

## The Saints



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The Church's catholicity, i.e. its universality, refers not only to all its faithful throughout the world, but also to the communion "with all the saints who throughout the ages were pleasing unto the Lord". Orthodox Christians believe that which St. Paul declares: "Love never ends" (I Cor. 13,8); it will never cease to join with a close bond all the members of the

Body of Christ, i.e. the entire Church Militant with all the saints, i.e. the Church Triumphant. For the Orthodox Church both the Christians who carry on their spiritual struggle on earth (the Church Militant), as well as those who with God's grace completed this struggle victoriously (the Church Triumphant), belong to, and together constitute, along with the angels, the One Catholic Church.

The Orthodox Christians sense the presence of the saints in their lives, and are bound to them in the bond of mutual love. Through the sacred Memorial Services we entrust both our brothers who have reposed and ourselves to God's mercy and love. One of the Church's prayers states:

*"O Christ, those who were devoured by wild beasts,  
and those torn asunder by fish,  
and those who were buried by earthquakes,  
by chasms and precipices,  
Do Thou, O Savior, have mercy on them  
and save them, Most Merciful,  
from every threat there"*

And another prayer states:

"Receive therefore, O Master, our petitions and intercessions, and grant rest unto all the fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and children of each of us, and to any others of our kinsmen and people, and all the souls of them that have gone to rest before us in the hope of the resurrection of life everlasting;...and raise up our bodies on the day that Thou has appointed, according to Thy holy and unfailing promise".

And the prayer continues:

"For there is no death, O Lord, for us, Thy servants, when we have departed from the body and come unto Thee, O God, but rather a translation from things sorrowful unto things better and more delightful, and unto repose and joy. And if we have sinned in anything against Thee, be Thou merciful unto us and unto them; for there is none pure of stain before Thee, even though his life be but for a day...and grant unto them that have preceded us, freedom and rest, and bless us who are here present, granting a good and peaceful end unto us and all Thy people."

The first among all in the Church Triumphant is, according to our Orthodox faith, the Virgin Mary. In her person all of mankind gave its consent for the realization of the plan of Divine Economy for the salvation of the world. This came about when she declared: "Behold the Handmaid of the Lord. Let it be unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1, 38). In this way the Virgin Mary became an instrument and collaborator with God in the salvation of man.

With the consent of the Virgin, the Holy Spirit overshadowed her, purified her and made her to be the suitable "receptacle" of His grace, for the creation of the human nature of the Son

and Word of God (Luke 1,35). This is why that which was born of her was not a god-bearing man but "God incarnate".

The Church does not attempt to approach the Mystery of God's becoming man (I Tim. 3,16), intellectually; for it is beyond reason. Thus, the Orthodox Christian remains ecstatic before it and glorifies God for His inexpressible love. This is to be seen in many of the Church's hymns.

*"Hear O heaven, strange things, And thou, O earth, lend thine ear, for a daughter of man, of fallen Adam, has become the Mother of God, her Creator, for our salvation and re-creation".*

Another hymn says:

*"Thou does give birth without intercourse, to Him to Whom the Father gave birth before all ages, and thou dost nourish Him Who nourishes us! O strange Wonder! O newly seen Miracle, thou O full of God's Grace! Wherefore every faithful soul doth glorify thee".*

The Virgin Mary gave birth to Christ's human nature, not to His Divinity. The human nature, however belongs to Jesus Christ, i.e. to the one and unique person; thus she is, and is rightly called the "Mother of God" i.e. Theotokos (Luke 1, 43). Man's salvation is founded upon this basic truth; whoever denies it, rejects salvation in Christ. As St. John Damascene says, "He who does not confess the Holy Virgin to be Theotokos, is separated from God".

Christ is the new "root" (Rev. 22,16); He is not descended from the root of Adam, because He was born of the Holy Spirit and from a Virgin Mother (Matth. 1, 20, 23. Luke 1, 35), who even after His birth remained a Virgin. And this because that which was used by Christ is unique in its use for it has been sanctified. A new use of course would have been sacrilegious. Through His birth, Christ did not violate His Mother's virginity; she remains a virgin after her birth-giving and Jesus is her only-begotten Son (Prov.4,3). In Holy Scripture, before the birth of Jesus, the Virgin Mary is called the wife of Joseph (Matth. 1, 20), just as Joseph is called the husband of Mary (Matth. 1, 16). Indeed, in accordance with the Mosaic Law, this was the case, for the "child" had to be protected. In this "legal" sense, Joseph is also characterized as the father of Jesus (Luke 2, 48), just as Joseph's children are called Jesus' brothers.

The Church honors the Virgin Mary as Theotokos and Ever-Virgin and chants:

*"O Virgin, You without experience of man, did conceive for us men, The Logos, Who boundless in His Divinity, did become man".*

In the Virgin's womb man's nature was renewed and man became a partaker of divine life. She is the "bridge" which united the earth with heaven. That is why she is depicted in the Sanctuary of the Churches in the apse behind the Holy Table as she who is "wider than the heavens", uniting heaven and earth.

We honor the Virgin Mary because God Himself was the first to honor her; He made her "full of Grace", "blessed" and "mother of the Lord". The Virgin Mary herself prophesies that "all generations shall call her blessed" (Luke 1, 28. 30. 35. 41. 45).

Orthodox Christians do not place the Virgin Mary above the Church but within it. They believe that she also inherited our sickly nature and was a genuine child of this world, which she represented and gave her consent to the realization of God's plan. She is considered "All-

Holy" [Panagia], not in relation to God, but in relation to God's creatures. She is "more honorable than the Cherubim" who "in a circle" surround God's Throne (Is. 6,2. Iez. 1, 26-28), while the Virgin Mary became herself the Throne of God.

The Lord's holy flesh was also the flesh of the Virgin. All we Christians who are incorporated in the Body of Christ are "brothers of the Lord"; hence the Virgin Mary becomes the mother of all mankind.

The Virgin Mary is not honored independently of her relationship to Christ, but always as the "Lord's Mother". In other words, the honor which we bestow upon her is always in relationship to our salvation in Jesus Christ. The mystery of our salvation is expressed with the term "Theotokos", and the honor which we accord to the Holy Virgin stems from this title. This term proclaims the reality of the union of the two natures of Christ which took place within the Virgin Mary's womb and it confirms the fact of our salvation.

The Orthodox Church also honors all the saints and bases their sanctity on the fact that they are partakers of Christ's sanctity (Heb. 12, 10), and "members the same body" [syssomoi] with Christ (Eph. 3. 6). The saints are "the faithful martyrs of Christ" (Rev. 2, 12) and stand "before the throne and before the Lamb" (Rev. 7.9); they lived "through the Spirit" and walked "according to the Spirit" (Gal. 5, 25); they are "a new creation in Christ" (II Cor. 5,7) and reveal man's true nature.

The glory that surrounds the saints is the glory of God (II Cor. 3, 18), the uncreated divine energy which in Scripture and in the life of the saints is revealed as light. When we read the lives of the saints we see examples of man's reconciliation with all of creation, even with the wild and dangerous beasts. Abba Isaac characteristically states: "the humble man approaches the destructive animals and as soon as they see him, their wildness is calmed, and they approach him as their master and they wag their heads and lick his hands and feet, because they sense that he has upon himself that fragrance which Adam gave off before the fall. And that which was taken away from us at that time, Jesus Christ gave back to us anew through His presence on earth, granting a sweet-smelling fragrance to mankind".

The glory of the saints is not yet their final state; it will be completed at the Lord's Second Coming when they shall shine "as the sun" (Matth. 13,43. cf. Rev. 21, 9 - 22, 5). They will be reunited with their bodies which shall be raised up and will be "conformed to the body of His glory" (Philip.3,21. cf. I Cor. 6,20).

Orthodox Christians believe that Christ is the unique Savior. He took upon Himself created man and He brought him to a true communion with the "uncreated God"; there is no other way for us to reach God the Father (John 14, 13-14. I Tim. 2,5. Acts 4, 12.1 Pet. 1, 18-19).

Yet Holy Scripture informs us that God saves even entire cities because of the love of those who love Him (Gen. 18, 23-33. 20,7. Acts. 32, 11-14. Hos. 11, 8-9). In the Revelation of St. John we see angels bringing the prayers of the saints up to the throne of God, and God hearkening unto the prayers of the saints (Rev. 8, 3-5). The saints care for their brothers on earth and rejoice at their spiritual progress (Luke 15, 7).

When, therefore, we honor the saints and we ask them to intercede for us before God, we do not make our salvation dependent upon them, but only upon our Savior Jesus Christ, whom the saints also beseech on our behalf. It is for this reason that every sacred service in the

Orthodox Church closes with the so-called "dismissal": "Glory to Thee, O Christ our God and our Hope, Glory to Thee...May Christ our true God, through the intercessions of His All-Immaculate and All-Holy Mother...through the petitions of the honorable and glorious Forerunner and Baptist John...and all the saints, have mercy upon us and save us, as a good and merciful God Who loves mankind".

The glory and honor is not rendered unto the saints but to Him Who glorifies His saints and grants them the gift of healing. This is why on the feast days of the ascetic saints the Church chants:

"O our God-bearing Father N., you showed forth to be a dweller of the desert, a body-bearing angel and a worker of miracles. You heal the sick and the souls of those who recourse unto you in faith. Glory to Him that giveth you strength; Glory to Him that hath crowned you; Glory to Him, Who through you, grants healing unto all".

The saints are not everywhere present. This is a characteristic that belongs only to God. The saints however, like the angels, are united with us through love in the one Body of Christ. Through the Grace of the Holy spirit, nature's limits are done away with in the life of the saints, and they know about us without having to be omnipresent (Luke 15,7).

The honor accorded to the saints cannot be compared with that which God Himself has granted to them. Nor can it be adoration. As the Seventh Ecumenical Council states, Christians render unto Christ, divine honor, i.e. adoration and worship; the saints however they honor because of their relationship to God, and they render unto them relative and not absolute veneration, as genuine servants of God: "[and we worship Christ] as God and Master, while [the saints] we honor and respect and render to them relative veneration because of the common Master, as His genuine servants...(The Seventh Ecumenical Council).

Already during the early Christian period the day on which a saint reposed was considered "his birthday". In "the Martyrdom of St. Polycarp" we observe the Christians gathering up the bones of the martyr which are "more precious than valuable jewels and more noble than gold", and burying them in a suitable place, so that they might be able to assemble there and celebrate his memory. During this feast the early Christians used to celebrate the Holy Eucharist upon the tombs of the martyrs. This is why the bishop, when consecrating a church, places upon the Holy Table on which the Holy Eucharist will be celebrated sacred relics.

The unity of the entire Church is expressed in a most realistic way in the Divine Liturgy. During the proskomide or preparation of the Eucharistic elements, the priest places upon the paten that piece of bread which is to become the Body of Christ, a "particle" in honor and commemoration of the Virgin Mary, to the left of the host, and on the right he places separate "particles" for the Holy angelic powers, the prophets, the Apostles, the Great Hierarchs and Teachers, the Martyrs, the Ascetic saints, the Holy Unmercenary Healing saints, the Forefathers of God, SS. Joachim and Anna, and all the saints. Below he places particles for the bishop and the living brethren. Then he places in particles for those who have reposed, and finally one for himself. Thus the entire Church is represented upon the sacred paten. After the bread and wine have been changed into the Body and Blood of Christ, and after clergy and laity have communicated, the priest unites all these "particles" with the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacred chalice and thus declares in a very real way the unity of the entire body of the Church.

The Divine Liturgy therefore is celebrated for the entire Church, not only for the Church Militant but also for the Virgin Mary and the entire Church Triumphant in heaven. The prayer of the Divine Liturgy is characteristic:

"Again we offer unto Thee this reasonable worship for those who have fallen asleep in the Faith, Forefathers, Fathers, Patriarchs, Prophets, Apostles, Preachers, Evangelists, Martyrs, Confessors, Ascetics, and every righteous spirit in faith made perfect; especially for our most holy, pure, blessed and glorified Lady, Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary...".