**The Communion of Saints**

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Our religion has two sides, the corporate and the personal. Every man’s religion is his own personal affair, and consists essentially of his direct relations with God. And yet he reaches God, and God reaches him, often and intimately through the body of the Church, which is the Body of Christ. So is it with our lives. Each one comes into the world alone, each one leaves the world alone. Alone each one has one day to stand before the dread judgment seat. There is something infinitely pathetic in the loneliness of every human soul. And yet, just as the grace of God, though it is in a true sense a matter between each man individually and his maker, must by divine ordinance be sought by that man through other men—through external sacraments, ministered by a human priest—so is the loneliness of life tempered by human society. . . .

Catholics should and do remember that they are members one of another, and above all, members of Christ. Christ is the head of the body to which we belong. Our life, then, has to be modeled on his life, who is our head. In one sense the life of Christ was a life of unutterable loneliness. Yet he had an earthly home, a home he left only to do his Father’s will, to be about his Father’s business. He spoke pathetic words: “The birds of the air have their nests and the foxes their holes, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head.”

But even while he was thus speaking he had friends—Lazarus, Mary Magdalene, Martha who from time to time received him in her house, and others of whom we read in the Gospels. He had disciples, one of whom to the end of time will be known as the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” In early life a foster father was given him, specially chosen for the high office of protecting him in infancy and childhood, who surely was dear to his Sacred Heart.

Above all he had a mother. Mary of Nazareth was the mother of our Lord. No other woman could call him son by right. In one sense—and that a most special sense—he could share her with no other. He bestowed upon her the love, unique of its kind, that every child owes to the mother who bore him in her womb. She gave to him and only him that love that a mother bears to the child who has drawn his life and blood from her veins—from the chalice of her heart.

Yet in another and equally true—if less close—sense, he shares her with us. She is our mother too, for we are his brothers and sisters, redeemed from sin by that precious blood which flowed from off the cross beneath which she stood on Calvary. Mary loves us with a mother’s love, for we belong to her family—she will disown none whom her son is not ashamed to call his brethren, and we owe and give her the love that is hers by right, both as the mother of our Lord and as the mother of all who belong to him. . . .

And as the Mother of God is our mother too, so the saints and friends of God are our friends also. Believing then in the communion of saints, believing that death does not hamper the activities of the soul, the Church encourages her children to invoke the saints, reigning together with Christ—above all to invoke our Blessed Lady. Are they not his friends and ours? Is she not the Mother of God and the Mother of men?

Protestants are accustomed to bring two main objections against this consoling doctrine. It is urged that Catholic teaching interferes with the mediatorial office of Christ—that while Paul says that there is one mediator, Catholics make many; and also that we can have no certainty that the saints in heaven hear our prayers on earth; that Catholics make the Blessed Virgin and the saints ubiquitous, an attribute that belongs to God alone.

We will consider these objections separately. It is quite true that we read in the sacred scriptures that as Moses was the mediator of the Old Testament between God and man, so is Christ the mediator of the New Testament (Deut. 5:5; cf. Gal. 3:19) and that “there is one God, and one mediator of God and man, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). It is also true that this is elementary Catholic doctrine, taught to every Catholic child in every Catholic school throughout the world. But it is by no means true, and most certainly Paul does not say that because Christ our lord and savior is the mediator between God and man in one sense, it follows that we his creatures cannot mediate with him for one another in quite another sense. On the contrary, we shall find on examination that Paul uses the fact that we have a mediator—who is the one mediator between God and man—as a great argument why we should mediate for one another in his name.

The sentence “There is one God and one mediator between God and man” does not stand alone. It is preceded by the word “for”—that is, “because.” The apostle had just urged that “first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men”—in other words, that we should mediate one for another. As a reason for thus acting he reminds us that we have a mediator, who is one as God is one. Through him alone can we go to God. But through him we can go, and can go with confidence, and should go not only on our own behalf but also pleading one for another. . . .

We who dwell yet on earth—as well as the saints and the Blessed Virgin in heaven—are “mediators of grace”; but Christ alone is “the mediator of justice.” He alone has a right to be heard. Through him Christian men and women, the saints, and Mary pray with much confidence. And their prayers are heard in proportion to their confidence, in proportion to their nearness to God, to their sanctity. “The prayer,” writes St. James—he is writing of the prayer of mediation one for another—”of a just man availeth much” (Jas. 5:16). The nearer to God, the surer the answer to prayer.

This is the reason why Catholics seek so earnestly the prayers of the saints; above all why they implore the prayers of the Blessed Virgin. Who so near to him as his saints, who ministered to him so faithfully on earth and who now can sin no more? Above all, who so near to him as the sinless Virgin on whom he first smiled in the crib of Bethlehem and who was his last earthly thought on the cross of Calvary? The saints are his servants. Mary is his servant; she is also his mother.

The New Testament is full of exhortations to intercessory prayer. It is practiced by all Christians. What Christian mother fails to pray—to “mediate”—for her son, or imagines that by thus acting she derogates from the supreme mediation of the one mediator, through whom she approaches the throne of God?. . .

No Protestant is shocked when he reads the declaration of Paul that by becoming “all things to all men” Christ hoped to “save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). When men use words—such words, for example, as “mediator” and “save”—everything depends upon the sense in which they use them. For Catholics the sense of these words is not arbitrary but is fixed by the first principles of their religion.

It seems to me that all difficulty with regard to the intercession of our Lady and the saints ought to vanish as soon as it is understood that their intercession does not differ in its nature from the intercession that all Christians should make on earth for their friends and, if they listen to the exhortation of the apostle, “for all men.” After the Ascension of Christ his mother lived in the house of John. Her prayers for the beloved disciple possessed the same character after her death as those she offered for him during her life. The intercession of the saints in heaven differs from the intercession of us poor sinners on the earth only in the fact that their prayers are more likely to prevail than ours because they are nearer to our Lord than we. Experience, as opposed to mere theory, proves that going to God together with his saints and his Blessed Mother, asking not only our friends on earth but also our friends and Mother in heaven to intercede for us greatly increases our confidence in Christ himself. . . .

But it may be urged, “You know that your friends on earth can pray for you. You can ask them to do so by word of mouth or by letter. How can you be sure that the saints in heaven can hear your prayers? They are gone beyond the reach of the human voice. You can have no communication with them. They are not ubiquitous. How then can they hear prayers put up at the same moment of time in different parts of the world?”

To this we reply simply, “I believe in the communion of saints.” It can be shown that the Church has always believed, as she believes today, that the saints in heaven hear the prayers of their friends on earth; that, as the Council of Trent teaches us, “it is good and useful to invoke the saints reigning together with Christ” (Sess. xxv). To this truth the early inscriptions in the catacombs and the writings of the Fathers bear ample testimony. It is enshrined in the Apostles’ Creed. The communion of saints, in which we express our belief whenever we recite that Creed, involves not only the communion of Christians on earth in prayer and sacrifice and sacraments and good works, but also the communion of Christians on earth with those who have gone before them to the city not built with hands. . . .

With regard to the saints, I know that they are not ubiquitous. I do not speak to their material ears; God enables their souls to know the yearning of my soul. How he accomplishes this I know not, and probably in my present state of existence could not understand. Catholic writers tell us that they who, like the saints, see God in the Beatific Vision, “in him see all things that it is well for them to see,” and certainly hear the prayers of those who address them.

This we believe; it is part of our religion. It does not trouble us that we do not know the precise method by which the saints are able to know the needs of many mortals all over the world at the same time. I can use wireless telegraphy, though I may be profoundly ignorant as to how it operates. In like manner I can pray to the Blessed Virgin, or to any saint, even though I cannot explain how our Lady or the saint to whom I pray is enabled by God to hear me. It is enough for me to rest upon my religion, and to believe—as by God’s Mercy and to my great comfort I do believe—in the communion of saints.

But the communion of saints reaches beyond this earth to souls who are not in heaven, and yet are the friends of God and our friends too. We call them the holy souls in Purgatory.

The Catholic Church teaches that not all the friends of God—not all, that is, who die in the divine love and grace—are fit immediately after death to see his face and dwell with him eternally. For all God’s friends in need there is a period of purification beyond the grave that we call Purgatory. Moreover, we believe that these waiting souls can be helped by us on earth. . . .

The Council of Trent defined this doctrine, against the denials of Luther and Calvin and their followers. The definition runs as follows: “There is a Purgatory, and the souls there detained are helped by the prayers of the faithful, and principally by the acceptable sacrifice of the altar. . .” (Sess. vi, cap. 30; Sess. xxii, cap 2–3).

It is true that there were Jews at the time of Christ who by no means reasoned excellently concerning the Resurrection. The Sadducees denied there was any resurrection of the dead. But all Jews who understood that, as our Lord reminded his unbelieving questioners, God who is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the God not of the dead but of the living and that their fathers who had passed beyond the veil of our senses still lived, understood also the duty of offering prayer and sacrifice on behalf of the souls of the departed. Those they loved and often venerated might too probably have in this life committed offenses for which punishment was still due the justice of God.

I am well aware that what is called the “modern mind” shrinks from such a phrase as “punishment due the justice of God.” Yet nothing is more certain than the fact that throughout the scriptures both of the Old and New Testaments we are assured that God does punish sin both in this life and in the life to come. In the Old Testament we are told that Wisdom—that is to say God the Son—”brought man out of his sin”; in other words he forgave him the guilt of his sin “and bestowed upon him power to govern all things” (Wis. 10:2). Man, even after sin, is rightly called creation’s lord. Yet the punishment due to him remained to be endured. “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread until thou returnest to the earth out of which thou wast taken; for dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return” (Gen. 3:19).

The incredulity of Moses and Aaron was forgiven them yet the punishment due their sin was inflicted by God: They were shut out from the earthly land of promise. “Because you have not believed me, you shall not bring these people into the land which I will give them” (Num. 10:12). The sin of David against Uriah the Hittite was declared by the prophet to be forgiven, yet the terrible punishment had to be endured. “And David said to Nathan: ‘I have sinned against the Lord.’ And Nathan said to David: ‘The Lord hath taken away thy sin. Nevertheless, because thou hast given occasion to the enemies of the Lord to b.aspheme, the child that is born to thee shall surely die’” (2 Kgs. 12:13–14).

We find the same principle at work in the New Testament. For example, we are told that certain debts due the justice of God have to be paid to “the last farthing” (Matt. 5:26) and of a man who commits “the sin against the Holy Ghost” (final impenitence) we read that “it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world nor in the world to come” (Matt. 12:32). From which statement of our Lord Augustine takes occasion to argue as follows: “That some sinners are not forgiven either in this world or the next world would not be said with truth, unless there were others who, though not forgiven in this world, are forgiven in the world to come” (*De Civitate Dei*, xxii:24). Whatever we may think of this inference, at any rate our Lord’s words prove the truth that sins are punished by God not only in this world but also in the next. . . .

So is it that the custom of praying for the dead that Tertullian in the second century mentions as an apostolic ordinance (urging a widow “to make oblations for him on the anniversary of her husband’s death” and charging her with infidelity if she neglect to succour his soul) (*De Monogamia*, x) was practised especially in the holy Mass. For example, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, describing the sacred liturgy, writes: “Then we pray for the holy fathers and bishops who are dead, and in short for all those who have departed this life in our communion, believing that the souls of those for whom prayers are offered receive very great relief while this holy and tremendous victim lies upon the altar” (*Ad Cor*., homily 61, no. 4).

St. John Chrysostom assures us that the custom of placing the names of the departed in the diptychs and then remembering them by name in the holy mysteries of the altar (a practice that was handed down to the Church by the apostles) is the best way of relieving the dead (*Catechet. Mystog*., q.v.).

St. Ambrose insists on the existence of Purgatory in his commentary on the first epistle to the Corinthians and in his funeral oration on the Emperor Theodosius thus prays for his soul: “Give, 0 Lord, rest to thy servant Theodosius, that rest which thou hast prepared for thy saints. . . . I loved him, therefore will I follow him to the land of the living; I will not desert him until by my tears and lamentations he shall be admitted to the holy mount of the Lord to which his merits call him” (*De Obitu Theodosii*).

Deep down in the human heart lies the desire to communicate with the departed. Necromancy under various forms has been practiced in every age of the world’s history. It is impossible to exaggerate the dangers that accompany any attempts to evoke the spirits of the dead. Such attempts are condemned the strongest terms by the holy scriptures and by the Catholic Church. Experience proves that those unhappy persons who, in defiance of the prohibition of their religion, tamper with forbidden practices of this nature gradually find that their moral sense has been perverted and their will power weakened and too often lose their faith. And after all, what excuse shall we have to offer to God should we out of idle curiosity yield to superstition and turn aside to what at best is doubtful and dark—to something which we know to be most sinful—when our religion gives us the consolation which God sees that His children need in sorrow.

Inspired by the truth of the Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints, taught us in the Creed, we know that we are not alone, even when we may seem to be most alone. The everlasting arms are around about us. We are surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses. We can help the dead and the dead help us. It is not indeed taught by the Church as of faith that the souls in Purgatory can pray for us, though this is the reasoned conviction of great saints and theologians and seems to have been proved again and again in the experience of the faithful who receive wonderful answers to their prayers to the holy souls. It is of faith that the souls in Purgatory will one day reach heaven and that the saints in heaven pray for their friends on earth.

The Church that has given us so much has given us friends in the heavenly country. Her saints raise their hands to help us. Over all the saints reigns their queen, our Mother. If we trust her now and seek her motherly aid in all our needs, one day beyond a doubt we shall see her with her son. Then with her we shall adore, and with her we shall see the human features of her child, Jesus—her God and our God, her Lord and our Lord.

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