

Why pray for the dead?

Why ask the departed saints to pray for us?

(The imaginary dialogue between the three intelligent people in our Church continues. This time there are two young ladies also introduced – Mary and Martha)

Paul: The Bible says quite clearly: “There is only one mediator between God and Men, the Man Christ Jesus” (I Timothy 2:5). Why do we then ask the Saints to mediate for us? I don’t understand.

Thomas: It is true that many people pray more to St. Mary or St. Gregorios than to Christ. What do you think, John? Can you answer Paul’s question?

John: I am not sure that I can. I would like to ask Paul a question. Does he ever ask anybody at all to pray for him?

Mary: I do ask people to pray for me when I am in trouble, or when someone dear to me is sick, or when I need something very badly from God.

Martha: How come? Why can’t you pray for yourself?

Mary: I guess I am a very sinful person, and I am not sure that God will always hear my prayer. So I ask somebody who is more religious or pious, like some friends I have, or our Achen to pray for us.

Thomas: Does that mean that you don’t pray for yourself, or do you ask somebody in addition to your praying for yourself?

Mary: Of course, I do pray for myself, but my prayers are rather weak. So I need the help of someone who will pray for me.

Paul: I see no problem in somebody living praying for me. But how can I be sure that St. Mary or St. Gregorios will hear my request?

John: Oh, so it is only a question whether the Saints are able to hear our requests. If they can hear our requests you see no objection to our asking them in interceding for us?

Paul: I still think that Jesus Christ is the only true mediator between us and God, and that it is taking away from Christ’s role as Sole Mediator to ask the departed Saints to pray for us.

Thomas: Paul, I see an inconsistency in your thought. You say it is all right to ask a living Christian to pray for us; but not a departed believer. Well, by asking a living Christian to

intercede for you, are you not making that Christian friend another Mediator, taking away from the sole Mediatorship of Christ?

Paul: Yes, but I can see living people praying for each other. In fact the Bible says “Pray for one another” (James 5:16). So that I can see. But why pray to those who are already dead.

Thomas: Paul, would you make clear what your objection is. I don’t understand. You say that if you ask a living person to pray for you, you are not violating the sole mediatorship of Christ. Do you think only when you ask a departed saint to pray for you, you violate that sole mediatorship principle?

Paul: I am not sure. I see your point. Somehow I have a prejudice against praying to the Saints. It seems to be almost like idolatry. But where does the Bible say that we should pray to the departed saints?

Mary: There I cannot agree with you Paul. Do you think we should do only those things which the Bible tells us to do? Where does the Bible say that we should turn to the East for prayer, or that we should make the sign of the Cross, or that we should run hospitals and schools, or even that we should build churches? The Bible is not a law-book which tells us all the things which we should do as Christians.

Martha: Well, then, how do we know what we should do or should not do as Christians?

John: Christians have freedom – within the Tradition. That is to say, Christians do not live by law, but the Tradition of the Church serves as a basic guideline, within which they have freedom to decide what is good in each situation. In the cases of both intercession through the Saints and prayer for the departed, the Tradition of the Church, of which the Bible is the earliest witness, offers a reliable orientation. But the Bible does not witness to the whole of the Christian Tradition. It shows us the earliest strata of the Tradition of the Church. The Tradition is always growing and we should know it in its dynamic continuity.

Martha: That is a lot of heavy theology which I don’t fully understand, John. But tell me, did the early Church practice either of the two – prayer for the departed or asking for the intercession of the Saints? What is the evidence?

John: One of the earliest documents we have is the Martyrdom of Polycarp. St. Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna (Asia Minor), was a great leader of the post-Apostolic Church. Baptized as an infant, he died as a martyr at the age of 86, being burnt to death around 155 A. D. The story of his martyrdom was written immediately afterwards and is a classic of the Christian Tradition. In this document, the people of Smyrna, who are the authors, say

“The Centurion. put him (St. Polycarp) in the midst, and as their custom, is burned him. So we afterwards took-up his bones, more valuable than precious stones, and finer than fine gold, and laid them where it was fitting. There the Lord will permit us, as shall be possible to us, to assemble ourselves together in joy and gladness, and to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom”. (para XVIII).

Thomas: So, that shows only that the relics of martyrs were treasured by the Church, and that the anniversaries of their martyrdom were celebrated by the Church with joy and gladness. But does it say anything about praying for the dead or asking for the intercession of departed Saints?

John: Yes, you are right. All that we know from this passage is that the relics of the martyrs were respected and treasured by the Church from the beginning; that their day of martyrdom was celebrated by the Church with great joy and gladness; and that the martyrs were regarded as having been “born” on the day of their martyrdom into a life of joy and gladness with the Lord.

Thomas: Is there any other evidence from the early centuries?

John: Of course there is plenty of other evidence. Let us begin with the New Testament. The Epistle to the Hebrews speaks about the cloud of witnesses by whom we are always surround (12:1). There are the holy people of the Old and New Testament, who always share with us life in the Body of Christ. Praying for each other is an essential aspect of life in the Body of Christ; they pray for us and we should pray for them.

Martha: Tell us more arguments from the Bible.

John: Well, look at the same Hebrews passage: “The writer says to the Hebrews Christians, that they are no longer standing before Mount Sinai, with its blazing fire and tempest and thunder and lightning that accompanied the receiving of the law; but

“You have come to Mount Zion and to the City of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering and to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to a ruler who is God of all, and to the spirits just men made perfect, and to Jesus” (12:22-24).

This is where the Church lives and worships – in the company of the first-born whose names are inscribed in heaven and the “spirits of righteous human beings made perfect”. Our Orthodox Church never thinks of itself without becoming aware of the “cloud of witnesses” who surround us all the time in the Body of Christ.

Thomas: I begin to see the point that Jesus, the Sole Mediator, is never without his body, the Church in heaven and on earth. I now understand better what Hebrews also says: i.e. “The one

who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all one” (Or, “one one” – Heb. 2:11). So neither we nor the departed saints can intercede for each other except as part of Christ’s own intercession, for he is always, perpetually, praying for us (Heb. 7:25), and as part of the Holy Spirit’s perpetual intercession (Rom 8:27).

Mary: I also can see that (a) both the living and the departed are in Christ, as members of His body (b) that we should all pray for each other, i.e. we the living should pray for both the living and the departed, and that they the departed, should also pray for the living and the departed.

Paul: What I don’t understand is (a) whether the departed saints can actually hear our prayers and (b) what good our prayers can do for a person after he or she has died.

John: The second question was specifically raised in the Church in the 4th century and St. Cyril of Jerusalem gives a clear reply, in his catechetical lectures on the Holy Eucharist (Lecture xxiii: 9-10). I have the text here:

“Then we commemorate all these who have fallen asleep before us, first Patriarchs (of the Old Testament), prophets, Apostles, Martyrs, that by their prayers and intercessions God would receive our petition. Then on behalf of the Holy Fathers and Bishops who fallen asleep before us, and in a word, of all who in past years have fallen asleep among us, believing that it will be a very great benefit to the souls for whom the supplication is put up, while that holy and most awesome sacrifice is set forth.

“And I wish to persuade you by an illustration. For I know that many say, what is a soul profited, which departs from this world either with sins, or without sins, if it be commemorated in the prayer? For if a king were to banish certain persons who had offended against him, and then their people should weave a crown and offer it to him as behalf of those punishment, would he not grant a remission of their penalties? In the same way, we when we offer to Him our supplications for those who have fallen asleep, though they be sinners, weave no crown, but offer up Christ himself as the Sacrifice for our sins, propitiating our merciful God for them as well as for ourselves”.

Martha: That is a peculiar illustration. Who was this St. Cyril? When did he live?

John: He was Bishop of Jerusalem from about 340 to 386; a strong fighter against the Arian heresy in the period after the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.). These 24 catechetical lectures were given in or around Lent, 347 AD in the great Cathedral of Jerusalem, and form the most complete corpus we have of the teaching of the Church in the 4th century.

Mary: That is interesting. Then it was not just the medieval Roman Catholic Church that began the cult of the Saints and prayer for the departed. Do any other Eastern Fathers testify to such a practice at that time?

John: The interesting thing is that this is not St. Cyril's personal view that we have in the catechetical lectures. He is commenting on the prayers used in the Qurbana in Jerusalem at that time. And all scholars know that the Jerusalem Qurbana retained the original form established by the Apostles themselves. Everywhere in the churches of that time in the Holy Qurbana the saints were commemorated and asked to intercede for us, and we remembered also the departed faithful.

Paul: All right I am beginning to see. But tell us, who else among the Fathers write about this?

John: I cannot give you an exhaustive list. But I have some notes here, from which I shall read:

St. John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407): "Not in vain was this Tule ordained by the Apostles, that in the awesome Mysteries (i.e. Holy Qurbana) remembrance should be made of the departed for they knew that is a great gain to them and a great benefit". (Commentary on I Corinthians Hom. 41, p. 457 a)

St. Basil (ca. 330-379) enumerates the many favours (largely temporal blessings) granted by St. Mamas to those who pray to him (Sermon on St. Mamas para 26)

St. Gregory Nazianzen (329-389) – prays for his younger brother Caesarius who died in 369 A.D.: "O Lord of life and death do thou now receive Caesarius, the first fruits of our pilgrimage". (N.P.N.F. series Two Vol: VII:p. 238). St. Gregory also prays to St. Athanasius, who died in 37 AD in the following words:

"And mayest thou cat upon us from above a propitious glance, and conduct this people in its perfect worship of the perfect Trinity, which as Father, Son, Holy Ghost, we contemplate and adore. And mayest thou, if my lot be peaceful, possess and aid me in my pastoral charge, or if it pass through struggles, uphold me, or take me to thee, and set me with thyself and those like thee, in Christ Himself, our Lord, to whom be all glory, honour and power for evermore". (NPNF Vol: VII: p. 280).

St. Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330-ca. 395) makes the following supplication to the Martyr St. Theodore, on his feast day.

"O thou, come here to us, where you once were, on this thy feast day, we invoke thee; even thou dost dwell in the ethereal regions above, even if thine abode is about the heavens, circulating with the choirs of angels serving Thy Lord, worshipping as a faithful Servant with the principalities and powers, come for a little while to us who honour thee, O friend Invisible,

intercede for your country to our common king; for the country of the martyr is the place of his suffering, of which the citizens and relations are those who know him, have him and honour him. We honour your afflictions, we show forth your sufferings: (He then goes on to invoke the protection of the Martyr for his homeland which is being invaded by the scythians)".

Such instances can be indefinitely multiplied from both East and West. We know that every year there was an annual Qurbana in the cemetery when all the departed were commemorated. We know that the place of burial of Saints and martyrs became places of pilgrimage.

Paul: I can see now that in the early centuries Christians prayed to the Saints and prayed for the faithful departed. The only question is, does not the Bible say somewhere that the dead cannot pray?

Martha: I know the passages which all my Protestant friends quote:

“Dost thou work wonder for the dead?

Do the shades rise up to praise Thee”? (Ps. 88:10)

“The dead do not praise the Lord,
Nor do any that go down into silence”. (Ps. 115:17)

Mary: But Psalm 115:17 is followed by 115:18 which says

“But we will bless the Lord

From this time forth for evermore”.

Evermore, does not mean up to the moment of death, does it?

John: Again we have some theological problems here. If it does not sound too heavy for you, I will say that we don't create our theology from stray verses of the Old Testament. Or even from stray sayings of our Lord, who said “Let the dead past bury their own dead” (Mt. 8:22); this we do not understand in the sense that there should be no funerals at all. There were periods in Old Testament history that the soul survived in Sheol as a pale shadow of yourself. That was not the teaching of our Lord. He taught us that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were alive, since the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was God of the living and not of the dead (Mt. 22:32).

Thomas: What is the context in which the Psalmist has said these things in Ps. 88:10 and Ps. 115:17?

Mary: That is clear. In Ps. 88, it is Human crying out to God from a long-standing illness, asking for immediate relief. He says in effect, “what is the use of your healing me after I am dead?

Heal me now, so that I can praise thee, which I am still alive". One cannot make a doctrine out of that.

Martha: What about Ps. 115:17?

Mary: The same thing. It is a dialogue hymn, in which two groups of people are saying to each other to "bless God" and "may God bless". And the choirs are saying that those who do not praise Yahweh are already dead, and that those who are really alive will eternally praise him. That poetic statement is not a basis for Christian doctrine about the Saints and the departed.

Paul: I think I have learned a few things today. I will tell you what I have understood.

First, the Saints, and all the faithful departed are all part of the body of Christ, and in the body of Christ, we are duty bound to pray for each other;

Second, praying to the Saints to intercede for us is not in principle different from asking living people to pray for us. Both do not detract from the sole mediatorship of Christ.

Third, the Church practiced both prayers for the departed and invocation of the Saints from the beginning, and it is only the Protestants who stopped it, due to some misunderstanding.

Thomas: I am also beginning to see that the Tradition of our Church is always reliable. But we modern young people need a lot of help to understand the meaning of many of our practices.

Mary: There are many other things I want to know about our faith. We should meet again soon.