

LESSON 13

PRAYER AND THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

BACKGROUND READING



There are times we face particular problems in our lives and we look for the guidance of experts. If we face a medical emergency, we look to the guidance of a nurse or a doctor; or if our car is making strange noises, we head to the auto mechanic. The same can be said if we face a particular problem in prayer. The prayer experts of the Church are the saints. The Church recognizes the saints in Heaven because they lived lives of heroic virtue—lives that should inspire us to imitate them. We know they are holy because they are in Heaven, and the way that they achieved this holiness was through an intimate life of prayer with God. Not only that, the saints are meant to be our friends. There are countless saints with innumerable spiritualities; their personalities and life experiences are as individualized as our own. That means that we can befriend particular saints whose lives speak to us and inspire us, and view their lives as models for us to follow.

Friends in Heaven

One of the greatest aids to prayer is to read the lives and writings of the saints. Their lives act as inspiration for us to lead holy lives, and

their instructions can guide us on how to develop our prayer lives. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, “The witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom, especially those whom the Church recognizes as saints, share in the living tradition of prayer by the example of their lives, the transmission of their writings, and their prayer today” (CCC 2683). This not only means that we strive to imitate the saints, but that we can also rely on them as powerful intercessors. We can speak to the saints about our troubles, and they can pray for us to God, as the *Catechism* explains: “Their intercession is their most exalted service to God’s plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world” (CCC 2683). At every Mass, the needs of others are lifted up to God and we ask for the intercession of all the Communion of Saints. In this way, we intercede for others, and seek the intercession of others.

When we pray to Mary and the saints, we are not giving them the worship that is due to God alone. Instead we are speaking to them as our friends, and as God’s friends. After all, we ask our family and close friends to pray for us all the time. And so it is the

same when we ask prayers from the saints in Heaven. We imagine that there are these sharp boundaries between us on earth and the saints in Heaven because we cannot see the saints. But they are so much closer to us than we think, because we are all united in the Body of Christ. The Body of Christ is another name for the Church, and all of us united in communion with each other (especially through reception of the Eucharist), because Christ is our head. Each of us have special roles to play within the Church that depend on God's particular call for each and every one of us. This includes the saints in Heaven, the souls in Purgatory, and the people on earth. In fact, the members of Christ's body on earth, Purgatory, and Heaven all play special roles in the life of prayer within the Church.

Those on earth are meant to intercede for each other, petition God for our needs according to His will, as well as ask the intercession of the saints in Heaven and the souls in Purgatory. The souls in Purgatory are those who "[though] die in God's grace and friendship, but [are] still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven" (CCC 1030). These souls endure great suffering in order to be purified of any unconfessed venial sins and for the reparation of the remaining effects of confessed mortal and venial sins. They are able to intercede for others, but they are not able to pray for themselves. Therefore we should see it as a special gift to be able to pray for those who are suffering in Purgatory, and remember that we have allies there who will be praying for us in return! The saints in Heaven do not need anyone to intercede for

them because they have already received the fulfillment of their being through the vision of God in Heaven, but as mentioned before, they are especially tasked by God to pray for the rest of us. Their prayers are especially holy and pleasing to God because they are not tinged with any selfishness, but are motivated entirely by love of God and love for us.

Sacramentals

Not only does the Church give us the saints to inspire us and intercede for us in prayer, the Church also provides us with sacramentals to aid us in prayer and to give us particular graces. A sacramental is a prayer, practice, or object that helps us receive the grace of God. We have already learned about some sacramentals in previous lessons, such as the Holy Rosary, the Sign of the Cross, and blessings; others include holy water, crucifixes, icons, scapulars, and other items that, through the Church, bring reminders of God's love into our lives.

Though the word "sacramental" is based on the word Sacrament, a sacramental object does not have the power of a Sacrament. Nor do sacramentals give us grace in the same way that the Sacraments do. But like a Sacrament, sacramentals are signs or physical reminders of a spiritual reality, and they prepare us to receive the grace of the Sacraments and make everyday life holy. They can also be great aids to prayer, or be prayers themselves, because the particular graces given by that sacramental strengthen our spiritual lives. For example, you might wish to ask God's blessing for safe travels for your children before they go on the bus or a trip, or you might offer a blessing over your meal before you eat it. Praying a family Rosary together asks God