

Praying to Saints

by Sebastian R. Fama

Because Catholics pray to the saints in heaven, they are sometimes accused of equating them with God. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Such accusations stem in part from a misunderstanding of what the word "pray" means. The word pray has several meanings. One definition means to simply ask. Another is to worship or adore. When we pray to God we can do both. But when we pray to the saints in heaven all we can do is to ask them to pray for and with us. Catholics know that worship is due to God alone.

I find it amazing that this accusation is still made. What the Catholic Church teaches is anything but secret. The Church's position on this has been spelled out for centuries. For instance, St Thomas Aquinas wrote:

In more technical terms used by the Tradition to draw this important distinction, devotion to Mary belongs to the veneration of **dulia**, or the homage and honor owed to the saints, both angelic and human in heaven, and not to **latria**, or the adoration and worship that can be given only to the Triune God and the Son incarnate. Because of her unique relationship to Christ in salvation history, however, the special degree of devotion due to Mary has traditionally been called **hyperdulia**. While **latria** is owed to her Son by reason of unity of his divine and human natures in the Person of the Word made flesh, **hyperdulia** is due to Mary as truly his Mother (*Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 103, a. 4; III, q. 25, a. 5 [A.D 1270]).

Dulia, hyperdulia and latria are Greek words. To put it into modern English we might say that dulia and hyperdulia are degrees of honor. It is not unusual for us to honor teachers, pastors or a dedicated pro-lifer. As Catholics we merely apply this principle to those who have gone before us who have likewise done well. Latria, as we saw, is the adoration and worship due to God alone.

You might disagree with the Catholic position on this. But you must admit that Catholics do not equate Mary and the saints with God. To say otherwise would be to "bear false witness against your neighbor" (Exodus 20:16).

But why go to the saints when we can go to God? Doesn't the Bible tell us that we have but one Mediator between God and man and that is "Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5)? That's true, but if this prohibits the intercession of the saints in heaven it also prohibits the intercession of the saints on earth. And we know that isn't true. So, what does Paul really mean? If we read the verse in context the meaning becomes clear:

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 it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all, the testimony to which was born at the proper time (1 Timothy 2:1-6).

So, Paul begins by asking us to pray (mediate) for all men. He then says that it is good and acceptable to God because He desires all men to be saved. Paul sees intercessory prayer as a way to bring men to Christ and ultimately to salvation. Once on the subject of salvation, Paul expands on it by explaining how it was made possible. He does this by referring to Jesus' unique act of mediation: "there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for all." Hebrew 9:15 makes this last point even clearer. It says that Jesus "is the Mediator of a new covenant." When the saints in heaven pray for us they are no more mediating a new covenant than we are when we pray for each other. So, what is the lesson from these passages?

1. Pray (mediate) for men that they might be saved.
2. Salvation comes from Jesus' unique mediation.
3. Jesus' unique mediation consists of His death on the cross.

It is clear that the Bible encourages intercessory prayer. The only question left is whether or not the saints in heaven can intercede for us? Scripture indicates they can. We know that "the prayer of a righteous person has great power" (James 5:16). Who could be more righteous or pray more fervently than those in heaven?

We know that they care for us, "There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7). And it is reasonable to conclude that they know what is happening in our lives because God wills it. Why would God will such a thing? He wills it because He wants His children to love one another (John 13:34). God doesn't need us to do anything. But He chooses to use us in His plan of salvation because it pleases Him.

Scripture says that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Since God is pure Spirit it obviously doesn't have anything to do with our physical appearance. That only leaves one possibility; we are designed to imitate Him. Whenever we act charitably we are a likeness or image of God. And just like an earthly father would be pleased, God is pleased. As Jesus said we are to love one another as He has loved us (John 13:34). Are we not "one body in Christ, and individually members of one another?" (Romans 12:5). Is Christ divided? Does He have two bodies? As long as we are connected to Him we are connected to one another. And as we know, the saints on earth and the saints in heaven are both connected to Him.

And finally we see that those in heaven present our prayers along with their own to Jesus: "The four living creatures and the twenty four elders fell down before the Lamb, each holding a harp, and **with golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints**" (Revelation 5:8). Also, "And another angel came and stood at the altar with a golden censer, and **he was given much incense to mingle with the prayers of all the saints** upon the golden altar before the throne. **And the smoke of the incense rose with the prayers of the saints from the hand of the angel before God**" (Revelation 8:3-4). Note that incense represents our prayers, and that the angels and elders in heaven present our prayers to God.

In Matthew 18:10 we read: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven." What do you suppose that the little ones' angels would be doing on their behalf before God? Praying for them is the only logical answer.

Demonstrating early Christian belief, Origen wrote in the year 233, "But not the High Priest [Christ] alone prays for those who pray sincerely, but also the angels...as also the souls of the saints who have already fallen asleep" (*On Prayer* 11). Cyril of Jerusalem wrote the following: Then [during the Eucharistic prayer] we make mention also of those who have already fallen asleep: first, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs that through their prayers and supplications God would receive our petition... (*Catechetical Lectures* 23:9 [A.D. 350]).

Evidence is also found in the Old Testament. In the book of 2 Maccabees 15:11-14 we see the high priest Onias and the prophet Jeremiah praying for Israel. At the time this took place they had both already died. The passage reads as follows:

He armed each of them not so much with confidence in shields and spears as with the inspiration of brave words, and he cheered them all by relating a dream, a sort of vision, which was worthy of belief. What he saw was this: Onias, who had been high priest, a noble and good man, of modest bearing and gentle manner, one who spoke fittingly and had been trained from childhood in all that belongs to excellence, was praying with outstretched hands for the whole body of the Jews. Then in the same fashion another appeared, distinguished by his gray hair and dignity, and of marvelous majesty and authority. And Onias spoke, saying, "This is a man who loves the family of Israel and prays much for the people and the holy city—Jeremiah, the prophet of God."

Some will object to my quoting 2 Maccabees. And that is understandable because Protestant Bibles don't include it. However, up until the Protestant Reformation this book was in every Christian Bible. The reformers decided on their own authority to eliminate not only this book but six others as well. But even if you don't accept this book as being a part of Scripture you would have to admit that it is a historical document. And that is significant because it shows us that the doctrine in question was not some late invention of the Catholic Church. Rather it is a practice based on ancient belief, and as we saw earlier, Scripture itself.