



Boston Catholic Journal



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Why do Catholics Pray to Mary and the Saints?

“We are Surrounded by a Cloud of Witnesses”

“And therefore we also have so great a cloud of witnesses over our head, “laying aside every weight and sin which surrounds us, let us run by patience to the fight proposed to us.” (Hebrews 12.1)

Catholics are often asked why they pray to the Blessed Virgin Mary, or to the Saints. In a way, it is difficult to understand this question because it often comes from people who claim to have read Sacred Scripture, and who hold themselves to be quite familiar with it. Most often it is asked in sincerity and charity, but often enough in disdain. Such a practice — that is to say, *intercessory prayer* (from the

Latin, “*intercessionem*” or a “going between”) —is often regarded as something verging upon, if not tantamount to, superstition at best or sheer ignorance at worst. It is regarded as a vestige of medieval spirituality fostered by the Church at a time when literacy was not wide-spread — a superstition that would be quickly dispelled once the Latin Vulgate was translated into the vernacular and such a practice would quickly be revealed as uncorroborated by the Bible.

The first happened, but the second did not. Why?

It is, to Catholics, a thoroughly perplexing question because the answer lies precisely in Sacred Scripture; an answer, moreover, that accords with both reason and common sense.

Let us answer it, then, not simply as *we* understand it, but as the earliest Christians understood it, as the Apostles themselves understood it. St. Paul tells us the following:

“You helping withal in prayer for us: that for this gift obtained for us, by the means of many persons, thanks may be given by many in our behalf.” (2 Corinthians 1.11)

St. James, likewise exhorts us to:

“... pray one for another, that you may be saved.” (St. James 5.16)

We see clearly the exhortation of two of the Apostles to pray for one another.

Despite this, the question persists: “Why should we pray for each other if it is sufficient to pray directly to God?”

Should we be praying directly to God? Of course.

But we *also* see that we can assist another by petitioning God on their behalf. This is part of what Catholics understand in the beautiful doctrine of **the Communion of the Saints**, or the unity of all God’s children — both those alive, and those who have died — who form the One Body of Christ, which is His Holy Catholic Church: *both those living and those who have died*. Christ was very clear about this when He told the Sadducees,

“Concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken
by God,
saying to you: I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of
Jacob?
He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” (St. Matthew 22.31-32)

Christ is telling the Sadducees that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are not dead, after all — but alive!

In the Parable of the rich man and Lazarus, we find that Lazarus is alive in Heaven, and the rich man in Hell (St. Luke 16.19-31), and even though in Hell, the rich man implores Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers. To what end would he seek this if there is no communion between the living and those who have died and are in Heaven — in this case, Lazarus?

We see, then, that the living have a vital connection to those who died before them.

Unlike the case with the rich man, forever condemned to Hell, how much more so can those who are still living by the grace of God petition those in Heaven to help them in their needs?

To understand this more clearly, we need a deeper understanding of *The Communion of the Saints*. It is the *living* relationship between *the Church Militant on Earth* (those now living on Earth fighting as good soldiers of Christ ¹), *the Church Suffering* (the souls in Purgatory, or those assured of Heaven but not yet prepared to enter it), and *the Church Triumphant* (those already in Heaven). These are not three Churches, but one Church, and each person, either in Heaven, on Earth, or in Purgatory, can assist, pray for, the other. Those in Heaven, of course, do not need *our* prayers, but *they* can — and do — pray, petition, for us. And those in Purgatory can be prayed for by the living (as well as those in Heaven), and they in turn can pray for us (the living, or the Church Militant on Earth). We are always and forever one and inseparable in Christ Jesus.

UNCHANGING MAN

Consider this: when we die and (hopefully) go to Heaven, do we become different people from the people that we are now? Do we cease loving those whom we now love? Do we forget those for whom we now care? If we did, then we would be *different* persons from the persons that we are on Earth. We would be, in a word, less than human, for it is part of our human nature to ever love whom we love and to be mindful of those we love. It is indefeasible to love and therefore indefeasible to man. If we are becoming perfect through Purgatory, or are already

perfected in our humanity in Heaven — how could we be *less human* than we are now? Would we consider a person *perfected* or *perfect* — who no longer loves whom they loved on Earth, and who is no longer mindful of them nor cares any longer for them? We would say of such that they did not love us after all, for when apart from us they completely forget us. We are created in the *imago Dei*, in the image of God — Who *Is* Love — in Heaven, then, will we be *less* like God or *more* like God — Who *Is* Love? Will we love more perfectly, or less perfectly?

If imperfect, selfish and sinful people on Earth can love others and be mindful of them, ever solicitous of them, never forgetting them, and always striving to do good for them — *how much more so when we are perfect in Heaven?*

In the end, you really know nothing of love until you really know something of the Communion of the Saints. Some of them have gone before you, and some remain with you, but all of them *never* cease loving you.

¹ 2 Timothy 2.4

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