

60. *The organist's little daughter*

One evening when I was having dinner with Maurice and his family, he was indignant when he heard me allude to the cult of the saints. I asked him what he meant, and he explained. During a day of recollection with a few of his classmates, the preacher advised them to leave devotion to the saints to the old women.

Maurice was a “neat” fellow, sixteen years old, quick as a whip, straight as an arrow, intelligent and aggressive. As I was leaving, he asked me to write down the answer I had given him, and he added, “I’ll read your letter to my pals.”

A few days later, I sent him the letter I am now sending you. It was the start of a correspondence that made me discover in him an unexpected spiritual maturity. Our correspondence was brutally ended six months later, by Maurice’s accidental death.

My dear Maurice, you were very much surprised the other evening, when I admitted that I like to pray to the saints. You wondered if you were talking with a survivor from the “dark ages.” I am not willing to lose your esteem, so I am defending myself.

First of all, allow me to give you some advice. I hope you will hold it as precious as the explorer holds his compass when he is traveling through the wilderness. When you hear anyone express an idea, or when an idea comes to your mind, that appears to contradict a venerable, indisputable, and essential tradition of the Church, always begin by giving the benefit of the doubt to the tradition.

Now, that applies to the present matter. The cult of the saints has been held in great honor by the Church for nearly 2000 years. Almost every day, the liturgy celebrates one or another of these saints. Once a year, all the saints are honored together. And in the most solemn ceremonies—for example, the ordination of priests—the Litany of the Saints is sung, asking them to pray for us.

How can anyone have told you that belief in the intercession of the saints had no Biblical foundation? Peruse the Gospel, and you will see that very often miracles are granted in response to an intercession. The centurion intervenes with Christ for his sick servant, a mother importunes the Lord to cure her little daughter. Why would those whom the Lord has called to himself lose their power of intercession? Why would the Woman who obtains her Son’s first miracle at Cana, be less successful in obtaining her requests today?

On his return from the Algerian War, where he had lived through several terrible weeks, I asked one of my friends: “Did you find help in prayer?” He answered:

“Yes. Not in my own prayer, but in the prayers of my family. There were days when, in a state of physical and nervous exhaustion, shattered to the roots of my being, I was incapable of the slightest prayer. At such times, I remembered my father’s last words to me on the platform of the station as I was leaving Lille: ‘If there are times when you cannot make yourself pray, remember that the prayers

of all of us are with you, and simply say to God: *Lord, I can't pray anymore, but listen to the family assembled this evening for their prayer in common.*' "

Maurice, do you really find it hard to admit that this prayer for a son, a beloved brother, who was far away living through a kind of hell, was powerful before God?

Pity anyone who does not have a family of whom he can think: "At least they are all praying for me!" That is the most hopeless solitude. But not a single Christian suffers this disgrace. The Church is the family that prays for all the children of God. Not one is excluded from God's thoughts and solicitude. And when I speak of the Church, I evoke both the Church of heaven and the Church of this earth. It is a great error to depend only on our own prayers, and to neglect the prayers of the family!

Are you going to say, "In your view the Church plays the role that rightly belongs to Christ. What need have I of any prayer except his?" You are correct. Christ is the great intercessor. The Epistle to the Hebrews presents him to us as *living forever to make intercession for us* (cf. Heb 7:25). And his intercession suffices. The Father listens only to his prayer. But that's the point! What is the prayer of the Church if not the prayer of Jesus Christ? You believe St. Paul when he declares: "*The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me*" (Gal 2:20). Why would it be hard for you to think that it is Jesus Christ who prays in Paul, in Peter and in all my brothers and sisters, when they intercede on my behalf?

"A comparison is not a reason." Even so, I want to leave you with a mental picture. It is a memory from long ago. I was visiting one of our famous French cathedrals under the guidance of the cathedral's organist, who was accompanied by his little six-year-old daughter. After inviting me to admire the portals, the capitals and the stained glass windows, he led me toward the great organs of the cathedral. His daughter, Mireille made a request of him, which he at first pretended not to hear. At last he gave in, and started the organ's motor. The child, sitting on the organist's seat with a serious look on her face, struck a chord. And all at once, the ancient stone saints—patriarchs, prophets, martyrs, virgins—came awake. The cathedral vibrated from its foundations to the tip of its slender spire.

Now, the delighted child had much more than her own small voice with which to pray to her God. She had at her disposal the immense choir of all the saints she had awakened, the powerful voice of the ancient cathedral, suddenly delivered from its silence. Maurice, it's up to you. It's up to your faith to get all of God's children to start interceding for you—all the saints in heaven, whether famous or unknown and all your brothers and sisters in the Church, whether virtuous or sinful.

This is the law of the communion of saints. Each one is at the service of all, and each one knows he can depend on all the others. St. John of the Cross expressed it very well:

Mine are the heavens, and mine is the earth, and mine are the peoples; the just are mine, and the sinners, too; the angels are mine, and the Mother of God is mine, and all things; even God himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and entirely for me.

