

THE GOSPEL IN PARIS:

SERMONS

BY THE

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WITH PERSONAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

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VII.

PROVIDENCE AND FATALITY.

“Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father, But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows.”—MATT. x. 29-31.

ON the day when these simple and touching words were uttered, faith in Providence entered the world; till then it had been utterly unknown to men. The heathen nations admitted, it is true, certain gods who were the supposed protectors of the country and of the family; but above these, above Jupiter himself, they placed the cold, stern, and impassible figure of Destiny. It never entered the mind of any of the ancient philosophers that this world might, in reality, be led by a beneficent will towards a certain though mysterious destination; never were the ideas, now so widely spread, of general progress, of Divine education, of a providential purpose, expressed during the whole of the time in which the world walked in its own ways; nowhere will you find a page or even a line which contains them. Never did a pagan hear the pulsations of the heart of the universal Father in creation or in his own personal history; never did it enter his thoughts to seek in this God his strength in times of trial; and when he succumbed beneath the weight of affliction, his best consolation was to persuade himself that, after all, he was simply yielding to the common destiny, and that it was impossible for him to alter its laws.

But why speak of the heathen world? Do we see nothing like this in the present day? Ah! let us not be deluded! Let us acknowledge that, notwithstanding the influence of Christianity, the belief in fatality, which has been the supreme religion of all the heathen nations, is still today that of a vast multitude of our fellowmen. Is it not, in reality, that which rules over all the suffering classes? Do we not hear its sorrowful or passionate expression in their most sincere effusions? But what especially strikes me, is the fact that this belief is plainly avowed by thinkers and writers whom public opinion places in the foremost rank; they openly declare that they acknowledge no other action than that of the natural laws in the history of humanity, or in their own personal existence; they reject the intervention of Providence as a dream of mankind's infancy. When these ideas are proclaimed with so much boldness, we may infer that they have long since found their way into the human soul, and we must not set them aside lightly. Let none tell me that it is improper to combat them from this pulpit; there is not one of us, however firm be his faith, but has known the obsessions of fatality; not one of us but has doubted that his life was indeed governed by a loving will,

and that all his prayers were answered. This temptation is all the more terrible that, instead of presenting itself to us under a precise form, it glides and insinuates itself into the heart to chill all its impulses of love and child-like trust. Well, it is this awful phantom which haunts us continually that I would now fight hand to hand. Let us bring to this conflict all our attention, all our moral energy, all the vital powers of our soul, and with the aid of God we shall conquer. What a triumph, brethren, if in the place of that invisible and gloomy enemy that constantly besets us, we see the beaming face of the God whose name is Love appear and rest upon our life !

The first cause which leads us to forget Providence and to believe in fatality, is the inflexibility of the laws of nature under whose subjection we are necessarily placed. If we could see nature sympathise, as it were, with our personal impressions, mourn over our sorrows, or smile on our joys, we would easily recognise in it the manifestation of a Father's love. So children think in their simplicity. For them the roaring thunder is the menacing voice of Divine justice; the earth with its bright flowers is the garden of the Lord; a fine day is a festival which the Almighty gives them to make their hearts glad; everything proves to them the presence and action of God. But modern science tends more and more to substitute for Divine action the action of the great natural laws which govern the world. Now the peculiar characteristic of these laws is that they are fatal and inflexible, that they are and remain always and everywhere the same. In the skies, for instance, far from considering the marvellous harmony of worlds as a sublime hymn raised to the honour and praise of the Creator, science sees and studies in it simply what it calls the heavenly mechanism, and I have read in one of its most widely-circulated books this impious phrase, "The heavens no longer declare the glory of God; they declare the glory of Newton and Laplace." Even those who believe in God often make of Him simply the Great First Cause who put everything in motion, and who from that moment left the natural laws to follow their own course. God gave the first impulse, or, as Pascal ironically said, the first toss, and the immense machinery was set agoing. Everything acts in the prescribed order; the worlds pursue their eternal and silent march through infinite space, and our globe, lost in the universe as if it were a speck of dust, is only an imperceptible atom in this immensity! On this very globe the same laws, laws of death and laws of life, act without one moment's interruption. There is a law which requires that a certain number of beings should die and disappear for the preservation of the others; that every second, for instance, one man should die and one be born. All this is, all this must be; and as all this is fatal, of what avail, says the infidel, of what avail are our complaints, our prayers, and our simple faith? How, especially, can we suppose that God interferes in each existence, and that there can be a plan, a particular will, a providential

purpose in those necessary, periodical, and inevitable sorrows and bereavements!

Ah! let us not be mistaken; others than the learned have asked themselves these questions. Yes, they come to the most ignorant, and often chill his heart. They come to him particularly in times of affliction, when pain or death have brutally—traitorously, shall I say?—struck those he loved best; children, perhaps, or grandchildren. They come to him when he sees nature continuing its serene and peaceful march while his own heart is sorrowful as death; they come to him when he sees the same sun which had so cheerily shone upon the path in which he had walked resting on a fondly cherished being, shine more joyously still upon his grave. . . . Oh! truly there is in nature an awful silence; truly nature is a book which in all its pages often teaches a terrible lesson of fatality.

Such is the temptation, and certainly it is a fearful one; but the Christian has a refuge against it; he believes in God, the Master of nature, in God the Creator. Creation, that first word of the Bible, that first article of the Creed, how necessary it is today, and how full of light for our souls! I open that book in which so many millions before me have found peace and assurance. From the very first line I see that *God created*. Consequently, above the laws which govern the world, there is a lawgiver greater still than all the laws which He has made, and which He can destroy at pleasure; consequently, by faith in God I escape from the circle of fatality, I come out of it to take refuge in the sovereign will from which all things have proceeded.

That is why we so energetically maintain the belief in miracles, and in the first of all miracles; namely, creation. We do not do so for the mere satisfaction of that gross and vulgar need of the marvellous which is the principal attraction of all inferior minds. Christ once refused to satisfy this undue curiosity; nay, He even condemned it; but that is not the point in question. The point in question is to ascertain whether nature is supreme or subject to a master, to choose between fatality and the will of a living God. Now, let men show us another method of solving this problem than miracles—miracles which, by breaking the chain of natural causes, attest the intervention of the Creator! Miracles are therefore eminently religious. Deny miracles! At the same stroke, you weaken faith in the personal God, and your only master henceforth is necessity! Call this necessity God, if you will, but to that God you will never be able to offer either prayer or worship, you will have nothing to expect from Him. Miracles are therefore necessary in order that we may escape fatality. I will give but one example in support of this assertion: We Christians believe that eighteen centuries ago a certain grave opened, and that a dead man came out of it alive. Is this fact without importance? Is this simply one of those prodigies destined to strike the multitude with amazement? No; for ever since this grave opened

the world has believed in eternal life; the fatality of death has been broken, and nothing short of this was required to bring man to believe in immortality.

The Christian, then, believes in a God who is Master of the laws He has made, and by this very belief he escapes the grasp of fatality. True, we no longer witness miracles; true, the natural laws govern us uninterruptedly, they are even inflexible and unchangeable, and, should we oppose them, they would crush us beneath their fatal power. And why should it be otherwise? God loves order. It has been enough for Him to attest that He was the Lord of nature; but can He alter the order of His works and the admirable chain of natural causes upon which everything rests, to satisfy our least desires, which soon, in that case, would become mere fancies? He could do so, doubtless; He could hear each prayer, interfere in each event to bless or chasten. But what would be the consequence of this? All would serve Him from interest or from fear, since their actions would be immediately followed by punishment or reward. Who would obey from love? Now, God will be served neither by slaves nor by mercenaries; He will be followed by faith and not by sight. Therefore He hides himself from sight that He may reveal Himself to faith. Sight reveals to us those general laws in virtue of which His sun rises alike upon the just and upon the unjust, in virtue of which nature pursues its unalterable course. But faith reveals to us, in the midst of the general succession of causes and effects, the delicate action of His providence by which He interferes in each existence, so that He knows every one of us, and that not one of our thoughts, not one of our sighs, is lost to Him. If we judge only by sight, everything is fatal; the same accidents, the same sorrows come to all men; but if we judge by faith, we discover in every existence a plan in virtue of which all that appears to be accidental and fortuitous realises a Divinely determined purpose. In consequence, the man whose sight would be sufficiently penetrating, would recognise that all the forces of nature, however fatal they may seem, definitively serve, in their relation with humanity, an end which is superior to nature itself—that is, the realisation of a moral, spiritual, and Divine order.

Unbelief will perhaps grant that there is in nature a vast and sublime harmony—for he were blind indeed who would fail to perceive it—but it will deny that the object of this harmony is man. It will seek to crush us beneath the sense of our littleness and of our insignificance. It will reproach us with yielding to the illusions of pride when we affirm that man is the object of the tender cares of Providence. It will, no doubt, tell us that our opinion was possible when, with the Bible, men believed that the earth was the centre of the universe; but now that it is known by all to be lost with its sun amidst millions and millions of worlds which fill infinite space like clouds of dust, how can we still suppose that humanity acts the part which

the Bible ascribes to it, how can we still imagine that man has so great an importance in the designs of God? We hear this objection expressed in familiar language under another form: Well, after all, men are willing to believe in a God who governs the world by regular laws, and to hear His name associated with the great events of history. But let one of the poorest and humblest of human beings in his turn use the name of the Lord, and see the intervention of the Almighty no longer in the great events of the world, but in the humble accidents of his lowly existence; let him believe himself the object of the love and tender care of Jehovah, you may be sure that such a man will excite both the surprise and the scorn of his fellows. The most kindly disposed will bear with his childlike trust, seeing that for him it is a source of consolation; the greater number will laugh at what will seem to them a veritable delusion. "What!" they will say, "is it not most singular to suppose that the Almighty interferes in events of such slight importance? Is it not degrading His name to mix it with the familiar details of life? Show us His intervention in the grand laws of nature or history, join His name, if you will, to the noble actions of life or to the solemnities of worship, but do not profane it by associating it with your projects, with your habitual preoccupations, with your fleeting joys or your private sorrows, to which He is absolutely indifferent."

So the world reasons. This language is not that of atheists, but of a multitude of honest and would-be Christian people who are proud of the name they bear. I feel sure that, under some form or other, you have all heard it.

Who has not been troubled by such thoughts as these? Who has not often questioned whether the attention of the Supreme Being could really be directed upon him? Ah! as for me, how often have I repeated these words of the Psalmist, "What is man that Thou shouldst be mindful of him?" How often has the spectacle of the world inspired me with a vague feeling of terror by the crushing contrast between His infinite grandeur and my own nothingness. "is it true," I asked, "that in the immensity of creation in which our globe is but as a speck of dust—is it true that, in the imperceptible ant-hill we call humanity, those thousands of beings of whom each minute sees some die and some come into life, have each their mission, their part to act, their account to render, and their judgment to expect? Is it true that their destiny has the importance which they ascribe to it, and that God can be acquainted with the numberless accidents of which their short-lived existence is composed? And, as regards myself, is it true that the eyes of the Most High distinguish me from the rest of my fellowmen? Is my prayer heard, and is my way known to the Lord? "

Here, again, allow me to oppose to the doubts of our hearts the reply of Revelation. True, the Scriptures tell us of the majesty of God and of our own littleness with unequalled energy; but never do they draw from this

comparison a consequence favourable to fatality. Hear, for instance, the words spoken by a prophet more than twenty centuries ago. It is a passage the beautiful sublimity of which should strike with admiration even the most unpoetical imagination: "Who," says Isaiah, "hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who hath directed the Spirit of the Lord, or being His counsellor hath taught Him? Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance. To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto Him? Lift up your eyes on high! Who hath created these things? He that bringeth out their host by number, who calleth them all by names, and not one faileth."

That is the expression of the feelings by which we were oppressed a moment ago. That is the most striking picture of our littleness compared with the greatness of God. But, what is the consequence which Isaiah draws from it? Hear him again: "Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? He shall feed His flock like a shepherd: He shall gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom." You have heard the prophet, and you have seen from his language, that the Divine Word reasons not after the manner of men. The Lord is great, and therefore He forgets us, such is the argument of men. The Lord is great, He preserveth the simple, such is the argument of God.

Which of these two modes of reasoning is the most rational? Judge for yourselves. The question is to know whether God is lowered when we affirm that He watches over the humblest of His creatures. Now, when have men made the discovery that true greatness is incapable of caring for what seems to us insignificant? Would you call him great, the poet who, wholly preoccupied with the plan of his epic, would judge that harmony, rhythm, and a proper choice of words are details unworthy of his attention? Would you call him great, the statesman or the general who, in his plans of administration or war, would overlook little things? Who, on the contrary, does not see that one of the most evident signs of true greatness is that it directs everything at the same time, that it embraces, in one vast and precise glance, the whole with each of the details, that it perceives at once the two extremities of the chain, without forgetting one single link? That which most excites our admiration in men of genius is not only their gigantic plans, but especially that powerful grasp by which they lay hold, with the plan itself, of all the details of its execution; it is that kind of intellectual

omnipresence which makes of Michael Angelo at once the most sublime artist and the most exact mathematician; which enables Napoleon, at the very moment when he is tracing the plan of a distant campaign, to calculate without one error the allowances of his soldiers and the minutest details of their encampment; or which, in a very different sphere, enables a great writer to find, in the very midst of the burning flame of inspiration, the most correct and suitable words in which to give expression to his thoughts. Now, raise this marvellous gift of genius to its highest power, take it in its source, in God Himself, and you will find, together with the most imposing greatness, the most attentive Providence; you will find the Supreme Being whom nothing can limit and whom nothing can escape, not even the sparrow that has dropped during the night on the frozen ground, not even the silent tears which you have perhaps shed this morning in secret. . . . Let none, therefore, seek to crush us beneath the sense of Divine greatness, for it is in that very greatness that we find our refuge against fatality!

Thus, by faith in the living God, the Christian is enabled to triumph over the sentiment of fatality in the sphere of nature.

But, if faith in Providence vacillates and dies away in so many souls, this is owing, in most cases, to another cause than that which I have brought before you. That which hides, that which may even blot out the intervention of God from the eyes of the great majority, is the spectacle of life and of the world such as sin has made them.

For example, how difficult it is to discover a providential plan in history! How can we trace out a way through the dismal confusion of events? How can we find the key to all the moral problems which they raise? What is the meaning of so many painful abortions, what was the destination of so many lost civilisations, what will be the result of so many sorrows, wars, heartrend-ings, and tears? Men tell us that blood is a fruitful seed. Alas! how oft has it flowed in torrents upon the earth only to leave after it the aridity of the desert! Men tell us that there can be no birth without suffering. Alas! how many sufferings which bring forth nothing! Men tell us that crime is necessarily sterile; but how many successful crimes do I see which leave after them a long and fearful posterity! Doubtless, it is easy for the man who is blessed with a sanguine temperament to explain all these things in a superficial manner, to write in a few chapters a philosophy of history, and to declare that he sees his way clear through the night which appals me; but all are not so easily comforted, all cannot hail as a true light the *ignis fatuus* of the imagination. For them, the history of humanity, with its monstrous crimes, with its endless sufferings, history embracing the millions of millions of beings who, outside of our ideas and beliefs, pursue their own mysterious destinies, history remains a problem which troubles them and often makes their heart bleed.

These are, some will perhaps say, the temptations of cultivated minds. No, they are not; in another form they also beset the most ignorant and the most untaught. Is not each individual existence an abridged reproduction, so to speak, of the painful problems which agitate the nations? The injustice that triumphs, the perfidious skill that attains its end, the suffering without cause, the unexpected blows of death, are not these the questions which have oppressed us all in the solemn hour of visitation? From the patriot who, seeing the cause of justice fall with his standard, dies in denying God, to the workingman who has often answered us with these bitter words, "If there be a God, He is the God of the rich," what is the situation in which men are not sometimes tempted to doubt the action of God on the world and on their life? Alas! as we have already said, if fatality was the supreme god of the ancient world, it is still that in whom the men of the present day most willingly believe. Some worship it stupidly, others rebel against it and curse it, but over all it exercises a fatal influence. The Christian himself, under the stroke of extreme afflictions, or under the impression of iniquity, is apt to bow the knee before it and foolishly to repeat the words of Asaph, "How doth God know, and is there knowledge in the Most High?"

To all these momentous questions I will not answer lightly; I will not, therefore, tell you that faith completely illumines this darkness, or that, for the Christian, all terrible mysteries disappear from the spectacle of the world. Yes, in history, the apparent influence of fatality is immense; there is, for instance, in the hereditary transmission of disease and suffering, in the action of matter over mind, in the innate dispositions of characters and races, many problems which baffle all our wisdom; there are, in the history of men, thousands of pages whose meaning is still unknown to us; truly the ways of the Lord are enveloped in shadows which our eyes vainly seek to penetrate.

Nevertheless, through this darkness I advance, for my eyes are steadily fixed upon these words, in which I explicitly believe, "God is love." He is love, that is my most intimate conviction; I oppose it without weakness to all I see, to all I hear, nay, to all the thoughts of my intellect, to all the agitations of my heart. He is love; therefore, everything in His works concurs to a supreme harmony; therefore, the history of humanity is no longer a fruitless conflict between contrary passions, instincts, and chances. Above all these, in the midst of all these agitations, of all these discordant wills, of all these seeming accidents, a Divine plan, which leaves nothing to fatality, is being pursued. True, this plan is hidden from me, but I know it exists, and this thought is a firm support, a sure refuge for my faith. Besides, if this plan does escape me, if, when I would explain it, I am compelled to avow my ignorance, this ignorance, after all, is very natural in a short-sighted and fallible being who, during his rapid passage upon earth, can take but a very

imperfect and one-sided view of the designs of the Lord. How can a short-lived being such as I am comprehend the purposes of the eternal God? Duplessis-Mornay, in the sixteenth century, said to an infidel who denied Providence, "Wilt thou judge of a drama from one scene which thou wilt have heard only in passing? And because, in that scene, the innocent succumb, wilt thou accuse the poet of having forgotten justice? Stay a little longer and hear the following note. When in his turn the criminal will have fallen, then thou wilt own that the discord is turned into harmony. . . . Now, seest thou not that we are children who would judge of the drama of all eternity from one particular note?" Mornay spoke true. God acts a drama of which all the scenes are ages, He in whose sight a thousand years are as a day, He who is patient, being eternal! Or, to take another illustration, will you ask of the soldier who is fighting in the hottest of the battle to expose to you his general's plan? How could he do so? If he has done his duty, if he has rushed in the midst of the fray, he has seen nought but the confusion of the charge, nought but the glitter of arms, nought but the clouds of dust and smoke, he has heard nought but cries mingling with the deafening noise of the firing and of the artillery. For him all was disorder and chaos, but from the neighbouring heights there was one eye that followed the progress of the battle, one hand that directed the slightest movements of the troops. Now, brethren, there is a combat that is being pursued throughout all ages. It is the conflict of truth, love, and justice against error, selfishness, and iniquity. It does not pertain to us, obscure soldiers cast in the hottest of the fray, to direct its course; we must be satisfied to know that God governs; it is our duty to remain in the post which He has assigned to us, and to fight bravely to the end.

When I ponder over this Divine plan which is being pursued amid the confusion of history, there is an Old Testament scene which often presents itself to my mind. When Solomon built the Temple of the Lord upon Mount Zion, we are told in the Scriptures that all the materials which entered into the construction of this vast edifice were prepared out of Jerusalem, that the noise of the instruments of labour might not be heard within the holy city; so, for many long months, workmen were employed throughout the valleys of Judea or over the hills of Lebanon in felling cedars or hewing stones; none knew the plan of the great architect, but each had received orders to complete his task; and the day came when, at length, the Temple rose in its majestic beauty. I have often thought this a striking image of the destinies of humanity. God, who is the Supreme Architect, is erecting throughout all ages an immense edifice whose plan escapes us, but which is to become the sanctuary in which we shall adore Him. It is far from heaven, far from the Holy Zion, far from the abode of peace and glory; it is here below, in this land of exile, that the materials are being prepared, for the sounds of suffer-

ing and toil are not to reach the heavenly city; each of us must, therefore, accomplish at his post the work which has been committed to him, even though he understands not the place it is destined to occupy in the universal harmony. How could we, workers of a day, how could we penetrate the designs of the God of eternity? It is enough for us to know that our work, however humble it be, is known of the universal Master, that it has been appointed by Him, and that He will accept it. It is enough for us to believe that the day will come when all these materials, which seem to be dispersed in a fatal confusion, will be united in an order that will charm our intellect. Then all human sorrows, sacrifices, and afflictions will no longer appear to us useless; then we shall see all the heroic actions, all the hidden virtues of which God alone had been the witness, start from oblivion; then all that seemed to be fortuitous or fatal in the history of humanity and in our own existence will be explained; then chance will be no more, and the edifice which Divine Wisdom had slowly prepared by secular labour will rise in its sovereign beauty as the eternal sanctuary of infinite love.

That is my belief. I know not if it be yours also, but you will at least confess that, with such a belief, one can be strong in the conflicts of life and against the most terrible of temptations—against the fearful attacks of fatality.

And yet, shall I say. . . . This is not enough for me. Yes, doubtless it is an incomparable consolation to know that all things concur to the realisation of the universal plan of God, and that nothing is useless, that nothing is lost in our lives. But who can tell if this be not, after all, a magnificent theory? Who can tell if love be truly the centre and end of all the Divine dispensations? How can I believe this when so many clouds dim my sight? What I want is to hear the heart of God throb for one moment in His works. ‘Willingly would I say with Jacob, “Tell me thy name.” Willingly would I exclaim with Job, “Oh, that I knew where I might find Him!” and with Isaiah, “Oh, that Thou wouldst rend the heavens, that Thou wouldst come down!” Yes, between myself and the hidden God the distance is too great; that I may believe in His love, I must first see and contemplate Him.

Well, the God of the Gospel has responded to this desire of the human soul. Incarnation! that is the most convincing proof of providence. I see a holy love appearing and shining upon our earth, a love such as mankind has never beheld, a love which is the very substance of Christ’s nature, the principle of all His actions and of His whole life; and Jesus, who manifests it to the world, declares in the most positive manner that He is the Incarnation of God—that when men see Him they see the Father. Then souls go to Him attracted by an irresistible charm. . . . If you should ask them why the words of Jesus have so mighty a power over them, why His Cross, which is the supreme manifestation of His love, spreads so brilliant a light on their

personal history and on that of the world, many would, doubtless, be unable to answer; but they feel most deeply that it is because on that Cross God has written His name and revealed to the world His ways. . . . Hear what that God tells us by the Cross: “Thou didst ask to know My name? My name is Justice, Holiness, and Love! Oh, human conscience! thou didst seek Me, though thou knewest Me not, each time that thou didst love what is true, just, and good. I am holiness and Justice, and I might have reigned amid terror, crushing whatever resisted Me; for Mine is power, Mine is sovereign dominion for ever and ever. But I am Love, and I will not reign thus; I desire to draw the hearts of men unto Myself by a free attachment, and to ask of them a voluntary obedience. That is why My Son has come upon earth in humility and abasement; but by that Cross upon which men have nailed Him I draw, and still will draw, all men unto Me. Thus My reign will come; not the reign of terror and might, for, as I taught My prophet Elijah in the wilderness of Horeb, I dwell neither in the storm which overthrows, nor in the fire which consumes, nor in the earthquake which destroys. No; My voice is heard speaking in soft and persuasive accents; to all I say, ‘Come unto Me!’ I break not the bruised reed, I quench not the smoking flax. . . . I call all men unto Myself; to this tend all the plans of My providence; that is the secret of history—that is the explanation of all My purposes.”

Is not that what the Cross tells us? Is not that what it teaches to the world? Ah! I know that the world does not understand this sublime instruction—that very often it rejects it. But, in spite of itself, a ray of that Divine light pierces through its gloom and illumines it. This fact is obvious. Men have believed in progress only since the establishment of Christianity, and in the midst of the Christian nations alone. Now, what is progress in its most elevated sense (for I do not refer to the refinement of luxury, enjoyment, and ease, which attests the decline of a nation as forcibly as its civilisation), what is progress but the realisation in history of a Divine plan? Striking fact! men have begun to believe in progress only when they have seen the Cross. They have begun to believe in a Divine plan only on the day when God revealed to us His name by tracing it in bloody letters on Golgotha. Whilst all the heathen or Mohammedan nations are at a standstill or even recede, the Christian nations alone are marching on towards a glorious future, and pretend to win the rest of the universe over to their faith; is not this the result of that general belief in progress which is one of the fruits of the Gospel? The belief in providence entered the world only on the day of the Incarnation. Till then the religion of mankind had been fatalism, and, even amongst the Jews, faith in the intervention of God was maintained only by repeated miracles: But, from the day when humanity felt the heart of God throb in the heart of the Son of Man, from the hour

when it beheld Him who is the revelation of the Father, it was enabled to believe that God loved it, and would never more leave it to its fate. See, in fact, how everything changes from the moment when this glorious event of the Incarnation illumines the darkness of our night!

As I thought of our earth lost in this vast universe, I said, "Can the eyes of the Most High distinguish it?" But now, I know that, amongst so many millions of worlds, it has been the object of the predilection of the Most High; I know that it has become the abode of His Son, the scene of the revelation of His love. Henceforth can millions of worlds have the same value in His sight as this small earth on which the tears and the blood of His Son have flowed? Willingly would I say with the prophet addressing Bethlehem: "Thou earth, though thou be little among the thousands of stars, though thou be lost in the immensity of the universe, yet the most glorious of worlds art thou, for out of thee has come forth the Saviour, the Son of the Most High. Yes, in their flight through infinite space the angels hail thee, for in the whole universe they see not one spot as brilliant as thou. Though they wander among those thousands and thousands of suns whose splendours declare the glory of God, though they soar to the very limits of His dominions, though they behold the magnificence of the works of His hands, yet will they never discover anything so truly grand as Divine love offering itself in sacrifice, and the brilliant light of all these suns will pale beside the ray which flashes from the Cross. Oh, earth! be thou blessed, for out of thee has come forth the Saviour!"

Again I said: "What is the secret of the Divine will, what is the meaning of those extraordinary dispensations which blind and bewilder me?" But now God has answered me. I have seen the Cross triumphant. I know that, through all that surprises and troubles me, the reign of God is advancing, and that the earth will be brought under its subjection. But the Cross does more than illumine the destinies of humanity at large; it enlightens also our own individual history. The Cross teaches me what is the value of my soul in the sight of God by showing me at what price it has been redeemed. And if I have believed in that love, if I have understood what is the value of my soul, how can I still deny Providence? Here we may call up St. Paul's argument: "He that spared not His own Son, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" After this great and striking proof of His love, why should I not expect the most devoted care which a Father's tenderness can bestow? Why should I doubt the merciful intention that presides over all the Divine dispensations, even over those which baffle my reason and break my heart? Is there an affliction whose darkness cannot be dispelled, or whose bitterness cannot be allayed by the Cross?

So the Christian reasons. Now, observe that what I have said of nations may be as strongly, though perhaps less clearly, applied to individuals.

Man's firm belief in Providence depends on his acceptance of the Cross. Apart from faith in Jesus Christ you may meet with impulses of sincere piety, with a touching submission to the will of God, with a degree of confidence in His love; but when you see a man who firmly believes in the continual intervention of God in his existence, a man who affirms that all his sorrows enter into the Divine plan for his spiritual education, a man who is able to give thanks in the midst of affliction, you will not be mistaken if you say that this man is a Christian.

But it is precisely at this point that the doubt which we combat arms itself against us with new weapons. Men tell us that it is a senseless delusion to believe that the Church is the centre of all the Divine plans, and that humanity has been the object of a miracle of love such as the Incarnation. They accuse of a singular pride the Christians who imagine that the heavens have been shaken for their salvation, and that all things concur to the realisation of their hopes, that is, to the glory of their God.

You accuse them of pride, and wherefore? What pride is there in believing that God, when He placed us on earth, had evidently a purpose, and that this purpose was His service? What pride is there in believing that the free obedience of a loving heart is more agreeable to God than the forced submission of all the creatures that serve Him fatally? What pride is there in believing that, in order to obtain this obedience, His love has shrunk from no sacrifice—no, not even from an unutterable abasement, not even from the immolation of the Cross? Proud, are we? when our desire is to refer all our life to Him from whom we have received all things, to listen to the voice of conscience and to take a serious view of Divine holiness! Proud, when we believe that nothing in our life is indifferent to God, and that our pride, our selfishness, and our sins grieve and offend Him! Proud, when we believe that His mercy surpasses even His justice, and when we suppose it sufficiently great to have led Him to the very sacrifice of Himself! Proud, when we believe that His fatherly tenderness is vast enough to embrace all His creatures, to know and count all their sorrows and miseries! Proud, in fine, when we live in the child-like confidence that in His purposes towards us nothing is chance, but all is charity!

But you who charge us with pride, have you sought to take into consideration all that lies concealed beneath your pretended humility? You are too insignificant, you say, to occupy the attention of God! But search the depths of your heart, and you will discover there the true reason of your meekness. Is it not that you wish to escape this God who annoys you, and that the better to forget Him you find it necessary that He should forget you? Is it not that you wish to hide from His sight in order to live all the more freely for yourselves and do your own will? Oh, convenient humility! No wonder that it has become so popular a virtue. But shall I tell you the true name of this

humility? It is pride! To steal away from God under pretence of one's insignificance, and then to find one's independence anew, to live for self and for the world, what is this in reality but the old rebellion of pride despoiled of grandeur but clothed in hypocrisy? Brethren, one thing is sure, and it is this: in the great day when all the veils which hide our secret intentions will be rent, they will be found in the ranks of the ungrateful and the rebellious, those would-be humble beings who escaped God under the plea that they were too insignificant for Him!

Ah! be humble, but be not so in appearance only. Say that you are, not too insignificant, but too great sinners to be brought under the notice of the Holy God; cast a terrified glance into that abyss which your sins have opened between Himself and you; repeat in trembling the words of the prophet: "What is man that Thou shouldst be mindful of him?" Then you will know what is humility; but, far from being led by it to escape God and to delight in your own proud independence, you will rather cast yourselves into His merciful arms, and you will find that nothing short of the blood of the Cross could have been sufficient to efface the iniquity whose depth you will thus have measured.

I have endeavoured to combat the thoughts which lead us to deny providence and to believe in fatality; nevertheless, my task is not yet complete. I have still to speak of the supreme temptation which gives to all the doubts I have mentioned the most intense and the most terrible force. This temptation is suffering. Alas! here I am sure of being understood. Here I am sure of recounting the past or future history, or, it may be, the present history of each of you.

You were full of faith, my brother, and your Christian life was gliding happily and easily by under the approving eye of God. But behold! the day assigned to every human soul is at length dawning on your horizon, the gloomy day of trial!

You were strong, and behold! your health has vanished and your energy has fled; on your path are insurmountable obstacles which you are vainly endeavouring to overcome. You were rich, or at least in easy circumstances, but behold! your resources are dwindling away and poverty is advancing with its dismal train of humiliations and painful deceptions; your friends are falling off one by one, and their heart is growing cold. Alas! behold death striking right and left around you, and taking from you those whom God had given you in days of gladness, and without whose society life seemed to you impossible; . . . or again, behold! here is a sorrow greater than death, one of those secret sorrows which we must hide from the world because shame and dishonour are attached to them!

You struggle at first, fixing your eyes upon Him who is invisible. The great days of visitation have something Divine. In the first blow that strikes

us we easily recognise the hand of the Lord; but when the morrow dawns gloomy and dull, when we must resume our march through the desert, when day succeeds day, and the trial of affliction is followed by the more terrible trial of patience, when deliverance or consolation, which for one moment had lighted up our path, dies away like a fleeting ray which leaves us in deeper gloom than before, alas! the stern yet mild figure of the Heavenly Comforter disappears. You grieve bitterly, you whose piety had been so firm and so serene, you who had always been so ready to impart to others those consolations which are now lost to you.

And do you know what adds to your bitterness? It is the sight of those whom God spares and prospers, whilst He crushes you, His child. Yes, those blessings of fortune which you would have employed so generously, another will possess them and will waste them away in guilty or frivolous pleasures. That strength which you would have consecrated to God, another will enjoy it and spend it in that which is but vanity. Those affections which would have been so needful to you and for which your heart thirsted, he will enjoy them, that being who cannot so much as appreciate them. Beaming faces will surround his hearth while yours will be desolate. Yes, that man who lives for himself alone will have everything, health, joy, love, and strength; and you, whose aim was to serve the noblest of causes here below, you will be reduced to maintain your existence by the most fruitless, ungrateful, and discouraging toil; you will perhaps be chained down to a bed of suffering, incapable of action, and the unbeliever, as he passes by, will open your door to thrust this withering thought indirectly into your mind: "Where is thy God?"

That is not all. While passing through this dark valley of tribulation, you may be called, by a strange dispensation, to endure inward anguish which will add its pangs to your outward sorrows. Your soul will be dry without being athirst; the Word of God will cease to be as a spring of living water; its promises will vacillate before your troubled eyes. Doubts till then unknown will assail your intellect; prayer will become a painful duty; it will rise to God but bring down no response. Oh, brother! less than this was required to lead you to believe in fatality!

Ah! no doubt you will not pronounce this awful word which terrifies you. What matters, if you believe in the thing? Fatality! Men may believe in it and yet call themselves Christians. After twenty or thirty years of a life in which God has multiplied the most evident signs of His goodness and tender care, men may allow themselves to be so completely blinded by ingratitude as to give utterance to these words, for which God upbraided His ancient people: "My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God!"

Hid from your God! and wherefore? You suffer, but is there anything in this to surprise you? Is not this what your Saviour has foretold? When He called you to His service, did He promise you enjoyment or a cross to bear, success or struggle, pleasure or tears? Search the Word of God. What have those who have preceded you in the narrow path experienced? What do all the cries of sorrow and anguish which rise from the pages traced by David, Isaiah, or St. Paul say to your heart? You suffer! But may not this be precisely the sign of your election? Is it not written that through much tribulation we must enter into the kingdom of heaven? Was less than this required to teach you your nothingness, to crush in you the pride of life, to reveal to you all the lukewarmness, weakness, and cowardly fear of your natural heart?

You suffer and the enemies of God triumph! The enemies of God! Ah! who will tell what awaits them? Is the end of the broad way in which they eagerly press so strangely alluring? Is perdition so attractive? Is the fate of a heart full of blindness and rendered utterly insensible by ease and comfort, of a heart which, proud and rebellious, goes forward to meet the judgments of God,—is the fate of such a heart, I ask, one which can be looked upon without terror?

You suffer, and heaven is closed, and your prayers remain unanswered! But who can tell if the end of these inward trials is not to separate, in your faith, the pure gold from the dross which still mingles with it, the wheat from the chaff which is to be burned? Who can tell if this silence of God is not meant to render your faith firmer and more triumphant? . . . Besides, is it yours to determine the time of deliverance, and to measure, according to your own feeble wisdom, the ways of the Lord which are not your ways?

All this I might tell you, and in support of each of these thoughts the Word of God would lend me multiplied declarations; because for you, for feeble souls like yours, it has been written by the God who knoweth our frame. But time fails me, and I prefer inviting you to behold with me a spectacle which will tell you more than all my words.

Come, I will say to you, come, you who in your bitterness have said again and again: “My way is hid from the Lord,”—come and behold in the garden of Gethsemane that innocent Being who bows down in the dust, overpowered by an inexpressible anguish. *You* suffer, but you have been guilty. . . . *He* suffers, and He is innocent, and sin has never touched His soul. He suffers, nevertheless, and how great must be His grief, that He who had said to all human sorrows, “Come unto Me and I will give you rest,” should succumb crushed and broken-hearted!

You suffer and the enemies of God prosper! *He* is about to be led as a lamb before Herod, and the vilest beings will triumph as they load Him with insults!

You suffer, and none understand you, and affection fails you! *He* who wanted love, being Love itself, turns towards His sleeping disciples and utters these words of sorrowful reproach: “Could ye not watch with Me one hour?”

You suffer, and heaven is closed to your prayers! *He* casts towards a heaven of brass a supreme look, a look of agony. *He* cries to earth, “I thirst!” and earth replies by taunts and curses; He turns towards the Father, who hides His face from Him, and He must utter this cry of fearful anguish: “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?”

You believe all this, . . . in that Man of Sorrows you recognise your brother and you worship your God, . . . then you think that He ignores your state, and that your sorrows are unknown to Him? Why then has He come to suffer, why has He loved you unto death, even unto the death of the Cross? Why has He revealed to you a charity so astonishing and so sublime? Why is it written that Christ, having completed His work, intercedes for us with the Father? or rather, why shouldst thou still doubt, O my brother! the reality of that vast and profound sympathy which fills His heart?

No; none of thy anxieties, none of thy conflicts, none of thy prayers are unknown to Him. No; thy obscure acts of devotion, thy silent sacrifices, are not buried in the bottomless abyss of oblivion. Ye tears of the sinner, ye sorrows of the poor, ye groans of broken hearts, ye unseen sufferings, the world misunderstands or stifles you; but the angels see and hear you, and, above the noise and roar of what men call their great events, ye rise to the throne, nay, to the very heart of God! Bear this thought away with thee, afflicted one, and when sorrow oppresses thy heart, go to thy God; go, though thou understand not; go and weep in His bosom, and remember these words which Christ addressed to Peter: “What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter!” One word more and I conclude. You to whom God has revealed the secret of your history and of His providence, endeavour to enlighten those who travel through the way of life with you. Alas! how many unfortunate beings there are who suffer and who believe only in fatality! How many there are who, when they see iniquity successful and triumphant, persuade themselves that if there were a God things would not take this fatal course! Well, live amongst them in such a manner that they may be brought to say that if there were no God, your life and love would be inexplicable. To soothe their sorrows or dispel the temptation to revolt by which they are beset, what is required? A very little thing, perhaps—a smile, a friendly pressure of the hand, a look of affection; something, in a word, which will make them feel that, after all, everything does not conspire against them since there are hearts that love them still.

But beware especially lest you profane the consolations of the Gospel by uttering them with your lips while your heart is indifferent and cold. Do

not, from the midst of your ease and comfort, lightly say to the wretch who suffers that all things work together for his greatest good; do not imprudently cast at him such words as these, for they would sear his embittered heart as vitriol burns a bleeding wound. Remember that, to prove us His love, the Son of God has not merely spoken to us from the midst of His felicity; no, He has given us His life, and that is why He alone can truly comfort. When that love, which shrinks not from sacrifice, will have penetrated your heart, then indeed will you be strong to meet suffering, and to proclaim to the world that God is love.

Let us redouble our efforts in the fulfilment of our Divine mission. In presence of all the voices which rise from the earth to proclaim fatalism, let us unweariedly repeat that the destinies of the world are in the hands of a Father. Let us hasten by our labours, sacrifices, and prayers the advent of that glad day when the dismal darkness which has so long covered our miserable earth shall disappear, when chance shall be no more, when fatality shall vanish as a vain dream, and when the glorious morning of eternal love shall dawn!