

## THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS AND THEIR INTERCESSION

One hundred years have passed since St. Gregorios of Parumala left this world. This is a good occasion to think about the role of saints in our spiritual life in general and that of Parumala Thirumeni in particular. Often our youngsters ask: Who are the saints? Why do we pray for their intercession? Is it a right type of worship? Let us answer all these questions in the following paragraphs.

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### Jesus the only Mediator and Saints as our "Friends"

As we have seen in the last chapter, the Orthodox Church believes in our communion with the departed. Which means, the living can pray for the dead, and the dead for the living. Keeping this in mind, the Church teaches about the Communion of Saints. Saints are people who lived a fruitful life on earth and those who effectively used the talents given to them by God as honest

stewards. During their life here, they were holy people who gave spiritual leadership to their contemporaries by showing how one could face the challenges of daily life with the Grace of God. After death they do intercession for the living who ask for it. Among the group of saints we include the patriarchs of Israel (eg. Abraham), the prophets of Israel (e.g. Isaiah), apostles (e.g. Peter), martyrs (eg. Stephen), teachers of the Ancient Church (e.g. Athanasius), venerable monks (eg. Antonius), soldiers who died for Christ (e.g. St. George) and kings who helped the Church (e.g. Constantine). These are the people who outlived their age and who help the believers even now, centuries after their death.

However, the Orthodox Church does not consider these saints as mediators between God and man, because *Jesus Christ is the only mediator* who gave his life for the salvation of humanity. Instead the saints surround us with a cloud of prayer, a cloud of the glory of God. This cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12,1) would not separate us from Christ but brings us nearer to Him. Sergius Bulgakov calls the saints as "our friends, who stand along with us to pray for us". Their intercession would add to our prayers. They are our friends, who pray with us and aid us in our Christian ministry and in our communion with Christ. They guide us into a relationship with Jesus, whom they hail in heaven. If Christ mediates for us, the saints intercedes our prayers.

The glorification of the saints is not founded on the special merits of the saints before God. Rather by their active faith and love, they become like God and reveal the Image of God in all its power. The saints are holy because the God in whom they believe is "the Holy One". In Isaiah 6,3-9 the prophet repeats the word "holy" when he sees a vision and he finds himself unclean before the Holy One of Israel. During the inter-testament period the future savior of Israel was called "Holy One of Israel". However, during the Old Testament period the holiness of the people was closely linked with their relationship with the Temple and its cult.

## Saints as our Model for Deification

Whereas the *sacred* in the Old Testament was always related to the priestly cult, the New Testament opens the proper sphere of holiness in the prophetic life of the people of God. As per this understanding holiness implies a relationship with God, which is expressed not primarily through a cult but through the life in Jesus Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the life in which one has to "be perfect as the heavenly Father" (Mt. 5,48) as Jesus Christ asked his disciples to do. The Church is, the Body of Christ and those who are saved in the Church receive the power and the life of Christ. In a sense they become *christs* in Jesus Christ. Because Jesus said: "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him" (Jn 14,23). St. Paul also expresses this indwelling of God in the following words: "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me" (Gal.2,20).

There are three words in Greek, which could be translated as holy. They are: (i) *hosios*, which intends a devout or a pious life, (ii) *hieros*, which gives the meaning of a priestly life; and (iii) *hagios*, which appears more often in the New Testament, and it means a holy, sacred, consecrated or sanctified life. In the writings of St. Paul the believers are called *hagioi* (saints) in the sense of the

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"called", "faithful" or "elect ones" (Rom. 1,7; 1Cor. 1,2; 2 Cor. 1,1 etc.). It is a condition of acceptance at the parousia and of entering upon the inheritance of God's people (Col.1,12). For St.Paul, each believer is a *Temple of God* because of the Holy Spirit that dwells in him (1Cor. 3,17). One is sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all (Heb. 10,10). Therefore he has to keep holiness in body and spirit (1Cor. 7,34). God disciplines him in order that he may win a share of his Holiness (Heb. 12,10). As an obedient child of the Holy One of Israel he will keep himself away from passions of former ignorance (1Pet. 1,14f). By his saintly life he can even sanctify the people with whom he lives (1Cor. 7,14).

Thus every believer is capable of attaining the bliss of holiness or sanctity. According to true Christian principles the greatness of man lies not in the highest biological existence as a rational or political animal, but as a "deified animal". As per the Orthodox theology the ultimate aim of our spiritual life is called *deification*. It is a stage by which the believer comes face to face with God and he attains the illumination. We are not created up to the likeness of this world, but we are created in the Image of the Creator. This Image of God was manifested in its ideal nature by the life of Jesus Christ among us. If through Adam we have lost the glorious life by sinning and as a result wear "garments of skin", i.e. a life of passions and pains, through Christ, we are called to regain the eternal bliss.

Through baptism every believer is united with the spiritual senses and functions of the Body of Christ and can make them his own. St.Gregory of Nyssa explains in detail about the possibility of what we call Deification. He exhorts us to reverse the sequence of events, which threw Adam and Eve out of Eden. For example, he says, "In the beginning it was pleasure, engendered by deception, that began the fall (Gen 3,6). Then shame and fear followed the passion of pleasure, and afterwards

Adam and Eve no longer dared to appear in the presence of the Creator but hid themselves in leaves and shadows (Gen 3,7-8). After this they were dressed in dead skins (Gen 3,21). And thus they were sent as exiles into this disease ridden land...If therefore we are to be released from this life and to be withn Christ (Phil 1,23) it is appropriate that we should begin our return by starting out again from the last stage of our departure"(s.Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*).

The Saints are people who realised this fact, and led a disciplined life as per the teachings of the Word of God and thereby became *deified*. They are people who had a close relationship with Jesus, and who showed us how to keep the *Image of God* without distortion. Such a life includes both the spiritual and ethical aspects. In some Indian religions there are five enemies, which a saint should win over. They are *Kaam* (immorality), *Krodh* (uncontrollable anger), *Lobh* (*greed for money/wealth*), *Moh* (love flesh/ material world), and *Ahankar* (haughtiness).

But how can we know that somebody possesses the quality of a saint? Special signs like miracles that have happened by the intercession of a saint will be a good testimony to prove his sainthood. In the Roman Catholic Church there is a definite practice for declaring somebody as a saint. If the Church finds that somebody could be called a saint, a special commission will be appointed to study his spiritual credentials. In this process of study there will be a *Satan's Advocate* who can raise as many objections as possible to hinder the procedure. If all is well, he/she will be called a *blessed one* in the first stage and only later on he will be *canonized*. For example, Mother Theresa has been declared as a *blessed one* and after some years she may be declared as a saint. The Orthodox Church is not so enthusiastic as the Roman Catholic or Russian Orthodox Church in *canonizing* people regularly. It maintains the view that there may be many people

among the clergy and laity, who live a sanctified life. But in addition to the list of saints (of the Ancient Church) it has added very few people. The latest is the declaration of Vattassil Thirumeni as a saint.

### **Adoration of God in Veneration of Saints**

When St. Gregorios of Parumala was declared as a saint in 1947 he became the first Indian Christian, who achieved such honor. Within a short span of life (1848-1902) St. Gregorios was leading an exemplary life before his contemporaries. He became a bishop in his young life and till now he is the youngest among the Indian bishops as per the date of ordination. He was a great thinker, a progressive leader of the people and above all a man of prayer and fasting. During his life time itself many people considered him a saint. Even the senior bishops of Malankara found him as a model Christian. Within a short time of his death people found that prayers made before his tomb were rewarded by God. Miracle stories began to be published one after the other. As in the case of all saints the Church began to address itself to him, asking his intercession before God instead of praying for the repose of his soul and for the pardon of his sins. And now years after his bodily removal from earth, he has become a symbol of all Christian saints. Millions of believers, irrespective of the caste or creed, march themselves to Parumala and bow their heads before his tomb, because they experience manifold blessings through his intercession.

However, I would like to quote a sentence from the famous Russian theologian Sergius Bulgakov here: "Sometimes veneration of saints is seen as approaching the pagan cult of heroes and demigods, even to be equivalent to pagan polytheism" (*Orthodox Church*, page 119). This can happen at Parumala, because it is gradually becoming one of the leading pilgrim centres of India. Because of the increase in number of the pilgrims and

their different religious backgrounds there is a possibility that some sort of pagan worship can be developed there and St. Gregorios may become a *Cultic Deity* at the end. If this happens, Parumala may give a wrong message to the Christian believers and after some decades it may be substituted by another pilgrim centre somewhere else. That is the lesson, which reverberates from every pilgrim centre of the world. Therefore the true followers of Parumala Thirumeni have to keep the following principles in their mind:

1. The prayers are not to be addressed to Parumala Thirumeni. We adore only God and what we do at Parumala is venerating a saint.
2. The intercessory prayers to Parumala Thirumeni can't be substitutes for the Holy Qurbana. In some parishes of outside Kerala dioceses there is a gradually developing tendency, by which people prefer to go to the Church on Friday evenings instead of Sunday mornings.
3. The overemphasis given to the veneration of relics should be avoided. It is against the Orthodox way of worshipping God. There is no need that every church should have the relics of St. Gregorius. Moreover, a relic means a part of the body (mostly bones) of a saint. The materials used by a saint such as dress or a book cannot be considered as a relic.
4. All the Churches are same as far as the sacraments are concerned. We need not go to Parumala for conducting all the sacraments of our life. We will not get any special grace if a sacrament is conducted there. Instead the sacraments become showpieces there because of the increasing number of participants.
5. We should not make Parumala a market place. We have to maintain its sanctity. Remember what Jesus did at the

Jerusalem Temple, when he found that people used that pilgrim centre for making money (Jn 2,13-17).

The Orthodox theology draws a clear line between the prayers addressed to God and those addressed to saints. We adore only God; only to him do we ask for salvation and Grace. He is the ultimate provider and our existence is a part of his providence. We pray to God the Father through Jesus Christ and we do this in the Holy Spirit. What we ask from Saint Mary or other saints is just their intercession to God. We need their fellowship in our prayers just to strengthen us. It is God only who hears and answers a prayer. Therefore all the prayers, which show a tendency for putting saints in place of God should be avoided. We venerate the saints, but we adore God. Veneration of saints is our response to their communion in our spiritual life.

### **Lessons we learn at Parumala**

Nevertheless, it is important to think after centenary Jubilee of Parumala thirumeni's departure from this world: In what way can he help the young generation to have a meaningful spiritual life in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium? The following are the important things, which we can get at Parumala:

1. We come face to face with an icon for young people who want to lead a good spiritual life. Thirumeni was a genius and a man who made a *spiritual career* (in the modern sense). But what differentiates him from us is his unblemished life.
2. We learn how a man of flesh and blood overcame temptations of this world. Let us ask ourselves: If he could do it, then why can't we?
3. We get confident faith in God when we touch the sands of Parumala. It is not like praying in other places. Since we



are in the presence of a man who has got answers from God and who intercedes for us, our faith becomes stronger while praying there.

4. We find a place of calmness for prayer and meditation. It gives us immense relief in a world of stress and strain.
5. We meet people of other status in health, wealth, faith etc. On the one hand we could identify our own strength and weakness. On the other hand we are open to a life in the community of bearing and sharing others' riches and needs.

Let us march to Parumala to meet the 100 year old saint. He will certainly illumine the youngsters of this age old Church of India. Even though the Church and tomb at Parumala belong to the Orthodox Church, Parumala Thirumeni is the common father of three Christian communities of Kerala, viz. Orthodox, Jacobite and Syro-Malankara Churches. So let him be a saint for all Christians of Kerala. One thing is clear: we cannot hide this illumined saint of our Church; he is becoming a beacon of light to the nations. •