



Pastor's Column

St. Peter Catholic Church

November 11, 2018, Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Our Relationship with the Saints

Question: "Why do Catholics ask the saints for intercession? Catholics should not do this; we have no evidence that they pray for us."

Answer: We do have evidence that the saints pray for us, including Sacred Scripture.

In our Catholic tradition, the month of November is a time to be mindful of the souls in the life hereafter in a particular way: the saints already in glory in Heaven and the souls in Purgatory. And so, we consider this question of our relationship with the saints.

First, we may infer from the fact that the saints are in Heaven that they would pray for us. Being in Heaven means being united with God, Who is love (1 Jn 4:8-9, 16). When united with God, we will be transformed to be like Him (Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49-52; 2 Cor 3:18; 2 Pet 1:4; 1 Jn 3:2), for "nothing unclean shall enter" the heavenly city (Rev 21:27).

Being thus transformed by the love of God, the saints are filled with love and so care about others. It is natural when you care about someone to pray to God for that person. We can thus infer that, just as God loves us and provides for us, the saints love and pray for those on Earth.

We also have direct evidence of their intercession in Sacred Scripture. Judas Maccabeus had a vision of two men who had died. The first was the former high priest Onias, and in the vision, "With outstretched arms, Onias was praying for the entire Jewish nation" (2 Macc 15:12). When he saw the second man, Judas was told, "This is God's prophet Jeremiah, who loves the Jewish people and offers many prayers for us and for Jerusalem, the holy city" (2 Macc 15:14).

Though 2 Maccabees is not in the Protestant canon, it is in the Catholic canon, and so it is legitimate for Catholics to appeal to it to inform their faith. Even for Protestants, 2 Maccabees attests the pre-Christian Jewish belief in the intercession of the saints.

The book of Revelation, in the Protestant and Catholic canons, also shows the saints and angels interceding in Heaven. In Rev 5:8, we see the twenty-four elders, who appear to represent the leaders of the people of God in Heaven, offering incense to God, which we are told represents the prayers of the saints. In Rev 8:3-4, we see an angel offer incense to God, incense mingled "with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar" in Heaven. Guardian angels also intercede (Mt 18:10).

A follow-up challenge is the question: "Why do Catholics use statues of saints when that is clearly idolatry?" Answer: Idolatry involves worshipping a statue as a god; that is not what Catholics do with statues.

Statues of saints do not represent gods. They represent human beings or angels united with God in Heaven.

Even the least learned practicing Catholics are aware that statues of saints are not gods, and neither are the saints they represent. If someone points to a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and asks, "Is this a goddess?" or "Is the Blessed Virgin Mary a goddess?" the answer is always "no." If this is the case for the Blessed Virgin Mary, the same is true for any saint.

As long as we are not confusing a statue with a god, it is not an idol, and the commandment against idolatry is not violated.

This was true in the Bible. At various points, God commanded the Israelites to make statues and images for religious use. For example, in the book of Numbers, the Israelites were suffering from a plague of poisonous

snakes, and God commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole so that those bitten by the snakes could gaze upon it and live (Num 21:6-9). The act of looking at a statue has no natural power to heal, so this was a religious use. It was only when, centuries later, people began to regard the statue as a god that it was being used as an idol and thus was destroyed (2 Kgs 18:4).

God also commanded that the temple, which represented Heaven, be filled with images of the inhabitants of Heaven. Thus, God originally ordered that craftsmen work images of cherubim (a kind of angel) into the curtains of the Tent of Meeting (Ex 26:1). Later, carvings of cherubim were made on the walls and doors of the temple (1 Kgs 6:29-35).

Statues were also made. The lid of the Ark of the Covenant included two statues of cherubim that spread their wings toward each other (Ex 25:18-20), and the temple included giant, fifteen-foot tall statues of cherubim in the holy of holies (1 Kgs 6:23-28).

Since the Ascension of Christ, the saints have joined the angels in Heaven (CCC 1023), making images of them in church appropriate as well.

- Fr. Lewis