

15. The Communion of Saints

Each year on the first two days of November, Catholics throughout the world celebrate the Communion of Saints. The first day of November we call the Feast of All Saints; the second day of November we call the Feast of All Souls.

The community of the Church reaches beyond earthly boundaries to all who have died in the peace of Christ. By baptism we all become members of one Christian family that not even death can separate. The divine life which we receive as Christians unites us all in a real bond of love in Christ. That bond of Christian love extends beyond death into everlasting life.

This is the Communion of Saints. We profess our belief in it each time we say the Apostle's Creed.

"I believe in _____ the Communion of Saints"

It means that there is a living spiritual link between the members of the pilgrim Church here on earth and all who have died in God's friendship, That link is maintained and strengthened through prayer.

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Every community holds its heroes in great honour. The believing Christian community is no exception. From the earliest days it honoured the Apostles and Christian martyrs who had given supreme witness of faith both by their virtuous lives and by their heroic deaths. Soon the Church added others to that list of great ones, so that the whole community might meditate on their outstanding practice of Christian virtue and strive to imitate their good example.

The whole aim of our lives is to be Christlike. The saints help us by their example to do this. They spent their lives in close imitation of Christ. By trying to follow in their footsteps we too can achieve a deeper knowledge and love of Jesus.

Praying to the Saints

We must all pray direct to God. But the saints can help us to reach him. Any prayers or devotion to them strengthens our relationship with Christ. They are not God's enemies; they are his friends. By praying to them, by asking them to pray for us and with us, we are honouring God through them.

We could hardly say we honour God fully if we were to ignore those who served him so faithfully, and whom he loves so much.

Canonised Saints

St. Paul used the word *Saint* to refer to all the believing Christians, even those still living on earth. We usually reserve it for those who have left this world in God's friendship and are now with him in heaven forever. It is most likely there are countless millions of these in heaven.

The Pope and the bishops sometimes nominate a particular saint who lived an exceptionally holy life, and propose him or her for public honour and imitation. We call these canonized saints. They are people who lived the Christian virtues to a heroic degree. A feast day is kept in their honour each year either in that country or part of the world where they lived, or by Catholics everywhere. A new name may be added to that list at any time. Saints are sometimes nominated as patrons of some work or occupation or class of people in which they were particularly interested or involved during their life time.

Catholics give their child the name of a saint at baptism so that the child can regard that particular saint as his or her *patron saint*.

Veneration of the Saints

The Catholic attitude to the saints has always aroused the interest of those who are not Catholics. One of the first things to strike them is the number of statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and other saints which are often seen in church buildings, in homes and sometimes even in wayside shrines. They are struck also by the variety of medals and other representations of saints which they find among many of their Catholic friends. Sometimes they see in such things a sort of superstition, black magic or idolatry. Even when they not completely opposed to such customs they feel that they personally could never kneel down or pray before such images. It is important therefore to have a correct view of Catholic veneration of saints, and to be able to distinguish clearly between what is obligatory and what is optional, and between what is approved by the Church and what is disapproved.

Permissible to Venerate Saints

The Church has always taught that some degree of devotion to the saints is *good* and *useful*. There is no strict obligation regarding it apart from a reverence and respect for the saints in general, and some measure of devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is possible to embrace the Catholic Faith without having any liking for the actual practices employed in the veneration of the saints, such as decorating their statues, exposing their relics, or saying particular prayers to

them. One must however accept it as a point of teaching that it is *permissible* to venerate the saints and to ask them to pray for us.

Superstition to be Avoided

Poorly educated people easily fall into unsound practices which have nothing at all to do with genuine devotion to the saints. There is no doubt that this has sometimes happened over the centuries. Devotion to the saints, even today, is sometimes tainted with superstition. This happens when some representation of a saint, is credited with a certain power which the stature or medal itself could not possibly possess. One sometimes finds such superstitions associated with medals or plaques of St. Christopher in motor cars. Any protection which the motorist may expect from the saint is to be attributed to the saint's intercession on our behalf because of our prayerful devotion to him. It not to be attributed to the plaques or medals as if they were just lucky charms.

Taints of superstition also creep into devotion to the saints when people attach too much importance to particular attitudes, numbers, or rites, which have no particular value in themselves. We must never attribute a *compelling* influence to any devotional practice; the result to the prayer and intercession of the saint must be left to the wisdom and love of God.

It is not always easy to distinguish between a case of superstition and a case of genuine filial confidence. We must therefore be extremely careful not to judge others nor to condemn their various forms of private devotion just because they do not appeal to us personally.

The Example of the Saints

It is a most praiseworthy practice to read accounts of the lives of the saints and to follow their example. By studying their lives we are unconsciously moved to imitate them. We are thus drawn closer to men and women who were truly great and good. By admiring their actions we learn to follow their example. For those who wish to make such a study there are books on the lives of the saints available in all religious book stores.

It is true that for Christians, Christ himself is the first and greatest example. But who can better show us how to follow the example of Christ than a saint? We live in quite different times, under different circumstances. The saints are the Christian heroes. They are the words of the Gospel come to life. We see true Christian courage in the martyrs, faith in the great teachers, the humility for repentance in St. Augustine, the spirit of Christian service in St. Francis, the challenge of the social apostolate in St. Vincent de Paul, etc., etc.

"Lives of great men all remind us

*We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time."*

The Blessed Virgin Mary

Chief among all the saints is the Blessed Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ's own mother. We honour her and pray to her more than all the other saints because of her unique place in the whole story of Christianity. The first chapter of the gospel according to St. Luke tells of how the angel Gabriel spoke to her and told her that God had chosen to become man and be born of her. This the scene.

The angel says:

"Hail, O favoured one, the Lord is with you!"

She is amazed and afraid at the vision of the angel and his words. He reassures her:

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Mary asks how this is possible, since she is a virgin and, she implies, intends to remain one. The angel replies:

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God."

She is given a sign by which she will know that this message is from God. She will find that her aged cousin, Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah, is already six months pregnant. Mary says:

"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1, 28-38).

Mary is far more sacred than the Holy of Holies, where God dwelt in the Temple in Jerusalem, for she is to bear within her womb the Saviour himself, God-made-man.

The Visit of Elizabeth

Mary sets off immediately to visit her cousin Elizabeth, who is filled with the Holy Spirit at the sight of her and cries out:

**“Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!
And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come
to me?”**

Mary, now that her secret is known, praises God in the beautiful poem called the *Magnificat*:

**“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold,
henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has
done great things for me” (Luke 1, 39-56).**

Finding Christ with Mary

Mary's forecast has come true. Millions of Christians in every generation have called her the *Blessed* Virgin Mary.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem angels announced the good news to shepherds in the surrounding countryside. St. Luke tells us that they went to see Jesus and found him *with Mary*. It is significant that the first people to find the Incarnate God on earth found him with Mary.

Again St. Matthew tells us that when the wise men from the East came to Bethlehem to find Christ and adore him they found him *with Mary his mother*. Mary's unique role in the whole story of Christianity was to bring Christ to mankind. When the world recognizes her for what she is, it will recognize Christ also, for what he is. This helps us to understand why devotion to Mary is so important to Catholics.

The “Woman” in Genesis

The third chapter of the Book of Genesis tells how, after the sin of Adam and Eve, which caused the downfall of the human race, God told Satan, symbolized by a serpent, that he would be defeated through “The Woman” and her offspring:

**“I will put enmity between you and the Woman, and between your seed
and her seed; he shall bruise you head and you shall bruise his heel”
(Gen. 3, 15).**

The Fathers, the great Christian writers of the first four centuries, saw in this a reference to Mary and her son. The "seed," or offspring, of the woman will crush the head of the Serpent. The Serpent will wound him in his lowest part, his heel. Jesus, in his death and resurrection, crushed Satan, yet in the process he was wounded in his human nature. The Father called Mary "The second Eve," and Christ "The second Adam." Death and sin came to man through Eve, life and salvation through Mary, whose son saved the world. "Death through Eve, life through Mary" became almost a proverb.

The "Woman" in St. John

St. John tells how on two important occasions, when Jesus worked his first miracle and when he hung dying on the cross, he addressed Mary with the solemn and respectful Hebrew title, "Woman." No doubt St. John intends us to think of the Woman of Genesis.

The first occasion was the wedding at Cana, where Jesus, Mary and the Apostles were guests. The wine ran out and Mary drew Jesus' attention to it. He replied: "woman, what have you to do with me?" ---or, alternatively translated --- "Why do you trouble me with that? My hour has not yet come." In St. John's Gospel the "hour" of Jesus means the time of his death and resurrection. This remark implies that at Cana it was not Mary's business to be Christ's agent in helping men, but it would be when his "hour" had come, that is, after his death and resurrection. However, he worked the miracle at her unspoken request, and did not do it grudgingly. He changed water from six large jars into wine, and it was better wine than they had had before (John 2, 1-11).

The second occasion was at the Crucifixion. St. John, the beloved disciple, stood next to Mary beneath the Cross:

"When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' \then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (John 19, 26-27).

Jesus wanted St. John to look after her when he was gone, particularly as she had no other children. But he meant more than that. Mary is the second "Woman" through whom life is to come to the world. She is the woman whose offspring crushes the Serpent's head. St. John is the representative of all the Christians who are her children, since they belong to the Body of Christ, the Church.

The Mother of God

Mary is the mother of Jesus Christ, God-made-man. That does not mean that she existed before the Creator of heaven and earth. She adored him as his humble

servant. She said to the angel: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord," Yet the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, God the Son, became a member of the human race to give his life for men.

A mother brings forth a *person*, not just a human body or a human nature. It was a person who lay in Mary's womb, was suckled at her breast, lay in the manger, and was carried in her arms. Since that person was God-made-man, she is truly the Mother of God.

All her gifts and privileges were given precisely because she was God's mother. No other human being has ever been called upon to fulfil such an exalted office, and no other human being has been so honoured and blessed by God. Hence she could humbly say: "Behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed".

The Immaculate Conception

The Catholic Church teaches that Mary was preserved from the effects of Original Sin from the very first moment of her existence. This unique privilege is called the *Immaculate Conception*. This has been explained in lesson 4 in the section on Original sin. It means that the new life of sanctifying grace, which was lost by original sin and is restored to Christians through Baptism, was given direct to Mary from the first moment that she began to exist as a child in the womb of her mother.

The Virgin Mother

When the angel told Mary she was to become a mother she questioned it. "How can this be?" (Luke, 1, 34). An ordinary Jewish girl would have wished and even expected to have a child, particularly if she already had a husband as Mary had. St. Joseph was her husband. Yet she asked the question, "*How can this be?*" From this the Church has always believed and taught that, in agreement with Joseph, Mary had pledged her virginity to God, so that she might be able to dedicate herself fully to the Will of God.

The Church teaches also that Mary always remained a virgin. She had no child but Jesus. There are some references in the Gospels to "the brethren of the Lord", but *brethren* among the Jews did not necessarily mean children of the same parents. It included cousins and relatives. Thus in the Old Testament Lot is called the brother of his uncle Abraham, and Jacob is called the brother of his uncle Laban.

Mary in Heaven

We believe that at the end of her life on earth Mary was taken up into heaven. The early Christians treasured the bodies and tombs of the Apostles and the

martyrs, and built churches over them. Yet no one ever claimed to have the body of Mary or to be able to point to the place of her burial, because of the belief of Christians that her body was taken up to heaven.

Christians celebrated the feast of the "Going to Sleep of Mary" as far back as the fourth century. Later this feast was kept each year on 15th August and it was called the feast of the *Assumption* of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the ninth century it was such a big Christian feast day that King Alfred declared the 15th of August an annual public holiday. This is now the biggest annual feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary for Catholics everywhere. In the year 1950 Pope Pius XII made a precise and infallible definition of it when he declared that all Catholics are to believe that at the end of her life Mary was taken up into heaven and reigns there with her Son as Queen of the angels and saints.

Mary shared in a unique way with her Son in the work of our Redemption. That is why we have always believed that as he rose from death and ascended into heaven so also she was lifted up both body and soul into heaven.

Mary our Mother

In the Book of the Apocalypse, we read of the vision of "the woman clothed in the sun and with the moon at her feet". The woman is about to give birth to a child and a great dragon is waiting to devour it. Frustrated in the attempts to overcome the mother and child, "the dragon went elsewhere to make war on the rest of her children, the men who keep God's commandments and hold fast to the truth concerning Jesus". (*Apoc. 12*).

Christian tradition has seen in this "woman" a reference to Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is also the mother of his followers.

Mary's spiritual motherhood of men is one of the most ancient of Christian traditions; for Mary gave birth to Jesus not as a private person but as our saviour and head. Even within Mary's virginal womb, Christ our saviour bore the exalted title of head of the Church. "The conception of Christ is the beginning of the Christian people and the birth of the Head is the birth of the Body". (*St. Leo the Great*).

Through baptism, we have been united with Christ to share with him his life and glory: we have become brothers and sisters of Christ, adopted children of the same Father in heaven. And Mary is the spiritual mother of Christ's brothers and sisters by grace just as surely as she is the physical mother of Christ.

"Christ is not in the head nor in the body but the whole Christ is in both head and body together". (*St. Augustine*). And Mary is the mother of the whole Christ.

"She is the mother of the members of Christ ... having co-operated by a positive act of love in the birth of the faithful in the Church, who are the members of that head". (*St. Augustine*).

Since Mary is our mother, she has all of a mother's intense love and interest for us. We may go to her with confidence --- confiding to her our interests, laying before her our sorrows and difficulties, having recourse to her in all our needs and temptations.

There are many people who regularly ask for our Lady's assistance for the grace of a good confession, for spiritual advancement, for peace in the home, for conversion of sinners for financial assistance, for a Catholic partner in life, for better health, for daily needs both spiritual and temporal.

But remember: Mary does not operate independently of God. Mary will only ask for what is God's will for us. And her constant reply to us will be the one she gave to the servants at the marriage feast of Cana: "Do whatever he tells you". (*John 2, 5*).

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Catholics say to one another, "Pray for me," because they know that all the members of the Body of Christ help one another. They ask the saints in heaven to pray for them, because these are close to God and their prayers are powerful. But there is no member of the Church closer and dearer to Christ than Mary. She is far superior to all the angels and saints. Hence the Church pays her unique honour, but always short of adoration which is due to God alone. After the Lord's prayer and the Creed, there is no better prayer than the "Hail Mary." It is said by millions at all times of the day, in all parts of the world. It is made up of the words of the angel Gabriel and of Elizabeth to Mary, to which is added the petition of the Church.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death. Amen."

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POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1. Show how prayers to the Saints can deepen our friendship with God.**
- 2. "The bond of Christian love extends beyond death into everlasting life". What, if anything, does this statement mean to you personally?**
- 3. Give briefly the life story of some saint to whom you feel devoted.**
- 4. Give some examples from the life story of Christ showing that he gave Mary a unique share in his work of Redemption.**
- 5. Give your own reasons for the belief that Mary is the Mother of all Christians.**
- 6. Why do we say it is appropriate that God would not allow Mary's body to corrupt after death?**