32. Praying to Mary and the saints

Often heard: "There is one mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2:5)." / "Talking to the dead is necromancy."
Also heard: "You ask friends at church to pray for you. Why not the saints in heaven, who are alive in Christ?"

Pray to God alone, not to the saints

HELD BY Lutheran · Reformed · Anglican Article XXII · Methodist · Baptist

Prayer should be addressed to God alone through Christ. The departed cannot hear us, contacting the dead is forbidden, and honoring saints distracts from Christ.

VERSES CITED

1 Tim 2:5; Deut 18:10–12; Isa 8:19; Matt 6:9; John 14:6, 13–14; Heb 4:16; 7:25; Eccl 9:5; Luke 16:26–31; Rev 19:10; 22:8–9.

WHERE THE IDEA COMES FROM

Vigilantius (c. 400) opposed the cult of saints and relics, and Jerome answered him in *Against Vigilantius* (406). Wycliffe and the Lollards; the Augsburg Confession, art. 21 (1530); Calvin, *Institutes* 3.20.21–27.

Ask the saints to pray for us

HELD BY Catholic · Orthodox

Asking a saint to pray for us is like asking a fellow Christian to pray for us. Christ's mediation is unique, yet the verses just before 1 Tim 2:5 command Christians to intercede for others. Those in heaven are alive in Christ, members of one Body that death does not divide, and Revelation shows them offering the prayers of the saints. Necromancy is conjuring the dead for knowledge, not asking for prayers. The Church distinguishes the honor given to saints (*dulia*) from the worship owed to God alone (*latria*).

VERSES CITED

1 Tim 2:1–5; Jas 5:16; Rev 5:8; 6:9–10; 8:3–4; Heb 12:1, 22–24; Mark 12:26–27; Luke 9:30–31; 15:7, 10; 16:19–31; Jer 15:1; 2 Macc 15:12–14; Rom 12:4–5; 1 Cor 12:21–26.

EARLY CHURCH AND HISTORY

Catacomb inscriptions (3rd century) ask the dead to pray for the living. Origen, *On Prayer* 11 (c. 233): the saints pray with us. The *Sub tuum praesidium* prayer to the Mother of God survives on a papyrus (John Rylands Library, Greek 470) that scholars date from the third century (Edgar Lobel) to the sixth through ninth (Hans Förster, Piotr Towarek); C. H. Roberts, who published it in 1938, placed it in the fourth century, with a query. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Mystagogical Catecheses* 5.9 (c. 350): we commemorate

the saints so that God may receive our petitions through their prayers. Augustine, Sermon 159. Second Council of Nicaea (787) on veneration vs worship.

Catholic and Orthodox writers add two further lines of evidence. Gregory of Nazianzus (*Oration* 24, 379-380) tells of a virgin, Justina, who prayed to Christ and begged the Virgin Mary to help a virgin in danger. From about the sixth century, homilists and hymn writers in Greek and Syriac ask Mary directly for her prayers: Severus of Antioch (Homily 14, 513), Abraham of Ephesus (after 560), Romanos the Melodist, in whose Nativity hymn Mary herself pleads for humanity, Jacob of Serugh's Dormition homily, and the Homily on the Annunciation ascribed to Basil of Seleucia, which calls her a mediator between God and humans. They also note that the one fourth-century dispute over devotion to Mary concerned worship, not requests for her prayers: Epiphanius of Salamis (*Panarion* 78-79, c. 375) condemns women in Arabia who offered bread in Mary's name and writes that Mary is to be honored while the Father, Son and Holy Spirit alone are worshiped ("let no one worship Mary"). They read this as the same line that *dulia* and *latria* draw, and observe that he says nothing against asking for her prayers.

CATECHISM AND COUNCILS

CCC 946–962 (esp. 956, 958), 971, 2132, 2679, 2683–2684; Trent, Session 25 (1563).

Across the traditions

How each major tradition answers this question, in its own words and from its own documents.

Catholic

Asking a saint in heaven to pray for us is like asking a fellow Christian to pray, within the one Body that death does not divide; saints receive honour (dulia), God alone worship (latria). The full case is set out above.

Sources: CCC 956, 958, 2132, 2683-2684; Council of Trent, Session 25 (1563); Second Council of Nicaea (787).

Orthodox

The faithful on earth, united in prayer with the Church in heaven, call the saints to their aid; the Church grounds this in holy tradition, with its principle seen in Scripture (Rev 8:3-4). The saints, above all the Mother of God, are intercessors, and the Second Council of Nicaea (787) gives them and their icons veneration, while adoration (latreia) belongs to the divine nature alone. Orthodox do not pray to the Theotokos instead of God but ask her to pray for them.

Sources: Longer Catechism of St. Philaret, art. 9, Q 263-265; Confession of Dositheus (1672), Decree 8 and Question 4; Second Council of Nicaea (787), Definition; OCA Questions & Answers, "Mary / Prayer / Death" (oca.org).

Lutheran

The Augsburg Confession commends remembering the saints so that we may imitate their faith and good works, but not invoking them, since Scripture sets forth Christ alone as Mediator and Intercessor. The Apology grants three honours to saints (thanksgiving for them, strengthening of faith, imitation) and allows that the saints in heaven pray for the Church in general, but rejects invocation as having no command, promise or example in Scripture. The Smalcald Articles call invocation idolatry.

Sources: Augsburg Confession XXI; Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXI.4, 8-9, 17, 27-28, 31; Smalcald Articles II.2.25-28.

Reformed

Religious worship is due to God alone, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, "not to angels, saints, or any other creature," and only through the mediation of Christ. The Heidelberg Catechism counts prayer to saints a breach of the first commandment and teaches that those who seek salvation in saints deny the only Saviour. The Second Helvetic Confession honours the saints as living members of Christ and imitates them, but neither worships nor invokes them nor treats them as intercessors.

Sources: Westminster Confession 21.2; Heidelberg Catechism Q 30, 94; Second Helvetic Confession ch. 5.

Anglican

Article XXII calls the Romish doctrine of the "Invocation of Saints" "a fond thing, vainly invented," grounded on no warranty of Scripture, while the Prayer Book keeps feasts of the apostles and of Mary to give thanks for them. Practice differs: Evangelicals hold to the Article, while many Anglo-Catholics ask Mary and the saints to pray for them. ARCIC II (2005), a commission text not adopted by either church, judged that asking Mary and the saints to pray for us need not divide the churches.

Sources: Thirty-Nine Articles XXII; Book of Common Prayer (1662), Calendar; ARCIC II, Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ (2005), paras 67, 75, 78.

Methodist

Wesley's Articles of Religion keep the Anglican rejection almost word for word: the Romish doctrine of purgatory, pardons, worship of images and relics, "and also invocation of saints," is "a fond thing, vainly invented," with no warrant in Scripture (Art. XIV). Methodists honour the saints as examples of faith but address prayer to God through Christ.

Sources: Methodist Articles of Religion XIV (Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church).

Baptist

Prayer should be addressed to God alone through Christ, the one Mediator; the departed are not shown to hear us, contacting the dead is

forbidden, and honouring saints distracts from Christ. The full case is set out above.

Sources: 1 Tim 2:5; Deut 18:10-12; Heb 4:16; 7:25.

Where it gets contested: Those who pray to God alone (Lutherans, Reformed, Anglicans, Methodists and Baptists) answer that the NT has no example of a believer on earth praying to a departed saint, and that we don't know the saints can hear. Those who ask the saints to pray for us (Catholics and Orthodox) point to Rev 5:8 and to the rich man in Luke 16 (a departed person aware of and concerned for the living), and to the practice attested by the 3rd century. On the Marian evidence they cite, Protestant writers answer that the date of the *Sub tuum* papyrus is open, that Gregory's story of Justina is a legend of a sorcerer's attack which confuses Cyprian of Carthage with Cyprian of Antioch, and that, in Mary B. Cunningham's survey (*The Virgin Mary in Byzantium, c. 400-1000*, 2022), such requests are firmly attested in homilies and hymns only from the sixth century: Proclus of Constantinople never invokes Mary as intercessor in his surviving sermons, the authorship of the Basil homily is disputed, and Jacob of Serugh is the only exception among early Syriac writers. They add that no command, promise or example for invoking the saints can be produced from Scripture (Apology of the Augsburg Confession XXI.10). On Epiphanius, Baptist and Reformed writers answer that his rule states what they hold, that Mary is a creature and not to be worshiped, and that his silence about asking her prayers is not consent.

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