

All in the Family

The Communion of Saints

ISSUE: What is the communion of saints?

DISCUSSION: The communion of saints is the intimate union that exists among all the disciples of Christ. This communion is known as the Mystical Body of Christ: the Family of God consisting of the faithful on earth (the Church Militant or pilgrim Church), the holy souls in purgatory undergoing spiritual cleansing (the Church Suffering), and the saints in heaven (the Church Triumphant). This union of believers joins us in Christ, our source of grace and life, and calls us to love and pray for one another as members of His body. Therefore, we can ask for the prayers of the saints in heaven, and we can also pray for people on earth and those in purgatory (Catechism, nos. 946-62).

The doctrine of the communion of saints was taught by the apostles, both in the Scriptures and the Tradition they handed down in words and practice. It is explicitly contained in the Apostles' Creed. The Church reaffirmed this teaching at the Second Council of Nicea (787) and further addressed it at the Councils of Florence (1438-45), Trent (1545-63), and Vatican II (1962-65).

This *communion* refers to the bond of unity among the followers of Christ. Such a bond is possible because, as believers in Christ, we become children of God (1 Jn. 3:1), members of His family (Rom. 8:14-17), with divine life bestowed on us through Baptism (Jn. 3:3-5). The apostles teach us that through Baptism we become "fellow heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:17) and "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). Saint Paul states that this union of the faithful, brought about by the Holy Spirit in Baptism, is so complete that we are actually members of a single body, *Christ's own body* (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-27).

The communion of saints is based on four essential points:

- All Christians are members of Christ's body and one another (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:27).
- Jesus has only one body (Eph. 4:4; Col. 3:15).
- Death cannot separate Christians from Christ or from one another (Rom. 8:35-39; cf. Lk. 20:37-38).
- Christians are bound in mutual love (Jn. 13:34-35; Rom. 12:10).

Family Ties

In John 15:1-5, Jesus tells us that He is the vine and we are the branches. As branches are connected to a vine, participating in a single life, we are connected to Jesus and to one another in His Mystical Body. Saint Paul speaks many times about the importance of this unity in one body (e.g., 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Rom. 12:4-16). As members of the same family, we are able to pray for one another and to ask others—including the saints in heaven—to pray for us. Nothing, not even death, can break that union between Christ and His body and the members with one another (cf. Rom. 8:35-39). Everyone who is "in Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17) participates in His life not only on earth, but even more fully in the glory of heaven.

In a human family, members love one another, are concerned for one another's well-being and growth, turn to one another in times of joy and sorrow, and intercede for one another in times of trial and distress. Therefore, it is fitting that in God's supernatural family, Christians are called to love one another and be concerned for the good of one another, turning to one another for inspiration and intercession in times of need. Saint Paul himself asks for the intercession of others (e.g., Rom. 15:30; Col. 4:3). He further stresses the mutual need of all Christians for one another:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."... If one member [of the body] suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:21, 26).

We cannot say, then, that one “does not need” the saints in heaven or the souls in purgatory, because they too are members of the Body of Christ.

The Bible speaks of the prayers of angels and other saints in heaven, including prayer offered from and for others, and also tells us of the martyrs’ praying for justice to come upon the earth (e.g., Rev. 6:9-11; Tob. 12:12). The angels and saints are concerned with earthly events (e.g., Ps. 91:11-12; Lk. 15:7; Rev. 5:8). If they were not concerned, they would be guilty of a lack of charity for their brothers on earth, because charity means desiring and seeking to bring about the ultimate good of others. Such a gross violation of love is simply not possible in heaven (cf. 1 Jn. 3:10, 14-15; 4:7-11).

Alive in Christ

Some object that the Catholic position on intercessory prayer is the same as *necromancy*, that is, calling upon the spirits of the dead to find out the future or obtain other information. Necromancy is a grave sin that, far from fostering communion, shows a lack of faith and trust in God. Necromancy was punishable by death under the Mosaic law (Lev. 19:31, 20:6). Some of the early Israelites practiced necromancy, including Saul (1 Sam. 28:3, 8-14), and they were punished severely for doing so (1 Sam. 28:17-19). This practice offended God (2 Kings 21:6) and led to the destruction of Israel.

Catholics do not practice necromancy, which is explicitly forbidden by the Church (cf. Catechism, nos. 2115-17). Rather, they ask for the prayers of the saints to foster communion in the Family of God.

Seeking the intercession of the saints is not necromancy for two reasons. First, necromancers are usually trying to receive information that they do not have, such as what will happen in the future. Asking the saints to pray for us, however, is not a form of divination or fortune-telling.

Second, necromancers are also trying to bring back and control the souls of dead people. Catholics, on the contrary, believe that those who have died in God’s grace are not dead but truly alive, and are able to help us by their prayers. As Jesus says, “[Moses] calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to him” (Lk. 20:37-38).

According to Jesus, death cannot separate the faithful—such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—from God. And, if they are alive to God, they must be alive to us through Him as members of His one body. *Otherwise, contrary to what Saint Paul says, Christ’s victory over death was incomplete, and His body is not truly one* (cf. Jn.17:21; 1 Cor. 12: 12,13; 15:14 et al).

Idol Chatter

Some believe that asking the saints in heaven to pray for us is a form of *idolatry*. The Catholic Church does not worship any person other than God, who created everyone and everything. The Church may offer praise and honor to Mary and the other saints, who are great disciples of the Lord, but she worships God alone.

The saints are honored and blessed by God and therefore worthy of our respect, and they serve as role models for Christians to emulate (e.g., Phil. 3:17; 4:8-9). This is not idolatry as long as they are distinguished from God. For example, Abraham the patriarch bows down before angels of the Lord and Nathan the prophet bows down before David the king of Israel—in due reverence, not idolatry (cf. Gen. 18:2; 1 Kings 1:23). We ask saints to bring our needs before Our Heavenly Father, for “[t]he prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects” (Jas. 5:16).

Similarly, some claim that the phrase “praying to saints” indicates that Catholics are treating the saints as if they were gods, and thus committing idolatry. This reflects a common misunderstanding of the English language. “Pray” historically meant nothing more than “to ask” or “to make a humble request.” Until modern times, this word was never used exclusively as a request to God. Rather, it was often used in common speech between two people, as in the sentence: “I pray you, may words have more than one meaning?” It is in the older sense that Catholics “pray to the saints,” which merely means asking for their intercession on our behalf.

One Mediator

Another common objection is that asking the saints to pray for us violates the Bible's teaching in 1 Timothy 2:5, which states there is one Mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ. When read in context, however, Saint Paul clearly states that *this is the reason Christians should pray for others*, rather than a reason against it: "I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men.... This is good and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior..." (1 Tim. 2:1, 3).

Jesus' mediation between God and man is based on the Incarnation, the truth that He is both fully God and fully man. No one else can mediate in this way, which is why it is correct to say "there is one Mediator." Christians can and do, however, *participate* in Jesus' mediation in a lesser and dependent way, just as they share in His one eternal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:5), because they are members of His body and "coworkers with God" (cf. 1 Cor. 3:9).

All Christians are called to unite their prayers, supplications, and intercessions to those of Jesus. Jesus' mediation is what makes the mediation of other Christians possible, just as His priesthood makes the ordained priesthood and the priesthood of believers possible. Christians intercede on earth for one another without diminishing Christ's unique mediation. The same holds true in heaven. All prayer, whether on earth or in heaven, comes to the Father through Christ. Just as the one Creator shares His creative role with couples in procreation, or delegates His authority to Peter and the apostles, Christ shares His mediation with the saints, who are members of His own body.

Another commonly held objection is that the saints cannot hear us. Yet, Christ our Mediator enables us to communicate with members of His body. The saints in heaven are intimately connected to us through Christ, like branches on a vine. Scripture passages such as Luke 15:7 demonstrate that the angels and saints in heaven clearly do know and care about what is happening on earth. After all, the saints surround us like "a cloud of witnesses" (Heb. 12:1).

A final common objection is that no human being in this life can simultaneously hear numerous prayers, so how can a human being, even if a glorified saint, do so elsewhere? The answer is that heaven escapes the limitations of time and space that we experience in this life on earth. The Bible teaches that those in heaven can intercede for many, and bring their prayers before the throne of God (cf. Rev. 5:8; 8:3-4).

God's Love: A Consuming Fire

What about prayer for the souls in purgatory? Most objections here are based on a disbelief in purgatory. But these objections are answered by the Bible, which affirms the value of prayer for those who have died:

[Judas] took up a collection, man by man ... and sent it to Jerusalem to provide for a sin offering¹ [for soldiers who had died]. In doing this he acted very well and honorably, taking account of the resurrection. For if he were not expecting that those who had fallen would rise again, it would have been superfluous and foolish to pray for the dead. But if he was looking to the splendid reward that is laid up for those who fall asleep in godliness, it was a holy and pious thought (2 Mac. 12:43-45).

Some Christians do not accept 2 Maccabees as part of the Bible, although it has always been part of the canon recognized by the Church. But those who do not accept this book as scriptural must still admit that it is a history of the Jewish people that reflects their religious beliefs two centuries before Christ. Jews prayed for those who had died then and they still do today, and ancient Christian liturgies and tomb inscriptions continued the practice. Likewise, Saint Paul prays that his friend Onesiphorus, who seems to have died, will obtain mercy on the last day (2 Tim. 1:16-18). It is certainly acceptable to pray for souls in purgatory, for they too are members of the Body of Christ (cf. Catechism, nos. 1030-32).

All the faithful who are alive in God's grace, on earth, in purgatory, and in heaven, are children of God, brothers and sisters of one another, and members of the single Body of Christ. Because we are one communion and one body, we need each other. It is fitting for us to ask for prayers and offer prayers for one another to build up the Body of Christ and advance the kingdom of God.

Communion in Spiritual Goods

All those united to Christ are also united to one another. We participate in the treasury of riches with which Christ has endowed His Church.

Communion in the faith. What we believe is the faith of the Church, received from the apostles and their successors. Faith is a “pearl of great price” (cf. Mt. 13:45-46) that we are to share with others.

Communion of the sacraments. The merits of Christ’s saving work are communicated to members of His body through the sacraments, beginning with the waters of Baptism and culminating in the Eucharist, which signifies and brings about our unity in Christ.

Communion of charisms. The Holy Spirit distributes special graces to all the faithful for the building up of the Church.

Communion of worldly goods. Christians should be ready and eager to come to the aid to those in need, recognizing that the goods of the earth are intended for the entire human family.

Communion in charity. Since we are really united with our brothers and sisters in Christ, the least of our acts done in charity strengthen our communion, just as every sin harms this communion. “If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 Jn. 5:12).

—adapted from Catechism, nos. 949-53

Questions for Reflection or Group Discussion

1. Do I experience the Church as a reality that is larger than my own parish family? What can I do to heighten my awareness of the needs of Christians in other parts of the world?
2. Review Catechism, nos. 1030-32. The doctrine of purgatory is difficult or even embarrassing to some Catholics who don’t understand what the Church teaches. Am I able to explain this teaching to others? Do I need further explanation myself? (Chapter XIII of *Catholic for a Reason: Scripture and the Mystery of the Family of God* and CUF’s FAITH FACT on purgatory are good starting points.)
3. Who are my patron saints? Do I have a special devotion to a particular saint? How do I understand the role of the saints in my own personal pilgrimage to heaven?

¹ A “sin offering,” in this context, is the removal of the temporal (not eternal) consequences of sin that remain after sin is forgiven, which may be rectified in “the age to come” (Mt. 12:32; cf. 1 Cor. 3:12-15).

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