

II

Communion of saints

Books of the Bible Index of Homilies

Pope Francis

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Catechesis on Saint Joseph: 10. Saint Joseph and the communion of saints

1 Corinthians 12: 12-13





Dear brothers and sisters, good morning!

In recent weeks we have been able to deepen our understanding of the figure of Saint Joseph, guided by the few but important pieces of information given in the Gospels, and also by the aspects of his personality that the Church over the centuries has been able to highlight through prayer and devotion. Starting precisely from this sentire commune ("common feeling") of the Church that has accompanied the figure of St Joseph, today I would like to focus on an important article of faith that can enrich our Christian life and also shape our relationship with the saints and with our deceased loved ones in the best possible way: I am talking about the communion of saints. We often say, in the Creed, "I believe in the communion of saints." But if you ask what the communion of saints is, I remember as a child I used to answer immediately, "Ah, the saints receive Communion." It's something that... we don't understand what we are saying. What is the communion of saints? It's not the saints receiving Communion, it's not that. It's something else.

Sometimes even Christianity can fall into forms of devotion that seem to reflect a mentality that is more pagan than Christian. The fundamental difference is that our prayer and our devotion of the faithful people is not based, in these cases on trust in a human being, or in an image or an object, even when we know that they are sacred. The prophet Jeremiah reminds us: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man, [...] blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord" (17:5,7). Even when we rely fully on the intercession of a saint, or even more so that of the Virgin Mary, our trust only has value in relation to Christ. As if the path toward this saint or toward Our Lady does not end there, no. Not there, but in relationship with Christ. He is the bond, Christ is the bond that unites us to him and to each other, and which has a specific name: this bond that unites us all, between ourselves and us with Christ, it is the "communion of saints". It is not the saints who work miracles, no! This saint is so miraculous..." No, stop there. The saints don't work miracles, but only the grace of God that acts through them. Miracles are done by God, by the grace of God acting through a holy person, a righteous person. This must be made clear. There are people who say, "I don't believe in God, I don't know, but I believe in this saint." No, this is wrong. The saint is an intercessor, one who prays for us and we pray to him, and he prays for us and the Lord gives us grace: The Lord, through the saint.

What, then, is the "communion of saints"? The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms: "The communion of saints is the Church" (no. 946). See what a beautiful definition this is! "The communion of saints is the Church." What does this mean? That the Church is reserved for the perfect? No. It means that it is the community of saved sinners [It: peccatori salvati]. The Church is the community of saved sinners. It's beautiful, this definition. No one can exclude themselves from the Church, we are all saved sinners. Our holiness is the fruit of God's love manifested in Christ, who sanctifies us by loving us in our misery and saving us from it. Thanks always to him we form one single body, says St Paul, in which Jesus is the head and we are the members (cf. 1 Cor 12:12). This image of the Body of Christ and the image of the body immediately makes us understand what it means to be bound to one another in communion: Let us listen to what Saint Paul says: "If one member suffers", writes St Paul, "all the members suffer together; and if one member is honoured, all the members rejoice with him. Now you are the body of Christ and, each according to his part, his members" (1 Cor 12:26-27). This is what Paul says: we are all one body, all united through faith, through baptism... All in communion: united in communion with Jesus Christ. And this is the communion of saints.

Dear brothers and dear sisters, the joy and sorrow that touch my life affect everyone, just as the joy and sorrow that touch the life of the brother and sister next to us also affect me. I cannot be indifferent to others, because we are all in one body, in communion. In this sense, even the sin of an individual person always affects everyone, and the love of each individual person affects everyone. In virtue of the communion of saints, this union, every member of the Church is bound to me in a profound way. But I don't say "to me" because I am the Pope; [I say] to each one of us he is bound, we have been bound, and bound in a profound way and this bond is so strong that it cannot be broken even by death. Even by death. In fact, the communion of saints does not concern only those brothers and sisters who are beside me at this historic moment, or who live in this historic moment, but also those who have concluded their journey, the earthly pilgrimage and crossed the threshold of death. They too are in communion with us. Let us consider, dear brothers and sisters, that in Christ no one can ever truly separate us from those we love because the bond is an existential bond, a strong bond that is in our very nature; only the manner of being together with one another then changes, but nothing and no one can break this bond. "Father, let's think about those who have denied the faith, who are apostates, who are the persecutors of the Church, who have denied their baptism: Are these also at home?" Yes, these too. All of them. The blasphemers, all of them. We are brothers. This is the communion of saints. The communion of saints holds together the community of believers on earth and in heaven, and on earth the saints, the sinners, all.

In this sense, the relationship of friendship that I can build with a brother or sister beside me, I can also establish with a brother or sister in heaven. The saints are friends with whom we very often establish friendly relations. What we call devotion to a saint — "I am very devoted to this or that saint" — what we call devotion is actually a way of expressing love from this very bond that unites us. Also, in everyday life one can say, "But this person has such devotion for his elderly parents": no, it is a manner of love, an expression of love. And we all know that we can always turn to a friend, especially when we are in difficulty and need help. And we have friends in heaven. We all need friends; we all need meaningful relationships to help us get through life. Jesus, too, had his friends, and he turned to them at the most decisive moments of his human experience. In the history of the Church there are some constants that accompany the believing community: first of all, the great affection and the very strong bond that the Church has always felt towards Mary, Mother of God and our Mother. But also the special honour and affection she has bestowed on St Joseph. After all, God entrusts to him the most precious things he has: his Son Jesus and the Virgin Mary. It is always thanks to the communion of saints that we feel that the men and women saints who are our patrons — because of the name we bear, for example, because of the Church to which we belong, because of the place where we live, and so on, as well as through personal devotion — are close to us. And this is the trust that must always animate us in turning to them at decisive moments in our lives. It's not some kind of magic, it's not superstition, it's devotion to the saints. It's simply talking to a brother, a sister, who is in the presence of God, who has led a righteous life, a model life, and is now in the presence of God. And I talk to this brother, this sister, and ask for their intercession for the needs that I have.

Precisely for this reason, I want to conclude this catechesis with a prayer to St Joseph to which I am particularly attached and which I have recited every day for more than 40 years. It is a prayer that I found in a prayer book of the Sisters of Jesus and Mary, from the 1700s, the end of the eighteenth century. It is very beautiful, but more than a prayer it is a challenge, to this father, to this our guardian, Saint Joseph. It would be wonderful if you could learn this prayer and repeat it. I will read it.

“Glorious Patriarch Saint Joseph, whose power makes the impossible possible, come to my aid in these times anguish and difficulty. Take under your protection the serious and troubling situations that I commend to you, that they may have a happy outcome. My beloved father, all my trust is in you. All my trust is in you. Let it not be said that I invoked you in vain, and since you can do everything with Jesus and Mary, show me that your goodness is as great as your power. Amen.”

And it ends with a challenge, this is to challenge Saint Joseph: “You can do everything with Jesus and Mary, show me that your goodness is as great as your power.” This is a prayer... I have been entrusting myself to St Joseph every day with this prayer for more than 40 years: it's an old prayer. Amen.

A few minutes ago, we heard a person shouting, shouting, who had some kind of problem, I don't know if it was physical, psychological, spiritual: but it's one of our brothers in trouble. I would like to end by praying for him, our brother who is suffering, poor thing: if he was shouting it is because he is suffering, he has some need. Let us not be deaf to this brother's need. Let us pray together to Our Lady for him: Hail Mary...

Let us go forward, have courage, in this communion of all the saints we have in heaven and on earth: the Lord does not abandon us. Thank you.

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