

The Communion of Saints

We should preface our session by defining exactly what the term "Communion of Saints" means.

The word Communion comes from the Greek word Koinonia from which we derive the words fellowship, communion, communication, and economy.

The word Saints is the Greek word "Hagios". It can also be translated "holy ones."

For example the New American Bible reads as follows:

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the holy ones (Hagios) who are in Ephesus" (Ephesians 1:1)

Whereas the Revised Standard Version (Catholic Edition) reads:

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints (Hagios) who are in Ephesus" (Ephesians 1:1)

Often times, we only think of saints as those who have been canonized (i.e.: St. Patrick, St. Anthony). Other times, we use the term to refer to all those in heaven. However, the word "Hagios" literally means: those set apart or separated from. In ecclesial usage, the word Hagios means those separated from the world (world system) and thus set apart for God. Therefore, the broader sense of the term includes all Christians, be they on earth, in purgatory, or fully perfected in heaven.

So "Communion of Saints" is a term used to describe the entire Church, the interaction of all Her members and the mystical economy that exists between them. While economy might sound like strange word to use, it is very accurate. Within the Communion of Saints, there is a sharing of Spiritual goods. The prayers, deeds, and offerings of one member affect the entire Body of Christ. So too the needs, sufferings, and even sins of any member impact the entire Body. This, in essence, describes an economy.

What does Scripture teach us about the Communion of Saints?

Let's start by looking at a key text:

1 Tim 2:1-8

1: Therefore I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men,

2: for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence.

3: For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior,

4: who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

5: For there is one God and **one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,**

6: who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time,

7: for which I was appointed a preacher and an apostle-- I am speaking the truth in Christ and not lying-- a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth.

8: I desire therefore that men pray everywhere..."

The foundation of our doctrine is rooted in the proper understanding of verse 5. "For there is one God and **one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,**"

Notice Paul's emphasis: he refers to "**the Man Christ Jesus.**"

Why is Paul stressing Jesus' humanity?

Because, the implication of the **Incarnation** is that God intended to include and involve humanity in Christ's redemptive work. Hence, the role of "**the Man Christ Jesus**" isn't meant to exclude the rest of mankind. To the contrary, in and through the Incarnation, Christ saves us and we become members of His Body. If, by grace, we are members of His Body, then also by grace, we participate in His mediation and redemptive work.

St. Peter, in his first epistle, referred to us as " a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, ... that [we] may proclaim the praises of Him ..." (1Peter 2:9)

Of course Peter is not saying we are all ordained priests. However, through our baptism and adoption into the Body of Christ, we all share in the Priesthood of Christ. If we are all priests, we are therefore all mediators by definition, because the role of priest is to mediate.

And that is what St. Paul is telling Timothy. Notice that he doesn't mention Christ's mediation alone. Rather, the text is bracketed by exhortations to pray and intercede. If Christ alone is the exclusive mediator, then Paul's exhortation makes no sense.

This brings up two questions:

- 1) Are the souls of the deceased able to witness what is happening among the living?

The answer is found in Hebrews Chapter 12.

Heb 12:1

1: Therefore, we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Notice the text starts with the word "therefore". One of the first rules of biblical interpretation is: When you see a "therefore" you have to find out what it's there for!

In this instance, the "therefore" is a reference to all of Hebrews 11. This chapter lists the many Old Testament characters who died in faith, awaiting the promised Messiah. So the author of Hebrews makes it clear that those who have gone before us, surround us and are very conscious of what is happening amongst the living.

2) The second question then becomes: Are these deceased saints merely spectators? Or are we some how connected with them in prayer and worship?

Again, the author of Hebrews answers this question for us.

Heb 12:22-24

22: But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, to an innumerable company of angels,

23: to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect,

24: to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant, ...

First, notice verse 24. The author of Hebrews also mentions Jesus as the Mediator. But again, as in Paul's letter to Timothy, Christ's mediation is not mentioned in a vacuum. Quite the contrary, verse 23 mentions, the angels, the general assembly, the church registered in heaven, and the "*spirits of just men made perfect*". Then finally, Jesus the Mediator is referenced in verse 24.

The inspired author is telling us that the unity of the Mystical Body of Christ is organic and inseparable. Death has no power of this unity, just as death had no power over Christ Himself.

This understanding is not a Catholic novelty. This belief is shared by our Orthodox Christian brothers. And, just as important, it also has roots in Jewish Tradition. The 2nd Book of Maccabees records a vision/dream experienced by Judas Maccabeus. In this vision Judas sees the High Priest Onias and the Prophet Jeremiah (both of whom were dead and buried) interceding on behalf of Israel. (II Macc. 15: 11-16) While Maccabees were not included in the Jewish Canon (for political reasons in 90AD), Jews still maintain this belief.

All that being said; we must remember our starting point. The Communion of Saints is rooted in the Doctrine of the Incarnation. The Saints in heaven, the souls in Purgatory, just like the Christians on earth, are all members of the **Mystical Body of Christ**. Therefore, since we are all "In Christ", as Paul wrote to the Ephesians, we participate in Christ's mediation and intercession for the world.

The particular role of Mary:

Among the Saints, the Blessed Virgin Mary plays a unique and privileged role.

As we've established, God in choosing to become Man, ordained that men and woman participate in the redemption of the human race. Therefore the Catechism prefixes any discussion of Mary with the following text.:

487: *"What the Catholic faith believes about Mary **is based on what it believes about Christ**, and what it teaches about Mary **illuminates**, in turn, its faith in Christ."*

Notice the emphasis: **Everything** we believe about Mary is related to the Incarnation and it illuminates our Christian faith. To that end, Mary becomes our model of the perfect disciple. Nowhere is this more evident than in her response to the Angel Gabriel.

"Let it be done to me according to your word. . ."

With these words, Mary allowed God's eternal plan for our salvation to become manifest in our time and space.

That Catechism puts it this way.

494: *At the announcement that she would give birth to "the Son of the Most High" without knowing man, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary responded with the obedience of faith, certain that "with God nothing will be impossible": "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be [done] to me according to your word." Thus, giving her consent to God's word, Mary becomes the mother of Jesus. Espousing the divine will for salvation wholeheartedly, without a single sin to restrain her, she gave herself entirely to the person and to the work of her Son; she did so in order to serve the mystery of redemption with him and dependent on him, by God's grace:*

As St. Irenaeus says, "Being obedient she became the cause of salvation for herself and for the whole human race."

Hence not a few of the early Fathers gladly assert. . .:

"The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith." Comparing her with Eve, they call Mary "the Mother of the living" and frequently claim: "Death through Eve, life through Mary."

Mary, by agreeing to bring Jesus into the world, became a "cause" of our Salvation. In doing so She mediated between heaven and earth. Therefore, the Church gives Mary certain titles such as Mediatrix of all Grace and Co-Redemptrix.

Again, when we hear titles such as these, we must always remember that these titles are in no way equating Mary to Jesus. To the contrary, they are meant to be understood in relationship to Jesus Christ. Mary is what she is by grace and by virtue of being "in Christ." Since Jesus Christ is the source of all grace and Mary brought Jesus into the world, Mary is the Mediatrix of grace. Since she cooperated with God's redemptive plan, she is Co-Redemptrix.

She is what we must strive to be. Every time we, by word or deed, bring someone closer to Christ we also function as Mediators and Co-Redeemers. The difference is that what we do imperfectly, Mary does perfectly.

With that in mind, there are 5 essential doctrines about Mary which we will attempt to cover.

- 1: The Immaculate Conception
- 2: The Virgin Birth
- 3: Mary's Perpetual Virginity
- 4: Mary Mother of God
- 5: Mary's Assumption into heaven

