

## Communion of Saints

The phrase “communion of saints” is found in the Apostles’ Creed. While this Creed did not come directly from the apostles, its statements of belief probably date back to the early days of the Church. The Apostles’ Creed probably originated sometime in the fourth century and was used in baptismal rites and catechetical instruction. Today we find it most commonly used as the first prayer in the recitation of the Rosary.

The word “creed”, which means a statement of beliefs, comes from the Latin word *credo* -- “I believe”. Thus, in English when we say something is creditable, it indicates that we have reason to believe. The statement of belief in the communion of saints is found in the third article of the Apostles’ Creed:

I believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, sits at the right hand of God, the Father almighty; from thence he shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Catholic Church, **the communion of saints**, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen

The Apostles’ Creed is not the Creed which Catholics recite at Mass on Sundays. At Mass the priest and the congregation recite the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. This Creed was formulated by the Council of Nicea in 325 and modified by the Council of Constantinople in 381. This is a longer and more doctrinal creed, but it does not contain a statement about the communion of saints. By the 6<sup>th</sup> century it had replaced the Apostles’ Creed in the liturgies of baptism and the Mass.

For our purposes we will deal with these questions: **1)** What does the communion of saints mean?, **2)** where did it originate?, **3)** how did it develop over time?, **4)** what can it mean for our daily lives?, and **5)** a word about those men and women which the Church calls saints.

**First:** What does the communion of saints mean?

In its broadest sense, the communion of saints was and still is a phrase used to emphasize the nature of the Church as a fellowship of persons made holy by baptism and the salvation offered by God. This fellowship of “holy ones” or “saints” is established by Jesus as he takes on our humanity and shares his life with us, thus according to Paul, we become one as members of the “Body of Christ” (Romans 12:5; 1Corinthians 12:12). For Paul, “saints” becomes the common designation of Christians in various cities – Corinth, Rome, Philippi -- to whom he addressed his Letters. The

word “saints” occurs sixty-one times in the New Testament, mostly in the Letters of Paul.

In its narrower sense, which developed over time, the notion of the communion of saints emphasizes that even death does not break the bonds that tie Christians together. These bonds are understood to include the ability to exchange prayers of petition between the living and the dead.

**Second:** Where did it originate?

The designation as saints began with the Old Testament concept of “holy”. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word “holy” has a basic meaning of separate or wholly other and thus it is used to signify the essence of God, who is wholly other in his perfection. In the Book of Isaiah God is referred to as the “Holy One” some thirty times.

Given that God is holy, there is also an Old Testament belief that God shares his holiness with his people. We find this phrase in Leviticus 11:45 “For I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall therefore be holy as I am holy”.. And so, by being a member of God’s chosen people a person shares in the holiness or divine life of God and thus becomes “holy” or “saintly”. By sharing in the holiness of God, the Israelites also understood themselves as separate from all other peoples.

The early Christians also saw themselves as a holy people of God. In our English translations of the New Testament, the word “saints” always translates the Greek term for “the holy ones”. The early Christians were designated as holy as God is holy. In 1 Peter 1:15-16 we read: “but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’”

In the NT this notion of “holy” has two related meanings: **1)** to be holy is to be in right relationship with God (righteous) and in some way to share His life. While in the OT this right relationship was established by being true to the Covenant and its laws, in the NT this right relationship is established by faith in the person of Jesus who offers salvation, **2)** in the NT to be holy also carries the notion of being set aside as a special people, somewhat like the OT people, but now with a special mission – to spread the Good News of the Kingdom of God in imitation of Jesus.

Paul, in several of his Letters to early Christian churches or communities, uses the term “saints” as a greeting for the members of these communities, because they have become holy or saintly through their faith in the salvation offered by Jesus. Their acceptance has been expressed in their baptism and in joining one of the local Christian communities.

As mentioned above, the word “holy” can also carry the notion of “set aside”, set aside for a special purpose. Christians see themselves as holy in this sense, but over time Christians also used this notion of holy in many other ways.

For example, we have:

- Holy Days, e.g. Christmas, Holy Thursday, Easter, etc., days set aside to celebrate important moments in Christian history.
- Holy Week – the week before Easter
- Holy Places – churches, shrines
- Holy Water – water set aside for baptism, also in the front of church to remind us of our baptism.
- Holy Oil – oil set aside to be blessed and used in Baptism, Confirmation, Ordination and the Sacrament of the Sick to communicate the presence of the Messiah, the anointed one, Jesus Christ.
- The Holy Eucharist – bread and wine set aside to reenact the Last Supper
- The Holy Year – every 25 years, a time for pilgrimages to Rome and other places
- The Holy Land – where Jesus lived, died and rose from the dead.

These places, times and things are set aside or made holy so that we may use them to express our faith and enter more deeply into the presence of God.

**Third:** How did it develop over time?

By the 5<sup>th</sup> century, the focus of the concept of the community of saints had shifted from a designation of the Christian communities of saints on earth, to the saints in heaven. Augustine taught that Christians must worship God, but also honor the saints, specifically the martyrs. He saw the saints as models to imitate and as intercessors who pray to God for the faithful. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century Pope Gregory the Great spoke of the interaction between the saints in heaven and the Church on earth.

In the 8<sup>th</sup> century, to curb certain pious practices, the Second Council of Nicea (787) emphasized that God alone is to be worshipped and adored, while the saints are to be given simple respect and veneration. In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Alexander III stated in a letter to the king of Sweden, that no one should be venerated as a saint without the authority of the Church of Rome.

Over the years, up to the Second Vatican Council in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the liturgy of the Mass became more and more complex and the language of the Mass and other sacraments remained in Latin. Therefore, people understandably turned to devotions in their native tongues, which they could understand and in which they could comfortably participate. Thus, pilgrimages to sacred shrines, intercessory prayers to the saints, novenas in honor of the saints and especially devotions to Mary became a dominant part of Catholic life.

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) addressed the devotions to the saints in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church:

Very much aware of the bonds linking the whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, the pilgrim Church from the very first ages of the Christian religion has cultivated with great piety the memory of the dead... (in them) we are shown a most safe path by which, among the vicissitudes of this world and in keeping with the state in life and condition proper to each of us, we will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is holiness.

This Synod urges all concerned to work hard to prevent or correct any abuses, excesses, or defects which may have crept in here and there and to restore all things to a more ample praise of Christ and of God. Let the faithful be taught, therefore, that the authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the intensity of our active love.

In this same Constitution, the Council devotes Chapter VIII to the Role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, in the Mystery of Christ and the Church. Here it is stated that Mary “far surpasses all other creatures, both in heaven and on earth. At the same time, however, ... she is one with all human beings in the need for salvation”.

The Document goes on to stress that we have only Mediator, Jesus (1Tim. 2:5-6). Further, “the maternal duty of Mary toward men in no way obscures or diminishes this unique mediation of Christ, but rather shows its power.”

**Fourth:** What can it mean for our daily lives?

In our daily lives, the notion of the communion of saints means that we are all in this life together. We can help others and others can help us as we daily strive to give witness to what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Furthermore, the Catholic tradition holds that there is not just an important relationship among the living, but that in some way we are also connected to those who have gone before us into the presence of God. While there are times in our lives when we feel lonely, we believe that we are not alone.

It is our living faith in the communion of saints that gives us this sense of belonging. However, it is well to note that the communion of saints is not simply a gift given us, but also a challenge given us to make the communion of saints alive and strong in our local and worldwide communities. If we are indeed the “holy ones”, those who are called and set aside by God for a special purpose, then it is up to us to make and keep the communion of saints a force for good in the world and a vehicle for a deep connection with our God, who calls us to love ourselves and each other.

**Fifth:** A word about those men and women called saints by the Church..

In the early days of the Church the veneration of the early disciples of Jesus and of those who died in the early persecutions (martyrs, i.e., witnesses) became widespread. Over the course of the centuries, many local Christian communities declared certain of their deceased members as saints and practiced various devotions to them and encouraged others to follow their example. Over time the numbers of saints proclaimed by local communities grew to enormous proportions. Some abuses arose and so the local bishop

became the one to review the life of the person recommended to be a saint and to evaluate any miracles ascribed to that person. If the bishop approved, a feast day was assigned to honor that person.

In our day, when the official Church speaks of saints, it is speaking about those persons who have lived a holy life and now in death are understood to be in the presence of God. This official designation of such people is established by a process called canonization and is controlled by the pope. The first canonization by a pope took place in 993. In that year Pope John XV canonized Ulrich, bishop of Augsburg. In the year 1234, Pope Gregory IX decreed that papal canonization was the only legitimate one.

The current process of canonization is supervised by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. When the name of a candidate is introduced, the Congregation goes to work to examine the person's life and any alleged miracles brought about by prayers of petition to him or her.

There are three steps in the process. As the investigation goes on and the person proves to have led an exemplary Christian life and there is evidence of a miracle or miracles, then the person may be declared as "venerable". The next step in the process is called "beatification", which includes a public declaration of the person's holiness. The person can now be venerated but is not yet enrolled on the universal calendar of the Church. After further positive investigations the person can be officially canonized and declared a saint.

While this is the process for an official declaration of sainthood, certainly there are many, many more deceased persons who are in the presence of God and are just as saintly or holy as those declared so by the official Church. They too can be examples for us as we try to grow in our Christian life and so they become our companions in the communion of saints.