

## MISSION: Prayer 11

### “To Whom Do We Pray?”

**Catholics love to pray.** Our Fathers at Mass. Hail Marys at football games. "Bless us, O Lord" over meals. We even pray before the 50/50 raffle and silent auction at the Catholic school fundraiser. We're always praying. Normally, our prayers are directed to the Father. After all, that's how Jesus told us to pray. Needless to say, we also pray to the other members of the Trinity. By its very nature, Christian prayer is Christ-centered. It is through the power of the name of Jesus that we have the ability to reach the Father. But this wasn't always the state of affairs.

Back in the Old Testament, people weren't allowed to utter the divine name of God. To this day, many Jews still refrain from using it, writing his name as "G-d" (which I've always had trouble pronouncing). For Christians, though, this all changed with the Incarnation of the Son. By assuming our humanity, he became our conduit back to the Father, a connection that had been disrupted by sin. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we now have the ability to call upon the name of the Lord. He is our lifeline. For "there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tm 2:5).

Unfortunately, the accusation often hurled at Catholics is that we go directly against this verse when we pray to the saints. Obviously, we strongly disagree, though this wasn't always the case for me personally. Don't tell anyone, but I had a hard time with some devotions and prayers to saints even after I'd been Catholic a few years.

### *Heavenly Prayers*

I'm sure you have a great story of a saint's intercession in your life. Most Catholics do. That's because the *Catechism* tells us the saints "constantly care for those whom they have left on earth" (2683). They do this because we are all part of the same family. The saints in heaven are basically our older brothers and sisters who have "been there and done that." They know how to pray for us better than anyone else. For this reason, the Church encourages us to "ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world" (CCC 2683). But what about that pesky verse in the First

Letter of Timothy where Paul says Jesus is the only mediator between God and man?

Allow me to answer the question with another question. When you're dealing with a big issue in your life, don't you often ask other people to pray for you? Of course you do! The Bible flat out says we should (see Jas 5:16; Eph 6:18; 1 Tm 2:1). In 1 Timothy 2:5, Paul is identifying the unique role of Jesus. As fully God and fully man, the Incarnate Word of God is the bridge between us and God. Everything ultimately goes through him. But don't forget that we have all "put on Christ" through baptism (Gal 3:27). We're family, incorporated into his Mystical Body. Asking prayers of those who have gone before us, our older siblings, is as natural as me asking you.

Of course, some people don't believe the saints in heaven can hear our prayers, that somehow they're cut off from the rest of the world. But that's certainly not what the Bible indicates. For example, Revelation says the saints in heaven are lifting up our prayers to God, interceding for us by offering "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Rv 5:8), So, praying for those remaining on earth is one of the jobs of those in heaven. They're interceding for us.

Part of the problem for those who lack this understanding is the notion that once in heaven prayer stops because it's no longer necessary. This is mistaken and doesn't jibe with the apostle John's vision of heaven in Revelation. And Scripture tells us that even God prays. Jesus, who even on earth always remained the Second Person of the Trinity, was constantly in prayer with his Father. Once in heaven, the Letter to the Hebrews says, he "lives to make intercession" for us (7:25). Prayer doesn't stop once we're in heaven. It gets more intense! St. Paul says the Holy Spirit "intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (Rom 8:26).

### ***Come, Holy Ghost***

Let's take a moment to talk about the Holy Spirit. As in so many other three-person groups, he's often the forgotten member. I think we have trouble remembering the Holy Spirit partly because he's hard to visualize. There's the Father (old, long white hair, and thick beard), the Son (seventies-style shoulder-length locks and kindly face), and the Holy Spirit (uhhhhh ... some kind of a ghost?). It's hard to picture the

Spirit that proceeds from the Father and the Son. How do you envision the love shared between them and given to us?

As hard as he is to picture, we have to remember the only way we can even say "Jesus is Lord" is through the power of the Spirit (CCC 2670; 1 Cor 12:3). It's the Spirit that gives us the grace to pray in the first place. It's the Spirit through whom we are "divinized" at baptism, receiving adoption as true children of God's family (CCC 1988). It is the Spirit that cleanses us from our sins and communicates to us "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (CCC 1987; Rom 3:22).

People may pray in all kinds of ways and languages, but it is all done through the power of the Holy Spirit, the "artisan" and "Master of Christian prayer" (CCC 2672). He is Christ's gift to us. But he doesn't just unite us to our Brother. The Holy Spirit draws us to our mother, too.

### ***Mary***

St. Louis de Montfort famously declared, "He who has not Mary for his Mother has not God for his Father." It was through fully "getting" the whole family motif of God that I finally "got" Mary. Since I am joined to Christ through the sacraments, God is really my Father and Jesus is truly my brother. Through the power of the Holy Spirit I'm joined to the Trinity and to all other members of the Body of Christ. That's a lot of people. But there's someone missing. What kind of a family doesn't have a mother?

The Reader's Digest Condensed understanding of Mary's divine maternity is this: Mary is the mother of Jesus. Jesus is God. Therefore, Mary is the Mother of God (*Theoto-kos* in Greek). It's that simple.

Jesus is one divine Person, both fully God and fully man. You can't separate out his humanity from his divinity like the marshmallows from the oats in Lucky Charms. His humanity isn't an outfit draped over his divine body, something he takes off before going to bed at night. He joined his human nature to his divine nature forever at the Incarnation in what's technically called the "hypostatic union" (not to be confused with what happens to your socks coming out of the dryer). His two natures are "united in the one person of God's Son" (CCC 481). And since Mary is the Mother of God, and we're members of the Body of Christ, she's our mother,

too. That's why she plays a special role in our life of prayer. She's the one woman chosen from among all the billions ever born to be the mother of us all.

God gave Jesus to us through Mary, and she works to give us back to him. St. Augustine declared, "All the elect are, in this world, hidden in the womb of the Most Blessed Virgin, where they are cherished and nourished and fostered and reared by this good Mother until such time as she brings them forth to glory after their death."

Through his power alone, she is God's instrument of grace. And in our work and prayers, we need to use the same instruments of grace God does. Mary is the most finely tuned, most perfectly pitched of those instruments. So dust off your rosaries, fire up your Memorares, and proclaim your litanies to Our Lady. The same mama who taught the Son of God to pray, is ready to teach and guide us, too - now, "and at the hour of our death."

### ***Prayers for the Dead***

Sitting in front of a rose bush in my backyard is a pretty statue of St. Therese of Lisieux. She's one of my family's favorite saints. These days I couldn't be happier about that statue. Every time it catches my eye I think of my mom. And often, these thoughts lead to prayers for the repose of her soul. I find these prayers one of the most comforting facets of our faith.

Catholic teaching about prayers for the dead is pretty straightforward and makes a lot of sense. When people die, they are either headed for heaven or hell. Even if they're on their way "up," they might have to go through the spiritual car wash known as purgatory, "the final purification of the elect"(CCC 1031).

In purgatory we feel the consequences of our sins. Remember, Christ dealt with the eternal consequences of sin - that is, death - but the temporal punishment still has to be dealt with. It's like when my kid doesn't clean her room as I've asked. I'll forgive her when she's sorry, but she's still going to have to clean (and maybe do some extra, too).

Unless you're God, you have no idea who currently resides in heaven apart from those holy people the Church has declared saints. Similarly, we don't know our own fate. Nothing is guaranteed in this life. It's not that God will ever let us down,

but we'd be silly to fully trust in ourselves. He leaves us free to choose life or death (see Jos 24:15). That's why Paul says we need to work out our salvation in "fear and trembling" (Phil 2:12).

But don't forget: as members of the Body of Christ, we're all connected. We're a family. And that doesn't mean only people who are alive on this earth. Every member of your family as far back as you can trace it (and beyond) is "alive." Every human being ever conceived has an immortal soul. We all live forever, either with or without God. And our prayers for deceased members of the family are just as effective as for those chatting with us in the kitchen at Thanksgiving.

In the Second Book of Maccabees, Judas Maccabeus offered prayers and sacrifice for a bunch of his buddies who had died in a battle. He felt it his duty because, after their demise, he discovered they hadn't been faithful to God's command to stay away from idols. So, "they turned to prayer, beseeching that the sin which had been committed might be wholly blotted out" (12:42). Taking up a collection to be offered for the sin of their fallen comrades, Judas and his men "made atonement for the dead, that they might be delivered from their sin" (12:45).

Quoting St. John Chrysostom, the *Catechism* references another Old Testament story with regard to offering sacrifices and praying for the dead: "If Job's sons were purified by their father's sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them." Notice Chrysostom says "help" them in addition to offering prayers. That's because "the Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead" (CCC 1032).

### ***Returning the Favor***

Not only can we pray for souls in purgatory, but they can pray for us. St. Cyprian of Carthage exhorted, "Let us on both sides [of death] always pray for one another. Let us relieve burdens and afflictions by mutual love, that if one of us, by the swiftness of divine condescension, shall go hence first, our love may continue in the presence of the Lord, and our prayers for our brethren and sisters not cease in the presence of the Father's mercy."

I highly suggest you ask for the saints' intercession. Why? Because they are already much closer to Christ than we are. Inflamed with the love of God, they love us even more than we love them. Their prayers unleash grace through the power of divine charity. There is a difference, however, between our prayers and theirs.

Souls in purgatory can't pray for themselves because their time of merit is over. In other words, they can no longer choose to do good things, because once in purgatory they can't sin. They're on autopilot, so to speak, on their way to heaven no matter what. But they need us. Like the paralytic in the Gospel who had to be lowered through the roof to Jesus, they need our prayers for their well-being (see Mk 2:1-12). We, on the other hand, can pray for ourselves and the souls in purgatory, gaining reward because it is a good work which we still must choose to perform.

There's no doubt about it: prayer is incredibly powerful. Think of how much good you can do by interceding for both the deceased and living members of God's family. The great Benedictine Dom Hubert van Zeller said that in prayer we're using our "human powers to their highest possible limit." In fact, we're surpassing that limit because we're praying through supernatural grace. Of course, the opposite is true as well. By not praying, we're throwing away the gift of conversation and union with God.

God has put his love into our hearts and desires that love be returned. We express that love through prayer. And since each of us is a unique individual, the love we give back to God is a unique expression of his love. That's why our prayers are always ultimately ordered to God. Even when we pray to the holy souls in purgatory, Mary, or any of the saints, we're praying through the grace of God and thus giving praise to him.