

August 2009 Q & A: Can We Pray to Deceased Saints?

Introduction:

Our tradition has become to use the fifth Sundays as a day to answer pre-submitted questions. In our last session, we answered the question of whether or not we can verbalize prayers to Jesus. I concluded that since Jesus is God and one with the Father and since we have the example of Stephen praying to Jesus in **Acts 7:59-60** and also **Revelation 5:8-14**, we can voice prayers to Jesus. I received a follow-up question to that one. Can we pray to Mary, Jesus' mother, or to the deceased saints? We are most familiar with the Roman Catholic Church teaching prayer to the saints. The Eastern Orthodox Church also accepts this practice, as do some Anglicans.¹ This actually comprises a large percentage of those who claim to be Christians. However, there are a large number of folks who claim the practice is wrong. But the answer to this question is not found based on how many people are for it or against it. The answer is not based on who is for it or who is against it. The answer is not found in whether or not we have ever done it. The answer is found in scripture. Should we pray to deceased saints?

Discussion:

- I. Understanding the issue.
 - A. The very first thing we must do is actually understand the issue. Before we just say, "Well, duh, we are only allowed to worship God," we need to recognize that is also the official position of the Catholic church. If you are talking to someone who is truly aware of the Catholic position on this topic they will explain that they do not teach praying to saints as a form of worshiping saints. Rather, they teach that just as we can ask each other to intercede for us, we can also ask the deceased saints to intercede for us.
 - B. Consider the following quotes.
 1. "Catholics believe as do our non-Catholic Christian friends, that there is only one mediator between God and man and that mediator is Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). We do believe, however, that there is nothing wrong with having a member of our church pray for us. There are many examples of this in the Bible. Paul asking for prayer, Paul praying for others, and scriptures encouraging us to pray for each other... I can't see what difference it makes if the church member we ask to pray for us is no longer on earth if we honestly believe our God to be the God of the living?"²
 2. "The 'Communion of the Saints' means that the members of the three branches of the Church can help one another. We can assist the souls in Purgatory by our prayers and good works, while the Saints in heaven intercede for us."³
 3. Consider the example of the prayer called the "Hail Mary." "Hail Mary, full of grace! The Lord is with thee: blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen."⁴ Notice how this "prayer" is asking Mary to pray or intercede on behalf of the one reciting this statement.
 - C. Before we simply dismiss the concept of praying to deceased saints we have to make sure we understand what we are really discussing. We must not build a straw man to knock down, but actually wrestle with the real issues.
- II. Arguments offered in favor of seeking the intercession of the deceased.
 - A. Refer to the quote above in I.B.1. The author of that quote referred to passages such as **II Thessalonians 1:11; 3:1** and **James 5:16**. We are clearly allowed to ask each other to intercede for us. If you ask me today to pray for you and I die tomorrow, why can't you still ask me to pray for you the next day?

¹ http://www.catholic.com/library/Praying_to_the_Saints.asp

² <http://members.cox.net/sfobro/saints.html> (Website for the **Saint Clare Fraternity Secular Franciscan Order of Omaha, Nebraska**)

³ Baltimore Catechism No. 3, Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., Rockford, IL, 1921, p. 20, q 74.

⁴ Ibid, p 5.

B. **Revelation 5:8** demonstrates this practice is okay.

1. “As Scripture indicates, those in heaven are aware of the prayers of those on earth. This can be seen, for example, in Revelation 5:8, where John depicts the saints in heaven offering our prayers to God under the form of ‘golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.’ But if the saints in heaven are offering our prayers to God, then they must be aware of our prayers. They are aware of our petitions and present them to God by interceding for us.

“Some might try to argue that in this passage the prayers being offered were not addressed to the saints in heaven, but directly to God. Yet this argument would only strengthen the fact that those in heaven can hear our prayers, for then the saints would be aware of our prayers even when they are not directed to them!

“In any event, it is clear from Revelation 5:8 that the saints in heaven do actively intercede for us. We are explicitly told by John that the incense they offer to God are the prayers of the saints. Prayers are not physical things and cannot be physically offered to God. Thus the saints in heaven are offering our prayers to God mentally. In other words, they are interceding.”⁵

2. Based on this text it appears that the saints in heaven are involved with our prayers and they offer them up to God on our behalf.
- C. If the prayer of the righteous is effective (cf **James 5:16**), we will naturally want the dead saints who are already shed of their unrighteous flesh to pray on our behalf.

1. “It goes without saying that those in heaven, being free of the body and the distractions of this life, have even greater confidence and devotion to God than anyone on earth.

“Also, God answers in particular the prayers of the righteous. James declares: ‘The prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects. Elijah was a man of like nature with ourselves and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth its fruit’ (Jas. 5:16–18). Yet those Christians in heaven are more righteous, since they have been made perfect to stand in God’s presence (Heb. 12:22-23), than anyone on earth, meaning their prayers would be even more efficacious.”⁶

2. If we are allowed to ask other Christians to pray for us and the prayers of the righteous are more effective, then it seems to make sense that the prayers of dead Christians are the best prayers to have offered on our behalf.
- D. Finally, we are directed in scripture to have those in heaven pray with us.
1. “The Bible directs us to invoke those in heaven and ask them to pray with us. Thus in Psalms 103, we pray, ‘Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word! Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will!’ (Ps. 103:20-21). And in Psalms 148 we pray, ‘Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens, praise him in the heights! Praise him, all his angels, praise him, all his host!’ (Ps. 148:1-2).”⁷
 2. If this passage shows living servants of God directing the angels in heaven to praise God, then we are allowed to ask them to pray for us as well, especially when we remember the passage in **Revelation 5:8** which demonstrates the deceased offer our prayers up to God.

III. Re-examining these arguments.

- A. First, I want to examine the crux of this argument. While I think we do need to clearly understand what the official position of the Roman Catholic church really is, we also need to recognize what is actually practiced. They claim they are merely asking for these deceased saints to intercede for them. However, that is not the reality of the actual practice. No doubt, we can find examples of prayers, like the “Hail Mary,” that request intercession. However, the fact is we can easily find prayers that are not requests of intercession but prayers for the departed saints to accomplish the requests. Note some examples.

⁵ http://www.catholic.com/library/Praying_to_the_Saints.asp

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*

1. The following is a prayer to Joseph, the earthly father of Jesus. You can go online to buy kits including a statue and prayers for getting him to help you sell your house. This prayer was found on a site that sells one of these kits. "O, Saint Joseph, you who taught our Lord the carpenter's trade, and saw to it that he was always properly housed, hear my earnest plea. I want you to help me now as you helped your foster-child Jesus, and as you have helped many others in the matter of housing. I wish to sell this [house/property] quickly, easily, and profitably and I implore you to grant my wish by bringing me a good buyer, one who is eager, compliant, and honest, and by letting nothing impede the rapid conclusion of the sale. Dear Saint Joseph, I know you would do this for me out of the goodness of your heart and in your own good time, but my need is very great now and so I must make you hurry on my behalf. Saint Joseph, I am going to place you in a difficult position with your head in darkness and you will suffer as our Lord suffered, until this [house/property] is sold. Then, Saint Joseph, i [sic] swear before the cross and God Almighty, that i [sic] will redeem you and you will receive my gratitude and a place of honour in my home. Amen."⁸
2. A prayer to Mary, Jesus' mother: "Virgin, most holy, Mother of the Word Incarnate, Treasurer of graces, and Refuge of sinners, I fly top [sic] your motherly affection with lively faith, and I beg of you the grace ever to do the will of God. Into your most holy hands I commit the keeping of my heart, asking you for health of soul and body, in the certain hope that you, my most loving Mother, will hear my prayer. Into the bosom of your tender mercy, this day, every day of my life, and at the hour of my death, I commend my soul and body. To you I entrust all my hopes and consolations, all my trials and miseries, my life and the end of my life, that all my actions may be ordered and disposed according to your will and that of your Divine Son. Amen."⁹
3. Another prayer to Mary, Jesus' mother in order to gain help in making decisions about your life's vocation: "Behold me at thy feet, O Virgin most kind, seeking to obtain through thee, the most important grace of knowing what I ought to do. I desire nothing but to comply perfectly with the Will of thy Divine Son at every moment of my life. Mother of Good Counsel, let me hear thy voice. It will dispel every doubt that troubles my mind. I trust in thee, being confident that, since thou art the Mother of my Redeemer, though wilt also be the Mother of my salvation. If thou, O Mary, wilt not send me a ray of the Divine Sun, what light will enlighten me? Who will direct me if thou refusest, who are the Mother of the uncreated Wisdom? Listen, then, to my humble prayers. Let me not be lost in my uncertainty and instability; lead me along the straight road that ends in life everlasting, Thou, who are my only hope, and whose hands are full of the riches of virtue and of life, and who dispenses the fruits of honor and holiness."¹⁰
4. A prayer to the apostle Matthew: "Dear Levi, now known as Matthew, you were first a publican, a tax collector, and then a gatherer of souls for Christ after immediately following his call. Later you wrote wonderful accounts for your Jewish brethren of what Jesus, descendant of David, said and did as Teacher and Savior. Make all accountants imitate your example in giving careful and honest accounts."¹¹
5. A prayer to Saint Christopher, patron saint of cabdrivers: "Dear Saint, you have inherited a beautiful name - Christbearer - as a result of a wonderful legend that while carrying people across a raging stream you also carried the Child Jesus. Teach us to be true Christbearers to those who do not know him. Protect all drivers who often transports those who bear Christ within them. Amen."¹²
6. These five prayers provide a clear demonstration that while Catholic apologeticists will defend their action by claiming they aren't actually praying to the deceased but seeking their intercession, the actual practice is that they often are, in fact, praying to the saints.

⁸ <http://www.luckymojo.com/saintjoseph.html> (There is even a site dedicated to the St. Joseph "Underground Real Estate Kit" at <http://www.stjosephstatue.com/>)

⁹ <http://saints.sqpn.com/pray0685.htm>

¹⁰ *My Sunday Missal*, by Father Stedman, Confraternity of the Precious Blood, 1940, p 343.

¹¹ <http://saints.sqpn.com/pray0203.htm>

¹² <http://saints.sqpn.com/pray0237.htm>

- B. My first major problem with the practice of praying to the deceased saints or even seeking their intercession is that there is not one single solitary case of it in the Bible. It never happened in the Old Testament. It never happened in the New Testament. We are never told to do it. We never see anyone actually doing it. There is just no authority for it. Yes, we are told to intercede for each other, but we are never once told to seek the intercession of those who have departed. It's not that there wasn't great opportunity to provide this teaching. For instance, in **I Thessalonians 4:13-18**, the apostle Paul had the perfect opportunity while setting the living saints minds at ease about the status of the deceased saints. He could very easily have told them that the saints were with the Lord and could even pray on their behalf so be comforted. Interestingly, if at the time of the writing of **I Thessalonians** it had simply been understood that dead saints could intercede for us, Paul would not have needed to set anyone's mind at ease about the state of the deceased saints.
- C. The first argument offered in favor of praying to the deceased saints claimed we are allowed to ask each other for intercession. I certainly agree that we are and would use the same passages and others that were presented earlier. If we can ask each other, what changes at death? If you can ask me to pray for you an hour before I die, why not an hour after? The Bible teaches one very significant change. The dead no longer have a part in this world. **Ecclesiastes 9:4-6** says the dead no longer have a share in what is done under the sun. They don't take part in what goes on down here. They don't influence what happens here. For all that seems comforting in saying the dead look upon us, hear our prayers, and are interceding on our behalf, it just isn't true. The Bible says they don't.
- D. The second argument offered looked at **Revelation 5:8** saying the deceased saints clearly offer our prayers to God, therefore we can pray to deceased saints. However, I encourage you to look at the verse again. This verse says nothing about the deceased saints interceding for us. It says nothing about prayers offered to deceased saints asking them for anything or asking them to intercede for us. Rather, we have an apocalyptic picture of beasts and elders, neither of which even represent deceased saints. They offer up prayers in this picture, but they are bringing the prayers of the saints to God. They are not bringing their own prayers on behalf of the living saints. Frankly, using this verse as a proof text falls far short of granting authority for living Christians to seek the working of deceased saints or even to seek their intercession.
- E. The third argument in favor of praying to deceased saints is that we are trying to get the most righteous people to intercede for us because their prayers are more effective (**James 5:16**). The problem with this point of view is that it completely misrepresents James's point. James is not saying your prayers aren't effective because you are not righteous enough. Therefore, you need to seek someone who is really righteous to intercede for you. His point is that when we, who have surrendered to Jesus and have the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus (cf. **Philippians 3:9**), are praying for each other, our prayers are effective. Interestingly, this would have been another great place in which God could have revealed that we are to seek the intercession of the deceased saints. But He didn't. He simply left it at us confessing to one another and praying for one another. He tells us to call the elders of the church, not pray to the deceased patron saint for the sick. Finally, the point of intercession is not that we really need someone better than us praying on our behalf. The point is that we all need to learn to be humble and seek the needs of others above our own.
- F. The final argument came from the psalms in which the psalmists called on the angels to praise God. If we can call on these heavenly beings to praise God with us, then we can certainly call on them to beseech God for us. At this point, the apologeticists lump together the deceased saints with the angels. It is true, some psalmists call on the angels to praise God (**Psalms 148:1-2**). However, these verses fall far short of teaching us to pray to the deceased saints.
1. No matter how you cut it, angels aren't deceased saints. Even if we could prove that we should get angels to intercede for us, that wouldn't conclude we should do the same with deceased saints.
 2. These psalms do not even try to get the angels to intercede for us. They are not prayers to angels to pray on our behalf but rather entreaties to get the angels to pray their own praises to God.

3. This statement plucks these verses right out of their context. Read **Psalm 148:3**. "Praise him, sun and moon, praise him, all you shining stars!" Do these verses teach us that we should pray to the sun, moon, and stars to intercede on our behalf? Of course not. Rather they demonstrate the hyperbole the psalmist is using. He is not calling on the angels to praise God as if we can actually tell angels what to do. Rather, he is using a poetic device to demonstrate how praiseworthy God is. He is so praiseworthy that all of His creations should praise Him.
4. There is nothing in these verses, or any others, about praying to the deceased saints.

Conclusion:

After making sure we understand the issue, seeing the arguments used in favor of praying to the deceased saints, and then examining the Scriptures to gain authority for the practice, I am forced to conclude that there is no authority for praying to or seeking the intercessions of the deceased saints. In fact, there is no need. The dead are not involved in this world. They are awaiting the resurrection. We are not seeking more righteous people than us to pray on our behalf. Rather, by Jesus' sacrifice we are allowed to pray to God and that is what we need to do.