

Vatican II and the Year of Faith
*My Favorite Question about the Catholic Faith:
Why Pray to the Saints?*

My favorite question about the Catholic faith is "Why pray to the saints? Why not just pray to God alone?" I love this question because if you can understand the answer, the rest of the faith follows quite easily. The reason is that our life with the saints is part and parcel of what it means to be saved. God does not want to save us as unrelated individuals, but as a family. He wants us to meet Christ in the fellowship of His Body, the Church. He wants us to have friendships that transcend time, space, and death. Nearly everything that non-Catholics find difficult about our faith - not only saints, but the sacraments, the hierarchy, the Blessed Mother - they all flow from this reality.

As a non-Catholic, I encountered this view of salvation in the writings of the Church Fathers. I was particularly moved by these words of St. Gregory of Nyssa, "He who beholds the Church really beholds Christ." But as I studied, I realized that this is not something the Catholic Church made up in the early centuries. It is the biblical view of salvation.

In the Old Testament, we encounter the idea that God desires to save all of humanity by way of a family, a covenant. This is especially true of the covenant with Abraham: "and in him all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." (Genesis 22:18) But it is preeminently true of the covenant in Christ. "That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ." (Ephesians 1:10)

Scripture also teaches that this family relationship transcends time and space. We receive love and benefits even from those members who have gone on to the next life. Scripture testifies to this in such places as 2 Kings 13:20-21, 2 Maccabees 15:12-16, and Tobit 12:12-15. Two of the clearest images of this reality are found in Revelation 5:8, and Revelation 8:4. These texts depict the saints and angels in heaven as offering up the prayers of the saints on earth:

The twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. . . .The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand.

It is obvious from these texts that the Church in heaven cares for and offers up the prayers of the Church on earth. Compare these passages in Revelation to what we find in the book of Tobit. The angel Raphael tells Tobit:

Now when you, Tobit, and Sarah prayed, it was I who presented the record of your prayer before the Glory of the Lord. (Tobit 12:12-15)

Similarly, we see in 2 Maccabees 15 that the Prophet Jeremiah, though long dead, was praying fervently for the people of God. Finally, 2 Kings 13:20-21 records that even the relics of Elisha the prophet brought about miraculous cures for the people of God on earth.

From these passages of Scripture, it should come as no surprise that the earliest Christians continued the Jewish practice of seeking the prayers and intercession of the saints. In fact, the practice was so widespread that historians chart the progress of Christianity in the ancient world by reference to the veneration of saints and martyrs. (On this topic, see Peter Brown's excellent book, *The Cult of Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*.)

Many non-Catholics get very nervous about our prayers to the saints. They worry that this detracts somehow from our devotion to Christ. The truth, however, is far different. St. Paul teaches that the sufferings, comforts, and graces of Christ flow into our lives that we may help others by our prayers. (2 Corinthians 1:3-11) It is only because of the merits of Christ that we share this relationship of mutual prayer and intercession. By asking the saints to pray, we do not detract from the glory of Christ. Rather, we celebrate its fruitfulness in the life of the Church.

Once you understand the Church's teaching about the saints, the rest of the Catholic faith follows almost as a matter of course. Though Catholics seek to have a "personal relationship with Jesus," we find Jesus primarily through our fellowship with His Body the Church. The Second Vatican Council taught, "In that Body the life of Christ is poured into the believers who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden and real way to Christ who suffered and was glorified." (*Lumen Gentium*) By celebrating our life with the saints, we bear witness to Christ's presence in His Body, the Church. This is the doctrine of both Scripture *and* Tradition.