

Alter Christus

*“As an **alter Christus** (another Christ) the priest is in Christ, for Christ and with Christ... Because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: he is the minister of their salvation” (Pope Benedict XVI)*

Monthly bulletin dedicated to all the Priests of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands

The Four Gates of Heaven

By Saint Robert Bellarmine

[From the book *The eternal happiness of the saints*]

It now remains for us to consider what is the gate by which we shall be enabled to enter that most blessed House. But Our Lord Himself, in the Gospel, not only makes mention of the gate, but also tells us that it is very narrow, for, being asked, “*Lord, are they few that are saved?*” He answered: “*Strive to enter by the narrow gate, for many, I say to you,*

shall seek to enter, and shall not be able. But when the Master of the House shall be gone in, and shall shut the door, you shall begin to stand without, and knock at the door, saying: Lord, open to us. And He shall say to you: I know not whence you are: depart from me, all ye workers of iniquity.” (St. Luke, chap, xiii.)

Thus our Lord plainly teaches us, that the “gate” of the house of God, which is in heaven, is very narrow, although the House itself is most extensive;

and that, because it is narrow, many will not enter therein who otherwise would; that they indeed desire to enter, but will not strive for it, nor be willing to suffer any violence.

But we will explain how it is that the gate of this most extensive House is narrow. The gate has four divisions the threshold, the inner court, and two side passages that is, four stones: one below, another above, and two at the sides; which, in our gate, are four virtues, essentially necessary in order to enter the heavenly house. These are faith, hope, charity, and humility. Faith and hope

are the two lateral stones, charity is the inner court, humility is the threshold on which we walk. But all these stones that is, all these virtues have their length and breadth so small, that in themselves they are narrow, and, accordingly, they make the gate very narrow.

1) On the first gate of the house of God, which is faith

Let us begin with faith. True Christian faith is so narrow that, unless the mind do violence to itself, and suffer itself to be reduced as it were into captivity, to

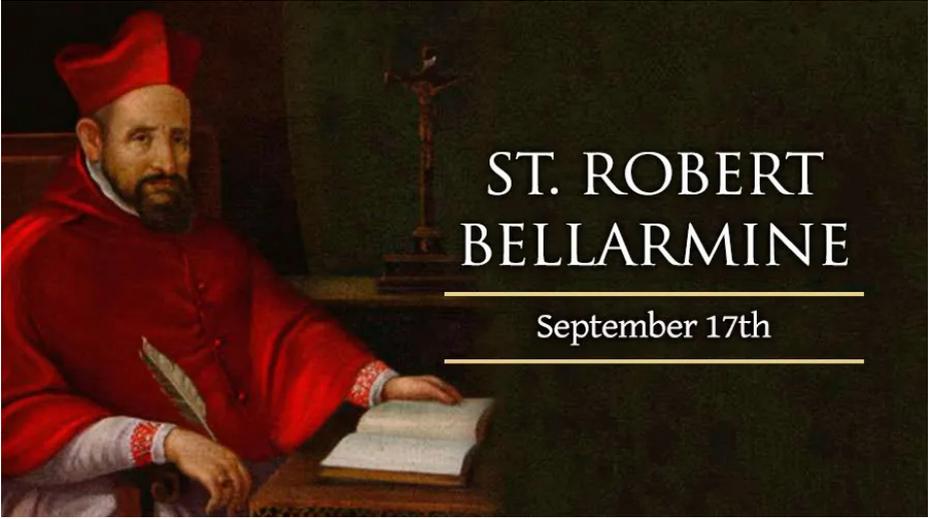
Author: Saint Robert Bellarmine

St. Robert Bellarmine, SJ, (1542-1621) was one of the most important cardinals of the Catholic Reformation and became a Doctor of the Church.

Robert Bellarmine was born to an impoverished noble Italian family. His early intellectual accomplishments gave his father hope that Bellarmine would restore the family's fortunes through a political career. His mother's wish that he enter the Society of Jesus prevailed. On completion of his studies, Bellarmine taught first at the University of Louvain in Belgium. In 1576 he accepted the invitation of Pope Gregory XIII (1572-1585) to teach polemical theology at the new Roman College. Robert Bellarmine spent the next 11 years teaching and writing his monumental Disputations on the Controversies, a three-volume defense of the Catholic faith against the arguments of the Protestant reformers. A confidant to the popes, Bellarmine held a number of positions, including rector of the Roman College, examiner of bishops, Cardinal Inquisitor, archbishop of Capua, and bishop of Montepulciano.

Although he was one of the most powerful men in Rome, Bellarmine lived an austere life. He gave most of his money to the poor. Once he gave the tapestries from his living quarters to the poor, saying that the walls wouldn't catch cold. While he took little regard for his own comforts, he always saw to it that his servants and aides had everything they needed.

St. Robert Bellarmine was canonized by Pope Pius XI in 1930 and declared a Doctor of the Church in 1931.



ST. ROBERT BELLARMINE

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be bound and trampled upon, no one can enter by it. This is what St. Paul means in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians: *“Bringing into captivity every understanding unto the obedience of Christ.”* (chap, x.) The Christian faith proposes many things to be believed, which are so beyond all understanding that it is most difficult to give our consent to them; and yet are we commanded to believe them so firmly that we should be prepared (if necessary) to die a thousand times rather than deny one article of faith.

This is a difficult duty, and no wonder so few comply with it. This is the reason why so many go over to other heresies, because they cannot bear the strictness of faith, but have made the gate very wide, which nevertheless leads, not to life, but to destruction, according to the words of our Lord in St. Matthew: *“Wide is the gate, and broad is the way that*

leadeth to destruction, and many there are who go in thereat.” (chap, vii.13) Every one naturally desires knowledge, but all do not readily assent to a proposition, unless it be demonstrated, or a probable reason for it be given. St. Paul, the Apostle, experienced this; for, although he eloquently preached from an infused and acquired learning, and by the gift of tongues, yet when he spoke of the Resurrection of the dead many laughed at him, and others said, “What is it that this word-sower would say?” And when he preached “Christ crucified,” it appeared foolishness to the Gentiles, and to the Jews a stumblingblock, as he mentions in his First Epistle to the Corinthians. Hence, the ancient heretics, in order to widen the narrow gate, invented various errors.

These and other points, which make the gate narrow, the heretics have so taken away as to make it very wide. For

they assert, that “faith alone is necessary for salvation,” so that a Christian could not perish, though denied with every sin, provided only he believed; that there is no need of confessing our sins to a priest, but only to God; that contrition is not required, a certain terror of the mind being sufficient; that works of penance and satisfaction are not necessary; that a priest is at liberty to marry, and monks and nuns to violate their vows; that superiors cannot oblige the faithful to perform good works, etc. These and other doctrines of faith being taken away, the heretics made the gate of salvation very wide for themselves: but they opened a way that leadeth to destruction, and through it they brought to perdition, together with themselves, an immense multitude of foolish men.

But neither do all Catholics keep within the narrow boundaries of faith, for, although they believe what their faith teaches them, yet because they live differently from what their faith commands, they are proved to be in the number of those of whom St. Paul speaks where he says: *“They profess that they know God, but in their works they deny him.”* Thus, these likewise enter in at the wide gate that leads to destruction. Wherefore, with regard to faith, when our Lord was asked, *“If they are few who are saved?”* we answer, few there are; and hence all must strive to enter in at the narrow gate.

2) On the second gate of the house of God, which is hope

Hope likewise has its difficulties, whether we consider the greatness of the reward promised, or our own weakness and nothingness. If an ignorant rustic, without experience were commanded to hope that in a short time he should possess the wisdom of Solomon, or that of Plato and Aristotle, and at the same time the kingdom of Alexander the Great or of Augustus how, I ask, could such an humble individual be persuaded to hope for such great things?

But this is much more easy than that a mortal man could hope to possess the wisdom and power of the angels in heaven, who are pure intelligences. For this rustic, and Alexander, and Aristotle, were of the same nature, and alike mortal; and the wisdom of Aristotle did not exceed all human wisdom, neither did the empire of Alexander occupy a third part of the globe. But Christians are commanded to hope for an equality with the angels, according to the words of our Lord: *“But they that shall be accounted worthy of that world, and of the resurrection of the dead, shall neither be married nor take wives. Neither can they die any more: for they are equal to the angels, and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection”* (St. Matthew, chap. xx. 38.)

Christian hope teaches us, that every one, provided he be baptized in Christ,

and observe his commandments, will have the “spirit of adoption” from God, will be truly chosen His son, and made heir of all things which God Himself possesseth co-heir with Christ, who is His natural and only Son, and whom the Father hath appointed Heir of all things. If these great and sublime hopes were entertained by Christians as they should be, they would certainly make them fearless as lions, so that no dangers or terrors could conquer them; and they would exclaim with the prophet: *“The Lord is my keeper: I will not fear what man can do unto me If armies in camp should stand together against me, my heart shall not fear;”* and with the apostle: *“I can do all things in Him who strengtheneth me;”* and again: *“If God be for us, who shall be against us?”*

But few there are who hope for such aid as they ought; whilst many are found who do not look even for temporal blessings from God, but trust more to their own cunning, to theft and lies, than in the aid of the Most High. Our Lord Himself, in St. Matthew and St. Luke, admonishes

Each one ought to think others better, and therefore higher than himself. For he is properly and truly the greatest, who is the greatest in the sight of God; and he is the greatest who is the best; and he is the best who excels in virtue, whatever may be his dignity, riches, titles, etc.

the faithful by most beautiful parables, not to be too solicitous about food and raiment, because our heavenly Father, who nourishes the birds that neither sow nor reap, and clothes the lilies of the field that neither labour nor spin, will much more take care of His children for whom He intends an eternal kingdom: but yet, so little confidence have many people in God, that often in their troubles they rather have recourse either to human fraud or diabolical arts, than to the Almighty. Wherefore, if these do not hope to receive from God what He gives to the birds of the air, and the lilies of the field, and which He hath,

promised to give them if they trust in Him, this is a great proof that their hope is not of that character which belongs to the sons of God, who hope to receive a share in His eternal kingdom.

There are also other and greater difficulties in the virtue of hope. It commands us to despise present things, which are seen, and to hope for future goods, which are not seen; to give alms to the poor, that, being multiplied, they

may be returned to us in heaven, though no one here can see them, or conceive what we shall there receive, if we sow them on earth. A rustic can indeed be easily persuaded to sow his seed in the ground, because the experience of many years teaches him that what is sown with labour will be reaped with joy. But no experience teaches us that what is given to the poor will be received back again with interest in heaven.

Therefore, it appears difficult to men to lose present things, which are seen, and to hope for future blessings, which are not seen.

3) On the third gate of the house of God, which is charity

Let us now speak of charity, which is the court of the heavenly gate. Charity is the queen of virtues, and on one side seems boundless, because it extends to God, to the angels, to men even those who may be unknown to us, and our enemies; but, on the other side it is made "*narrow,*" on account of the incredible difficulties it brings along with it, since its precepts are to be observed, not only in word and in tongue, but "*in deed and in truth.*" For what, I ask, doth this queen command? First, that we love God "*with our whole heart, with our whole soul, with our whole strength.*" We are reduced to great difficulties when we endeavour to fulfil these commands.

For, to love God with our whole heart

and strength, what else is it but a true and earnest love? "*With our whole heart and soul*" signifies, that our love must be real, not feigned; not in word and in tongue, as St. James saith, but in word and in deed. "*With our whole strength*" signifies, that our love of God ought to be supreme. The force of the precept, therefore, consists in loving God with a true and perfect love, so that we should prefer nothing before Him, but be prepared with the patriarch Abraham, if the glory of God required it, to sacrifice our only begotten and most beloved son. And not this merely; but also, as our Lord commands us in the Gospel, to hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even our own soul, and to renounce all that we possess: that is, we should be ready to be deprived of all these things with such promptitude as we should have, if we hated them in reality.

This is truly a severe command, and who can understand it? But how easily will men be found, and these not a few, who would rather renounce God and his promises than their riches and temporal honours, and much less their life or that of their sons! St. Cyprian beareth testimony, that in the primitive Church, when the fire of charity was much more ardent than now, there were many deserters, who preferred their riches and their lives before God; and Eusebius, in his Ecclesiastical History, testifies the same.

But what shall we say of charity towards our neighbours? What doth charity command us to do with regard to our neighbours? That we love them as we love ourselves; and that what we wish to be done to ourselves, we do to our neighbours also. Who therefore is there, being much in need, would not wish the rich to give him something out of their superabundance?

Neither would he consider it as an excuse, if the rich man answered that he was encumbered with debt, that he had purchased a villa at an enormous sum, that he was building a sumptuous palace, or, at least, adorning it with precious marble. But these were perhaps not necessary, and therefore charity does not allow our indigent neighbours to be deprived of subsistence. If we shall have to give an account of *“every idle word,”* much more shall we of money ill-spent.

But let us hear St. John the apostle, and from him learn how extensive is the duty of charity. He saith: *“In this we have known the charity of God, because He hath laid down His life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”* (1 Epist. chap. iii. 16.) Christ laid down His life for His servants: can it, therefore, be a great thing if we lay down our life for our brethren? The apostle does not say we can, but *“we ought to lay down our life for the brethren;”* neither did he say, I think, I advise, but absolutely, *“We ought.”* And if we ought to give our life, why not our riches much

more? Wherefore, St. Gregory justly concludes: “Since our soul, by which we live, is incomparably superior to our earthly substance, which we possess, who will not give his substance when he ought to lay down his life?”

The same may be said on other points; for he who ought to lay down his life for the brethren, ought much more to pardon an injury or an affront. And ought he not also to be on his guard, lest he injure his brother in word or in deed? But, because this precept of charity towards God and our neighbour is so difficult that few comply with it; therefore, when our Lord was asked, *“If few are saved,”* with reason did He answer, *“Few:”* we must then endeavour, with our whole strength, to enter with the few the narrow gate.

4) On the fourth gate of the house of God, which is humility

There now remaineth humility, which also hath its difficulties, and these not a few. What doth our Master command, who hath most truly said of Himself: *“Learn of me, because I am meek and humble of heart,”* *“Go, sit down in the last place?”*

When He came into this world, he was born in a stable, and died on a cross. Truly, no one, when born, could have found a more lowly place; nor, dying, a more disgraceful one. And whilst He lived, He was poorer, not only than

men, but even than the beasts of the field: for the foxes had holes, and the birds of the air their nests, *“but the Son of man had nowhere to lay His head.”* But what means, *“Sit down in the last place?”* This is the meaning: wherever thou art, however great thou mayest be, always consider thyself worthy of the last place. St. Paul, in his Epistle to the Galatians, gives a reason for this where he says: *“If any man think himself to be something, whereas he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.”* (ch. vi. 3.) He did not say, he who thinks himself to be great, or superior to others, either in wisdom, or power, or virtue; neither did he say, if any one think himself not to be great, or superior to others, but only equal to them; he said, *“If any man think himself to be something.”* In fine, he did not say, since he is poor, or unlearned, or ignoble, but, *“Whereas he is nothing.”*

Of this St. Augustine gives us an illustrious example, which I will mention in his own words: “From these that love the world I have separated myself: with those who govern the people I have not considered myself equal, nor at

the banquet have I chosen the highest place, but the lower: but the Lord said unto me, ‘Ascend higher’ But so much did I fear the episcopacy, that I would not have approached it, since amongst men the fame of a certain name had spread; and in this place I knew there was no bishop. I was on my guard, and endeavoured, as far as possible, to be saved in an humble situation, not to be in danger in a high one. But, as I have said, the servant ought not to contradict his Lord.”

Oh, that all men would imitate such an example! We should then have many good prelates! Each one ought to think others better, and therefore higher than himself. For he is properly and truly the greatest, who is the greatest in the sight of God; and he is the greatest who is the best; and he is the best who excels in virtue, whatever may be his dignity, riches, titles, etc.

Virtue alone makes a man good, not dignity, riches, or titles; and if virtues make a man good, greater virtues make him better, and the greatest make him the best. And they who possess virtue in a higher degree excel all others.



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