

The Communion of Saints as Community Life

“The church is Catholic, universal, so are all her actions; **all that she does belongs to all**. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and **ingrafted into that body** whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me: **all mankind is of one author**, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and **his hand shall bind up** all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie **open to one another**...

... No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: **any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind**, and therefore never send to know for whom the bells tolls; it tolls for thee.” **John Donne, Meditation XVII**

With vivid imagery, poet John Donne eloquently expresses the essence of the Communion of Saints in his Meditation XVII. The Communion of Saints partakes of the unity of Trinity—that triune Godhead which is ‘community life’ par excellence. There is much to be understood about the Communion of Saints that enriches every moment of our existence. This piece only begins to plumb the depths.

On Praying to the Saints: “The intercession of fellow Christians—which is what the saints in heaven are—also clearly does not interfere with Christ’s unique mediatorship because in the four verses immediately preceding 1 Timothy 2:5, Paul *says* that Christians should intercede: ‘First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and pleasing to God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth’ (1 Tim. 2:1–4). Clearly, then, intercessory prayers offered by Christians on behalf of others something ‘good and pleasing to God,’ not something infringing on Christ’s role as mediator.”¹

The Intercession of the Saints: Because they are more closely united with Christ, the saints—those who dwell in heaven unburdened by sin and the cares of earthly life—ceaselessly call upon the help of the Lord on behalf of their brethren still living on earth (cf. CCC 956)². “You say in your book that while we live we are able to pray for each other, but afterwards when we have died, the prayer of no person for another can be heard. . . . But if the apostles and martyrs while still in the body can pray for others, at a time when they ought still be solicitous about themselves, how much more will they do so after their crowns, victories, and triumphs?” (St. Jerome, *Against Vigilantius* 6 [A.D. 406]).

The Basis of our Unity: We are in communion with the saints, not only by virtue of following their example, but by an actual relationship with them—sometimes called devotion. We love the saints in our common love for Christ—we are their companions and fellow disciples (cf. CCC 957). The source of our communion is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (cf. CCC 1108). All the faithful form one body, so it can be said that “The communion of saints is the Church” (CCC 946-47).

The Implications of the Communion of Saints: “In this solidarity with all men, living or dead, which is founded on the communion of saints, the least of our acts done in charity redounds to the profit of all. Every sin harms this communion” (CCC 953). Or as St. Paul puts it: “*If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.*” 1 Cor 12: 26-27

Church Fathers on the Communion of Saints: Augustine writes: "Neither are the souls of the pious dead separated from the Church which even now is the kingdom of Christ. Otherwise there would be no remembrance of them at the altar of God in the communication of the Body of Christ" (*The City of God* 20:9:2 [A.D. 419]). Cyprian of Carthage reminds us of the need for continual prayer for the building up of the Body of Christ: "Let us remember one another in concord and unanimity. Let us on both sides [of death] always pray for one another. Let us relieve burdens and afflictions by mutual love, that if one of us, by the swiftness of divine condescension, shall go hence first, our love may continue in the presence of the Lord, and our prayers for our brethren and sisters not cease in the presence of the Father's mercy" (*Letters* 56[60]:5 [A.D. 253]).

¹ Excerpted from <https://www.catholic.com/tract/praying-to-the-saints>

² CCC is used as the abbreviation for the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1992 edition.