



## ON THE VENERATION & INTERCESSIONS OF THE SAINTS

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**I**t is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me...  
(Gal. 2:20)

Beloved reader, our ultimate goal in life is union with the Holy Trinity. This union has been made possible by the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. By His life-giving works, our Savior has revealed to us His Truth, brought us to the true knowledge of God and man, granted us through Himself victory over our passions, redeemed us from our sins, abolished death and raised us with Him to sit at the right hand of the Father. Indeed, our Good Savior, the Lover of Mankind has accomplished everything on our behalf so that we might eternally live with Him in the Kingdom of God!

Our way, then, to the Kingdom of God, the bosom of the Holy Trinity, is always *in* Christ. Since it is Christ Himself who has accomplished everything for us and become the “first-fruits”, we likewise can only know the Father *in* Christ. “I am the way, the truth, and the

life. No one comes to the Father except through Me”  
(John 14:6).

It is the Holy Spirit, poured out on the Church on the day of Pentecost, Who brings us to Christ and makes known to us all His works. As St. Paul declared, “no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. “(1 Cor. 12:3). Thus, the Holy Spirit is called our Helper, and our Advocate. The Holy Spirit, beloved, is imparted to the world through the Church! Yes, it is through the Church that we receive the Holy Spirit through her life-giving Mysteries and the new life in Christ.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, glory be to Him, did not come and establish a new religion, nor did He come to create a new system of philosophy. He came to establish His Church. When our Lord Jesus Christ asked His holy apostles the question, “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” St. Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. To this confession



of faith our sweet Savior declared, “On this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it” (Mat 16:13-18). In fact, dear friend, you will not even find the word “Christianity” mentioned at all in the Holy Scriptures, you will only find the Church! And what then is the Church? Lets listen to St. Paul our teacher, “And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23).

The Church then is the new life in Christ, the fullness of Him who fills all in all! The Church is the body of Christ, of which He is the Head and we are the members. It is in the Church that we are united to Christ our Head through the life-giving mysteries. That is to say beloved, that the mysteries of the Church seek to unite us with Christ. In baptism we are united to His Death and Resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). In the Holy Eucharist we partake of His Holy Body and His Precious Blood, and again, are thereby united to Him in the most beautiful and intimate way (John 5:56). And so it is with all the Mysteries of the Church. By the action of the Holy Spirit in the Church through the Holy Mysteries, we are united to Christ, by which we know the Father!

If we then, dear reader, are united to Christ who is the head of the body, is it not also true, therefore, that we are united to the members of the body, that is, to one another? Indeed! The Church is one and indivisible. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). St. Paul, elsewhere says, “...so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another (Rom. 12:5).

And likewise there can be no “death” for those in Christ, since in Christ death has been destroyed. As we pray in the divine services of the Church, “there is no death for your servants but rather a departure.” And the Scriptures attest to the reality that “God is not

the God of the dead, but of the living” (Mat. 22:32). So there is one Church, one Body, made up of those who have departed this world and those of us still struggling in this world. And there can never be a separation from the two just as the Body cannot be separated from her Head nor the Body divided within herself.

It is based on these realities, dear friend, that the Holy Orthodox Church venerates the holy saints and seeks their intercessions. Let us now go deeper into these beautiful aspects of our faith!

The saints are those which have “put on” Christ and attained to the life that each of us is called to live. “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (Lev. 19:2). We venerate their lives, beloved, precisely because they reflect for us Christ Himself. They are, as one of the Fathers has put so beautifully, the “incarnation of the beatitudes, the living Bible, the perfection of the Gospel”. It is as if, dear reader, the Scriptures in all their truth and reality are being lived out before our very eyes through the lives of the saints! St. Paul indicated this to us when he said, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1).

We see in the lives of the saints the proof of the transfigured life, the life of holiness and intimacy with God, the life that has overcome the passions and rejected earthly attachments. They are our encouragement and our examples. Indeed, did not our Savior say to us “You are the light of the world” (Mat. 5:14)? This light is not an earthly light but the very light of Christ Himself who said “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). So it is through the saints, in whom this light shines bright, that we see Christ Himself!

The saints are people with the very same nature as ourselves and we, therefore, can relate to them in their struggles. We are nourished by their spiritual successes and have the hope of Christ revitalized in ourselves,



which is the hope of glory as the wise St. Paul says, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). They are our consolation in times of trouble and weariness. In their lives we see the Gospel commandments lived out through their life of prayer, fasting, almsgiving, love for neighbor, and other virtuous efforts. Their lives offer proof that what our Sweet Savior said is true, “For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matt. 11:30).

Their examples, like the Scriptures, are never limited to any single generation since the truths they manifest in their lives are eternal. And our Lord, the Lover of Mankind, provides every generation with a “cloud of witnesses” (Heb. 12:1), so that we always are reminded, beloved, of His words of comfort to us when he said, “be of good cheer, I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). The saints of every generation are those who have “overcome the world” in Him!

They inspire us to make drastic changes in our own lives, renewing our commitment to Christ as we compare our lives to theirs. How many saints, O Lord, started on the path to sainthood because they read about the lives of one of the saints?! How many lost sheep, O Christ, have repented of their evil ways and committed their lives to You, the Master of All, after reading about the life and struggles of one of Your holy saints?! Do you see, beloved, how precious are the lives of the saints and how beneficial they are to those of us who are “sojourners in this place”? Our Church

has witnessed the reality that the saints themselves, and indeed all pious Christ-loving Christians, have been nourished by the lives of the saints throughout all generations and in all places!



St. Ephrem the Syrian wrote, “Blessed is he who plants in his soul good plants, that is, the virtues and the lives of the saints.” And St. Clement of Rome wrote, “Come to the saints, for they who cleave to them shall be made holy.” And likewise, dear reader, listen to the wise St. Basil when he gives this analogy: “Just as painters, in working from models constantly gaze at their exemplar and thus strive to transfer the expression of the original to their own artistry, so too he who is eager to make himself perfect in all kinds of virtue must gaze upon the lives of the saints as upon statues, so to speak, that

move and act, and must make their excellence his own by imitation.”

Among the saints, the Church has always acknowledged the unique place of those who have been called and gifted by the Holy Spirit to offer their lives for the sake of Christ by the shedding of their blood unto death. I speak of the holy martyrs, dear reader, who fulfilled the perfect command of the Savior when He proclaimed, “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends” (John 15:13). Indeed what can be a greater expression of our love for Christ than



to offer our lives, even to the shedding of blood, in witness to Him who died for us first?

Beginning with St. Stephen the Archdeacon, the Church has always celebrated the honor of the holy martyrs. In the early Church, Christians customarily met in the places where the martyrs had died, to build churches in their honor, venerate their sacred relics and blessed memory, and present their example for imitation by others. Perhaps, dear friend, you are familiar with the beautiful story of St. Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, who was martyred in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century after our Lord? We are told that those pious God-loving Christians reverently collected the remains of this saint and honored them “more than precious stones”! Do you see, dear one, how even the bones of these holy ones were honored as precious because of the Holy Spirit Who dwelt in them? And indeed throughout the writings of the great Church Fathers like St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. John Chrysostom, we see a great reverence for the relics of the martyrs which are “filled with spiritual grace”.

You might ask beloved reader, how it is that the saints hear our requests for prayers, and how it is that they intercede for us before the Lord. This is indeed a deep question and one, God willing, we shall attempt to answer now.

In addition to the testimony of Scripture which speak of the efficacy of the prayers of the righteous on behalf of others (James 5:16), this question really goes to the heart of our knowledge, which came to us by divine revelation, of Gods very nature and our own human nature (man), being created in Gods image and likeness.

God is love! (1 John 4:8, 16). Love is not merely an attribute of God but directly speaks to His nature. God is also Trinity, a communion of love within Himself. Do you see, beloved, that God is Love precisely

because He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, One Divine Essence and yet three Persons, Who exists in a communion of love within His very being? Man was created in this very image of love, being called to share in the very life of the Holy Trinity. Therefore, the more we draw closer to God, or rather the more He draws closer to us, the more we share in this God-like love, a love that is eternal and extends to the whole creation, just as Gods love is eternal and extends to all creation! Perfect love was revealed to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, blessed is His name, when He humbled Himself and became man and suffered and died on our behalf. He commanded us to share in this sacrificial love when He said, “Love one another as I have loved you” (John 13:34). Do you see dear friend that this is a new kind of love; one that, contrary to nature, goes beyond the love of self? It goes even beyond the level of love for another which is equal to oneself. Rather it is a love that is greater than the love for oneself. This self-emptying love is a compelling love for neighbor and it is precisely this love that the saints perfected. That is to say, that as the saints grew in their love for Christ; they also grew in their love for others, and lived their lives for their neighbor laboring for his salvation. St. Antony the Great said, “Our life and our death is with our neighbor. If we gain our brother, we have gained God...”

St. John Chrysostom explains this perfectly for us like this: “The most perfect rule of Christianity, its exact definition, its highest summit, is this: to seek what is for the benefit of all. I cannot believe that it is possible for a man to be saved if he does not labor for the salvation of his neighbor.” What a beautiful saying! How powerful! Have the saints, who have perfected their love for God, lost the ability to labor for the salvation of others because they departed from this world? God forbid! Indeed if they, while on earth, prayed fervently for their neighbor, how much more now in the presence of Christ will they remember us and intercede for us? Again, listen to St. Mark the Ascetic who says to us, “The saints are required to offer repentance not only



on their own behalf but also on behalf of their neighbor, for without active love they cannot be made perfect.” If the saints, who while in the flesh, offered repentance for us as their own, will they not still at least pray for us for the benefit of our salvation, now that they are in the very presence of Christ Himself?

Beloved Christian, the death of the righteous cannot separate them from their love for us, who are members of the Body of Christ! Listen to what St. Paul says clearly: “For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38-39).

This love compels the saints to pray for us and likewise the Church remembers and commemorates them in her own prayers! It is by the Holy Spirit that they hear our petitions. By the Holy Spirit, who is “present everywhere and fills all things”, they are near to us and intercede for us. This is a great mystery!

Do you want to see a glimpse of this wonderful and awesome reality? Turn your attention to that most inexplicable and divine vision of St. John the Beloved... “Now when He (the Lamb) had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.” And again, “Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel’s hand” (Rev. 5:8, 8:3-4). So, dear friend, we have here a clear and beautiful image of how those before the throne of God indeed hear our prayers and offer them on our behalf!

Call upon the saints with faith! Learn from them by studying and contemplating on their lives! Imitate their ways! Keep icons of them in your home! Praise them with the praises of the Church! Be near to them and they will be near to you!

In conclusion, beloved, the strength of the saints is not to be found simply in their virtues and good habits but rather in the fact that Christ Himself lives within them. Our goal, again, is the Kingdom of God, union with the Holy Trinity. Our means of achieving this goal is Christ Himself. Let us seek Christ in His word, which is the Holy Scriptures, in the mystical life of the Church through the Divine Mysteries and her spiritual disciplines, and in the lives of those saints who can proclaim with joy, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me!”

