

The perennial honoring of saints by the Church

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An excerpt from the book: “A Manual of Heresies and para-Christian Groups”

According to the faith of our Church, the saints are **a reflection of God’s glory** (Corinthians II, 3:18); they **radiate** the uncreated Light of God (Matthew 5:14, John 8:12, Ephesians 5:8, Colossians 1:12 and Revelation 22:5).

The glory of the saints and the angels is not independent of the glory of Christ, because they are **members of His body** (Ephesians 1:23, 4:16, 5:23, Colossians 1:18-24). They are named the “**beloved ones of God**” (Chronicles II,20:7, Isaiah 41:8), the **Friends of God** (Psalms ρλη' 17 according to the Septuagint, John 15:14, James 2:13), the **Brothers of Christ** (Matthew 12:50). A saint is the **temple** and the **domicile of God** (Corinthians I 3:16-17, 6:19, Corinthians II 6:16), the **children of God** (John 1:12, Galatians 3:26-27), **Christ’s** inheritors and **co-inheritors** (Romans 8:17). Furthermore, the **commemoration** of the saints is **everlasting** (Psalms ρια/ριβ' :1-9, Proverbs 10:7, Hebrews 11:4-38).

God Himself, through the Holy Body of Christ, comes into personal communion with mankind and bestows him with holiness. This holiness is of the Body of Christ, not of an isolated person, and it is not dependent on the person’s communion with Christ (John 14:23, Corinthians I 3:5-17, 6:19, Corinthians II 6:16, Ephesians 2:22). It is in this manner, that **Christ triumphs through His saints** (John 21:19, Corinthians II 2:14).

In John’s Revelation, the 24 elders –who represent the triumphant Church- wear “**crowns of gold upon their heads**” (Revelation 4:4)

The innumerable hosts of the saints, who “washed their robes and whitened them in the blood of the Lamb” (Revelation 7:14), are arrayed “in the presence of the Throne and in the presence of the Lamb” as **victors** (Revelation 7:9-10); to them were given “**thrones**”, so that they would “**reign for one thousand years**”, until the Second Coming, when the Body of Christ –the Church- is to be delivered by its very Head to the Triadic God, so that thenceforth, “God will be everything, in everything” (Revelation 20:4, Corinthians I 15:23-28).

Christ is the **only** “Paraclete” (the One Who is called upon), the **only** “mediator” and “saviour” (John I 2:1, John 14 6:13-14, Timothy I 2:5, Acts 4:12); reconciliation can only be attained with the blood of Christ (Peter I 1:18-19). The “**other Paraclete**” (One Who is called upon), i.e. the Holy Spirit, **activates** -through the holy Sacraments- the endowments of Christ: i.e., through Holy Baptism it makes us members of the Body of Christ, the Church (Galatians 3:27, Corinthians I 12:3); through Holy Communion, it nurtures us with the “bread of life” (John 6:48-3). Thus, in this **absolute context**, there cannot be another savior, or a second mediator.

And yet, the Scripture does mention the mediation of people and angels, through prayer and supplication (Genesis 18:23-33, 20:3-18, 32:9-14, Job 42:8-10, Proverbs 15:8, Zechariah 1:12-13, Jeremiah 7:16). There are certain people who are

referred to as “ambassadors” (Corinthians II 5:18-20, Ephesians 6:20) and also as “saviors”, but only in the sense that they lead us towards the only true Savior, Christ (Corinthians I 9:22). God assures the prophet that even if one holy man were to be found, for his sake alone, the entire city would be saved (Jeremiah 5:1, Ezekiel 22:30).

Well, could it be that “mediation” -in a relative context- pertains only to living people? “No”, was God’s reply to the prophet Jeremiah: “**Not even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, would my soul be swayed towards them**” (Jeremiah 15:1). This suggests that in other instances, God **did** respond to the supplications of holy men who prayed for the population. In Revelation, we read of the celestial, triumphant Church (=the 24 elders) holding “vials filled with incense, which were the **prayers of the saints**”, in other words, of the living faithful who were still on earth – which incense/prayers they united with their own prayers. (Revelation 8:5)

The celestial Church accepts our supplications, and in fact it mediates to the Lord to relieve its brethren of their torments on earth (Revelation 6:9-11), a request that is eventually granted by God (Revelation 7:9-11, 8:3-5, 11:16-18, 14:14-20, Kings II 20:4-6, Maccabaeus 15:12-16)

Thus, when we call upon the saints, our hopes are not futile; the saints are bonded to us in a bond of love which “never lapses” (Corinthians I 13:8). In other words, we believe that we are truly “co-denizens with the saints and close to the Lord” (Ephesians 2:19-20).

Saints are “ever-present”, so that they can hearken to our supplications. Saints are **not** independent of God’s Grace, they are **not** ever-present, **nor** are they aware of what takes place a long way away from them, through any power of their own. Bathed as they are in the uncreated divine Grace, through the Holy Spirit, as members of Christ’s Body (the Church) which embodies Godhood, they are enabled to transcend the laws of nature and thus participate in the lives of their terrestrial brethren.

If God’s people who live on earth are able to transcend the laws of nature by the Grace of God, we are obliged to conclude that this is more than feasible for the members of the celestial triumphant Church. Indicatively, we shall mention just a few examples from the Holy Bible:

- The “heart” of Elisha was with Gehazi, enabling him to know what had happened at a distant place (Kings II 5:25-27).
- Abraham “saw” the day of the Lord and “rejoiced” (John 8:56)
- The Apostle Peter “saw” the wickedness of Ananias (Acts 5:3)

God reveals all miraculous things “through the Spirit, for our benefit”. Everything is activated by the Holy Spirit, without the Spirit being bound to any of the natural laws that God put in place for a particular purpose. (Corinthians I 12:7-11, Corinthians II 12:2-4). The very Lord Himself assures us of the communion of love in the celestial Church, which is aware of the events of our life and rejoices on the return of every sinner (Luke 15:7-10)

God performs miracles through the saints and the righteous (Kings I 17:21-22, Kings II 4:33-35, Acts 5:12-16, 12:11-12). Not only through those still alive on earth, but also through the reposed saints. We are told how the prophet Elijah received God's command to convey "to Hezekiah, leader of the people" how he would save the city from the Assyrians "for David, my servant" – in other words, for the sake of David, who –however- had already departed from this life (Kings II 20:4-6).

To assert that the bond of love between the struggling (terrestrial) Church and the triumphant (celestial) Church minimizes the mediatory function of the Paraclete is a naïve thought, because the saints **do not** possess any powers of their own to perform miracles and to intervene in our lives, independently of God's grace. The "spirit of Elijah" which "rested upon Elisha" was the grace of the Holy Spirit, and not something apart from it, which is why the "sons of the prophets" fully prostrated themselves on the ground before him (Kings II 2:14-15). This same thing is observed in the resurrection of the man who was buried in Elisha's grave (Kings II 13:21). Naturally it is not the venerable bones of the deceased that perform miracles, but the divine Grace which envelops them and which also graces the whole of man and not only his spirit.

In the Orthodox Church, the honor and respect paid to the saints is also expressed with prostration. This **however is not a prostration of worship**, which is an act strictly forbidden by the Holy Bible (Exodus 20:4-5, Deuteronomy 6:12-14, Matthew 4:10). No Orthodox Christian has ever been under the impression that they are prostrating themselves before anyone (whether an angel or a saint) as though it were God Himself. If this were the case, then the prostration would be absolute; in other words, it would be **worship**.

We therefore honor (pay our respects to) the saints, without being oblivious to their nature; that is, **we do not regard them as gods**, because we realize that **prostration is not always an exclusive expression of worship**. As long as we do not acknowledge as God the ones whom we are honoring, then we are not bestowing worship with our prostration; it is intended only as a display of our honor and affection towards that person. It is precisely with this kind of honoring that David prostrates himself before Jonathan: "**he fell on his face to the ground, and bowed himself three times**" (Samuel I 20:41) and before Saul: "**David stooped with his face to the earth and bowed himself**" (Samuel I 24:8); this is also how Nathan prostrated himself before David: "**he bowed himself before the king with his face to the ground**" (Kings I 1:23), also how the sons of the prophets "**bowed themselves to the ground before**" Elisha (Kings II 2:15), how Nebuchadnezzar "**worshipped**" Daniel (Daniel 4:46). Even in the New Testament, the jailer "**fell down before Paul and Silas**" (Acts 16:24), while the Lord Himself promises that He will oblige the Judeans to "**worship before the feet**" of the bishop of the Church of Philadelphia (Revelation 3:9; compare this with incident in Samuel I 5:4).

Those who have rejected the honoring and the veneration of the saints usually invoke incidents from the Holy Bible, such as Acts 14:11-15 and Revelation 19:10, 22:8-9.

In Acts 14:11-15 we read:

14:11 And when the people saw what Paul had done, they lifted up their voices, saying in the speech of Lycaonia, "The gods have come down to us, in the likeness of men."

14:12 And they called Barnabas “Jupiter”, and Paul “Mercury”, because he was the chief speaker.

14:13 Then the priest of Jupiter, who stood before their city, brought oxen and garlands to the gates, and would have offered a sacrifice along with the people.

14:14 When the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of this, they rent their clothes, and ran in among the people, crying out

14:15 And saying: Sirs, why are you doing such things? We also are men of passions/weaknesses just like yours, who preach to you that you should direct such praises to the living God, who made heaven and earth, and the sea, and all things that are in them.

It is more than obvious, that the citizens had taken Paul and Barnabas to be **gods**, which is why the apostles rightly reacted as they did. That kind of veneration was not befitting to them, as it was a veneration of **worship**.

In Revelation 19:10, 22:8-9 we read:

19:10 And I fell at his feet to worship him. And he said to me: See [thou do it] not: I am thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren that have the testimony of Jesus: worship God: for the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

22:8 And I John saw these things and heard them. And when I had heard and seen, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel who showed me these things.

22:9 Then he said to me: behold, do not do thus, for I am thy fellow-servant, and of thy brethren the prophets, and of them who keep the sayings of this book; you should worship God.

Here, bewildered by what he was blessed enough to see and still under the influence of the vision that the Lord Himself had given to him :

Revelation 1:17 And when I saw Him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying to me, Fear not; I am the first and the last: 1:18 [I am] he that liveth, who was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and of death.

John thought that it was the Lord appearing before him once again, which is why he spontaneously prostrated himself to worship Him. The angel however brought him back to the reality of that moment, by telling him that he was only John's "fellow-servant" and that such a form of veneration belonged only to God!

If we were to allow that John had in fact intended to merely greet the angel with his prostration, he had every right to do so; for example :

Numbers 22:31 Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam and he saw the **angel of the LORD standing in the way, and his**

sword drawn in his hand: and he bowed down his head, and fell flat on his face.

and

Joshua 5:14 And he said, No, but [as] captain of the host of the LORD am I now come. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and worshipped, and said to him, What saith my lord to his servant?

and of course this kind of prostration would not have been construed as worship. If this were the case with John, then the angel's refusal of his prostration would have been an indication of his humility. Otherwise, how could John have dared to prostrate himself before the angel a second time? (Revelation 22:8-9)

This is the interpretation of the Scripture, according to the teaching of the Church (Timothy I 3:15). It is thus witnessed, even in the early Christian texts. The first Christians would confess that: "I shall never be able either to abandon Christ, Who suffered for the salvation of those being saved throughout the world and the most immaculate, above all sinners, nor shall I worship anyone else. For He is the one whom we **worship** as the Son of God, and as for the martyrs, we **love** them as disciples of the Lord, and they are worthy of this love, because of their unsurpassed dedication to their king and teacher." This is mentioned in the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp (†156). Also mentioned therein is the fact that the Christians had collected the bones of the martyr, "the even more precious than precious jewels, and even nobler than gold", and they were entombed in an appropriate place, so that the people could assemble there and celebrate "the birthday of his martyrdom" (Martyr Polycarp 17-18)

Origen (†253/4) mentions that "the souls of those slain for their witness of Jesus do not reside in heaven in vain; they **minister** to those who pray for the absolution of sins" (Origen, 'Exhortation to martyrs', 30 – compare to Revelation 20:4).

Saint Basil (330-379) makes mention of the festivals that took place for the commemoration of the saints (in Epistle 227 addressed to the bishops of Pontus. Broad terms, 8,40) and of the invoking of the saints (Homily 4 on Saint Mamas, 1): "He who is grieved **resorts** to the forty (saints); he who rejoices, hurries to them. The former, in order to find a solution to his troubles, and the latter, to safeguard for himself the more important benefits....let your entreaties be made along with the martyrs." (Basil the Great, Homily 5 On the holy forty saints, 8)

We are informed by Basil the Great that the honoring of the forty saints was prevalent in many territories, and that those saints "grace many homelands" (On the holy forty saints, 8)

Saint John the Chrysostom (344-407) speaks of "litanies and supplications.....in a temple, where relics of the saints are kept", in the hope of averting the ordeals threatening the city (Chrysostom, To those who deserted the Church). The power of the holy martyrs –says Chrysostom- "daily lives and acts; it drives out demons, it diverts illnesses, it animates entire cities, and it draws entire crowds to this place." (On the enjoyment of future benefits, 2) He also underlines that the honoring of saints "shall most certainly be forwarded to the Lord"(Compare with Matthew 5:16).

Saint Gregory the Theologian (329-390) has the same viewpoint: «We should celebrate all the martyrs.....» (Oration 24, 3-4, on Saint Cyprian), «and now, the martyrs shall make the skies to open up...» (Oration 44 12, On the New Sunday). «And now, he (the saint) is in heaven, and there he offers his sacrifices for us...» (Oration 43 80, On Basil the Great). «We beseech you to benevolently watch over from on high the people who are around you, and direct them towards perfection.....» (Oration 21 37, On Athanasius the Great).

Thus, the 7th Ecumenical Synod formulated Orthodoxy's belief, as follows: **Firstly, to bestow upon Him (Christ) as God and Master, and then, (bestow) upon the others (the saints) - inasmuch as they have a common Master and are His genuine servants - the honor and the respect and the veneration (prostration) that is appropriate to their relative status.** (Synodicon of Orthodoxy of the 7th Ecumenical Council).

This constitutes the orthodox teaching on saints. Thus, we do not believe that the saints can save themselves or other people. Irrespective of what the saints may have accomplished, it is hardly enough for their own salvation, because they have done nothing more than what their duty demands. (Luke 17:10)

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