

The Communion of Saints

... have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God said to him, "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. ~ Mark 12:26-27

IN THE APOSTLES' CREED, we profess our belief in "the communion of saints." This profession immediately follows profession of belief in "the holy catholic Church," for the Church is the Body of Christ (see 1 Cor 12:27). God is the God of the living, not the dead, so we know that all the faithful, whether still on their earthly pilgrimage, or having passed through the gate of death into eternal life and are in Purgatory or in Heaven, are united as members of the Body of Christ, for there *"is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all"* (Eph 4:4-6).

The **Church Militant** is the faithful on earth who continue to run *"the race that is set before us"* (Heb 12:1). We are in the midst of a battle: *"For though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war"* (2 Cor 10:3). This battle for the souls of the faithful is raging constantly: *"For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the Heavenly places"* (Eph 6:12). The **Church Suffering** is those who have died and are being purified in Purgatory (see handout on Purgatory). And the **Church Triumphant** is the saints, both those known to us and those known to God alone, in the glory of God in Heaven. The Church on earth shares a real though

invisible communion with the souls in Purgatory and the saints in Heaven, and expressions of faith in this communion have marked the prayers of the Church since its beginning.

We experience the communion of saints in the faith handed down from the apostles, which is only enriched by being shared with each other and with those who have not yet heard the Gospel. The graces of the sacraments, made available to us through the salvific actions of Christ and made present to us

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Baptism brings us into the family God as adopted sons and daughters of our one Heavenly Father

through the ongoing ministry of the Church, sanctify the whole Body of Christ. The sacrament of the Eucharist, especially, is not only the sign of our bond with each other but creates and strengthens it as well. As Scripture says, *"we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every joint with which it is*

supplied, when each part is working properly, makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love" (Eph 4:15-16).

The Church is governed by one Spirit, so the riches of Christ necessarily become a common fund available to all. This is true not only of spiritual goods, but of material goods as well, for the true Christian regards material goods as gifts from God. Our possessions are intended not to build up our own material wealth but to help build up the entire Body of Christ by helping others who are in need, especially the poor. The talents and capabilities we are given are also intended

for the good of the Church: *"To each of us is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good"* (1 Cor 12:7). There is no wall between the spiritual and the material life of the Body of Christ, between our own private good and the good of all. It is for this reason that the sin of one person wounds all of us, and why we share not only glory, but also suffering (see 1 Cor 12:26).

It is nearly universal to pray for others, and to ask others to pray for us. This is an expression of our solidarity in the faith. St. Paul encouraged prayer on others' behalf: *"Pray at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints"* (Eph 6:18). (The "saints" in this verse refers to faithful Christians on earth, not the holy ones of Heaven.) In this way, we work together to build up and strengthen the Body of Christ. Prayer for one another is not only on behalf of the faithful, however, for Jesus commanded us to pray for those who persecute us as well (see Mt 5:44). Our love of neighbor must know no bounds.

The prayers of the faithful for each other are a form of exchange of spiritual goods. St. Paul tells us that his suffering has meaning: *"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church"* (Col 1:24). What can possibly be lacking in Jesus' perfect sacrifice? It is our own contributions which, insignificant in themselves when set beside the infinite sufferings of our Lord, are given value because we choose to offer them for the good of the whole Church. Our Lord's sufferings were sufficient in themselves to accomplish our salvation, but God allows us to participate in Christ's salvific action. Children are allowed to "help" Mommy and Daddy even when their contributions are not necessary to get chores done. Their participation is important for the development of a sense of family; it creates a true family spirit and allows each child an opportunity to give to the whole, however small that contribution might



Madonna and Child, by Paul Kerrer

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be. In the same way, our Heavenly Father has made our loving concerns for each other, whether on earth, in Purgatory, or in Heaven, a necessary element of our salvation.

Our belief in the communion of saints extends our prayers on each other's behalf across the barrier of death. The pilgrim Church on earth looks to the saints in Heaven as models of holiness and turns to them for intercession. They, in turn, seek only our good. They have achieved the crown of salvation, and are far nearer the throne of God than we who still must struggle with our sin and weaknesses on earth. We know that the *"prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects"* (Jas 5:16); how much more so, then, will the prayers of those in Heaven be effective for our needs and concerns. In this way, just as we draw nearer to Jesus through our communion with each other on earth, we draw nearer to him by our faithful prayers to the saints, and by imitating them as our models of holiness. And in his benevolent love, God sometimes wills that intercessory prayer to saints in Heaven is rewarded with miracles that attest both

to his almighty power and to his desire to allow his beloved holy ones some part in fulfilling the petitions of his children here on earth.

In addition, we honor those who have died and are in Purgatory, praying and making offerings for them that they might be purified; *"it [is] a holy and pious thought"* to offer prayers on their behalf and make *"atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin"* (2 Mc 12:45). We can especially do this by offering those indulgences we gain, not for our own benefit but for theirs (see handout on Indulgences). Furthermore, our "prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective" (CCC 958).

We cannot be saved alone, for we are the family of God; we are saved in solidarity with one another. In this way, "we will be faithful to the deepest vocation of the Church"¹ (CCC 959).

(CCC 946-959, 2635-2636, 2683)

¹ *Lumen Gentium* 51; cf. Hebrews 3:6

People of God

For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore come out from them, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch nothing unclean; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." ~ 2 Corinthians 6:16-18

IN CREATING THE WORLD, God the Father had in his heart the desire to create men and women to live together both in communion with himself and with the created order. The human family was to be a people created and called into communion with God. The book of Genesis tells us what happened when Adam and Eve sinned, rejected God's friendship, and were alienated from God. God's providence allowed this to happen in order to show the depths of his love in sending his Son Jesus to heal the wounds of division caused by sin and to restore us to friendship with him as the People of God, the Church.

The plan of God, however, was not realized overnight but, according to the history narrated in the Old Testament, was fulfilled in stages. At the very moment our first parents fell, God made his first covenant with them, promising a savior who will defeat Satan (see Gn 3:15). God next made a covenant with the eight members of the family of Noah (see Gn 9:8-17), and then with Abraham as the patriarch of his tribe, promising to make him the father of many nations (see Gn 17:1-14). At the foot of Mount Sinai, God, through Moses, made a covenant with the Israelites as his Chosen People (see Ex 19:3-6). With David the king of the Israelites, God made a covenant promising to the line of David a perpetual Kingdom (see 2 Sm 7:9-16), a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ, Son of God, Son of David, our eternal high King (see Mt 16:16; Mt 21:9; Mt 25:31). Through these covenants, God the Father was preparing the world for the Church that would bring to fulfillment, in the new and final covenant in the blood of Jesus (see Lk 22:20), his desire to draw all people to himself (see Jn 12:32) and establish the Kingdom of Heaven on earth (see handout on The Covenants of

God with Us for a fuller discussion). The Church, as that People of God called into fellowship with the Trinity, realizes "the plan of the mystery bidden for ages" (Eph 3:9), as St. Paul says, by communicating the grace and merit of Christ to the world.

"Through Baptism, the Christian becomes a member of the People of God."

The Church, united in Christ and entrusted with his authority and grace, is God's in-



Union in Prayer, by James Tissot, 1856-1902

strument or sacrament through which communion with him is made possible. "As sacrament," explains the *Catechism*, "the Church is Christ's instrument. 'She is ... the universal sacrament of salvation,' by which Christ is 'at once manifesting and

actualizing the mystery of God's love for men"¹ (CCC 776). Through the working of grace, Christ reunites all people and fashions them into the one People of God. St. Clement of Alexandria wrote: "Just as God's will is creation and is called 'the world,' so his intention is the salvation of men, and it is called 'the Church'"² (CCC 760). The Church is thus the goal of creation; "the world was created for the sake of the Church"³ (CCC 760).

The call of Christ is for the Church to "make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19). For this reason the Church, spread throughout the world and seeking always to bring the message of the Gospel to those who have not yet heard it, is a family of a great diversity of cultures. Wounded by sin, we too often succumb to the temptation to divisiveness, rather than heed the call to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). We, all of us, Christian and non-Christian alike, are called to belong to the People of God, restoring our original unity under Christ our Head. We know that God gives grace to all to seek and find him; and "in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:35).

As the People of God united in Christ, the Church participates in his ministry. Christ came as the true priest whose sacrifice was acceptable to the Father; as the true prophet whose message revealed the fullness of God's plan of salvation and the mystery of the Church; and as the true king whose throne has been established forever and made visible on earth through the Church. Through Baptism, the Christian becomes a member of the People of God and is given a share in each of these roles. The priestly office of God's people is realized through the sacraments of the Church. Baptism, the door to all the other sacraments, regenerates the human

soul and establishes the People of God as "a spiritual house, ... a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Pt 2:5) (see handout on The Priesthood of the Faithful). As a prophetic people, the Church witnesses to the world through the preaching of the Gospel and the example of authentic Christian living. Finally, the Church is a royal (kingly) people when its members, like their master who "came not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28), make themselves the servant of others, especially the poor and the neglected. The kingship of Christ can only be extended through works of charity, because only love has the power to change hearts and bring people to conversion.

In a mysterious way, Jews who have not accepted the Christian faith live still under the covenants that God has made with them, even though those covenants have been fulfilled and surpassed in Christ, for "the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29) and "they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers" (Rom 11:28). They were the recipients of the entirety of God's promises and covenants, right through the New Covenant in Jesus' blood which was intended first of all for "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (see Mt 15:24), but which many of those living at the time of Jesus rejected. Although the Jews still look for the coming of the Messiah, rather than to his return as do Christians, we share a desire for his coming.

"The Church 'is the visible plan of God's love for humanity,' because God desires 'that the whole human race may become one People of God, form one Body of Christ, and be built up into one temple of the Holy Spirit'"⁴ (CCC 776). At the end of time, God's plan will be completely fulfilled, and everyone that Jesus has redeemed will be gathered together as one People of God.

(CCC 758-762, 776, 781-786, 814, 831, 836, 839-840, 865)

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¹ *Laumen Gentium* 9 § 2, 48 § 2; *Gaudium et Spes* 45 § 1

² Clement of Alexandria, *Pæd.* 1, 6, 27 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 8, 281 (Paris, 1857-1866)

³ Pastor Hermæ, *Vision* 2, 4, 1 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 2, 899 (Paris, 1857-1866); cf. Aristides, *Apol.* 16, 6; St. Justin, *Apol.* 2, 7 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 6, 456 (Paris, 1857-1866); Tertullian, *Apol.* 31, 3; 32, 1 from J.P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina* 1, 508-509 (Paris: 1841-1855)

⁴ Paul VI, June 22, 1973; *Ad Gentes* 7 § 2; cf. *Laumen Gentium* 17

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