

## DR. LIVINGSTONE, I PRESUME?: PRESUMING UPON GOD'S MERCY

In the 1939 film entitled *Stanley and Livingstone*, a journalist named Henry Stanley (portrayed by Spencer Tracy) finally meets Dr. David Livingstone (portrayed by Sir Cedric Hardwicke). The film is based on a true story of Livingstone, a British doctor and missionary, who had disappeared and been presumed dead for years. After months of searching, almost giving up hope and feverishly ill to boot, following a local lead, he makes his way to a lake in Tanzania. When he thinks he has finally found him, it is not surprising that he was somewhat hesitant as the words came out of his mouth, including the now famous phrase, “Dr. Livingstone, I presume?” He had many reasons to surmise it was Livingstone, despite the many protestations of his colleagues back home.

There is a subtle difference in meaning between presuming and assuming. Technically, the word *presume* means to “suppose to be the case on the basis of **probability**,” whereas *assume* typically refers to a conclusion reached that is **devoid** of any **substantive evidence**. While both words have Latin roots, they are slightly different. The Latin *assumere* means “to accept” or “to take up,” and it is evident that when we assume, we “take up” to ourselves a conclusion, typically too hastily. The problem is we do not have evidence upon which to reach that conclusion. But if we presume (from *praesumere* “to employ beforehand”), in fact we are taking some **previous evidence** and drawing a conclusion based upon it. A common problem in the spiritual life is **presumption**, one of the sins against the Holy Spirit. Presumption occurs if we think we will obtain forgiveness solely due to the fact that we desire it. News flash— that is not enough!

When we presume, especially about God’s mercy, it is not a calculated move devoid of all knowledge. Far from it— it begins from the certain knowledge of God’s love. This is always a good starting point, but it cannot and must not stop there. If I presume on God’s mercy, I may too easily be expecting God’s mercy ahead of time in such a way that I more readily commit a sin, **banking on His goodness** and forgiveness. This is wrongheaded and must be avoided. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* describes it as “the condition of a soul that, because of a badly regulated reliance on God’s mercy and power, hopes for salvation without doing anything to deserve it, or for pardon of his sins without repenting of them.” The Catechism of the Catholic Church also chimes in, paragraph # 2092 (emphasis added): “There are two kinds of *presumption*. Either man presumes upon his own capacities, (hoping to be **able to save himself** without help from on high), or he presumes upon God’s almighty power or his mercy (hoping to obtain his **forgiveness without conversion** and glory without merit).”

The first example, that of presuming upon **our own** capacities, was condemned as heretical by an early Council and given the name **Pelagianism**. The name comes from an austere early 5th century monk named Pelagius who was shocked by the moral depravity he saw. He believed that “man could, by the natural power of free will and without the necessary help of God’s grace, lead a morally good life” (CCC # 406). He effectively denied original sin, and as a result there is nothing from which we need to be redeemed. He felt that God wanted it to be easier for people to lead good and upright moral lives, but do not need the assistance of God interiorly to avoid sin and lead virtuous lives.

With the help of St. Augustine, Pelagius’ teaching was condemned 1600 years ago on May 1, 418 by the bishops in Carthage, North Africa. Canon 5 reads: “If any man says that the grace of justification was given us in order that we might the more easily fulfill that which we are bound to do by the power of free will, so that we could, even without grace, only not so easily, fulfill the Divine commands, let him be anathema.” If you think that definitively settled the matter, think again! Many of the underpinnings of Pelagianism remain sixteen centuries later, though manifest in more subtle ways: “Don’t worry, I can handle it.” “I earned that promotion by hard work— I deserved it.” Or, in a hat tip to the late **Alexander Haig**— “As of now, I’m in control here at the White House.”

In short, if we seek His mercy, we do so with contrite and truly repentant hearts, knowing that ultimately, we are **not** in charge. If we believe that we can be assured of God’s mercy **without fulfilling** our end of the bargain, we are making a fool of God. We make Him out to be a puppet on a string. Yes, it is extremely difficult to manifest perfect contrition— there is always a hint of an ulterior motive when approaching confessions. But

we ought to guard against presuming on his mercy, especially if we lack sufficient resolve to fight against sin, surmising that it doesn't much matter, since we will be going to confession soon anyway. This is a common, though seriously flawed manner of thinking and we must pray for the grace to resist it. St. Cyprian hit the nail on the head, exhorting his readers to "open the eyes of your hearts to an understanding of your shortcomings, neither despairing of the mercy of the Lord nor yet already laying claim to pardon." (Next week: Impenitence)

- Our Catholic bishops have a full agenda for this week's meeting in Baltimore, including a series of concrete measures to respond to the abuse crisis. While new protocols are needed, a substantive discussion of the **underlying root causes** of the sexual abuse crisis is **even more critical**. Please pray for our bishops—they need our support and we need their decisive leadership now more than ever.
- Ecclesial sabermetrics... The latest Church statistics (31 Dec. 2016) were released, showing a Catholic population of 1.29 billion. This represents 17.67% of the world's population, down by 0.05%, with Europe once again showing the greatest decline. A deeper dive will require a future column, but the Cliff Notes version is that Church growth is **not keeping pace** with general population growth.
- We take seriously your safety and have employed plainclothes security each Sunday morning for some time now. The reality of homelessness (whether by circumstance or in some cases by choice) is evident here, being so close to downtown. The **vast majority** of people enter here for noble reasons, even those who may be struggling in life. We are not a Church only for the perfect, but at the same time, **you have a right** to feel safe and secure.
- All was well at the Cathedral during the magnificent SPCO performance of Bach's Passion of St. John until I saw this in the libretto: *Wäre dieser nicht ein Übeltäter* ("If he were not a **malefactor**"). I knew my surname was sketchy, but then there is fightin' words!
- Called at the time the "Great War" or "The War to End All Wars," but known to us as World War I, at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month in 1918 an armistice was signed. To commemorate the end of the four-year conflict that claimed 116,000 Americans (and millions of others), our **funeral bells will toll** on Sunday morning beginning at 11:01 a.m. *Requiescant in pace*.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector