

St. Gregorios Orthodox Church, Austin, TX

www.stgregoriosaustin.org

10th Anniversary Faith Study Series Part – 3

Intercession of Saints

Presented by Rev Fr. Varghese Joshua, Vicar, St. Thomas Orthodox Church, Washington DC

I think we selected the theme for today's class may be to prepare and face questions raised by those who challenge the relevance of intercession or questions the biblical basis of intercession. It is better to have a clear understanding about what we do during intercession.

First, let me state clearly, that we are not worshipping the saints, but only honoring or venerating them. Second, the basic purpose of our invocation of saints is to partake in the Holiness of God with them. The author of Hebrews says "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith". (13:7). Jesus is the one and only savior. At the same time the departed saints are the inseparable part of the church. We find that our lineage to Christ is through them. "Just like in OT you see the name of the entire lineage up to Adam". So they are the linking chain between us and God, just like there will not be a child without a father and mother. In almost all our prayers we commemorate them (I mean the saints) and we are asking them to pray for us. So it is very important to know what we mean by the invocation of their prayers.

Here I would like to answer to the key questions posed by those who oppose the intercession of the saints.

What is meant by intercession of the departed? Are they able to hear and pray to the God for us?
Is it biblical since 2 Tim. 1:5 says that Christ is the one and only mediator between God and men?
1) What is meant by intercession of the departed? Are they able to hear and pray to the God for us?

To answer this question we should know who we are?
What is the specialty of a Christian? Etc.

What is intercession?

I would like to try to trace the answer of this question by asking two or three questions to you; and my first question is:

Who are we?

We are the members of the Church.

What is the Church?

The Church is the community of the saved;

In another way with the help of biblical words we can explain Church is the body of Christ with Christ as the head and all the members are the different parts of HIS body. St. Paul says in Romans

12:4-5, "For as in one body we have many members, and all members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. In "1Cor. 12:25-28 ...but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. 26If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. 27Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 28And in the church, God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers... So it is the duty of other member to take care of the fellow members of the same body.

Does all of this sound anything related to our subject here? What do you think?

They are the members of the church.

It is the common obligation of a member of the Church to pray for another in his need. So this is what we do during intercession. You may say it says about prayer between the living and why we are asking intercession from the dead? In Hebrew 12:1 "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses ... and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us". Here the author of the Hebrews clearly says that the departed forefathers are around us. Also read Rev. Ch. 7.

According to the world's understanding all these people died and were cremated long ago, but the bible verses says they are living. First, we should understand one important truth, that there is no death for a faithful. John 11: 25-26 says: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; 26and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" [For this Jesus demands one more condition: Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day (Jn. 6:54)].

They are living

So, why we are praying to the saints who were departed? Because, a faithful will never taste the death, that means they are still alive. We don't say dead, but departed, means departed from us to another place, just like you and I depart to another town or country. See some examples: Psalm 27:13; 52:5; 116:9; 142: 5(the land of the living) (we can frequently see the saying that; I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; God of our Fathers. See what the opinion of Jacob about his life is: The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers. (Gen. 47:9)". According to Jacob this life is a pilgrimage only. What does the OT say about the departed; he died and rested with his fathers.

They are living and they are not in a vacuum or in silence.

Jesus said in Luke 20:38, "Now He is not God of the dead, but of the living: for all live to Him." Yes, they are living: see the revelation of Moses and Elijah at Tabor, Jesus' description the story of Rich man and Lazarus, Paul' s intention in Philippians 1: 21-23For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain... I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

Are they active? Are they able to speak?

Yes, they are active. Read 2Cor. 12: 2-5, Revelations chapter 7. They are living and always praising God.

Hebrew 11:4, 12:24 says that Abel is still speaking.

We are invoking the prayers of the departed, because:

They are the inseparable part of our body, the Church. First of all we are praying to the departed because they are the members of the church, they belong to Christ. They are saved, they lived a fruitful life in this world and they begotten us in Christ.

Secondly we ask intercession from the departed because they are living and they are praying unceasingly in the presence of God.

II. Is the intercession biblical?

In 1 Timothy 2:5 St. Paul says: "For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus". Since Jesus is the only mediator, what is the place of another mediator? Or is it contradictory to the biblical teachings?

Yes we believe that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man. But we have to know what Paul was trying to convey by saying 'only mediator'. Read the adjoining parts of the verse: I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, (read Rom. 5:16-17 "For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, ... gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ) who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time. And for this purpose I was appointed a herald and an apostle—I am telling the truth, I am not lying—and a teacher of the true faith to the Gentiles.." When we go through this passage closely, we realize that it is not about the mediation that you and I think that St. Paul is describing here, but Christ's redemptive work, as the "mediator" for the old sin of Adam in Eden. St. Paul is saying how Jesus was:

Reconciled God and man: Eph. 2: 13ff. 16 And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.

Redeemed the man from sin and death: Read Hebrews 9:7-15 and 12:24. He redeemed the world by his own blood once for all. Rom. 5:9; 1pt 1:19; 2:24; 4:6 Heb. 10:13, 19; 13:12. See also the following verses. 1Pet. 1:18; Gal. 4:5; 1Cor. 1:30; Mk.8:37' 10:45; Mt. 20:28 etc. So the mediation referred in 1Tim. 2:5 is about the salvific act of Jesus Christ and not about the intercession.

Are there any references that prohibit intercession in the Bible?

There are no references against intercession in the Bible, but in several instances Paul is asking the prayer of the faithful. In 2 Timothy 1:16-18 we read, Paul interceding to God after the death of Onesiphorous, "May the Lord show mercy to the household of Onesiphorus,... May the Lord grant that he will find mercy from the Lord on that day!?"

Col 4:3 says: At the same time, pray for us, too, that God may open a door to us for the word, to speak of the mystery of Christ, for which I am in prison.

Rom 15:30

... join me in the struggle by your prayers to God on my behalf,

1Thes. 5:25: Brothers, pray for us

Jam 5:14

Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray

over him and anoint (him) with oil in the name of the Lord.

At Cana Mary, the mother of asking Jesus to help the master of the banquet because they ran out of wine and Jesus heard her petition (John 2:1-11).

In the OT, when Abraham pleaded for the righteous people in Sodom, Yahweh heard his plea in trying to save the city from the wrath of God.

“Then Abraham approached him and said: "Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? ... The LORD said, "If I find fifty righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake."

Job 42:7-8 “ ...because you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has. ... and go to my servant Job and sacrifice a burnt offering for yourselves. My servant Job will pray for you, and I will accept his prayer and not deal with you according to your folly...”

Departed saints appearing, speaking and praying and the relics doing miracle:

1 Sam. 28: 11-19 says about the meeting between Samuel who passed away and Saul, the king of Israel.

Mark 9:4

Then Elijah appeared to them along with Moses, and they were conversing with Jesus.

Ezekiel 32:21 says about the speaking of the dead.

Jer. 15:1 1 Then the LORD said to me: "Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. So the men of God, even after their departure from this world, are pleading to the God for those who seek help from them like they are in this world.

Epistle of Jude says about Michael, the archangel's argument for Moses' body.

Rev. 7:10, 14-17 depicts the heavenly worship

2Kings13:20 Elisha's bones works wonder

So from the Bible we can see that the living and the departed praying and doing miracles. Psalms. 34:15 says “The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their cry”. James 5:16 says “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective”.

History of intercession in the early church

The tradition of veneration of the saints is closely related to the martyrdom of early christian believers. In the early centuries a lot of Christians become martyrs due to the persecution and the church remembered these days as the day of the particular saint. These lines of saints have a lineage from St. Stephen. The Martyrdom of Polycarp (d.155 AD) says about the veneration of the departed souls.

“Then at last, we took up his bones, more precious than costly gems and finer than gold and put them in a suitable place. The lord will permit us, when we are able to assemble there in joy and gladness and to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom”.

First written (as a dogma) evidence of the veneration / communion of saints was seen in the apostolic creed (3rd or 4th Century).

Cyril of Jerusalem in his catechetical lectures, which was composed around 350, wrote the following, "them we make mention also of those who have already fallen asleep, first the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs that through their prayers and supplication God would receive our petitions.

Hagiography of St. Mary was famous in the early church.

In short we see that Intercession is done between the members of the church and it is the duty of the members to pray for his/her fellow member in their need. The departed are not in a static condition but they are living with all faculty of life. It is purely biblical and there is not a single instance in the bible prohibiting intercession but several occasions of intercession between one another.

It was a common practice in the early church even from the second century itself.

www.stgregoriosaustin.org