

HOW THE SAINTS KNOW OUR PRAYERS

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IN THESE DAYS of world-wide conflict, wars are won by the conquering, not of one nation, but of many. And when an ally goes down in defeat before an enemy, nations yet fighting pledge themselves to help that ally restore itself after they have attained the victory. But when the day of victory dawns, it too often happens that such pledges of aid are forgotten in the greedy scramble for the spoils of war.

How different is the memory of a saint who has won through to the victory of heaven! His pledge to assist struggling sinners may never have been voiced, and surely it never attained the volume with which allied nations promise aid to one another. Nations may forget, but saints never do, for this is a part of their reward, that they should bring aid to those who need it for salvation.

One of the problems confronting anyone who gives aid is that of communication. Nowadays we hear much of the lines of communication. What of those between heaven and earth? The saints in heaven are not awaiting the ring of a celestial telephone, or the arrival of a rocket ship from earth to bring them word of our needs. They do not rely on any of the mechanical devices of man, for all of these are subject to failure. Our line of communication with the saints will never fail, for it is on wings of prayer that our petitions fly heavenward to the land of saints.

But why will prayer never fail us? How can our prayers so bridge the gap between earth and heaven, between the wayfarer and the saint, that we can have complete confidence in our gaining a hearing? Why is it that, though our lips remain unmoved, though our hearts alone be stirred, yet the saints have a sure knowledge of our prayers? Can it be that this is the work of the angels?

Though this may seem a likely answer, and though the work is one worthy of the angels, yet we find the truth something even greater. The saints in heaven do not have to await the message of a Gabriel to learn the prayer addressed to them. Their knowledge is gained in a more perfect manner. For when the saints storm the heights of heaven and attain the Vision of God, they know immediately therein all the prayers that will be offered to them throughout the ages. When St. Dominic first stood in the sight of Almighty

God, he saw then, and all at once, in that ineffable Vision of God, the prayers and petitions his sons and daughters would pour forth to him.

This is a startling fact. We who are accustomed to discover truths in a slow stumbling manner hesitate to accept it. We come to know most things when they happen, and sometimes in a very confused manner. The saints on the other hand have a most sure knowledge of the prayers we pour forth to them, for that is their due. This knowledge is most sure because they obtain it from a knowledge of God Himself, Who is Truth. It is their due because it pertains to the perfection of their happiness and their glory that they should know the prayers addressed to them in order to bring aid to those who need it for salvation.

This is truly a startling fact, but we are speaking of heaven where the Vision of God awaiting us is far greater than anything we have ever known or can imagine. Sacred Scripture declares that "eye has not seen nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man, what things God has prepared for those who love him."¹ This is true, not only for those saints who have won their reward, but for all of us who, with the help of God's grace, will win through to victory.

In our heavenly home, we shall find great joy in the knowledge we shall have of all things pertaining to our happiness, a knowledge we shall have, not in the course of time, but immediately when we come to know God, just as soon as we participate in the unending joy of viewing the Splendour that is God. If we knew naught else but God, if our view of other things was completely cut off, we would yet be happy. Still, God in His infinite goodness gives to us a knowledge, not only of Himself, but also of all created things which pertain to each of us as individuals.

In heaven we shall find the fulfillment of all our right desires, and every man rightfully desires to know whatever pertains to him. Among the things that certainly concern an individual saint are the prayers of which we speak. These they know immediately when they enter the court of heaven and gaze upon the infinite majesty of God. But Mary, our Blessed Mother, she who is the Mediatrix of all graces, what must be her state! Every mother knows in the Beatific Vision all she desires to know about her children. But Mary is the Mother of all! From the moment that she returned to her Divine Son, she must have known every prayer ever to be offered. No petition escapes her mediation (And how well this is!). No prayer then escapes her in her view of the Eternal God for all pertain to her as Universal Mediatrix and Mother.

¹ I Cor. 2, 9.

Yet, there are those who might hesitate to accept the truth when they come to a consideration of this fact. Hesitation and confusion, however, are excusable when we remember that our intellects have been darkened by original sin and cannot see the truth so readily as they otherwise might. When they stand in awe even before the truths of nature, why should they not be confused when confronted with the grandeur of heaven? "If I have spoken of earthly things to you, and you do not believe, how will you believe if I speak to you of heavenly things?"² And there are some too who lessen the perfection of this knowledge by separating it from the Beatific Vision and making it the object of special revelations. Special revelations of God are very lofty ways of acquiring knowledge, yet they are not so lofty as this more perfect way, which is to know immediately and all at once in the Vision of God.

All of us are acquainted with the lessons by means of which a teacher brings knowledge to his pupils. They are as so many separate revelations, each contributing a little share to the perfecting of knowledge. A student requires very many of these from his learned professor before he comes to a complete knowledge of the science he is pursuing. How much easier it would be if less of these were required! But let us go further. Let us suppose that it were possible for a professor to give his student a perfect knowledge of some science by means of one sentence, say a sentence expressing the definition of that science. No auditorium would be large enough to accommodate those who would rush to hear him.

Yet in heaven, we find Something infinitely greater than any science, Someone infinitely wiser than any earthly professor, Someone ready to teach us with Something more simple than even a spoken word. Strange it is that the demands for admission to the halls of heaven are not more numerous. In that august place we shall find a Divine Master, Who has already shown us the Way thither, judging us worthy of the perfect knowledge of the Vision of God. There are accidental joys immeasurable, but to give us true rest and peace, this Vision of God is all-sufficient. There is no series of lessons, there is not even one spoken word. There is only the contemplation of God, of Him Who is Truth, Who contains all truth. In Him, as if in a mirror, we shall see reflected all the grandeur of His creation in proportion as our merits and our happiness demand.

In their knowledge of the Beatific Vision, those who have already attained to sainthood know the prayers we offer to them. Not all the circumstances of our prayers pertain to their happiness, but the

² John 3, 12.

prayers themselves do, and these they see immediately upon entering heaven. There are many things which we shall not learn all at once when we reach heaven, but which will be revealed to us now and then to add to our accidental happiness, things we shall know because we have merited the Vision of God. About some things we shall be instructed by our fellow saints, even by the angels. But since there are no special revelations necessary for a saint to learn those things which do pertain to the perfection of his happiness, none are needed in order that the saints may know the prayers addressed to them.

That such is the mind of St. Thomas can be discovered from a consideration of his writing on the subject of the Vision of God which is the reward of the blessed. His reasoning manifesting the truth that the saints know our prayers in the Beatific Vision is very orderly and clear. In a knowledge of God we can know all things, for God by knowing Himself knows all things. While no one of the saints fully comprehends God and each more perfectly knows Him as he has the greater merit, yet each of the saints must know in his view of God all that his happiness demands. "Each of the blessed must needs see in the Divine essence as many other things as the perfection of his happiness requires. For the perfection of a man's happiness requires him to have whatever he will, and to will nothing amiss: and each one wills with a right will, to know what concerns himself. Hence since no rectitude is lacking to the saints, they wish to know what concerns themselves, and consequently it follows that they know it in the Word. Now it pertains to their glory that they assist the needy for their salvation: for thus they become God's co-operators, *than which nothing is more Godlike*, as Dionysius declares (Coel. Hier. iii). Wherefore it is evident that the saints are cognizant of such things as are required for this purpose; and so it is manifest that they know in the Word the vows, devotions and prayers of those who have recourse to their assistance."³

Later in his life, St. Thomas was to reaffirm what he had already written. He tells us in his *Summa Theologica* that we should pray not only to God but also to the saints that we might have them for our intercessors in heaven. Anticipating the objection that the saints cannot know our prayers, especially those which are hidden in our hearts, St. Thomas says: "The dead, if we consider their natural condition, do not know what takes place in this world, especially the interior movements of the heart. Nevertheless, according to Gregory

³ ST. THOMAS, 4 *Sent.*, d. 45, q. 3, a. 1. Trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province in the Supplement of the *Summa Theologica*, Q. 72, a. 1. Benziger Brothers, New York. 1921.

(Moral. xii), whatever it is fitting the blessed should know about what happens to us, even as regards the interior movements of the heart, is made known to them in the Word: and it is most becoming to their exalted position that they should know the petitions we make to them by word or thought; and consequently the petitions which we raise to them are known to them through Divine manifestation."⁴ Cardinal Cajetan, one of the great students of St. Thomas, after indicating in his commentary on these words the distinction already made, i. e. knowing singulars all at once in the Vision of God, and knowing them afterwards by special revelations,⁵ comes to the conclusion that the saints know our prayers all at once in the Vision of God. The liturgy of the Church, he points out, confirms this position in its direct appeal to the saints, e.g. "St. Peter, pray for us." If the saints did not know our prayers in the Vision of God, we should first beseech God to reveal our prayers to them, and so they would pray for us.⁶

When the Son of God became man, human nature was exalted to the uttermost. The soul of Christ possessed while on earth the Vision of God. We may have heard it said that Christ on the Cross could look down the years and see all the good to be derived from His Passion and Death. The truth of this statement is evident from the words of St. Thomas regarding the knowledge which the soul of Christ possessed in the Vision of God. Christ stands at the head of creation. He therefore knows in the Word more than any other creature. "Every created intellect knows in the Word, not all simply, but so many more things the more perfectly it sees the Word. Yet no beatified intellect fails to know in the Word whatever pertains to it. Now to Christ and to His honour all things to some extent belong, inasmuch as all things are subject to Him. Moreover, He has been appointed Judge of all by God, *because He is the Son of Man*, as is said John v. 27; and therefore the soul of Christ knows in the Word all things existing in whatever time, and the thoughts of men, of which He is the Judge, so that what is said of Him (John ii. 25),

⁴ *Summa Theologica*, II^a II^{ae}, Q. 83, a. 4, ad 2. Trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

⁵ The terminology of theologians distinguishes knowing *causaliter in Verbo* against knowing *formaliter in Verbo*. Cardinal Cajetan here states that the saints know our prayers *formaliter in Verbo*.

⁶ "Et hoc videtur attestari Ecclesia in suo modo interpellandi sanctos, dum dicit: *Sancte Petre, ora pro nobis*. Nisi enim praesupponeret omnes sanctos, ex hoc quod Deo fruuntur, orationes nostras cognoscere, non omnes adiret ut orarent pro nobis: sed orandus prius esset Deus ut eis revelaret orationes nostras, et sic ipsi orarent pro nobis." CAJETANUS, *Commentaria in Summa Theologica*, II^a II^{ae}, Q. 83, a. 4. Editio Leonina, Roma. 1897.

For He knew what was in man, can be understood not merely of the Divine knowledge, but also of His soul's knowledge, which it had in the Word."⁷ Mary, the Mother of men, knows every prayer ever to be offered; Christ, the Judge of men, even while on earth, knew not only the prayers of men but also all that they would ever do.

To complete the teaching of St. Thomas we must needs turn to that place in the *Summa Theologica* where he inquires whether those who see the essence of God see all they see in it at the same time.⁸ St. Thomas quotes from the writing of St. Augustine on the question. "Our thoughts will not be unstable, going to and fro from one thing to another; but we shall see all we know at one glance."⁹ The Angelic Doctor proceeds to show how sometimes we know many things successively by means of many ideas, as when we understand the parts of a whole successively, and then again sometimes we know these parts all at once in the consideration of the whole. After the manner of the latter, in the idea of a man we understand animality and rationality; in the idea of a house, we understand the wall and the roof. So too, when we see things in the Vision of God, we see them all by the one essence of God; we do not see them by their own similitude.

That there can be no increase in the knowledge of the Word is apparent from the fact that such an increase would constitute an advance in beatitude. St. Thomas speaks of this in regard to the blessed angels, who also share in the Vision of God as their eternal reward. "The vision of beatitude is that by which God is seen by His essence, and things [are seen] in God: and in this there is no succession; nor do the angels advance in it, as neither do they [advance] in beatitude."¹⁰ The same is true of the happiness of the saints. If they are truly to know our prayers in the Vision of God, they must see them all at once; there can be no gradual unveiling.

Here on earth we sometimes wonder whether our prayers are even heard. How can those feeble prayers we whisper reach out into eternity and obtain an intercessor in heaven? That they should do so at all is wondrous enough, but that the saints and our Blessed Mother should attain a knowledge of them all at once is much more wondrous. But this is so, not for our sakes, but rather on account of the merits of the saints in heaven. Though we may at times doubt our worthi-

⁷ *Summa Theologica*, III^a, Q. 10, a. 2. Trans. by Eng. Prov.

⁸ *Idem*, I^a, Q. 12, a. 10.

⁹ ST. AUGUSTINE, *De Trinitate* xv. 16. Quoted by St. Thomas in the *Summa Theologica*, I^a, Q. 12, a. 10. Trans. by Eng. Prov.

¹⁰ ST. THOMAS, *De Veritate*, Q. 8, a. 4, ad 15^{um}.

ness to be heard by this or that saint, yet we should remember that it pertains to the glorious reward of the blessed that they should hear us—hear us as soon as they behold the vision of God—hear us that they might bring us aid for our salvation—hear us that thus they might become co-operators with God in the dispensing of His graces. We pray to them to ask them for their prayers. We should be confident of an answer, for, “if the Apostles and martyrs while yet in the body and having to be solicitous for themselves pray for others, how much the more now that they have the crown of victory and triumph.”¹¹ Here, indeed, is a glorious kingdom where we who are hard pressed to gain this crown may go “with confidence to the throne of grace: that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need,”¹² and where the saints who have already won it find it a part, and a very small part, of their glory and reward that they should thus help us who still fight on.

¹¹ ST. JEROME, *Contra Vigilantium*. Quoted by St. Thomas in the *Summa Theologica*, II^a II^{ae}, Q. 83, a. 11. Trans by Eng. Prov.

¹² Heb. 4, 16.