



SAINTS & COMMUNION OF SAINTS

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“To all God’s beloved...who are called to be saints: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

-Rom. 1:17

“Be holy, for I am holy.”

-Lev. 11:45

What is a saint?

There are many definitions of the word *saint*, some of them more accurate than others. Most commonly, four different usages are found in contemporary culture. The first two definitions are cultural, the second two theological:

- (1) The most general: a saint is anybody who does good in the world, regardless of religion: “Martin Luther King Jr. was a saint.”
- (2) A saint is any pious or holy Catholic: “My grandmother prays the rosary every day; she’s a regular saint.
- (3) The general theological definition: a saint is any and every person in heaven. They may or may not be known to us on earth.
- (4) A saint is a person whose virtue and holiness are recognized by the Church in that they are publicly proclaimed to be among the blessed in heaven; this person is referred to as a “canonized” saint.

Definition 1 is the most frequently used, but it is entirely inaccurate. Usually, when *saint* is used in this way it means that a person is very virtuous, admirable, giving, etc. But it says nothing about real holiness.

Definition 2 is used frequently within the Church to denote a person who is extraordinarily pious or religious. But usually this usage is meant as a statement of exaggerated praise, not as a theological truth. We do not necessarily know if our pious grandma is in heaven or not; the use of the term *saint* in this way is an exaggerated way of saying she was very pious.

With definitions 3 and 4 we come to the precise, theological usage of the word *saint*. Generally speaking, a saint is anybody who is in heaven, including the angels (who are referred to as saints in the Church’s liturgy). Most often, when Catholics speak of saints, they are referring to the tiny fraction of the blessed in heaven whose holiness has been recognized publicly by the Church in her worship and teaching through the process of canonization.

The eminent characteristic of a saint is *holiness*. The word *saint* comes from the Latin *sancta*, which means “holy.”

What is holiness?

Holiness is first and foremost defined as *setting apart unto God*, though St. Thomas Aquinas adds the characteristic of firmness or stability to it. It is a firm and continuous separation from the world and firm consecration to God. St. Thomas says:

[P]urity is necessary in order that the mind be applied to God, since the human mind is soiled by contact with inferior things, even as all things depreciate by admixture with baser things, for instance, silver by being mixed with lead. Now in order for the mind to be united to the Supreme Being it must be withdrawn from inferior things: and hence it is that without purity the mind cannot be applied to God. Wherefore it is written (Hebrews 12:14): "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see God." Again, firmness is required for the mind to be applied to God, for it is applied to Him as its last end and first beginning, and such things must needs be most immovable. Hence the Apostle said (Romans 8:38-39): "I am sure that neither death, nor life . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God" (*STh*, II-II, q. 81 a. 8)

Total holiness consists in complete abandonment of one's own will to the will of God and the total renunciation of sin. This is the end result of the process of sanctification and is completed ultimately only in heaven. This is the fullness of Christian life and the reason Christ redeemed us: that we might be one with God forever without any attachment to sin.

Holiness is necessary to enter God's presence. The Epistle to the Hebrews says, "Strive for peace with all men, and for holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (Heb.12:14). This holiness must be attained either on earth or through Purgatory. It finds its fulfillment in heaven.

Universal Call to Holiness

Though holiness is perfected in the next life, it is initiated here and we are called to persevere in faith, hope and charity until the end. Christ Himself gave this commandment to all men: "Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). The Catechism teaches that all Christians, of whatever state in life, are called to pursue holiness (CCC 2012-2014). It is therefore not reserved to the canonized saints, nor the religious, nor the priests and bishops, but is for all of the baptized.

The Communion of Saints

After confessing "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church," we profess in the Creed belief in "the communion of saints." Traditionally, this communion has been viewed as a communion in spiritual goods: common possession by the faithful of the means of grace deposited by the Church and of the extraordinary gifts of grace bestowed upon the Church, and also through common participation of the faithful in the fruits of the prayers and good works of all the members of the Church. We are all interconnected by virtue of the one Spirit we share through our baptism. Pope Pius XII said in *Mystici Corporis* (1943): "There can be no good and virtuous

deed performed by individual members of the Mystical Body of Christ which does not, through the communion of saints, redound also to the welfare of all” (p. 89).

The sacred goods shared in this communion are identified by the Catechism as the communion of faith, of sacraments, of charisms, charity and even of possessions. In short, every member of the Church has access to all the spiritual riches and goods of all the others, and all benefit from the sanctification of the other.

Communion between the Three States of the Church

Christ willed that those who believe in Him should form an inner moral unity with one another, the model of which is His own unity with the Father (John 17:21). He sees Himself as a vine, and us as the grapes, which the power of the vine brings forth as fruits. This union transcends the boundary of physical death and is based in the unbreakable love of God, Who has broken the power of death.

Thus, we not only have communion with each other and with all living Catholics upon the earth, but with all Catholics who have ever existed at any time. The Church exists in three states:

- **Church Militant:** The Church upon earth, fighting against the world, flesh and the devil.
- **Church Suffering:** Those being purified in Purgatory.
- **Church Triumphant:** The Saints and the Angels in Heaven.

The first two states are temporary and will pass away at the end of time, while the third is everlasting. Because of our unity in the Spirit, we have communion with all Catholics who are in any one of these three stages.

By virtue of our baptism, we share in the priesthood of Christ, and thus are able to make intercessions and prayers for all, even those being purified in purgatory. “For there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all...I desire then that in every place men should pray, lifting up holy hands” (1 Tim. 2:5,8). We, who have the power to pray and merit, may offer prayers for the souls in Purgatory. We do not offer prayers for those in Heaven, who need no prayers, but rather invoke their prayers for us and for those in Purgatory. It is a matter of theological speculation whether or not the souls in Purgatory are able to pray or not.

Common Objections

This doctrine and practice, commonly called “praying to the saints,” is especially unsettling to Protestants, who do not accept it. There are a few standard objections to this doctrine:

Obj. 1) You are attempting to contact the dead, and Deuteronomy 18:10-11 forbids this: “Anyone who practices divination, a medium, a soothsayer, a necromancer...is an abomination to the Lord.”

Reply: The dead in Christ are different from the dead in general. God says in the Book of Revelation: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth” (Rev. 14:13), and Christ affirms that those who die in God’s friendship are not dead, but are in fact alive (“He is not the God of the dead, but of the living”- Mark 12:27). In fact, the dead in Christ are more alive than we are. The Church has never recognized this as divination or necromancy, which is the tapping into occult powers for the purpose of attaining occult knowledge and is different from petitioning the blessed in Heaven.

Obj. 2) The First Commandment says that God alone is to be worshipped. Praying to someone is a type of worship. Therefore, you are actually worshipping the saints when you pray to them and thus violate the First Commandment.

Reply: The First Commandment does indeed forbid worship of other gods, but prayer to the saints is not worshipping other gods. First, we do not “pray” to them in the proper sense, but ask for them to pray for us. Thus, we venerate, honor them and ask for their intercession, but we do not pray to them as an end in themselves. Second, there are various degrees of honor. *Latria* is the honor of adoration due to God alone; *dulia* is the relative honor given to the saints, and *hyperdulia* is the unique veneration given to Mary, Queen of Saints. God alone is worshipped; saints are venerated.

Furthermore, not all prayer is worship. Pray simply means to ask, and even in English, “I pray thee” used to be a phrase that meant “I ask you” and was commonly addressed to other persons. The use of the term “pray” has never been seen as restricted to God alone.

Obj. 3) Those in Heaven cannot see or know what is going on in the earth, and therefore it is superfluous to ask their prayers.

Reply: Scripture says that men are judged immediately after death (Heb. 9:27), and Tradition affirms that the souls of the just go immediately to Heaven where they enjoy the beatific vision and the souls of those in mortal sin go right to Hell and are subject to its torments (the souls of those needing purification, of course, going to Purgatory (*Benedictus Deus*, 1336). In Heaven, our knowledge is more perfect and complete because it is not hindered by sin and concupiscence. Therefore, it is inconceivable that our knowledge of what was going on in the world in Heaven would be *less* than it is currently on earth: “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, then I shall understand fully” (1 Cor. 13:12). Furthermore, these souls would want to know what was going on on the earth so that they could aid the Church Militant by their prayers.

Obj. 4) Why ask the saints to pray for you when you can go to God directly?

Reply: Going to God directly is a good thing, but we have to understand that when we ask the saints to pray for us, we are still ‘going to God’ because they are praying to God for us. We pray for each other on the earth and do not consider it an infringement upon the need to go to God directly, because we understand that another can go to God for us, that the prayers of two are better than one, that God rewards perseverance in prayer, that it demonstrates charity, and that “the prayers of a righteous man avail much” (James 5:16). Who is more righteous than the saints in Heaven? Therefore, while we do not strictly *need* to ask the prayers of Mary or the saints, it is in our interest to ask for them.

In the Liturgy

While the veneration of the saints and the possibility of prayers for the repose of the souls of the dead are not explicitly mentioned in Scripture, they are hinted at in several places (2 Macc. 15:11-16 being the most famous example). It was in the earliest decades of the Church in the

liturgical veneration of the martyrs that the doctrine of the communion of saints first took on its explicit form.¹

The saints are venerated several ways liturgically:

The Mass: every Mass is offered on the Feast Day of some saint, and whenever it is, the prayers of that saint are invoked and added to the merits of the Sacrifice. Beyond this, every Mass includes in its merits the merits and prayers of all the saints and angels, whether or not they are specifically invoked by name. However, Eucharistic Prayer 1 does mention several saints by name: “In union with the whole Church we honor...Peter and Paul, Andrew, James, John, Thomas, James, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Simon and Jude; we honor Linus, Cletus, Clement, Sixtus, Cornelius, Cyprian, Lawrence, Chrysogonus, John and Paul, Cosmas and Damian.”

The Litany of Saints: The Church’s litany of saints is sung on All Saints Day and on the Easter Vigil and asks for the prayers of all the saints of the Old and New Testaments.

Dedication of Churches: When a Church is dedicated liturgically, it is placed under the patronage of a specific saint. That saint is invoked as the special patron of that parish.

Baptism/Confirmation Name: One entering the Church and receiving the sacraments of initiation chooses a saint under whose patronage they will place themselves. This saint is invoked liturgically at the celebration of these sacraments.

In Devotional Life

In addition to these liturgical rites, there are innumerable other ways to venerate the saints in the private devotions which abound in the Catholic Church. The Rosary is probably the most common pious devotional, in which the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Saints, is invoked. There are numerous novenas, nine-day prayers, to certain saints (the novena to St. Jude is probably the most popular). Pilgrimages to certain places associated with the lives of the saints are forms of veneration.

The most popular form of private veneration of the saints throughout the ages has been the veneration of relics. Relics are the remains of a saint or articles closely associated with that saint. A relic may be First Class, Second Class or Third Class. A *First Class* relic is a piece of the body of a saint. *Second Class* is a piece of the saint’s clothing or other personal item, while a *Third Class* relic is something that was touched to either a First or Second Class relic. The idea behind relics is that when God sanctifies a person, He sanctifies not only their soul but their body, so that their very flesh and bone becomes holy. We see this in Sacred Scripture:

Elisha died and was buried. Now Moabite raiders used to enter the country every spring. Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man's body into Elisha's tomb. When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet (2 Kings 13:20-21).

¹ As so often happens in Church history, the Church later came to a definition of what it had always been doing.

Another famous example comes from the life of St. Paul as recorded in the Book of Acts:

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, 12so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them (Acts 19:11-12).

We must always remember that veneration of relics is no substitution for holiness of life, but is meant to go along with personal striving after sanctity as a means of grace.

Steps to Sainthood

The Church acknowledges that there are innumerable saints in Heaven whom we shall only know about when we get there; as Scripture says, they are “myriads upon myriads” (Dan. 7:10). But the saints who are publicly invoked by the Church in her liturgy are those few men and women of outstanding sanctity and virtue whose holiness has been scrutinized by the Church and whose status among the blessed have been confirmed by an infallible declaration of the Pope called a *canonization*.

Below are steps in a canonization, which can be dragged out for centuries²:

- 1) A local bishop investigates the candidate's life and writings for **evidence of heroic virtue**. The information uncovered by the bishop is sent to the Vatican.
- 2) A panel of theologians and the cardinals of the **Congregation for Cause of Saints** evaluate the candidate's life. The candidate is called **Servant of God**, which means their cause is being investigated.
- 3) If the panel approves, the pope proclaims that the candidate is **Venerable**, which means that the person is a role model of Catholic virtues and that private veneration of the candidate is permissible.
- 4) The next step toward sainthood is **beatification**, which allows a person to be honored by a particular group or region liturgically. In order to beatify a candidate, it must be shown that the person is responsible for a posthumous miracle. Martyrs -- those who died for their religious cause -- can be beatified without evidence of a miracle. Beatified saints are called “blesseds” (Lat. *beati*).
- 5) In order for the candidate to be considered a saint, there must be scientific, demonstrable proof of a second posthumous miracle. If there is, the person is **canonized**, which means that they are declared a saint of the Universal Church and their veneration is commanded throughout the Church.

² Like St. Joan of Arc, who was martyred in 1431 and not canonized until 1920.

For Further Reading: 2 Kings 13:20-21; 2 Maccabees 15:11-16; Heb. 12:12-17; St. Thomas Aquinas, *STh*, II-II, q. 81 a. 8; Pope Benedict XII, *Benedictus Deus* (1336); Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis* (1943); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 828-829, 946-959, 2012-2014; Patrick Madrid, *Any Friend of God's is a Friend of Mine*