

## Prayer to the Saints

### The Resurrection

#### **Why do Christians pray to the Saints? Describe their attitude and expectations in these prayers. Why is this prayer so misunderstood by non-Orthodox?**

All who profess Christ, whether they be Orthodox or not, commonly ask one another to pray for them. It is a duty of Christians to pray for one another. This is easily seen in scripture. St Paul professes his intent to pray for his flock in every letter. James, the Brother of the Lord tells us:

“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much.” (James 5:16)

We will see that this instruction also helps explain why we ask those who have departed to pray for us – it is a very important verse.

Christians live in the knowledge that those who have passed on are not dead or insensible, and since "God is the God of the living, and not the dead", they naturally turn to the Saints for intercession, and place more confidence in their prayers than those fellow Christians who have not completed their earthly sojourn.

Jesus Christ came that we might have life. The church has always understood that all life comes from God, and the soul, which is created at the moment of conception, never ceases to exist after its creation. Death of the soul is not it being blotted out of existence, but its separation from God – not a literal separation because of course, the scripture teaches that God is everywhere – but to be in the presence of God, as a sinner who cannot endure the light.

The point is this: the soul remains aware, and can see and hear, and think and know and understand after the death of the body. At the consummation of all things, the soul will be reunited with the body. St Paul clearly teaches this, and the church has always understood it:

For this we say unto you by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. <sup>(16)</sup> For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise first: <sup>(17)</sup> Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord. (1Th 4:15-17)

Let's return to the verse we quoted above, that God is the God of the living and not the dead. This is an expression, directly from the lips of our Lord, that states that the soul will never cease to exist. It was a surprising and provocative statement to those He said it to, especially the

Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection. Jesus said it as part of His reply to the ridiculous example given to him, about the woman who had 7 husbands:

“The same day came to him the Sadducees, which say that there is no resurrection, and asked him, (24) Saying, Master, Moses said, If a man die, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife, and raise up seed unto his brother. (25) Now there were with us seven brethren: and the first, when he had married a wife, deceased, and, having no issue, left his wife unto his brother: (26) Likewise the second also, and the third, unto the seventh. (27) And last of all the woman died also. (28) Therefore in the resurrection whose wife shall she be of the seven? for they all had her. (29) Jesus answered and said unto them, Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God. (30) For in the resurrection they neither marry, nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in heaven. (31) But as touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, (32) I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? **God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.** (33) And when the multitude heard this, **they were astonished at his doctrine.**” (Mat 22:23-33)

To this day, there are many still “astonished at His doctrine”, even among Christians. The implications of the resurrection are not well understood. Those who die in the flesh are not dead – their soul lives and is aware. The church has always understood this.

There are many who profess faith in Christ but have almost no knowledge of the intercession of the Saints, and even eschew this intimate knowledge and heavenly intercourse as blasphemy. There are several reasons for this, including prejudice, a lack of grounding in Christian Tradition, misunderstanding of Scripture, and the abuses of Rome, but the primary reason is that they do not fully understand the resurrection, and its implications!

The Saints are not asleep or "dead". Our Lord Himself told us clearly that *"God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."* (Mat 22:32). The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob (Cf. Mat 22:32) once appeared transfigured on a mountain, with two of his favored ones (Moses and Elias) appearing very much alive next to Him. This clearly shows that the "dead" are even more filled with knowledge and activity than the living, as the apostles Peter, James and John could not withstand the uncreated light which came forth from Christ, but Moses and Elijah basked in it. Therefore, the departed Saints have greater vision and knowledge and their intercessory boldness is greater for them without their bodies, than when they were in the flesh. This important understanding is elementary knowledge for the Church, but has passed from many of those outside of her.

A Christian has great reverence in approaching the Saints, since the Saints have been shown by God to be "more than conquerors". Of course, the word “saint” means “holy” and we are all called to be saints in the scripture (Rom 1:7, 1 Cor 1:2), but it is very clear that among Christians, some

have “fought the good fight” more than others, and some have borne fruit more than others: “some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.” (Mat 13:23)

We are in awe of their exploits, and recognize the grace of God clearly in their witness and struggle. This is also natural, even in the world. Men honor others who have performed great deeds, such as a brave general, or wise statesman. Since we are in awe of the Saints, we render them honor when we ask their intercession, even more so than we would honor a great man in the flesh. In every communication with the Saints, we see the light of Christ, and rejoice in it, and do it honor.

We know that prayer to the Saints, (or put in a way that is less offensive to those who do not live fully in the knowledge of the resurrection and the Saints, *"asking their intercession"*) is pleasing to God, because of the witness of the Scriptures and the abundant experience of the church. Because we are assured that such prayers are pleasing, and because we recognize the great grace that God has bestowed upon His Saints, we have great confidence when we ask their intercessions.

"In invoking the intercession of the saints, the Church believes that the saints, who interceded with the Lord for the peace of the world and for the stability of the holy churches of Christ while living, do not cease doing this in Christ's heavenly, triumphant Church, and listen to our entreaties in which we invoke them, and pray to the Lord, and become bearers of the grace and mercy of the Lord." St. Nectarios of Pentapolis, *Modern Orthodox Saints*, Vol. 7 by. Constantine Cavarnos

"We ought to have the most lively spiritual union with the heavenly inhabitants, with all the saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs, prelates, venerable and righteous men, as they are all members of one single body, the Church of Christ, to which we sinners also belong, and the living Head of which is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself. This is why we call upon them in prayer, converse with them, thank and praise them. It is urgently necessary for all Christians to be in union with them, if they desire to make Christian progress; for the saints are our friends, our guides to salvation, who pray and intercede for us." St. John of Kronstadt, *My Life in Christ*.

Partially because they do not understand that the Saints are alive, conscious and active, those who eschew prayer to the Saints misinterpret the reverence Orthodox show to the saints. Many get stuck on the word "pray", thinking that this word only applies to God, and any other use of it should make them rend their clothes. This is, of course, a misunderstanding, brought about by centuries of sectarianism and prejudice. "To pray" is merely "to ask". We ask the Saints to intercede for us, and any examination of our writings and liturgical texts shows that we understand that worship is for God alone.

The abuses of Rome also had a deleterious effect on the Protestant understanding of prayer to the Saints. Rome became very corrupt after the schism, both morally and theologically. A doctrine

of "superogatory works" was invented, and "indulgences" were sold. This false doctrine, perhaps more than any other abuse of Rome, has poisoned the understanding of Protestants regarding the Saints. In very simple terms, this false doctrine is as follows:

A certain amount of "good works" are supposedly needed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Let us affix this as some arbitrary number, say 1000 points. The Saints far exceeded this number, and had "points to give". The poor sinners, such as you and me, who cannot attain to all these good works, may pay to be granted "indulgences", which increase our "point total". Although this explanation may seem silly and mocking, it is essentially the doctrine of Rome till this day. The original "Protestants" reacted quite rightly against this abuse, but they did not understand the correct view concerning the intercessions of the Saints, and over time, their disavowal of this Latin abuse became a caricature of itself, and most now spout almost mantra-like that a Christian "needs no mediator" save Jesus Christ, believing that the scripture they refer to (*"For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus"* (1 Tim 2:5)) forbids prayer to the Saints.

It is ironic that those who refuse to ask the Saints to intercede for them on ideological grounds ask those who are still among the living, among their family and friends, to pray for them. This latter action is wholly correct, as fellow believers naturally want to pray for those they love. The prayer of the living, however, is not as powerful as the prayer of the Saints, as the Scripture tells us: *"... The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."* (James 5:16) Therefore, those who do not want to settle for "second best", and therefore pray "directly to God", actually DO settle for second best, when they ask their sinful companions, who are still struggling with their passions in the flesh, to pray for them, instead of asking those who have passed on and are more righteous.

There is much more, and the experience of the church bears this out. We are a living body, and therefore, God continues to reveal Himself, among and with His believed. We have a comprehensive calendar of Saints, and remember them, and read about their exploits, and strive to emulate them. Of course, this is wholly scriptural, as Paul told his beloved flock:

“Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.” (1Co 11:1)

Reference: [http://www.orthodox.net/questions/sunday\\_of\\_all\\_saints\\_1.html](http://www.orthodox.net/questions/sunday_of_all_saints_1.html)