

HIS VESTURE'S HEM

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F by some twist of fortune the Saints were given to recounting stories, as many old men we know, which would be their favorites? Many would suppose that if Elias had anything to relate it would be his trip in the fiery chariot. But we think that his favorite would be the event of the miraculous drought and the miraculous rain. Saint James graphically describes it for us in his Epistle: "Elias was a man passible like unto us: and with prayer he prayed that it might not rain upon the earth, and it rained not for three years and six months. And he prayed again: and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit."¹ With this illustration Saint James emphasizes the truth: "the continual prayer of a just man availeth much."²

If the Saints could perform such wonders while they were on earth what can they not do now that they are in Heaven! With this in mind it is easy for one to obey the command of the Scriptures: "Call now if there be any that will answer thee, and turn to some of the Saints."³

The Catholic has thousands and millions of patrons to whom he can turn in his needs and afflictions, friends in need, strong supports in peril, willing sharers of joy. Of course they are hidden from his sight, but he has it on the word of the Church, on the guarantee of Scripture, on the authority of Tradition, and on the testimony of his God-given reason that they are in Heaven listening to him and anxious to help him. The Catholic does not mind the jeers and gibes of the senseless atheist or of the captious critic who insists that the Saints cannot possibly help us because they cannot possibly hear us. These doubters are the same type of men who, without further investigation, forty years ago ridiculed the idea of the horseless carriage; who thirty years ago mocked the experimenter with wireless telegraphy; and who today are predicting the failure of television.

¹ *James*, v. 17, 18.

² *James*, v. 16.

³ *Job*, v. 1.

When the Saints walked this earth they loved their own, desired good things for them, were ever anxious to help them. By being Saints they did not cease to be human. There are countless examples of this. When Pope Saint Sixtus was being led to martyrdom Saint Lawrence, his assisting Deacon, was filled with anxiety and sorrow at the thought of separation: "Oh father, where are you going without your son? Oh holy priest, where are you hurrying without your minister? Do not leave me, blessed father." The holy Pope being roughly pulled along, consoled his Deacon: "I am not deserting you my son, I am not leaving you. You will suffer a greater torment for the faith of Christ, for in three days you will follow me." Here is a wealth of love and human feeling—among Saints. Also we need only mention in passing the strong filial love which bound Saint Augustine to his mother, Saint Monica.

Looking down the vista of the centuries we see Saint Dominic lying on his sackcloth and ashes, dying. His brethren are grouped around, distraught and distressed. They beg him not to die, they ask what will become of them when he is gone (his Order is only two years old). "I will be of more use to you in Heaven than here," speaks the dying Saint. Shades of the Inquisition! Here is the stern, bloody inquisitor, the man of cruelty, suffering and death of Protestant literature, showing signs of paternal love and tenderness. Oh Dominic, gentlest of Saints and tenderest of Fathers, like to Christ, our Lord, you have been misunderstood. Your loving care of our Order these seven hundred years has given the lie to your calumniators! Thou hast fulfilled, oh Father, what thou hast promised!

Even now in our own day we marvel to see how Saint Therese, the Little Flower of Jesus, has fulfilled the promise she made to her beloved sisters not fifty years ago: "I will spend my Heaven doing good on earth." Her favors, called the "Shower of Roses," prove the fulfillment.

These examples show us that the Saints were and are human like ourselves; and the assumption is that when they get to Heaven they do not lose their interest in things human; in the doings of those nearest and dearest to them. Welcomed into the home of their Father they are ever eager to have some news of the brother who is still fighting in the wilderness. The axiom laid down by Saint Augustine: "We are permitted to pray for whatever it is lawful for us to desire"⁴ compels us to believe that the Saints are even now interceding and

⁴ *Epist.*, 130.

praying for us. And they know that we pray to them. Of course they cannot know it in the same way we know things. They do not use eyes, ears and tongue, for these have long since passed into the corruption of the grave; but God, Who is All-Powerful, makes these things known to them. In the Divine Essence God permits them to see all that goes to the completion of the joys of Heaven.

There is no sense in denying that the Saints have a knowledge of our doings. They have an interest in such things and we are only acting in accordance with reason in supposing that the Omniscient God satisfies this desire of His holy ones. To deny this power to God is blasphemy. The Apocalypse of Saint John bears witness to the prayers of the Saints: "And the smoke of the incense of the prayers of the Saints ascended up before God from the hand of the angel."⁵ Would the Saints pray for something of which they did not have knowledge? Could Saint Jude answer your prayer if he did not know what you sought? Or how could Saint Francis Xavier succor the hard-pressed missionary in his adversities? Or could the seeker of peace and economic security expect any results if Saint Albert the Great could not possibly know that this world is in a terrible turmoil; that war debts need paying; that taxes need adjusting; that war clouds still hover over the Far East? In the days of the Maccabees, one hundred and fifty years before the time of our Lord, when Jeremias the prophet appeared to Onias the high-priest, we learn that the Saints pray for the needs and wants of the people: "Then Onias answering, said: This is a lover of his brethren, and of the people of Israel: this is he that prayeth much for the people, and for the holy city, Jeremias the prophet of God."⁶ Saint Jerome settled the whole question in a masterful manner: "If the Apostles and Martyrs, whilst still in the flesh and still needing care for themselves, can pray for others, how much more (will they pray for others) after they have won their crowns, their victories, their triumphs?"⁷

Perhaps the sceptic will now admit that the Saints know our needs and pray for us, but he is still unconvinced. He has seen the automobile work; he has listened to his first radio program; he has seen aeroplanes flying in the air. His incredulity in regard to their possibility has been dispelled. But he accuses us of idolatry when we pray to the Saints. We hear him mumbling: "Prayer to the Saints

⁵ *Apoc.*, viii, 4.

⁶ *Macc.*, xv, 14.

⁷ *Lib. contra Vigilantes.*

does injury to the power of God. Pray to Him alone. Jesus is the One Mediator. Why bother with the Saints?"

The solution is simple. He merely fails to see that there are two kinds of prayer. When we pray to God we pray to the Creator and Author of all our good; we pray to the One Who has given us all. In the last analysis, prayers can be answered by Him alone, because all our prayers are ultimately directed to the obtaining of our final end—grace and glory. The Psalmist enunciates this truth: "The Lord will give grace and glory."⁸

However, there is a second way of praying, called the prayer of intercession. We pray to the Saints and ask them in turn to pray for us to God, not that God may in this way learn our needs, but that our cause may be aided by the prayers and merits of the Saints.⁹ The usage of the Church in her official prayers confirms this point. In addressing the Trinity she begs for mercy; the Saints she asks to *pray for us*. This is how she prays on the feast of All Saints: "Oh Almighty and everlasting God . . . we beseech Thee that Thou wouldst bestow on us, *through our manifold intercessors*, that abundance of Thy mercy for which we long." Nor does she injure the prerogatives of our One Mediator, Christ, for she ends all her prayers: "Through Christ our Lord." "And the Saints . . . though they add their prayers to ours, and though their prayers are specially acceptable to God in view of their holiness, plead for us ever: through the merits of Jesus Christ."¹⁰ In the Magnificat Antiphon for the Vespers of the same feast the Church sings: "Saviour of the world, save all of us (He alone is asked to save): Holy Mother of God, *pray for us*: and *through the prayers* of the Holy Apostles, Martyrs and Confessors and of the holy Virgins we suppliantly pray that we may be freed from all ills and may merit to enjoy all goods now and forever." The exhortation of the ninth lesson of this feast gives us the reason for praying to the Saints: "Let us, oh brothers, seek the patronage of so many intercessors with all the power of our wills . . . that *by the intervention of their merits* we may attain to eternal (festivities)."

Mrs. Helen Parry Eden in her latest book *Whistles of Silver* admirably sums up the whole doctrine in her poem *A Dialogue of Devotion*.

⁸ *Ps.*, lxxxiii, 12.

⁹ *Summa Theol.*, II-II, q. 83, a. 4.

¹⁰ Smith, S.J., *Praying to Saints*, p. 14.

Men are devout, as thou hast said,
 To all God's friends alive and dead,
 For love of Him Whose love and dread
 Have filled them to the brim.
 He is the virtue of each gem,
 His Saint's are but His vesture's hem,
 Devotion does not end in them
 But passes on to Him.

Thus in honoring the Saints, the Catholic is honoring God, Whose friends they are. When he prays to God for forgiveness; when he begs a favor from God; when he makes amends for sins; when he adores the Infinite Majesty of God, he is never alone. He ever has the right to be alone, but why should he choose to be so when he has so many intercessors, so many advocates, so many favorites of God to speak for him and with him.

Nor should the poetic exaggerations and bold comparisons of Catholic prayers prove an objection. When the Catholic prays to Mary as the Mother of Mercy he never means to insinuate that she is the authoress of mercy. When he asks Saint Joseph "to be merciful to us in our warfare with the powers of darkness" or "to defend the Church from the snares of the enemy and from all adversity" he does not mean to imply that Saint Joseph is the direct giver of these gifts. Carried away by the fervor of his prayer the Catholic becomes more direct and says "have mercy on us, hear us," but the obvious sense is "obtain mercy for us, ask God to hear us." If anyone wants a test for the truth of these statements let him ask the youngest child or the simplest laborer if they believe that the Blessed Virgin is God. Even they, simple people, know the difference between God and creature; between the purest of creatures and Pureness Himself.

We are not guilty of idolatry in calling on the Saints, because intercessory prayer differs from absolute prayer, which is made to God alone. We do not injure the rights of our Mediator, because the Church and the Saints make their prayers through the merits of Jesus Christ. We have solid reasons for believing that the Saints hear us; intercede for us; that their prayers are acceptable and powerful with God. It remains for us then to make friends with the Saints for: "a faithful friend is a strong defense,"¹¹ and "they are before the throne of God and they adore Him day and night in his temple: and He, that sitteth on the throne, shall dwell over them."¹²

¹¹ *Eccli.*, vi, 4.

¹² *Apoc.*, vii, 5.