

## **Invocation of the Saints in Some Services of the Eastern Orthodox Church**

We are surrounded by “a great cloud of witnesses” according to the author of Hebrews (12:1). In the Divine Service we are gathered at Mount Zion with the angels and with all the saints in heaven and on earth to Jesus and His blood (12:22-24). Our Lord has only one flock of which He is the Shepherd. Christ shepherds all His people: those who hear His voice and follow Him on earth (John 10:2,11,27) and those who are before the throne of God and serve Him day and night without hunger or thirst (Rev. 7:17).

The Eastern Orthodox liturgy leads parishioners to pray to the saints in heaven and for the dead, both saints and the damned. Bishop Ware explains this practice:

In God and His Church there is no division between the living and the departed, but all are one in the love of the Father. Whether we are alive or whether we are dead, as members of the Church we still belong to the same family, and still have a duty to bear one another's burdens. Therefore just as Orthodox Christians here on earth pray for one another and ask for one another's prayers, so they pray for the faithful departed and ask the faithful departed to pray for them. Death cannot sever the bond of mutual love which links the members of the Church together (Bishop Ware, *The Orthodox Church*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 254 as quoted in “Eastern Orthodoxy,” John Brenner).

### **Prayer to the Saints**

In examining *The Divine Liturgy of Our Father Among the Saints John Chrysostom*, an English translation of the Greek liturgy issued with the blessing of the Ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I (Oxford, 1995), prayers to the saints were found. Here are two examples. First, here is a post-communion prayer “To the Most Holy Mother of God”:

All-holy Lady, Mother of God, the light of my darkened soul, my hope, protection, refuge, comfort, joy, I thank you, because you have made me, the unworthy, worthy to become a partaker in the most pure Body and precious Blood of your Son. But, O you who gave birth to the true Light, enlighten the spiritual eyes of my heart; you who bore the source of immortality, give life to me, who have been slain by sin; you, the compassionate Mother of the merciful God, have mercy on me and give me compunction and contrition in my heart, humility in my

ideas, and release from the imprisonment of my thoughts. And count me worthy, until my last breath, to receive without condemnation the sanctification of the most pure Mysteries, for healing of soul and body; and grant me tears of repentance and thanksgiving, to praise and glorify you all the days of my life. For you are blessed and glorified to the ages. Amen. (p. 56-57)

Second, this is a thanksgiving after Holy Communion to Saint John Chrysostom:

*Apolytikion of Saint John Chrysostom*

The grace which shone from your mouth like a torch of flame enlightened the whole earth; it laid up for the world the treasures of freedom from avarice; it showed us the height of humility. But as you train us by your words, Father John Chrysostom, intercede with Christ God, the Word, that our souls may be saved. Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit.

*Kontakion of Saint John Chrysostom*

You received divine grace from heaven, and through your lips you teach us all to worship one God in Trinity, venerable John Chrysostom, wholly blessed. Fittingly we praise you, for you are a teacher who makes clear things divine. Both now and forever and to the ages of ages. Amen (p. 58).

### **Prayers through the Saints**

The prayers of the Divine Liturgy often seek blessings from God through the prayers of the saints. “At the prayers of the Mother of God, O Saviour, save us” (p. 6). “May God through the prayers of the holy, glorious Apostle and Evangelist *N.*, grant you to proclaim the word with much power” (p. 15). The following blessing by the Priest comes near the conclusion of the Divine Liturgy:

May Christ our true God, through the prayers of his all-pure and holy Mother, by the power of the precious and life-giving Cross, through the protection of the honoured, glorious Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist, John, of the holy glorious and triumphant Martyrs, of our venerable and God-bearing Fathers and Mothers who have shone forth in the ascetic life, of our Father among the Saints John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, of the holy and righteous forebears of God, Joachim and Anna, [of Saint *N.* (*to whom this Church is dedicated*),] of Saint *N.*, whose memory we keep today, and of all the Saints, have mercy on us and save us, for he is good and loves mankind.

Through the prayers of our holy fathers, Lord Jesus Christ, our God, have mercy upon us (p. 51).

### **Prayer for the Dead**

Bishop Ware says, “Prayer for the dead is not seen by Orthodox Christians as an optional extra, but it is an accepted and unvarying feature in all our daily worship” (*The Inner Kingdom*, Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000, p. 34). Ware notes that there are varying opinions within Eastern Orthodoxy as to the purpose of these prayers.

Orthodox are convinced that Christians here on earth have a duty to pray for the departed and they are confident that the dead are helped by such prayers. But precisely in what way do our prayers help the dead? What exactly is the condition of souls in the period between death and the resurrection of the Body on the Last Day? Here Orthodox teaching is not entirely clear, and has varied somewhat at different times. In the seventeenth century a number of Orthodox writers—most notably Peter of Moghila and Dositheus in his *Confession*—upheld the Roman Catholic doctrine of Purgatory or something very close to it.... Today most if not all Orthodox theologians reject the idea of Purgatory, at least in this form. The majority would be inclined to say that the faithful departed do not suffer at all. Another school holds that perhaps they suffer, but, if so, their suffering is of a purificatory but not an expiatory character; for when a person dies in the grace of God, then God forgives him all his sins and demands no more expiatory penalties: Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, is our *only* atonement and satisfaction. Yet a third group would prefer to leave the whole matter entirely open. (Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, p. 254-255).

In public liturgical worship only those who die in visible communion with the Church can be named in the prayers for the dead. But, on the vespers of the Monday after Pentecost, the last portion of the third kneeling prayer intercedes not only for those who died in communion with the church, but also for those who have been damned.

Hear our prayer and grant rest to the souls of your departed servants, our brothers and sisters in the faith, *as well as to all our departed relatives and friends and the others we wish to remember*, for the authority over all things rests with you, and in your hand you encompass the very ends of the earth. For the dead cannot praise you, O Lord, nor do those in hell attempt to confess you, but we, the living, we bless you and pray to you, *we offer you supplications and sacrifices for the repose of their souls*. For you are the repose of all our souls and bodies, and we give you glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: now and forever, and unto ages of ages. (*A Book of Prayers*, translated, edited and published by the Monks of New Skete, Cambridge, New York: Orthodox Church in America, 1988, p. 229-230, *emphasis mine*).

## A Lutheran Response

First, prayer to the saints is never taught in Holy Scripture, not by threat for failure to do so, nor even by example. Martin Chemnitz, in his *Examination of the Council Trent, (Volume III, Translated by Fred Kramer, Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986)* offers this summary of the Scripture's teaching on invocation of the saints:

There is no statement in all Scripture which teaches the invocation of the saints; there is in it no command which teaches the invocation of saints who have departed this life; there is no promise that such invocation is pleasing to God and efficacious, that is, that it will be heard and procure grace and help; there is in Scripture no example where saints who had departed this life were invoked by godly persons; there is in Scripture no threat, no example of punishment against such as do not invoke the saints. And therefore the foremost among the papalists reckon the invocation of the saints among the things which were received without Scripture and outside of Scripture (p. 407).

Some have argued that tradition is an equally valid source of doctrine. Chemnitz argues on the basis of Christ's teaching in John 4 that true worship and prayer is based on the clear word of God.

For Christ, speaking of the Samaritans (John 4:22), of true and false invocation, makes this distinction on the basis of the principle that the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth: You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, namely because the Jews had the Word of the true God concerning their worship. The worship of the Samaritans, however, granted that it was made with good intention and rested on a prescription that had grown old during a long time (for they appeal to ancient fathers, John 4:20, ...), nevertheless lacked the testimony of the Word of God and was therefore rejected by Christ. And in Deut. 17:3 idolatry in worship or invocation is described with this mark, that it is done without a command of God. For He says that they worship other gods, sun, moon, and all the hosts of heaven, which He had not commanded. Thus in Matt. 6:6ff. there is opposed to the vain prayers of the heathen and of the Pharisees, which do not please God, that form which is prescribed by the Son of God. For about forms of worship which are undertaken without the Word of God, God Himself pronounces....: "In vain do they worship me [Teaching as doctrines the commandments of men]" (Matt. 15:9) (p. 408).

Furthermore, since faith is required for proper prayer (“Whatever you ask in prayer you will receive, if you have faith” Matt 21:22) and “the true faith is not conceived from private dreams or cogitations, nor from the traditions of men, but solely from the Word of God, and that it rests on it” (p. 408), it follows that true invocation is based on the Word of God alone.

Paul in Rom. 10:17, where he speaks about true and salutary invocation, sets down this rule in express words: “So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.” Therefore the conclusion is very certain and firm that the only true and God-pleasing invocation is that which is made on the basis of and according to the prescription of the Word of God, but that other invocations, which do not have a testimony, command, and promise in the Word of God, are vain, useless, and false, because they are made without faith. For how can a mind state certainly and rightly that such invocation is pleasing to God, accepted and heard, when it has no promise? (p. 408-409)

Some argue for the invocation of the saints based on this analogy. Just as we urge our brothers and sisters in Christ to pray for us here—even as Mary asked her Son to provide wine at the wedding at Cana—why not petition those who have gone before us to pray for us? In answer to this analogy, Chemnitz asks whether we would think it right to pray in the liturgy to saints currently living in Africa, asking them to pray for us (430-431). Just as we have no promise that the current denizens of Africa will hear us when we pray to them, so we have no promise that the heavenly saints can hear us either.

On the other hand, we are commanded and invited by our Lord to turn to Him with the promise that He will hear His people. The prayer our Lord Himself gave us teaches us to pray, “Our Father, who art in heaven...For Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the glory.” So also in Psalm 50:15 “Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me.” Psalm 86:3-5: “Be merciful to me, O Lord, For I cry to You all day long. Rejoice the soul of Your servant, For to You, O Lord, I lift up my soul. For You, Lord, are good, and ready to forgive, And abundant in mercy to all those who call upon You.” Psalm 120:1 “In my distress I cried to the LORD, And He heard me.” Psalm 145:18-19 “The LORD is near to all who call

upon Him, To all who call upon Him in truth. He will fulfill the desire of those who fear Him; He also will hear their cry and save them.”

Furthermore, the saints in heaven do not know what is going on in our lives. Isaiah and the faithful address the Lord God and acknowledge that their forefathers do not know them: “Doubtless You are our Father, Though Abraham was ignorant of us, And Israel does not acknowledge us. You, O LORD, are our Father; Our Redeemer from Everlasting is Your name.” (Isaiah 63:16). But the Lord does know. Romans 8:27 "Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God." Matt. 6:6 "But you, when you pray, go into your room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in the secret place; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly." Psalm 18:6 "And my cry came before Him, even to His ears." Psalm 38:9 "Lord, all my desire is before You; And my sighing is not hidden from You." Psalm 79:11 "Let the groaning of the prisoner come before You". Psalm 145:18 "The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, To all who call upon Him in truth." Deut. 4:7 "For what great nation is there that has God so near to it, as the LORD our God is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him?"

Concerning “glorifying” or “praising” the saints, Bishop Ware claims that different words are used for honoring the Lord than are used for the saints.

Among the saints a special position belongs to the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom Orthodox reverence as the most exalted of god’s creatures, “more honored than the cherubim and more exalted than the seraphim.” Note that we have termed her “most exalted *among God’s creatures*;” Orthodox like Roman Catholics, *venerate* or *honour* the Mother of God, but in no sense do the members of either Church regard her as a fourth person of the Trinity, nor do they assign to her the *worship* due to God alone. In Greek theology the distinction is very clearly marked: there is a special word, *latreia*, reserved for the worship of God, while for the veneration of the Virgin entirely different terms are employed (*duleia*, *hyperduleia*, *prosknesis*). (*The Orthodox Church*, p. 257).

It is true that Augustine, the greatest theologian of early Latin Christianity, marked a distinction between “the honor or cult of *douleia*, which may be given to creatures, and the cult of *lateria*, which is owed only to God, and which cannot be given to creatures without the sin of idolatry in *De civitate Dei*, 10” (Chemnitz, p. 436). But Chemnitz argues that Augustine is trying to explain the difference between the honor, love, and respect due to parents, rulers, and neighbors, and the honor, love, and worship due to God alone. Augustine’s point in making this distinction was that you do not give to creatures the worship due to God. Yet the prayer to Mary (quoted on pages 1 and 2 above) uses the same Greek word in glorifying her as is used in the doxology to God that concludes many prayers in the Eastern Orthodox liturgy (*doxazô*).

Concerning prayers for the dead, it is true that the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV, 94 says, “We do not forbid prayers for the dead.” However, this is to be understood not as a full endorsement of constant prayers for the dead, but rather in the sense in which Luther explains it. He writes, “As for the dead, since Scripture gives us no information on the subject, I regard it as no sin to pray with free devotion in this or some similar fashion: ‘Dear God, if this soul is in a condition accessible to mercy, be Thou gracious to it.’ And when this has been done once or twice, let it suffice. For vigils and requiem masses and yearly celebrations of requiems are useless, and are merely the devil’s annual fair” (quoted in Chemnitz, p. 268-269).

## **Conclusion**

The liturgy of the Eastern Orthodox Church offers much that is beautiful, trinitarian, and Christ-centered. In our days of constantly changing worship forms it is attractive that the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Church remains constant and universal. However, the inclusion of prayers to and through the saints, and for the dead and even the damned, are a human addition to the service that distracts the worshipper from the Lord who did all the good through His saints

(Isaiah 26:12). When Josiah reigned over Judah (2 Chronicles 34) the Holy Scriptures corrected what had become traditional worship practices and gave direction for the faithful. May the unanimous testimony of our Lord's Word turn the voices of all His faithful to cry to and give glory to Him alone.

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