

“Pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.” (James 5:16)

✠ Lecture II: St. Mary’s Intercession & Veneration ✠

✠ Intercession in the Orthodox Perspective:

In our Orthodox Church, we do not accept any mediator between God and man except Lord Jesus Christ, the Chief High Priest and the Sacrifice by whose blood we receive the reconciliation and remission of sins:

- “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.” (**Acts 4:12**)
- “There is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus...” (**1 Tim 2:5**)
- “We have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” (**1 Jn 2:1**)

Having said that, we need to understand that the Holy Gospel, in its spirit and text, aims at bringing man to the experience of Divine life, that is Divine love. This means that the person puts aside his own self so that by the Holy Spirit he offers his whole life for the salvation of his fellow brethren:

- “Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.” (**Jn 15:13**)

In other words, the evangelic life is a life during which the believer does his/her best, through good works and prayers, to see that everybody is glorified in the bosom of God. This is precisely the concept of intercession; as the soul moves closer to God, in a deeper union with Lord Jesus Christ, it becomes more attached to others and hence prays for them asking for their salvation. That is what St. Macarius meant when he said that no man could obtain salvation outside his relationship with others. We all pray for one another, each of us is a mediator of grace for others:

- “I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men.” (**1 Tim 2:1**)

Looking at our Lord Jesus Christ we can establish the positive response that He has given to the intercession of people and their petition for others. For example, He healed the paralytic for the sake of those who brought him (**Mt 9:2**). He also healed the centurion’s servant because of the petition of his master (**Mt 8:5**) and the daughter of the Canaanite woman in response to the cries of her mother (**Mk 7:24**). God, the lover of mankind, gives generously and longs to see us like Him loving the others and asking for them more than for ourselves.

On the other hand, it is evident that the evangelic love is always associated with true humility. This implies that in our minds, we feel that we are not worthy to pray for others, but rather we ask them to pray for us. For instance, St. Paul, knowing that he was called by God Himself for the ministry of the word through visions and revelations, still asked for the prayer of his people so that the Lord may grant him the ability to preach (**Eph 6:19**). We then wonder, was the apostle not able to ask God directly to give him what he wanted? Certainly not, but he felt the need to share love and humility with other people. Once again, we may wonder; if human intercession between the communion of the saints does actually exist on earth, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, then surely it is even more valid for those who enter paradise that they do not cease praying for their brethren. If while on earth and tied down under the burden of flesh they ask more for the others than for themselves, then how intense would their prayers be for those who are still living on earth when they are close to the author of Love Himself.

In brief, the intercession of saints in our Orthodox perspective confirms the effectiveness of the saving deeds of God in the life of every believer, and substantially rejects any hint of worshipping saints. It declares the unity of the Church as members of one body; all members suffer if one is hurt and pleased at the honor of others (**1 Cor 12:26,27**).

✠ St. Mary's Intercession:

From the above, we see that if we give importance to the principle of intercession in general, then how much more effective would be the prayers of the Mother of God for the salvation of her children. We have seen St. Mary receiving the motherhood of the Incarnate Son of God and becoming a mother of His flesh, i.e. His Church. This motherhood is not merely an honorable title but a responsibility of unceasing work. Being a superior member of the body of Lord Jesus Christ (the Church) she responds to the need of the other members seeking the salvation of everyone. In the story of the wedding of Cana of Galilee, we can realize the limits of the intercession of Virgin Mary. For she informed her Son, "they have no wine" (**Jn 2:3**) – Of course the Lord was aware of that and surely he does not need to be reminded with the need of his children, but our Lord Jesus Christ who is full of love is pleased to see the mutual feeling of love in His mother and His children. Her request was only made once, which shows clearly her confidence in Her Son's reply, for she did not repeat her request but with every assurance she said to the people, "Whatever He says to you, do it." (**Jn 2:5**) Through her conversation with the people of the wedding, we can visualize her role in intercession. For she presents our needs to her Son and then directs our hearts to diligently carry out His commandments and to do whatever He tells us.

✠ St. Mary's Veneration:

For two thousand years, the Church has preserved the memory of Virgin Mary as the prototype of all Christians for she was truly pure and unconditionally obedient to God. St. Mary is also our model in that she was the first person to receive Lord Jesus Christ. As she bore our Lord physically, all Christians now have the privilege of bearing God within them spiritually. The honor we give to St. Mary also signifies our view of who Lord Jesus is. From early times, the Church has called her Mother of God (Gr. *Theotokos*), a title that implies that her Son is both fully man and fully God. As His mother, St. Mary was the source of our Lord's human nature. Therefore, because of her character and especially because of her role in God's plan of salvation, Christians appropriately honor St. Mary as the first among the saints. The Archangel Gabriel initiated this honor in his address to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women" (**Lk 1:28**) – compare how the Archangel addressed Zacharias the priest (**Lk 1:43**). This salutation clearly indicates that God Himself has chosen to honor Virgin Mary. Her favored status was confirmed when she went to visit her cousin St. Elizabeth, who was then six months pregnant with St. John the Baptist. St. Elizabeth greeted St. Mary with these words, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (**Lk 1:42,43**). Virgin Mary herself, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, predicted the honor that would be paid her throughout history, "For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (**Lk 1:48**). In obedience to God's clear intention, therefore, the Orthodox Church honors St. Mary in icons, hymns, and special feast days. We entreat her, as the human being who was most intimate with Lord Jesus Christ on earth, to intercede with Him on our behalf. We ask her, as the first believer and the mother of the Church, for guidance and protection; we venerate her – but we do not worship her, for worship belongs to God, her Son, alone. Moreover, as our spiritual mother (**Jn 19:27**), we are commanded by Holy Scriptures to honor her – "Honor your father and mother." (**Ex 20:12; Deut 5:16; Eph 6:2**)

✠ St. Mary's Feasts in the Coptic Church:

1. The Annunciation of her birth to her parents (7th of Messra)
2. Her Birth (1st of Pashans)
3. Her Presentation to the Temple (3rd of Kiahk)
4. Her falling asleep (21st of Touba – also celebrated on the 21st of every Coptic month)
5. The Assumption of her body (16th of Messra)
6. Consecration of the Church in her name at Philliponis (21st of Ba-ouna)
7. Her Apparition at Zeitoun – Cairo (24th of Baramahat)

* This lecture is adapted from 'St. Mary in the Orthodox Concept' by Fr. Tadros Malaty.