

The Communion of Saints: A link that binds heaven and earth

As the Church and secular calendars once again turn to a new year, many of us wonder what the next months will bring. But we need not despair. Whether we succeed or fail, whether we find joy or sadness, whether we experience good health or sickness, we are all part of a community made up of Christians ready to help one another on earth – as well as those in heaven willing to intercede for us. We are all members of [the Communion of Saints](#).

While the Communion of Saints is an article of faith to be believed by every Catholic, it is a teaching not well understood among the faithful. “Perhaps no words in the [Apostles] Creed mean less to the average Catholic than ‘I believe in the Communion of Saints,’” wrote Father Benedict Groeschel in his book, “Praying with the Creed” (OSV, \$14.99). There are no annual liturgical celebrations regarding this teaching until the month of November, when we are called as a Church to pray for the dead and participate in the solemnity of All Saints on Nov. 1 and the commemoration of the faithful departed (All Souls) on Nov. 2. In those ceremonies and throughout November, we hear about the Communion of Saints in association with praying for the dead and about heaven, hell and purgatory.

What follows highlights the fact that we are all part of the Communion of Saints [and what it means](#).

The teachings of St. Paul

Before any review of this subject, it is important to understand how the word saint is used. St. Paul in his letters

to the various Christian communities constantly addressed the Christians as saints or holy ones, meaning the baptized, consecrated followers of Christ. So, St. Paul was the original source of the term saints, which certainly had a different meaning in his day than how the term is typically used in our time. The phrase Communion of Saints came years after St. Paul.

Filled with the Holy Spirit, Paul often admonished the early followers of Christ to love and be charitable to one another, share whatever they had, and to follow, serve and glorify Our Lord, Jesus Christ. He called on these Christians to stand together in their beliefs, to do good for all, to bear one another's burdens, to be at peace and while he doesn't use the words united and loyalty, they are widely inferred.

Pope Benedict XVI on the Communion of Saints



In discussing the Apostles Creed, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) wrote: “The saying about the Communion of Saints [*Communio Sanctorum*] refers, first of all, to the eucharistic community, which through the Body of the Lord binds the churches scattered all over the earth into one church. Thus originally the word *sanctorum* (of the holy ones) does not refer to persons but means the holy gifts, the holy thing, granted to the Church in her eucharistic feast by God as the real bond of unity. Thus the Church is not defined as a matter of offices and organization but on the basis of her worship of God: as a community at one table around the risen Christ, who gathers and unites them everywhere. Of course, very soon people began to include in this idea the persons who themselves are united with one another and sanctified by God’s one, holy gift. The Church began to be seen, not just as the unity of the eucharistic table, but also as the community of those who through this table are united among themselves. Then from this point a cosmic breadth very soon entered into the concept of Church: the Communion of Saints spoken of here extends beyond the frontier of death, it binds together all those who have received the one Spirit and his one, life-giving power.

– Source: “*Introduction to Christianity*”

In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle encourages all Christians to live in a united way with common goals, as a community or Communion of Saints, “striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace: one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ep 4:3-6). These words are still reflected during the holy sacrifice of

the Mass when together we recite our universal Nicene creed: "I believe in One God ... I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic faith ... I confess one baptism" If we say the Apostles Creed, then the ninth article of that creed is more straightforward: "I believe in the Communion of Saints." Cardinal Alexis Lepicier addresses this ninth article of the creed in his book, "Indulgences, Their Origins, Nature, and Development." He says, "In this article we are commanded to believe that there is, in the Church, a link which binds Christians together, which gives them an identity of interests and exists between the members of one and the same family. A family is enriched with the goods of the individual members, and again the members are benefited by the goods of the family, and one helps another by the transfer of his alienable goods."



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So, we can trace the roots of the Communion of Saints to the earliest periods of Christianity. Initially, Christians came together in someone's home on Sunday to share a communal meal

with distribution of the Eucharist at the end. Then, when the Roman persecutions ended, the communal meal and the Eucharist were separated and the "saints" received the body and blood of Christ as a group at the Lord's table, and thus the term Communion of Saints applied to those who gathered to receive holy Communion.

Tradition holds that the term itself, Communion of Saints, was first used by Bishop Nicetas (335-414) bishop of Remesians (Serbia) in the fifth century. He wrote six books, including "Instructions for the Candidates for Baptism" where he used the words "Communion of Saints" when referring to Christians living and dead. "What is the Church but the congregation of all saints? From the beginning of the world patriarchs, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and all other righteous men who lived or now alive or shall live in time to come, are one Church, since they have been sanctified by one faith and manner of life and sealed by one Spirit and so one made one body, of which Christ is the head, as the Scripture teaches. ... In this one Church you believe that you will attain to the Communion of Saints. Know that this one Catholic Church is planted throughout the world, and that it is your duty to hold fast to its communion." Before Bishop Nicetas introduced the term, there was already a clear connection among Christians through a conduit of love, charity and like beliefs. This conduit just didn't have a name.

Over the centuries, the meaning has taken on an even broader definition within the Catholic Church. The word saints included not only living Christians but also those who had passed on to eternity – that is, those baptized, practicing Catholics who died in the friendship of God: the faithful departed. Some of these persons reside in heaven and others – most others – are being purified in purgatory so they can enter heaven. They all make up the Communion of Saints: those saints living are known as the Church militant, those saints in purgatory as the Church suffering, and those saints in

heaven as the Church triumphant. “We, on earth, are poorer than the souls in heaven so we ask them for something,” wrote Ronald Knox. “But we, on earth, are richer than the souls in purgatory, so they ask us to give them something. It’s the same old principle that St. Paul used to preach, of give and take between Christians all around.”

Living saints (Church militant)

The pilgrims on earth, we the people of God, are meant to pursue the teachings and characteristics of Christ that St. Paul advocated 20 centuries ago. If we are graced with good health and material means, we can pray for and visit the sick, comfort and assist the homeless, uplift the persecuted. We can share ourselves and what we have with others and, in a Christ like way, include even our enemies. The need to be charitable and look out for each other is pronounced throughout the New Testament.

Those of us still living can ask the saints in heaven [to intercede on our behalf](#). The Church calendar identifies a different saint to honor nearly every day; their virtues are pointed out to us, and we look to them as role models for how we should live, striving to attain heavenly glory. On Nov. 1, the solemnity of All Saints, we acknowledge the virtues of those in heaven and their ever-present intercession for us. The collect of the Mass reads: “Almighty and ever-living God, by whose gift we venerate in one celebration the merits of all the saints, bestow on us, we pray, through prayers of so many intercessors, an abundance of the reconciliation with you for which we earnestly long.”

Wisdom from the Baltimore Catechism

“The word ‘communion’ means ‘a sharing.’ The more we love one another in Christ, the more we shall want to share our all with one another. Besides sharing the things we can see, we shall also want to share what we cannot see. This is all the graces and spiritual riches which God has given us. The more we love one another the more we will share in the graces and spiritual riches that God has given every one of us. This sharing is the ‘Communion of Saints.’ We can help those in spiritual need by our prayers, especially the souls in purgatory. And we can be helped by the prayers of others.”

– *Lesson 13 of the Baltimore Catechism*

As a member of the Church militant, we can influence the salvation of those in purgatory – that is, we can pray for them and offer good works on their behalf, seeking to reduce their time of purification. They cannot help themselves, and it is our duty to pray for them, offer Mass intentions on their behalf, participate in works of charity in their name; God has given us this unique role. It is likely that someday we will be where they are, and we will want the living saints to pray for us seeking that our time of purification before being united with God will be shortened.



Indulgences are another way our Church teaches that we can help the poor souls in purgatory. Through sacramental confession, carrying out the assigned penance, receiving holy Communion, praying the intentions of the pope, being completely void of sin and doing good works, we can obtain a plenary indulgence for someone in purgatory. Good works include walking the Stations of the Cross, attending

Eucharistic adoration, saying the Rosary publicly, reading the sacred Scriptures and having the intention to attain the indulgence.

In his book, "The Beauties of the Catholic Church," Father F.J. Shadler, discusses our relationship with those in purgatory: "Now, during their lives we could have rendered them no service, conferred on them no favor, and shown them no mark of affection to be compared to the service we can render them now by our intercession for them after death. Neither are these souls suffering in purgatory ungrateful for our help; they will assuredly, by their own prayers, abundantly reward our kind acts, not only when they shall have entered the kingdom of God, and we in turn shall perhaps languish in the place of purification, but even now."

Saints in heaven (Church triumphant)

It is not for us to know all the saints in heaven; however, we do know those who, because of their lives of heroic virtue, have been identified as saints by Holy Mother Church. They are spending eternity with God and are in a place we all strive to be. Saints in heaven do not need our help, but they can bring our prayers and petitions before God.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reads: "Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness. ...They do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth through the one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus" (No. 956). The Catechism, in that same paragraph, quotes St. Dominic: "Do not weep, for I shall be more useful to you after my death and I shall help you then more effectively than during my life." Someone described the saints in heaven as akin to a relative or friend who lives far away; you may not see them often, but they stay in touch and are always willing to help you.

Souls in purgatory (Church suffering)

The souls in purgatory love God but still need to satisfy the debt (temporal debt) they owe him before they can enter heaven. These souls cannot achieve merits for themselves; their only satisfaction comes from knowing that hell is not their destination, that they are no longer prey to temptation or the devil, and that they will spend eternity with God. But the glory in heaven comes after they have been purified. As Revelation says: "But nothing unclean will enter it [heaven] ..." (21:27). The length of this purification is known only to God. The suffering souls are aware when we, the living, focus on them, such as celebrating All Souls Day, attaining an indulgence for them, doing an act of charity in their name, remembering them during visits to a cemetery, and during Mass and in our prayers. Moreover, God also knows. Because of the Communion of Saints with Jesus at the head, nothing separates us, living or dead; we are all part of God's eternal plan. St. John Chrysostom offered in a homily: "Distance separates us [when we die], but love unites us and death itself cannot divide us. For though my body die, my soul will live and be mindful of my people."

Holy Mass and the Communion of Saints

Years ago, a college football coach wrote a newspaper editorial touting the popularity of college football. He remarked that on any autumn Saturday afternoon, thousands and thousands of people across our nation had one thing in common: college football. While the coach's enthusiasm was pretty obvious, it can be pointed out that on any Sunday around the world, millions of Catholics have one thing in common: the holy sacrifice of the Mass. The Mass is certainly reflective of the Communion of Saints. We pray as one, listen to the same holy Scriptures, watch a miracle unfold on the altar, and one after another eat the body and blood of Christ. We are a Church made up of a community of worshipers, a Communion of

Saints; people, even if unknown to one another, come together to worship one true God. The angels and saints, the Blessed Mother, indeed Christ himself, are there with us at every Mass, part of our family, the mystical Body of Christ.

At all times, somewhere in the world a Mass is being celebrated (except on Good Friday). As St. Josemaría Escrivá said: "Through the communion of the saints, all Christians receive grace from every Mass that is celebrated, regardless of whether there is an attendance of thousands of persons, or whether it is only a boy with his mind on other things who is there to serve. In either case, heaven and earth join with the angels of the Lord to sing: Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus."

Confession and the Communion of Saints

Sin has been called the great tragedy of our life. When we sin, we impact not only ourselves but all those who constitute the Communion of Saints. In the confessional when we pray our act of contrition, we are promising God and pledging to others of the Church that we will make amends and try to sin no more. In the early Church, for a time, confessions of mortal sin were made public so all fellow Christians could pray for and support the sinner. Penances were severe, often including exclusion from the Eucharist, and the penitent was well known to others in his church. St. Paul tells us: "If [one] part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy" (1 Cor 12:26)

The Communion of Saints, our connection to one another, whether living or dead is not constrained by time, space and the seasons of the year. The connection is eternal, described as a kind of spiritual reciprocity. We are called to practice the virtues St. Paul taught to the first Christians, called to pray and care for the living, called to pray for the dead, both in heaven and purgatory. We believe they pray for us and are all part of the Communion of Saints, a link that binds us together.

D. D. Emmons writes from Pennsylvania.

The Saints on the Communion of Saints



“Praying for others is a sign of love; and the more love the saints in heaven have, the more they pray for those on earth who can be helped by their prayers. And the closer they are to God, the more effective their prayers are.”

– St. Thomas Aquinas



“Let us become saints so that after having been together on earth, we may be together in heaven.”

– St. Padre Pio



“The saints are like the stars. In his providence Christ conceals them in a hidden place that they may not shine before others when they might wish to do so. Yet they are always ready to exchange the quiet of contemplation for the works of mercy as soon as they perceive in their heart the invitation of Christ.”

– St. Anthony of Padua



“All the science of the saints is included in these two things: to do, and to suffer. And whoever had done these two things best, has made himself most saintly.”

– St. Francis de Sales



“In order to bear our afflictions with patience, it is very useful to read the lives and legends of the saints who endured great torments for Jesus Christ.”

– St. Teresa of Ávila



“The saints have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult moments in the Church’s history.”

– Pope St. John Paul II



“God, because of the great love he bears us, and his great desire to see us saved, has given us among other means of salvation the practice of devotion to the saints. It is his will that they, who are his friends, should intercede for us, and by their merits and prayers obtain graces for us which we ourselves do not deserve.”

– St. Alphonsus Liguori



“The saints, because they loved God alone, also loved prayer above all else.”

– St. Eugène de Mazenod