

The Communion of Saints

Why Christians Ask the Prayers of Those Who Have Gone Before

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I. The Question Beneath the Practice

Few Catholic practices are objected to more sharply, or misunderstood more completely, than asking the saints to pray for us. To Jehovah's Witnesses it is not a devotional eccentricity but a species of idolatry: prayer is worship, worship belongs to God alone, and the dead in any case are unconscious and cannot hear. To many Protestants it is at best a distraction from Christ and at worst a rival to Him.

The objection is worth stating in its full strength, because a weak version of it is not worth answering. It runs like this. Scripture calls God the Hearer of prayer. It forbids consulting the dead in terms that could hardly be plainer. It names one mediator between God and men. It calls all believers saints, and knows nothing of a canonized elite. And it warns

against images in the very Decalogue. Set those five together and the Catholic practice looks not merely unnecessary but forbidden.

This essay answers each. But it is worth saying at the outset that they are not five independent objections. They stand or fall together on one prior question, and if that question goes the Catholic way the rest lose most of their force. The question is whether the Christian dead are alive.

II. Are They Alive?

Everything depends on this, so it is worth doing carefully. If the faithful departed are unconscious, or have ceased to exist until a future re-creation, then asking their prayers is not idolatry so much as futility — speaking to someone who is not there. The Watchtower argument is therefore not really about prayer at all. It is about anthropology.

Christ settled the point in an argument He selected Himself, against opponents who denied the resurrection. Pressed by the Sadducees with a riddle about a woman married to seven brothers, He answered from a text they accepted, and the argument turns entirely on a verb tense:

“And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.” (Matthew 22:31–32)

God spoke those words to Moses at the burning bush, centuries after the patriarchs had died. If Abraham had ceased to exist, the sentence would have had to run in the past tense. Luke preserves the conclusion in a form that leaves no room at all: “for all live to him” (Luke 20:38). Whatever else may be said about the state of the dead, Christ’s own argument requires that they be alive to God now.

The rest of the New Testament assumes the same thing without arguing for it. Paul is torn between remaining and departing, and calls departing “far better” (Philippians 1:23) — a comparison that collapses into nonsense if departing means unconsciousness, since a sleeper gains nothing by sleeping. He is confident that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8). John sees under the altar the souls of those slain for the word of God, conscious, crying out, answered, and given white robes (Revelation 6:9–11). And on the mountain Moses and Elijah, dead for centuries, appear alive and in conversation with Christ about His coming exodus at Jerusalem (Luke 9:30–31).

The prior question is argued at length on the companion page on the soul, and it is not repeated here. What matters for this essay is the consequence. Grant that the Christian

dead live, and the practice under discussion stops being a conversation with the nonexistent and becomes a conversation within a family.

III. Do They Know What Happens Here?

That they are alive does not by itself establish that they can hear us. Scripture is less explicit here, but not silent, and what it does say points consistently in one direction.

Christ tells us that repentance on earth is known in heaven as it happens: “there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Luke 15:10). Not joy in general over the salvation of the world, but joy over one sinner — particular, individual, and evidently known.

The letter to the Hebrews goes further. Having spent a chapter naming the faithful dead one after another — Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, David, the prophets — it turns to the living and says:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.” (Hebrews 12:1)

The word rendered witnesses is *martyres*, which does not mean spectators but those who testify. And the image is not of a distant memory but of a crowd surrounding a runner. Whatever the writer meant, he did not mean that the faithful dead are absent.

Most directly of all, Revelation twice shows the prayers of Christians on earth being handled in heaven by someone other than the one praying. The twenty-four elders fall before the Lamb, each holding a harp and “golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints” (Revelation 5:8). Later an angel is given much incense to offer “with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar before the throne” (Revelation 8:3–4). Whatever the imagery signifies in detail, heaven in these scenes is aware of what the Church on earth is asking, and is occupied with it.

The sharper form of the objection says that hearing many prayers at once would require something like omniscience, and that “they see it in God” is a construction Scripture nowhere states. Two things in reply. First, the objection quietly assumes that the blessed hear as earthly ears hear, one voice at a time, bounded by language and distance—but the glorified are not under the limits of the unglorified any more than the risen body is (1 Cor. 15:42–44), and how much a soul beholding God can know is not a question the objector can settle from below. Second, the construction is not built on nothing: Scripture shows creatures in heaven knowing particular earthly events as they happen—joy before the angels over one sinner repenting (Luke 15:10), bowls holding the prayers of the saints (Rev. 5:8). No omniscience is claimed for anyone; what is claimed is that God, who hears

the prayers, is not stingy about sharing what He hears with His friends. The theology explains the data; it did not invent them.

As for Calvin's account of the practice's origin—anxious believers seeking gentler patrons than Christ—the archaeology tells another story: the earliest petitions to the saints are scratched on the walls of the Roman catacombs, asking Peter and Paul to pray for the dead, in the age of the martyrs and centuries before medieval anxiety had anything to be anxious about. The practice was born not of doubt about Christ's mercy but of confidence that His friends were alive in Him.

IV. Intercession Is Not Necromancy

Now to the sharpest charge. The Law forbids consulting the dead, and does so repeatedly and without qualification:

“There shall not be found among you any one who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, any one who practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer.” (Deuteronomy 18:10–11)

Leviticus repeats the prohibition (Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27), and Saul's visit to the medium at Endor stands in Scripture as a warning rather than a precedent (1 Samuel 28). If asking a saint to pray falls under these texts, the case is closed and no further argument is needed.

It does not fall under them, and the reason is visible in the texts themselves. What they forbid is *necromancy*: an attempt to summon the dead by ritual technique, in order to obtain hidden knowledge, from a power God has not authorized. Every element of that description is doing work. Isaiah makes the animating principle explicit when he rebukes Israel for the practice:

“And when they say to you, ‘Consult the mediums and the wizards who chirp and mutter,’ should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?” (Isaiah 8:19)

The complaint is not that Israel spoke to the dead rather than saying nothing. It is that Israel went to the dead *instead of going to God*. Necromancy is a rival to prayer; it is a way of getting what one wants without asking the Almighty for it.

Asking a saint to pray is the opposite act at every point. Nothing is summoned, and no technique compels anyone to appear. No hidden knowledge is sought; nothing is asked except intercession, and intercession is a request that God be petitioned. Far from bypassing God, it multiplies the petitions directed to Him. The medium seeks information

the dead are supposed to supply on their own authority. The Christian asks a prayer that God alone will answer.

There is a further consideration, and it is not a debating point. If speaking with the departed were as such the forbidden thing, then the Transfiguration would convict Christ of it, since Moses and Elijah had been dead for centuries and He spoke with them in the presence of three witnesses. Whatever the prohibition means, it cannot mean that.

V. The One Mediator

The verse most often quoted against the practice is Paul's:

“For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.” (1 Timothy 2:5–6)

Read in isolation the verse looks decisive. Read in its paragraph it cannot be, because three verses earlier Paul writes this:

“First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions.” (1 Timothy 2:1–2)

Paul urges intercession and then names one mediator, in the same breath and the same argument. He evidently saw no contradiction, and if there is none between verses 1 and 5 there is none between the practice and the doctrine.

The resolution is that the two words are not doing the same work. Christ's mediation is unique, unrepeatable, and constitutive: He alone is God and man, He alone offered the sacrifice, and no creature contributes anything whatever to the redemption He accomplished. The Church has never claimed otherwise, and the moment anyone does claim otherwise he has left Catholic teaching behind. Intercessory prayer is not a second channel of redemption running alongside the first. It is a participation in the one — a way of being drawn into what Christ is doing, not a way of supplementing it.

That this is Paul's own view is evident from how freely he asks for it. He begs the Romans to “strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf” (Romans 15:30). He tells the Corinthians that God delivered him, “you also helping us by prayer” (2 Corinthians 1:11). He asks the Ephesians to pray for him that utterance may be given him (Ephesians 6:18–19), the Colossians to pray that God may open a door for the word (Colossians 4:3), and the Thessalonians simply: “brethren, pray for us” (1 Thessalonians 5:25). James adds that “the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects” (James 5:16).

If asking a fellow Christian to pray usurps the one mediator, the apostle usurped Him in nearly every letter he wrote. Nobody believes that. What follows is that the objection,

pressed consistently, proves far too much — and an argument that proves too much has proved nothing.

VI. One Body, Not Two

Which brings the disagreement to its real location. No Christian denies that believers on earth may ask one another for prayer; the New Testament commands it. So the claim must be narrower: that death severs the connection, so that a believer who prayed for you last week cannot be asked this week, because he has died in the meantime.

Paul denies exactly that, and he does it in the most emphatic sentence he ever wrote:

“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.” (Romans 8:38–39)

Death heads the list. If it cannot separate a Christian from the love of God in Christ, it is difficult to see how it separates him from the Christians who are also in Christ. Paul’s doctrine of the body says the same: “if one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together” (1 Corinthians 12:26). A body whose members drop out of communication at death is not the body he describes.

This is all the communion of saints means. It is not an extra doctrine added to the creed but a refusal to draw a line through the middle of the Church that Christ never drew. The Church on earth, the Church being purified, and the Church in glory are one Church in three conditions, and the traffic of prayer runs freely among them.

VII. The Witness of the Catacombs

The practice is sometimes described as a medieval accretion. The physical evidence says otherwise, and it is unusually direct, because the earliest Christians left their prayers scratched on walls.

The Roman catacombs preserve inscriptions in which Christians ask the departed to pray for them, in wording that leaves little room for reinterpretation — requests that a named martyr or relative *pray for* the living, sometimes for named children. These are not theological treatises composed to settle a controversy. They are graffiti and grave markers, written by ordinary believers, some of them within living memory of the persecutions that produced the martyrs they address.

The significance is in the ordinariness. A doctrine invented by later authority and imposed downward leaves its traces first in official documents. A practice that rises from the faith

of ordinary Christians leaves its traces first exactly where these are found: on the walls of burial places, in the hand of people who were not writing for publication.

VIII. The Fathers on the Prayers of the Saints

The literary evidence runs alongside the archaeological. Origen, in the third century, writes of the departed saints praying for those still in the struggle. Cyprian of Carthage, writing to a fellow bishop around the middle of the same century, proposes that whichever of them should die first will pray for the other — a pact that makes no sense unless both expected the dead to be able to pray. Cyril of Jerusalem, instructing catechumens in the fourth century, explains that at the Eucharist the Church commemorates the martyrs “that God, by their prayers and intercessions, may receive our petition.” Augustine treats the intercession of the martyrs as an ordinary part of Christian life and distinguishes it carefully from the worship offered to God alone.

What is striking about these witnesses is not their eloquence but their casualness. None of them argues for the intercession of the saints as a novelty requiring defense. They mention it in passing, while doing something else, in the way a writer mentions what everybody already assumes.

IX. Worship, Honor, and the Words for Them

A great deal of confusion would be avoided if the words were kept straight, and the tradition has kept them straight for a very long time.

The worship due to God alone is *latria*. It is the adoration owed to the Creator by the creature, and it may be offered to nothing and to nobody else; to offer it to any creature, however exalted, is idolatry in the strict sense. The honor paid to the saints is *dulia*, from the word for service or respect — the regard due to excellence, and in this case to God’s own work in a human life. The particular honor paid to the mother of Christ is sometimes called *hyperdulia*: *dulia* raised to its highest degree, but not for that reason a lesser sort of *latria*. Between *dulia* and *latria* there is not a difference of degree but a difference of kind.

Augustine draws the distinction, and Aquinas gives it its settled form: religion renders to God what is God’s, and the honor shown to the saints terminates in God, whose grace made them what they are. That is why Catholic prayer to a saint is, grammatically and theologically, a request rather than an act of adoration. The Church asks the saint to pray; she does not ask the saint to save.

It is fair to say that this distinction has often been obscured in practice by popular devotion, and that abuses have existed and have been condemned. But a rule is not refuted by its violations, and the Church's teaching on the point has never been ambiguous.

X. Images and the Commandment

The charge from the Decalogue can be answered briefly, because Scripture answers it directly. The commandment forbids making images to serve as gods:

“You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them.” (Exodus 20:4–5)

If that prohibits religious imagery as such, then God contradicted Himself within five chapters, for He commanded the golden cherubim to be made and set over the mercy seat (Exodus 25:18–20), cherubim to be woven into the veil of the tabernacle (Exodus 26:1), and a bronze serpent to be raised on a pole so that Israel might look at it and live (Numbers 21:8–9). Solomon's temple was carved throughout with cherubim, palm trees, and open flowers (1 Kings 6:29), at God's own direction.

The decisive case is the bronze serpent, because Scripture records both its making and its destruction. God commanded it; centuries later Hezekiah broke it in pieces, because by then the people were burning incense to it (2 Kings 18:4). The same object was righteous when it pointed beyond itself and idolatrous when it was worshipped. That is precisely the line the commandment draws, and precisely the line the Church draws — which is what the Second Council of Nicaea defined in 787, when it taught that the honor given to an image passes to the one it represents, and that the image itself receives no worship at all.

Christ Himself gave the bronze serpent its Christian meaning: “as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up” (John 3:14). An image can point to God. That is what images are for.

XI. What Canonization Claims

One objection remains, and it is a fair one: the New Testament calls all Christians saints, and nowhere describes a process of canonization. Paul writes to the saints at Rome, at Corinth, at Ephesus, at Philippi — meaning the believers there, not a subset of unusually holy ones.

The Catholic Church affirms that usage rather than contesting it. The communion of saints is the whole body of the faithful, living and dead; it is not a club within the Church.

Canonization does not confer sanctity, manufacture a saint, or promote anyone to a rank. It is a judgment, and a narrow one: that this particular Christian is with God, and that his life may safely be held up for imitation.

Both halves of that have New Testament warrant. Paul asks the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1), the Philippians to mark those who so live (Philippians 3:17), and Hebrews tells its readers to remember their leaders, consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith (Hebrews 13:7). Holding up particular Christians as examples is an apostolic instruction, not a later invention. Canonization is that instruction carried out with care.

XII. Conclusion: A Family Death Has Not Divided

The objections examined here are serious, and each rests on a text that says what it is said to say. The Law does forbid consulting the dead. Paul does name one mediator. The Decalogue does forbid idols. The New Testament does call all believers saints.

What each argument requires, however, is an additional premise that Scripture does not supply: that asking a prayer is consulting; that intercession is mediation; that an image is an idol; that recognizing a saint is inventing one. Remove those premises and the texts stand undisturbed, and so does the practice.

Beneath them all lies the question of whether the Christian dead are alive, and there Christ Himself has spoken. God is not God of the dead but of the living, and to Him all live. If that is true, then the Church has not been divided by death, and the oldest Christian instinct — scratched on the walls of the catacombs by people who had watched their friends die for the faith — turns out to be the reasonable one. When you are in trouble, you ask the people who love you to pray for you. Some of them have died. They love you still.

Endnotes

1. On the prior question of the soul's survival, see the companion essay and web page on the state of the dead. The argument of this essay presupposes it and does not repeat it.
2. Matthew 22:23–33, with Mark 12:18–27 and Luke 20:27–40. Christ quotes Exodus 3:6. Luke's addition, "for all live to him" (20:38), is the sharpest form of the conclusion.
3. Philippians 1:21–24; 2 Corinthians 5:6–8; Revelation 6:9–11; Luke 9:28–31, where Luke specifies the subject of the conversation on the mountain.
4. Luke 15:7 and 15:10, in the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin. The joy is located "before the angels of God," that is, in heaven.

5. Hebrews 11:4–12:1. The Greek *martys* denotes one who bears witness; the English “witnesses” preserves this, though it is easily read as “spectators.”
6. Revelation 5:8 and 8:3–4. In both scenes the prayers of the saints on earth are held or offered by someone other than the one praying.
7. Deuteronomy 18:10–12; Leviticus 19:31; 20:6, 27; Isaiah 8:19; 1 Samuel 28:3–25. The Endor narrative is told as an account of Saul’s apostasy, not as a model.
8. Matthew 17:1–8; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36. The point is not that the Transfiguration licenses any practice, but that it rules out the broadest reading of the prohibition.
9. 1 Timothy 2:1–6 read as a single argument. On requests for the prayers of others, Romans 15:30; 2 Corinthians 1:11; Ephesians 6:18–19; Colossians 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:25; James 5:16.
10. Romans 8:38–39; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27. On the three conditions of the one Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§946–962, and Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 49–51.
11. On the catacomb inscriptions, see the standard collections of early Christian epigraphy; the requests for the prayers of the departed are numerous and are not confined to one site.
12. Origen, *On Prayer* 11; Cyprian, *Letters* 60.5, proposing the mutual pact of intercession; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 23.9; Augustine, *City of God* 22.10, distinguishing the sacrifice offered to God from the memorials of the martyrs.
13. On *latria* and *dulia*, Augustine, *City of God* 10.1; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 84, a. 1, and q. 103, a. 3–4. On the honor of the saints terminating in God, *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§956, 2132.
14. Exodus 20:4–5 with Exodus 25:18–20; 26:1; Numbers 21:8–9; 1 Kings 6:23–29; 2 Kings 18:4; John 3:14. The Second Council of Nicaea (787) defined that the honor rendered to an image passes to its prototype.
15. Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1 for the wide use of “saints.” On imitation of particular Christians, 1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; Philippians 3:17; Hebrews 6:12; 13:7.

For Further Reading

Behold Your Mother—A Biblical and Historical Defense of the Marian Doctrines, by Tim Staples.

Rethinking Mary In the New Testament, by Edward Sri.

Was There a Great Apostasy?

Mary and the Fathers of the Church—The Blessed Virgin Mary in Patristic Thought, by Luigi Gambero.

Mary at the Crossroads of History, by Rev. Francis J. Hoffman, J.C.D.

Hail, Holy Queen: The Mother of God in the Word of God, by Scott Hahn.

A Complete Mariology, by C. X. J. M. Friethoff, O.P.—out of print; available used via AbeBooks.

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*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.