



## Praying to the Saints

To non-Catholic Christians, there aren't very many religious practices that seem as peculiar as praying to the saints. "Shouldn't we only be praying to God?" "What could a dead person possibly do for us?" Even though, from the earliest days of the Church, Christians have been praying to the virtuous men and women who have gone before us (i.e., asking them to intercede with God), it is still important for us to consider why this is worthwhile and if it is validated by the Bible. Does God approve? Let's break open God's Word and see whether it sanctions the practice of praying to the saints.

## The Saints: Alive in Christ

At the core of the practice of praying to the saints is the belief that the saints are alive in Christ and full members of the community of believers, the Mystical Body of Christ. As St. Paul proclaims:

"For I am sure that neither *death*, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39).

When we live a life of grace and virtue, when we "put to death the deeds of the body," then we will live (Rom 8:13). Yes, every person's time on this earth must come to an end, but if we die in grace and righteousness, then we'll live forever with God in heaven. The fact that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – prophets who died a long time ago – can still be declared by Jesus to be the God of *the living* (cf. Mt 22:32) is proof that the saints are very much alive. At any rate, how could Samuel appear to Saul (cf. 1 Sam 28:7-20), or Jeremiah appear to the Jews preparing for battle (cf. 2 Macc 15:12-16), or Moses and Elijah appear on the Mount of Transfiguration to talk with Jesus (cf. Mt 17:1-3), if the souls of the just do not live on after death? In Christ, "Death is swallowed up in victory" (1 Cor 15:54).

Not only does their union with Christ ensure their eternal life, it also maintains their membership in the Body of Christ. God's "plan for the fulness of time" which has already been realized in the lives of the saints – is "to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:9-10). In Christ, we are all citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Eph 2:19). By holding fast to the Head, the whole Body is joined and no part can be separated from the other (cf. Eph 2:20-21; 4:15-16; Col 2:18-19).

## Members of the Body Intercede for One Another

To "intercede" for someone is to take that person's need or petition to God. When we ask a friend to

pray for us, we are asking for our friend's intercession. Christians ask people to pray for them all the time on the basis that the more people who are praying, the better.

This sort of intercession is a common practice in Scripture. For example, Moses often prayed on behalf of the people, that God would refrain from inflicting His just anger upon them (cf. Ex 32:11-14, 30-34; 34:9; Num 14:17-20; 21:7-9). Paul repeatedly implored the various churches to pray for him, his ministry, and those who were with him proclaiming the gospel (cf. Rom 15:30; Eph 6:19; Col 4:3-4; 1 Thes 5:25; 2 Thes 3:1; Heb 13:18). The instances of Paul and the other apostles and members of the Body of Christ praying for each other are even more numerous (e.g., Acts 8:15; 9:40; 28:8; 2 Cor 9:14; 13:9; Phil 1:9, 19; Col 1:3, 9; 2 Thes 3:1; Philem 1:22; 3 Jn 1:2).

This essential bond of love and unity that connects us to seek the prayer of others and to pray for others really typifies what membership in the Body of Christ is all about. "First of all, then, urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men" (1 Tim 2:1; cf. 1 Tim 5:4; Tit 2:1; Jas 5:16). Since, as we have seen, the saints in heaven are alive and members of the Body, they must also be seen as participating in this worthwhile act of intercession.

## The Saints: Committed to Us and Our Needs

What we find in Scripture is that the saints in heaven do, in fact, play their part. Not only are they not being disinterested in human affairs, but they have achieved perfect unity with God. The saints show themselves to be keenly involved in and aware of what happens to the Body of Christ on earth.

Jesus said, "Do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 18:10). Something about beholding the "Beatific Vision" (the vision of God in all His glory) makes the angels aware of the mistreatment of God's children.

God also told us that there is joy among the angels in heaven over even one sinner who repents (cf. Lk 15:7, 10). We are "a spectacle" to them (1 Cor 4:9). The virtuous men and women who have gone before us make up a great "cloud of witnesses" that surrounds us as we run with perseverance the race that is set before us (Heb 12:1).

## The Saints: First Responders

Because the saints are aware of us and our needs, the love that fills their hearts compels them to do something about it! In the Book of Job, we see an angel asking the Lord to deliver a man from death and return him to his youthful vigor (cf. 33:23-26). The Lord Himself told Jeremiah about how Moses and Samuel (who were long since dead) pleaded with Him on behalf of the people (cf. Jer 15:1). Zechariah spoke of an angel who lamented to the Lord that He had yet to show mercy to Jerusalem and the cities of Judah (cf. Zech 1:12). The martyrs in heaven cry out to God to judge and seek vengeance upon those who take the lives of God's faithful people (cf. Rev 6:9-10). In heaven, the angels and saints offer our prayers to God like incense (cf. Rev 5:8; 8:3-4).

What all of this proves is that it is indeed possible for us to communicate our needs to the saints, and for the saints to intercede for us, to take those needs to God. When we tell the saints about a need that we have and ask them to take that need to God, this is essentially no different from what Catholics do when we pray to the saints, asking them to intercede. The saints, too, care about us and greatly care about our needs.

## The Prayers of the Righteous Are Powerful

James tells us in his letter, "The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects" (5:16). Or, to put it another way, "the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer" (1 Pet 3:12). No one is more righteous than a saint in heaven! We must also consider that the saints come from almost every walk of life imaginable. They took up every occupation, spoke every language, lived out every vocation, and hailed from every nation. They know what it's like to be us and to have the needs that are unique to our situation in life.

And so, because they are perfectly righteous and they understand the difficulties of this world for every man, *the saints can pray perfect prayers on our behalf*. Who wouldn't want that?! Once all the evidence is considered, how can we *not* avail ourselves of this power and blessing?

## Cry Out to the Heavens

Are there examples of anyone doing this in the Bible? The example of David is illustrative here. He implored the angels, "Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word!" (Psalm 103:20; cf. 148:2). We can do likewise.

