

MEMBER FOR MEMBER

A PLEA FOR THE SOULS IN PURGATORY

By ISIDORE O'BRIEN, O. F. M.

SOLACE OF FRIENDSHIP

ONE of the factors that make life's trials more tolerable is the knowledge that friends are never far from our side. Seldom, it is true, can even the utterly devoted contribute much actual assistance in our most soul-trying problems; but their willingness to part with their last penny or last ounce of self in our behalf, lightens the burden if it does not remove it, gives us that extra impulse of strength which at least makes it seem bearable.

St. Paul leaned heavily on his friends for their comforting companionship. He who knew no fear of mortal man, whether jailer or judge or executioner, he who "fought with beasts in Ephesus," felt utterly and almost despondently "alone in Athens," as he himself tells us. And he who bravely suffered stoning and scourging and maligning pleads in a letter from his Roman prison to Timothy, "Make haste to come to me shortly; for Demas has deserted me . . . , Crestens [has gone] to Galatia, Titus to Dalmatia. Luke only is with me. . . . At my first defense no one came to my support, but all forsook me" — adding, even in the depths of his lonely misery — "may it not be laid to their charge" (2 Tim. 4:9-11,16). St. Francis of Assisi, whose renunciation of all earthly things stands alone in purely human history, had his counselor and confidant, Leo, always within earshot, even amid the divine secrecies of La Verna. Our Blessed Saviour Himself, on whose word twelve legions of warrior angels waited, with faltering steps and blood-drenched body sought the sustainment of His Apostles' company in the darkness of His Agony; and from His dereliction on Calvary called across the abyss to His Father.

COMMUNION OF SAINTS

God, who has provided for all of man's needs, natural and supernatural, has decreed and established for his help and companionship a singularly complete, intimate, efficient and consoling agency, namely the Communion of Saints.

The doctrine of the Communion of Saints is commonly defined as the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of one Mystical Body under Christ its Head, and in a constant interchange of supernatural offices. The members are called "saints" (even the members on earth) by reason of their destination, hoped-for or assured, and because they partake of the fruits of redemption. The damned are excluded. The angels are included, because they come under Christ's power and He is their Head. The living share in it according to the measure of their union with Christ, even though they do not belong to the body of the true Church.

This article of faith was the latest added by the Church to the Apostles' Creed (about the fifth century, though it is substantially contained in St. Paul's teaching). It may be called also the most exclusively Catholic, in the sense that non-Catholics seem to misunderstand it most completely, condemning it as "worship" of the saints and a detraction from Christ's mediatorship. That this position is wholly erroneous and these assertions are simply not true, has been proved innumerable times by Catholic theologians and apologists.

Any Catholic child knows that to give to Mary and the saints, who are creatures, the worship due to God alone (*latria*), would be idolatry. Catholics honor Mary and the saints because they are close friends of God; but honor is certainly not worship. The First Commandment orders us to worship God alone; the Fourth, to honor our parents. And theologians have made it clear that the ministerial mediatorship of the saints does not detract from but actually emphasizes the magisterial mediatorship of Christ. For a king's officers, diplomats, generals and servants certainly do not take away from but express and underline the authority, power and glory of the king, since their authority derives from his and they speak only in his name.

The doctrine of the Communion of Saints has its roots in and draws its life from so many other fundamental teachings of the Church that it is called a synthesis of the principal dogmas of the faith. It flows from the doctrine of the Incarnation by which Christ is Head of men and angels. It is radically connected with the external glory and activity of the Blessed Trinity — man's creation, redemption and sanctification; and with the operations of grace and

the sacraments which are the very bloodstream and circulatory system of the Communion of Saints, or Body of Christ, as St. Paul termed it: “For as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, many as they are, form one body, so also is it with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body ... ; and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. . . . But God has so tempered the body together in due portion as to give more abundant honor where it was lacking; that there may be no disunion in the body, but that the members may have care for one another. And if one member suffers anything, all the members suffer with it, or if one member glories, all the members rejoice with it. Now you are the Body of Christ, member for member” (1 Cor. 12:12-13, 24-27). It is part of the structure of the unity of the Church which comprises all the faithful under their Head, Christ, directs with one authority and one faith the whole commerce of her prayers, sacrifices, almsgiving and indulgences, and promotes the good offices of the angels toward men. And because of the extraordinary richness of the idea of the Communion of Saints we shall have to confine ourselves to considering the doctrine simply under its well-known threefold aspect: the Church Militant (the Church in War), Suffering (the Church in Pain), and Triumphant (the Church in Glory) —with special emphasis on the second.

OPPOSITION TO CHRIST

The warfare between the Church and her foes has existed essentially not only from her foundation but from the very first promise of the coming of her Founder. “I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the Woman [Mary],” God said to Satan at the time of the Fall and the Promise, “between your seed and her Seed [Christ]; He shall crush your head, and you shall lie in wait for His heel” (Gen. 3:15). And the growth of that enmity between Satan and the coming Christ kept pace with the development of the character and life of our Lord in the Messianic prophecies. It found expression in the hatred and abuse showered on the prophets who foretold His coming with progressive clarity and yearned to see Him with increasing love and faith. “Amen I say to you,” Jesus reminded His disciples, “many prophets and just men have longed to see what you see, and they have not seen it,” namely the time of the Messiah and the Messiah Himself (Mt. 13: 17). And regarding the record of the persecution of the prophets, He said to the Pharisees, “Woe to you! for you build the tombs of the prophets, whereas your fathers killed them. So then you are witnesses and approve the deeds of your fathers” (Lk. 11: 47-48). Jerusalem, their own Holy City, He reminded them on another occasion, had the lamentable distinction of being the slaughter house of the prophets, and so He Himself was safe except there. “It cannot be,” He said with both historical and prophetic irony, “that a prophet perish outside Jerusalem” (Lk. 13:33).

There is no feature of the life to which He had called them, namely, the carrying on of the Church He would found on them, that Jesus made more clear to His Apostles than this: that because of their work and their loyalty to Him, the world through its various agents would persecute them: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before you. If you were of the world, the world would love what is its own ... but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.... Remember the word that I have spoken to you: No servant is greater than his master. If they have persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. ... They will expel you from the synagogues. Yes, the hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think he is offering worship to God” (Jn. 15:18-20; 16:2).

This, then, is the heritage of hate which came to the Church. It was directed against Christ by His enemies, and after they had put Him to death, was extended to His followers. A few years after His Ascension, the Church was banished to the four corners of the earth. First the disciples were scattered, then the Apostles; and wherever they went they met persecution, calumny, exile and martyrdom. Even the great city of Rome, that harbored any number of so-called religions, very soon picked out the Christian Church as the object of cruel sport. “The Christians to the lions!” became the popular cry; and the rulers, who had instigated the people’s hatred in the first place, enthusiastically acceded to their demand. Ten great persecutions between the years 64 and 303 drove the Christians to the hills, the deserts, the catacombs. The fairest and bravest, the wisest and most cultured, the holiest and best, were burned as torches for circus illumination; crucified and torn from their crosses to be devoured by wild beasts; sewn in bags with serpents and mad dogs and thrown into the Tiber; hacked to pieces as they united their voices in prayer and holy chants to God.

CONTINUATION OF SUFFERING

Through the centuries the Church's history shows a continuation of this suffering. Most of the national Apostles endured martyrdom, and the countries they evangelized were plundered and occupied by brutal tyrants who hated the faith. Even as these words are written the Gethsemani of the Church continues: a cardinal endures living martyrdom; archbishops undergo suffering and humiliation that it seems only fiends could have devised; priests and nuns are butchered, tortured, starved, lashed and exiled; whole countries of the faithful endure persecutions that out-Neroes Nero. "I will put enmity," said the Omnipotent, "between you and the Woman, between your seed and her Seed; He shall crush your head, and you shall lie in wait for His heel."

Yet this is only the outward warfare of the Christian. A greater, a far more subtle, conflict rages within him. All the outward assaults are made against his nature, its feelings and instincts; they spell physical pain, which nature abhors and avoids by its very constitution. But the inward onslaughts come in the stolen uniform of his own appetites, speaking the tongues of his own pleasures, advising in the diplomacy of his own inclinations; traitors whose sworn purpose is to leave him open for a mortal wound, the fifth column of his own disloyal thoughts and rebelling desires that is working with the enemy for his defeat and enslavement. For if the three parts of the Church work together for man's salvation, the three forces of evil, the world, the flesh and the devil, work hand-in-hand for his destruction. It is these that St. Paul was describing to the Ephesians when he wrote, "Be strengthened in the Lord and in the might of His power. Put on the armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our wrestling is ...against the Principalities and the Powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness on high" (Eph. 6:10-12). And practically our Lord's last words to His Apostles on the night of His arrest were these, spoken to Peter: "Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith may not fail; and do thou, when once thou hast turned again, strengthen thy brethren" (Lk. 22:31-32). Only the grace of Christ dispensed to us through the channels which He established and gave to the Church under Peter and his successors to administer, can arm us against the assaults of Satan and pour life into our souls if we are wounded.

DOCTRINE OF PURGATORY

Up till the moment of death we belong to the Church Militant; after that we immediately enter either the Church Suffering or the Church Triumphant. And since only the few are immaculate enough to go directly to glory, we shall consider here that place of purifying pain through which, first, the many must pass. It is purgatory, a place or state wherein the departed soul is cleansed from unconfessed venial sins and from other sins also, confessed but not fully atoned for.

The doctrine of purgatory is one of the most consoling taught by the Catholic Church. Without purgatory, what an unbearable lot would be ours! For on the one hand we have God's decree that nothing defiled can enter heaven: "And a path and a way shall be there, and it shall be called the holy way: the unclean shall not pass over it. And this shall be unto you a straight way" (Is. 35:8). And on the other hand, even those striving earnestly to be good gather much guilty dust on the road of life. St. Peter asks what will happen to "the impious and the sinner," since "the just man scarcely will be saved" (1 Pet. 4:18).

But there never has been lack of assurance to the faithful that God created this purifying place which removes the last trace of stain from the soul and makes it fit for heaven. Even the ancient Jews performed suffrages for the dead, as chapter 12 of the Second Book of Machabees clearly shows.

When Judas Machabeus, the royal champion of that people and of their religion, was in a certain skirmish with Gorgias, the governor of Idumea, some Jews were slain; and Judas' soldiers, going after the battle to bury their fallen brethren, found hidden under their coats votive offerings from the temples of idols, which had been appropriated by the soldiers when they destroyed those temples. This, besides breaking the Seventh Commandment, violated a stringent Mosaic ordinance: "Their [the idolatrous nations'] graven things thou shalt burn with fire. Thou shalt not covet the silver and gold of which they are made: neither shalt thou take to thee anything thereof, lest thou offend, because it is an abomination to the Lord thy God" (Deut. 7:25). In Jewish eyes the sin merited death (though it was not necessarily a mortal sin). The Bible account states:

“All plainly saw that for this cause they were slain. Then they all blessed the just judgment of the Lord, who had discovered the things that were hidden. And so betaking themselves to prayers, they besought Him that the sin which had been committed might be forgotten. But the most valiant Judas {Machabeus}...making a gathering,...sent twelve thousand drachms of silver to Jerusalem for sacrifice to be offered for the sins of the dead, thinking well and religiously concerning the resurrection ...and because he considered that they who had fallen asleep with godliness had great grace laid up for them. It is therefore a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from sins” (2 Mach. 12:32-46).

The Church founded by Christ in the New Law continued, intensified and elevated the prayers and suffrages for the dead which had been practiced under the Old Law. Inscriptions from catacombs and ancient cemeteries reveal this custom, as do old liturgies; while the writings of early theologians and Fathers of the Church clarify it. The words we still utter after every prayer for the dead, “Eternal rest grant to them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them,” come to us unchanged from the second century. “Let us pray for the dead that God may forgive their sins and bring them to the land of the living,” is a supplication that echoed through the burial places of the infant Church. Tertullian, who lived at the end of the second century, mentions anniversary Masses for the dead. “Pray for the soul of your husband,” he wrote to a recently bereaved widow, “begging repose for him, and ...have sacrifice [Mass] offered for him every year on the day of his death.” St. Perpetua beheld her brother Dinocrates, who “was suffering terrible torments,” being released from the place of punishment through her prayers. And St. Augustine, who appealed to his friends to pray for the soul of his mother, St. Monica, says, “There is no doubt that the dead are aided by the prayers of Holy Church, by the salutary Sacrifice, and by the alms that are poured out for their souls”

PAINS OF PURGATORY

That there is a place or state where souls are cleansed of all earthly stains in final preparation for heaven, is certain beyond all doubt. The cleansing is effected through a twofold punishment, the pain of loss and the pain of sense — each terrible and each only dimly comprehended by us in this life.

The pain of loss is an indescribable hunger for God. Here and now we can cushion ourselves against such yearning by placing creatures and ambitions and pleasures between ourselves and God. This, needless to say, is a wrong use of people and things — a use directly opposed to God’s intention in surrounding us with them, for He designed all things to lead us to Him. But we can nevertheless pervert their purpose and employ them to shield us, as it were, against His attraction. At the moment of death all these barriers fall away and we stand before God unprotected from the full force of His magnetic love. At last we see Him face to face, and His love draws and sets the whole tide and current of our own love, our own complete desire, our very being itself, toward Him. Now no created thing stands, or could stand, between us — with one exception: sin and the punishment still due to sin.

Many theologians believe that it is at this moment that the venial sins unforgiven at death are pardoned. Adequate temporal punishment remains, however, and this restrains us with fetters from rushing to God and immersing ourselves in His love, as chains would hold a person tortured with desert thirst from casting himself into a cool, grass-bordered lake. We are transfused with longing. But the fetters hold.

Stripped of all earthly illusions, we now see the fatherly goodness of God who created all things for our use and enjoyment—the heavens with their vast wonders, the earth in its beauty and usefulness, fellow beings in the divine purpose that relates their lives to us, and ours to them. We see Christ who became one of us and redeemed us. We see the value of His passion. We appreciate the love of His heart. We understand His call to us to be one of His followers along His Way of the Cross. We behold the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of love and of truth. We perceive the pattern of His work of sanctification in our souls. We comprehend the sacramental measures and methods He used to fit us at this very moment for an instant, eternal, all-satisfying union with God.

But the fetters hold. As the hind longs for the running waters, so my soul longs for you, O God. Athirst is my soul for God, the living God. When shall I go and behold the face of God?” (Ps. 41:2-3).

At this moment, indeed, we do behold God, but we may not yet enjoy Him. “A path and a way shall be there, and .. the unclean shall not pass over it.” For the evil fruits of sin prevent us from attaining the ecstatic possession of God which is the sole purpose of our existence, at the very instant at which God had planned the union. That union,

frustrated for a term by sin, must be postponed. The hunger cannot be postponed but the satisfying of it must. Yet the very pain of the postponement will hurry the hour of possession — such is the mercy of God!

Not the least factor in our agonized disappointment is the realization that we ourselves could have averted it; that while still living we knew how to avert it, and had the means of doing so. The whole economy of satisfaction for sins was explained to us in a thousand instructions by teachers and priests. We knew that pains-taking sacramental confession, acts of contrition, prayers, Masses, mortification, almsgiving — all the spiritual items of a good Catholic life — help to remit the temporal punishment due to sin. Yet we neglected these; and now unpaid debts come between us and God at the very moment when our nature, our affections and faculties, our whole being, cry for eternal union with Him.

The pain of sense is caused by what theologians call “purgatorial fire.” This in many features is similar to the fire of hell, but differs in one overwhelming way: the fire of hell is eternal; that of purgatory, temporal. From the salutary estimates that have been made of the sufferings of purgatory, we single out those of St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas, both Doctors of the Church. St. Bonaventure tells us: “The severest pain of purgatory exceeds the most violent known on earth”; and St. Thomas writes: “Even the slightest torture of purgatory is worse than all the sufferings endurable in this world.” However, we can take heart from the fact that the pains of purgatory are certainly not beyond what souls can endure; that they are measured out by the hand of a merciful God; and that when the newly departed soul sees the ugliness, the deformity, the blasphemy, of even the last traces of sin, it goes eagerly to its place of cleansing. For, it has been observed, were a soul permitted to enter heaven with even temporal punishment for sin still due, it would suffer there by contrast with God’s holiness more than it would in purgatory itself.

How long do souls remain in purgatory? Since it has not pleased God to reveal the scale of suffering He metes out to the poor souls, there is nothing left us but conjecture — a fruitless employment. One great, basic fact we know beyond all doubt: God has given us infallible means for shortening their period of pain. They are His dear and loyal friends. They overcame themselves and the world for His sake; and their cleansing even by fire has their patient, thankful co-operation, for it makes them fit to enter His presence and possess His eternal life and love. They are beloved by Mary as her helpless, suffering children. And when their day of deliverance comes, the whole court of heaven will introduce them to the joys of the blessed.

HELP FOR AND FROM THE SUFFERING SOULS

It is to hasten this happy day that we pray for the poor souls. It is for this that the Church so readily opens her spiritual treasury and permits the faithful through their prayers and sacrifices to withdraw so many and such large appropriations of mercy.

Or our power to assist the poor souls might be likened to the turning on of an electric switch. One infinitesimal gesture releases the light, heat and power stored up by a Tennessee Valley project or a Bonneville Dam. That tremendous bank of energy awaits the flip of a switch or the push of a button. But it does await it! — that is the point. It would remain forever unreleased, and therefore useless, if the circuit connecting it with wheels and bulbs were not closed. And, on the other hand, all the circuits of all the electric systems in the world could be closed, and if there were no energy stored, everything would remain still and cold.

The merits of Christ surpass all figures of might and endurance for they are the great, inexhaustible store of help and grace that awaits release to the suffering souls through the closing of the circuit of His love by a Mass, a prayer, an almsgiving. This application of the merits of Christ and the saints is called “indulgence”: the earned withdrawals by the Church on earth from the Church in heaven for the Church in purgatory.

Our aid to the souls in purgatory is far from being one-sided, however. Who are more willing than they to intercede to God for us? And who can realize as clearly as they our need of divine assistance? They wish most earnestly that we should escape what they are experiencing. They know as we cannot the dreadful torment of purgatory and how easily we on earth can supplant its purifying value by prayers, Masses and good works in the quiet, peaceful, comparatively painless atmosphere of our homes, churches, places of work.

The poor souls are not a hypothetical or impersonal “they,” but our own brothers in the family of Christ. Many are bound to us by close earthly ties as well. Our parents may be there, beseeching us to hurry to their relief and release.

The face of a lifelong friend may be upturned to us in agonized supplication. A wife may cry to her husband for his prayers. A husband may seek his wife's help. We can be morally certain that a part of the saved of our generation are calling to us from purgatory. We went through wars and upheavals with them. We fought and pleaded for the same things. We read the same papers, traveled on the same trains, went to the same amusements and games. They cry individually to us every moment of the day and night, "Have mercy on me, have mercy on me, at least you my friends, for the hand of the Lord has touched me." And — their eyes clear now of all earthly distractions, their minds certain of eternal values, their hearts directed to One All-holy Object — they yearn to warn us in time not only to atone for our sins but to strengthen our love for God. Moreover, while it is true that their suffering, called *satispassio*, has no meritorious value, but atones by the very fact and measure of suffering, yet they can and do intercede for us while still in purgatory, and also help us when they reach heaven and dwell in the presence of God.

The Church Triumphant comprises all the holy souls who have "paid the last penny" to the justice of God through the use of the sacraments and sacramentals of the Church, the prayers and penances of themselves and others. They are streaming into heaven at every hour — we can see them under the image of pilgrims, their weary faces lighted up from afar with the first rays of eternal joy and gladness as they press forward toward the throne of God. For them the kingdom of heaven has been won and grace has completed its work. An eternity of peace awaits them, an eternity in which they shall consciously and completely "live, move, and have their being" in God..

This life of the blessed in heaven is not to be conceived of as mentally static or solitary. The vision of God in which they dwell insures a knowledge of the certain relations that exist between Him and His creatures; a deeper understanding of His attributes and a clearer perception of Him as our Father and Creator; an eternal and fruitful, though finite, penetration of the Blessed Trinity. As members of Christ's Mystical Body the blessed converse with the angels and aid in administering the divine ordinances: who has not heard of the miraculous assistance rendered to men by St. Jude, St. Christopher, St. Anthony of Padua? And as children of her who sits enthroned in heaven, the Queen of men and angels, the blessed have the joy of the companionship of their Mother, the Mediatrix of Grace.

Such is the spiritual solidarity of the Communion of Saints, a solidarity which implies a variety of interrelations: within the Church Militant, not only the participation in the same faith, sacraments and government, but also a mutual exchange of prayers, merits and satisfactions; between the Church Militant and the Church Suffering and Triumphant, suffrages, invocations, intercession, veneration.

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