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THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

The Communion of Saints, spoken of in the creed, is the spiritual union among those of us on earth with those in purgatory and those in heaven. This union is “reinforced by an exchange of spiritual goods” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 955). In other words, we here on earth can pray for those in purgatory, and those in heaven can hear our requests and, through God’s grace, act on our behalf. Our prayers to the saints and their responses are called “intercessions.”

Many people wonder why Catholics pray to the saints when only God can answer prayer. The easiest way to understand is to think of the saints as friends in high places. Just as we might ask a friend here on earth to help us with a task or project, so, too, we can ask the saints for their assistance. It may be more accurate to say that we ask the saints to pray for us instead of saying we pray to them.

Remember that we Catholics *venerate* the saints, but we *worship* God. Worship means to submit completely, and therefore we can only worship God. Veneration, on the other hand, means paying honor. When we venerate the saints, we honor them, but we also recognize that they can do nothing for us without the approval and grace of God.

PATRON SAINTS

A patron is someone who gives support to an individual or an organization. In earlier times, a patron would provide a person, usually an artist, with the financial support needed to produce their art. The Medici family, for instance, were patrons of Leonardo da Vinci. Even today we are familiar with patrons of the arts.

A patron saint is simply a spiritual supporter or advocate. A person may be named after a saint at baptism, take the name of a patron at confirmation, or simply have a devotion to a particular saint. Saints are patrons of places, nations, activities, conditions, occupations, and more. For instance, St. Peregrine is the patron of cancer sufferers and the Immaculate Conception is patron of the United States. Your church’s name reflects your parish patron.

A patron saint “provides a model of charity and the assurance of his prayer” (CCC, 2165), so Catholics are encouraged — but not required — to build a prayerful relationship with their patrons.

POPULAR PATRONS

Patrons exist for almost everything imaginable:

- Writers: St. Francis de Sales
- Alcoholism/Alcoholics: St. Monica
- Animals: St. Francis of Assisi
- Childbirth: St. Gerard Majella
- Computers: Isidore of Seville
- Diabetics: St. Josemaria Escrivá and St. Pauline
- Impossible Cases: St. Rita of Cascia and St. Jude
- Physicians: St. Gianna Beretta Molla and St. Luke
- Priests: St. John Vianney
- Teachers: St. Gregory the Great and St. Thomas Aquinas

PRAYER TO A PATRON SAINT

Dear [saint’s name], I ask you to pray to God for me, to give me strength in my faith, courage in my convictions, and hope in my future. I ask you now for your help in [list need]. I trust and believe that you will hear my prayer and intercede on my behalf. Amen.



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The COMMUNION of Saints

The Coronation of the Virgin Mary and the Glory of all the Saints, 2003 (w/c on paper), Wang, Elizabeth (Contemporary Artist) / Private Collection / © Radiant Light / Bridgeman Images 04/17



“The saints ... were people who loved God in their hearts, and who shared this joy with others.”

— Pope Francis

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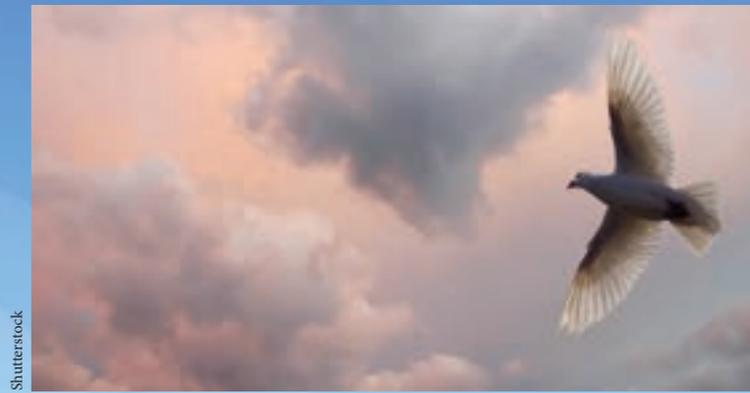
CANONIZATION

The road to official sainthood has four stages: servant of God, venerable, blessed, and saint. Sometimes people mistakenly think that the stages are an indication of holiness — that a blessed is “holier” than a servant of God, but the stages are merely an indication of where in the process that person’s cause for sainthood is. The process cannot begin until five years after a person’s death to make sure that nothing scandalous emerges. A person can be *saintly* on earth but may only become a canonized saint after death. That waiting period has been waived twice in modern times. St. John Paul II started the cause for Mother Teresa two years after her death, and Pope Benedict XVI waived all five years for Pope John Paul II.

After the waiting period, the bishop of the diocese where the person died can initiate the case for sainthood — called a cause for beatification and canonization. If there are no objections, the person can then be called a servant of God.

1 *Servant of God:* During this phase evidence of the person’s life is gathered and examined. This stage can take many years. Eventually, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Causes of Saints makes a decision as to whether or not the cause should go forward. If they vote to continue, the pope makes a final judgment and the person becomes venerable.

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2 *Venerable:* At this point, the person’s holiness is further established by evidence of a miracle performed through his or her intercession. Usually the miracle is a verifiable medical healing that could not have occurred under any known normal circumstances. If a miracle is established the person can then be declared blessed.

3 *Blessed:* Those who are declared blessed require a second miracle before the Church makes a final judgment. The same scrutiny and rules apply to the second miracle as to the first. If a second miracle is proven, the person then is named a saint.

4 *Saint:* Once a person is named a saint, he or she can be venerated by the whole Church and his or her name may be added to the general calendar of the Church. Someone who is known to have given his or her life for the faith is not required to have proven miracles before being canonized a saint, because martyrdom itself is believed to be a miracle of grace.

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*“You cannot be half a saint;
you must be a whole saint
or no saint at all.”*

— St. Thérèse of Lisieux

grandmother, who lived a holy life and whom we hope (and pray) are now in heaven. These are the saints who “go marching in” in the famous Southern spiritual of the same name.

The second kind of saints are those with a capital “S” in front of their names, like St. Peter, St. John Paul II, and St. Teresa of Calcutta. These individuals lived such exemplary lives that, after an exhaustive process called canonization, the Church formally and officially pronounces they are now in heaven.

SAINTS IN SCRIPTURE

In Scripture, the use of the word “saints” is often used to address Christians who live in a particular area — for example, in Paul’s Letter to the Corinthians: “To the Church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord” (1 Cor 1:2). “Saints” appears sixty-seven times in Scripture. Most of the saints mentioned in Scripture have become part of the official canon of saints of the Catholic Church even though they were never formally canonized.

Saints. Our churches are named after them, we pray to them, and every day of the year we pay special honor to one or more of them. Many Catholics are given the name of a saint at baptism and choose another patron saint’s name at confirmation. The naming of new saints even makes the headlines. It’s safe to say the Catholic faith is filled with saints!

But much about saints remains mysterious even to Catholics. How does one become a canonized saint? What does intercession mean, and how does it *work*? What is the role of a patron saint?

SANCTUS, SANCTUS, SANCTUS

The word “saint” comes from the Latin *sanctus* meaning “holy.” So a “saint” is first and foremost a holy person who is presumed to be with God in heaven. There are two kinds of saints — holy people and canonized saints. The first kind are all those good people, like your

THE ROAD TO SAINTHOOD

The formal canonization process we know has been in place only since the Seventeenth century. In the early Church, if a person died for the faith or if the congregation agreed the person was extremely holy, he or she could be immediately recognized as a saint. In medieval times, the pope could just declare a person a saint. To combat error, procedural norms were gradually added, becoming established canon law in 1917.