pious entreaties. Conceive, then, the dignity of God's saints. The affairs of life are decreed from all eternity; and the eternal decrees themselves are in a measure, regulated by the prayers of His servants. "Prayer moves the Hand that moves the universe."

II.

The remaining portion of this article will be devoted to the consideration and refutation of some of the most popular objections urged against prayer.

¹ Ps. xxxiii. 16.

² Job xxxviii. 2.

³ John v. 2-4.

1st. Some men have condemned the practice of prayer as vain,¹ on the assumption that there is no Providence.

If the assumption were correct, their conduct would be logical. But this objection need not detain us, as the existence of a Providence, and the reality of a divine government can easily be demonstrated.

2d. All prayers have reference to some future event. In all our petitions, we ask God to grant us some temporal or spiritual favor, or to avert some calamity. Now, all future events are foreordained by the eternal decrees of the Divine Legislator and regulated by His immutable laws. Therefore, our prayers cannot alter these laws, and hence they seem to be useless. How can we expect God to change these laws for our good pleasure,—not once, but at every instant, throughout the world? Would not a favorable response to our prayers disturb at every moment the stability of order, existing in the physical and moral world? Would not science be an impossibility, based, as it is, on fixed and uniform laws?

Of what use, for instance, were the prayers of Moses for Josue and the Israelites, when they fought against the Amalecites? Of what benefit were the prayers of the primitive Christians for Peter's deliverance from prison?² Would not these events have turned out precisely as they did, whether Moses and the first Christians had prayed or not?

Of what use were Samuel's prayers for thunder and rain?³ Of what avail were the prayers of St. Paul for the safety of the passengers during a storm in the Mediterranean?⁴ Was it any advantage to Ezechias to pray for the recovery of his health?⁵ The wishes of the suppliants were all fulfilled, it is true; but were the results due to their prayers? Are not rain and storms and fevers controlled by fixed and immovable laws? And how can Providence interpose, in answer to our prayers, to alter or modify those laws which His wisdom has framed? In a word, is it not vain to ask of God grace to avoid sin, since our salvation or condemnation is already determined in the eternal decrees of God?

ANSWER: The efficacy of prayer does not infringe on the eternal decrees of God, and is entirely compatible with the immutability of His laws. I will quote the lucid exposition of St. Thomas on the subject: "In proclaiming," he says, "the utility of prayer, we are not to be understood as putting any restraint on human acts, subject to Divine Providence, nor are we supposing any change in the ordinances of God. Divine Providence has determined in advance, not only the effects which are to be produced, but also

¹ Malach. iii. 14.

⁴ Acts xxvii.

² Acts xii. 5.

⁶ IV. Kings xx. 1-6.

³ I. Kings xii. 18.

their order, and the causes which are to produce them. Among these causes are included human acts. These acts are not intended to change the arrangement of God, but to concur in producing certain effects in accordance with the divine dispensation. Just as it is with regard to physical causes, so is it, too, with regard to prayer. The aim of prayer is not to alter the designs of God, but to ask that they be accomplished by our prayers. In the words of St. Gregory: 'Man prays that he may merit to obtain from the Almighty what He has decreed from all eternity to grant.'"¹

This explanation strikes at the root of the objection. It shows that prayer is efficacious without disturbing, for a moment, the order existing in the world; that God has no after-thoughts; that He is never surprised by our petitions, and never compelled to review or correct our account in the Book of Life. The dawn of creation, the present moment, and the day of judgment, are all simultaneous with God. Though in point of execution, my prayer is posterior to God's absolute decrees, yet before God it is anterior to them.

They who invoke the immutability of God's universal laws, lose sight of the great law of prayer itself. They forget that prayer holds a conspicuous place in the harmony of creation. They forget that it is a powerful leaven in shaping and moulding the mass of human actions, and an essential element and factor in framing His eternal decrees. As well might we suppose that the Signal Service Corps would leave out the winds in calculating the state of the weather, as that God would take no note of the spirit of prayer in determining our moral condition, and our future destiny.

Euler, the famous mathematician, expresses himself lucidly on this point: "Religion," he says, "prescribes to us the duty of prayer, in giving us the assurance that God will listen to our supplications, provided they are conformable to the rules which He has laid down for us. Philosophy, on the other hand, teaches us that all the events of life happen in accordance with the course of nature established from the beginning, and that nothing can happen which has not been foreseen and decreed. But, I answer, that, when God established the course of nature, and arranged all the events that were to occur, He evidently had regard to all the circumstances which accompanied each event, and particularly to the dispositions and prayers of each intelligent being, and that the arrangement of every event has been placed in perfect accord with all these circumstances. When a Christian, therefore, addresses to God a prayer worthy of being heard, it must not be imagined that this prayer has just come to the knowledge of God. He has al-

¹ Summa Theol. II. II^o. Quæst. LXXXIII.

ready heard it from all eternity, and if, as a compassionate Father, He has judged it worthy of being granted, He has arranged the world expressly in favor of this prayer, so that its accomplishment might be the succession of the regular course of events."¹

Let us now apply these principles to the special objections which I have adduced. From all eternity, God decreed that Josue and his hosts should conquer the Amalecites in answer to the prayer of his servant Moses, and that Peter should be rescued from prison in response to the prayer of the first Christians. The petitions of the Jewish Lawgiver and of the early Christians, were a potent element in deciding the earthly career of the Hebrew people and the Prince of the Apostles. From all eternity, God decreed to send rain in answer to Samuel, to rescue the passengers in view of the prayer and merits of St. Paul, and to prolong the life of Ezechias in compliance with his petition.

Hence, we see the fallacy of Mr. Tyndall's assertion that science regards a prayer for rain as involving a miracle just as much as a prayer for water to run up-hill;² for, should we ask for a stream to run up-hill, we would beg for a phenomenon clearly contrary to nature's laws; but when we pray for rain, we ask for an atmospheric change which is habitually occurring throughout the world without any disturbance of the established laws of nature.

But, if the laws of nature are immutable, are they emancipated from divine control? Does God allow them to run their course blindly, like the vessel which is launched at the river's source, and which rushes headlong without a pilot? By no means. It should be borne in mind, as Mr. Ward observes, that, though "it is true, on the one hand, that the laws of external nature are strictly invariable (waiving the case of miracles, which are not here discussed), it is equally true, on the other hand, that those laws are premoved and directed by God at every moment, according to the dictates of His uncontrolled and inscrutable will."³ God is not self-excluded from interference in the movements of His own works. He has not surrendered the reins of government in the moral and physical world. His knowledge, power, and influence are all-pervading. *He is behind the veil of nature, working always.* When God wished to chastise Egypt, He caused a burning wind to blow for a whole day and night. The next morning the wind spread the locusts over all Egypt, and He then made a very strong westerly wind to blow, which cast the locusts into the Red Sea.⁴ Here we have a series of inanimate and irrational creatures, acting in phenomenal sequence, following the law of their nature, but directed to a specific purpose by a supreme, intelligent Being.

¹ Lettres à une Princesse d'Allemagne.

² "Fragments of Science," p. 39.

³ "Dublin Review," 1867.

⁴ Exod. x. 13-19.

How true are the words of the Prophet: "The Lord's ways are in a tempest, and a whirlwind, and clouds are the dust of His feet. He rebuketh the sea, and drieth it up; and bringeth all the rivers to be a desert. Basan languisheth and Carmel, and the flower of Libanus fadeth away. The mountains tremble at Him, and the hills are made desolate; and the earth hath quaked at His presence."¹ Yes, He is behind the veil of nature, working always!

3d. But does not prayer paralyze human energy and encourage indolence, by resigning everything to God and neglecting the natural means of safety? Lord Palmerston is reported to have put this objection in a terse and plausible form, in reply to a delegation that asked him to recommend a day of public prayer and fasting, to avert the cholera: "Gentlemen," he said, "never mind prayer and fasting, but cleanse your drains."

This objection is more specious than solid. It supposes, what is not true, that natural remedies are to be disregarded, because supernatural aid is invoked. The advocates of prayer teach that every human means is to be resorted to, that all the appliances of science and the rules of prudence are to be employed to avert calamities, for, "God helps those that help themselves."

There are four ways in which the deputation referred to might be answered. 1st. An unbelieving scientist would reply with Palmerston: "Cleanse your drains, let prayer alone." 2d. A superstitious Christian (if such is to be found) would say: "Never mind the drains, but attend to your prayers." 3d. A fatalist would advise the deputation to do nothing at all, as, do what they would, their fate was sealed. 4th. A Christian philosopher would enjoin, as St. Charles Borromeo did during the plague of Milan, that prayers be offered up to God, but he would, also, direct that the drains be cleansed and the doctors consulted; for he knows that God ordinarily works His wonders through the established laws of nature, and it is not His will that the laws of hygiene and the science of medicine should be disregarded.

Lord Palmerston was right in advising that the drains be cleansed; but he was wrong in discouraging the invocation of the Deity, since prayer enters largely into the divine economy. The superstitious Christian would be doing right in counselling supplications to the Divinity, but in discouraging natural remedies he would be tempting God. The fatalist, in rejecting both human and divine assistance, pursues a course condemned alike by reason and revelation. The Christian philosopher, in enjoining prayer *and* the remedies approved by science, acts in accordance with sound sense and the ordinances of God.

¹ Nahum i. 3-5.

4th. But, perhaps, you will say with Rousseau :¹ " I commune, indeed, with God ; I adore Him ; I am sensibly touched by His benefits ; I bless Him for His gifts ; but why should I petition Him ? " In representing my wants to God, would I not be calling in question His infinite knowledge and insulting His uncreated wisdom ? Do I pretend to enlighten Him of whom our Saviour says : " Your Father knoweth that you have need of all these things ? " "

Our object in petitioning God is not, of course, to enlighten Him in regard to our condition, but to manifest our filial piety towards Him and our entire dependence on Him, and to acknowledge Him as the Author of every good gift. The obligation to implore God's mercy, is quite as imperative as the duty of worshipping and thanking Him. Experience shows that those who never ask favors of God, seldom bless Him, or give Him thanks, and often end by forgetting their Benefactor, if they do not even go so far as to deny His Providence altogether.

The practice of supplicating God fosters a spirit of devotion, filial gratitude, humility, and dependence, and keeps alive those hallowed relations which, as loving children, we ought to maintain with our Eternal Father. O say not, then, that prayer is a mark of spiritual bondage ! On the contrary, the more frequently we commune with God in prayer, the more we exercise our glorious prerogative as children of God ; for, surely, the children enjoy more familiar intercourse with the father of the family than do the servants of the household. Wretched, indeed, would be those children who would live under their parents' roof, without ever holding any conversation with them !—and tenfold more wretched are they who abstain from all communion with their Heavenly Father !

Our purpose in laying our wants before God, is not to excite His benevolence, which needs no incentive, but to discharge a duty, to fulfil the law of prayer, and to comply with a condition to which He has annexed some of His gifts.

There are, indeed, some blessings which the Divine Bounty bestows upon all without being solicited ; for, He " maketh His sun to rise on the good and the bad, and raineth on the just and the unjust. " But there are, also, many favors which are attached to prayer ; for our Saviour says : " *Ask* and it shall be given you : *seek* and you shall find : *knock* and it shall be opened, " evidently implying that there are certain gifts which we shall not receive, if we do not ask for them.

When our Lord says : " Your Father knoweth that you have need of all these things, " His aim is certainly not to dissuade us from asking of God (for, in the same discourse, He is encouraging

¹ Profession de foi du vicaire Savoyard.

² Matt. vi. 32.

prayer), but to inspire us with unbounded confidence in Divine Providence.

5th. Supplication, I now admit, forms an integral and essential element of divine worship. But, as "we know not what we should pray for as we ought,"¹ is it not sufficient to make our petition in general terms, or are we enjoined to descend to particulars?

Most assuredly: for the duty of prayer is prompted by a sense of our wants. But who is concerned about his general wants? It is our daily and particular necessities that excite our solicitude, and, taught by our Master, we ask "this day our daily bread." Hence, if we habitually restricted ourselves to vague petitions, we would soon cease to pray at all. As the bond of domestic union and friendship is maintained, not by indefinite sentiments of benevolence, but rather by specific acts, so is our devotion to our Heavenly Father quickened and fostered by asking Him for daily needs. And, although we know not of ourselves what is expedient to ask, "the Spirit (of God) helpeth our infirmity" by inspiring us with holy desires.

6th. Again, it will be objected, perhaps, that many persons have been justified in giving up the practice of prayer, because they have often failed to obtain the particular object of their petition. A Maryland physician informed me that, in the course of one of his professional visits, he expressed to the mother of the family the hope that God would spare the life of her sick child. "I have never," she replied, "bent my knee in prayer for the last two years, when I lost my other child, for whose recovery I earnestly, but vainly prayed."

And did not the death of the late President Garfield, notwithstanding the prayers that were offered for his recovery, tempt many persons to doubt the efficacy of prayer? Did they not say in their heart, as a certain lady said to myself: "I have prayed for the life of the President, and prayed in vain. My family prayed for him; our congregation prayed for him; the city of Baltimore prayed for him; the State prayed for him; the nation prayed for him, and prayed in vain. How can you reconcile the futility of the nation's appeal to heaven with the promise of our Saviour when He says: 'If you shall ask the Father anything in My name, He will give it to you.'"²

Having put the objection as strongly as possible, I answer, nevertheless, that the words of our Saviour are most true, and are to be received with unshaken faith. No good prayer ever goes unanswered. If a single drop of water, or breath of air is never anni-

¹ Rom. viii. 26.

² John xvi. 23.

hilated, still less is the faintest aspiration of prayer uttered in vain that ascends from a fervent heart to the throne of grace.

And now, in reply to your difficulty, I affirm that God answers our prayers in one of two ways, either directly or indirectly. Sometimes He grants us the direct and specified object of our petitions; sometimes He denies us what we particularly ask for, but He grants us something equivalent to, or even better than that for which we seek. Just as a prudent father withholds from his child a dangerous toy, and bestows on him, instead, something harmless and useful, so our Heavenly Father gives what to Him seems best, and our wisdom is but folly compared with the infinite wisdom of God.

First. In regard to the President: If God, in response to our prayers, did not save his life, He has done more,—He has saved the life and preserved the peace of the nation, and the life of the nation is of more value than the life of any individual.

Secondly. He was pleased to prolong the President's life for nearly three months after he had received the fatal wound. Had he died immediately from the wound, what terrible consequences might have ensued! So intense at the moment was public feeling; so strong (though most unjust) was the suspicion aroused against the leaders of a certain political party; so bitter was the animosity engendered by those suspicions, that, if the President had immediately succumbed, it would have needed but a spark to ignite the flame. The first assassination might have been followed by others, and anarchy and confusion and sedition might, for a time, have reigned supreme.

But God mercifully prolonged his life till the excitement subsided, when cool reason could regain her throne, and men could plainly see that the crime was the work of one man alone, having no collusion with others.

Thirdly. As another fruit of our prayers, God inspired the country with a more intense abhorrence of assassination, and a greater reverence for the Chief Magistrate of the nation.

Fourthly. As another result of our prayers, during the trying ordeal through which we were passing, party spirit yielded to the nobler and healthier sentiment of patriotism and love of country. Men forgot, for the time being, that they were Stalwarts or Conservatives, Republicans or Democrats, Administration or Anti-Administration partisans. They remembered only that they were Americans and citizens of a common country, children of the same mother, and they came together to shed a tear of sorrow by the sick-bed of their ruling brother.

Is not this a satisfactory answer to your difficulty? Did not God hearken to our petitions by sparing the life and saving the peace of

the Republic, by prolonging the President's life till public feeling was quieted, and by inspiring men with a greater abhorrence of the crime of assassination and a deeper love for our country and its institutions? And have not our prayers been profitable, also, in another sense? Have they not been an eloquent rebuke to atheism and infidelity, and a solemn and national profession of faith in God's existence, in His power and wisdom, and in His superintending Providence? Let us remember that the chief object of prayer is not to ask and receive favors from God—that would be a narrow and selfish consideration. God forbid that He should always grant us according to the desires of our heart! This would be abandoning us to our own folly, and the withdrawal of His Providence from us, as happened to the Jews when they importuned God for a king. We are always safe in leaving the result of our prayers to His discretion. The primary motive of prayer is to acknowledge our filial dependence on God and His Fatherly care of us.

Hence, we may judge how inconclusive and revolting to our religious instincts was the prayer-test of Mr. Tyndall, who proposed that the virtue of prayer should be tried by placing in two different wards an equal number of patients, afflicted in the same degree with similar maladies, and that the inmates of one ward should pray for their recovery, while those in the other should make no appeal to heaven.

Besides tempting God, the chief fault of the prayer-test lies in the false assumption that prayer is useless, unless the express object of the petition is granted. For my part, while protesting against the blasphemy involved in doubting the efficacy of prayer for temporal blessings, I would infinitely prefer to be a patient in the praying ward through a painful and lingering illness, if even death itself were to follow, than to be an indevout patient in the other ward, though I were to be restored to health. For I would be placing myself in the loving arms of my Father: "Although He should kill me, I will trust in Him."¹ I would expire in the blessed assurance that His mercy would follow me beyond the grave. Immeasurably sweeter to me would be the spiritual consolation, the blissful hope, the solid peace, and the friendship of my Heavenly Father, than the possession of a healthy frame, animated by a soul without God in this world, or the hope of Him in the life to come.

7th. But I may be met here at the end of the discussion by a more subtle objection. I have prayed, you will say, for a spiritual blessing,—the conversion of a friend or relative, or the moral reformation of a wayward son, and my prayer seems to have been thrown away. For what more legitimate blessing could I ask?

¹ Job xiii. 15.

I answer, in the first place, that you will very probably obtain the object of your petition, if you pray with perseverance. It was only after sixteen years of earnest entreaty that Monica obtained the conversion of her cherished son Augustine. It was only after persistent solicitations that the Canaanite woman procured the recovery of her daughter's health;¹ and St. Francis de Sales obtained the mastery over his temper only after a prayerful struggle of twenty years.

Secondly. But, perhaps, your friend for whom you constantly prayed, died without manifesting any certain signs of grace and repentance. Be it so! Did God make manifest to you the condition of your friend's soul at the moment of his demise? He may have sanctified that soul by a sudden ray of grace in the moment of dissolution, and concealed from you, for your present humiliation, the blissful fruit of your entreaties, that your joy may be full on the day of the Lord. He may, also, have concealed the conversion of your friend from all who knew him, that they might fully realize the necessity of an early conversion to their Creator, and of securing a happy death by a holy life. Even at the last moment, there is, indeed, hope of salvation; but, then, true conversion of heart after a long life of neglected duties, requires a miracle of grace. Of the conversion of the good thief, St. Augustine says: "One was converted at the hour of death, that you might not despair; *only* one was converted, that you might not presume." God's unrevealed mercies are over all His works. Who would have imagined the salvation of the dying thief, if the Evangelist had not recorded the expiring words of our Saviour: "This day thou shalt be with Me in Paradise!"²

But, lastly, even admitting that your friend gave manifest evidence of final impenitence and died with a blasphemy on his lips—what then? God compels no man to accept His proffered mercy, neither can your prayers force any one to surrender his will to the influence of divine grace. Nevertheless, your prayer was not offered in vain. If the heavenly waters find no lodgment in his stony heart, they will flow back abundantly into the valley of your own soul, and the words of the Psalmist will be fulfilled in you: "My prayer shall be turned into my bosom."³

¹ Matt. xv. 22-28.

² Luke xxiii. 43.

³ Ps. xxxiv. 13.