



Everything Is Like an Ocean: On the Essential Role of the Saints

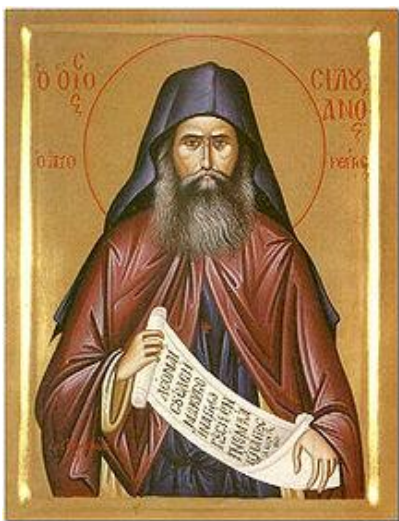
by Fr. John Oliver

There is a scene in *The Brothers Karamazov* – the novel by the 19th century Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky – that features a long and thoughtful speech by the elderly monk Zossima, who is nearing the end of his life. Fr. Zossima tells those under his care that they will come to a point in their spiritual lives when they will not think it strange to ask forgiveness from the birds. “That sounds senseless,” Fr. Zossima says, “but it is right.” Then the good monk offers this: “Everything is like an ocean, all is flowing and blending; a touch in one place sets up movement at the other end of the earth.”

This sense of the interconnectedness of all things, that there exists a fundamental unity to all life, that all humanity is like a finely woven fabric wherein all threads are in some kind of relationship with one another—this may be the primary reason why the saints of God are so necessary for our time and so critical for all times. When the holiness of God—in the person of a saint—enters through the surface of our world, the ripples go forth and somehow raise all that exists toward the Kingdom of Heaven.

Creation and Holiness

One approach, then, to understanding the role of the saints is first to consider the Christian doctrine of creation. We believe in “one God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible,” who created the world out of nothing—creation *ex nihilo*. Before creation, God alone existed. His is a perfect, complete, independent, *uncreated* state of being that, in so many ways, is beyond our ability to grasp intellectually. There was no “raw material” for creation that existed outside of God; creation emerged from the creative act of God Himself, as an expression of His love. St. Paul writes to the Colossians that it was precisely “by [the Word of God] all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist” (*Colossians 1:16, 17*).



In Christian thought, while there is Christ before and without creation, there is no creation before or without Christ. And when a human being becomes “christified,” or Christ-like, he, in a sense, draws down the holiness of Christ—not just into his own self, but into all creation. “A single saint is an extraordinarily precious phenomenon for all mankind,” wrote Archimandrite Sophrony Sakharov in his wonderful book on St. Silouan of Mt. Athos. “By the mere fact of their existence— unknown, maybe, to the world, but known to God—the saints draw down upon the world, upon all humanity, a great blessing of God.”

From the bones of Elisha (*2 Kings 13:20, 21*) to the handkerchiefs of St. Paul (*Acts 19:12*), authentic holiness will spill over whatever “walking chalice” is carrying it to touch the lives of others. This calls to mind the famous observation of St. Seraphim of Sarov, the 18th century Russian saint, “Acquire the Spirit of peace, and a thousand souls around you will be saved.”

From Emulation to Veneration and Relationship

What exactly do we *do* with the saints? St. Paul writes: “Imitate me just as I imitate Christ” (*1 Corinthians 11:1*). Certainly as believers we are called to emulate the saints in their witness to Christ and His Kingdom. However, are the saints men and women that we are asked only to admire, appreciate and emulate? Or, is there more: can we actually develop a relationship with the saints?

For the Orthodox Christian, the answer is an unqualified Yes! Because the Church is the Body of an always alive, always present Christ, her members enjoy a communion with each other that is stronger than space and time and the categories of life and death to which this fallen world is limited. The Church professes that after death, the soul— whether shining with virtue or stained with vice—experiences continual awareness. It’s an abundantly Biblical idea, seen in many places. For example, we see it in the parable the Lord Jesus told of Lazarus and the Rich Man, in Heaven and in Hades respectively, who both engaged Abraham in dialogue after their deaths (*Luke 16:19–31*). We see it in our Lord’s promise to the thief hanging on the Cross next to Him, that “today you will be with Me in

paradise" (*Luke 23:43*). We see it in the words of St. Paul, who wrote that "to be absent from the body [is] to be present with the Lord" (*2 Corinthians 5:8*). And we see it in that "great cloud of witnesses" with which we are surrounded, as the Book of Hebrews proclaims, inviting us to "come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven . . . to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus the Mediator of the new covenant" (*Hebrews 12:22–24*).

The living Christian's relationship with the saints may be described as veneration—not worship, which is reserved for God alone; and yet it is more than admiration and emulation, which can be practiced with regard to anyone with any quality we might happen to want. Instead, there is veneration: we venerate the saint as we might venerate the icon—experientially and prayerfully, always aware that there is so much more going on than what meets the eye.

Holiness That Keeps the World Going

The saints are signs that *Christianity* works. Every saint is a walking homily, revealing what can happen when a person orients his whole being around Christ—lives are changed, miracles happen, evil is defeated, righteousness prevails. And at an even deeper level, the saints are so critical for our time and for all times because, as Fr. Zossima told his young disciples, "*Everything is like an ocean; a touch in one place sets up movement at the other end of the earth.*"

Notice the implication? Because of what Archimandrite Sophrony in *St. Silouan the Athonite* calls "the ontological unity of humanity," each person who does a righteous deed, no matter how minor, sends ripples of redemption through the world. Each person who overcomes evil, no matter how minor, inflicts a huge defeat on cosmic evil. Remember the observation by Fr. Sophrony: "A single saint is an extraordinarily precious phenomenon for all mankind. By the mere fact of their existence—unknown, maybe, to the world, but known to God—the saints draw down upon the world, upon all humanity, a great blessing of God."

The saints are great examples, yes, and may we grow ever more aware of their lives in order to appropriate their qualities of love, compassion, peace, joy and virtue as our own! But their greatness is found especially in that blessing of God that they call down upon the world. In a very real way, we are alive at this hour because of the piety and prayers of men and women unknown to us, unknown to the world. These are, as St. James writes, the righteous ones whose “effective, fervent prayer” matters much (*James 5:16*).

So, in ways both seen and hidden, known and unknown, appreciated and ignored, the holiness of the saints, without exaggeration, keeps the world going. And here is a sobering thought, provided by St. Silouan, who is very much a modern saint (he died in 1938): “Prayer keeps the world alive, and when prayer fails, the world will perish....I tell you that when there are no more men [or women] of prayer on earth, the world will come to an end and great disasters will befall...when the earth ceases to produce saints, the strength that safeguards the earth from catastrophe will fail.” Because of “the ontological unity of humanity,” because of Fr. Zossima’s “ocean” of everything, both the vice of sinners and the virtue of saints send ripples through all that exists. Do you get the sense that each of us, simply by virtue of being alive, possesses the potential for greater influence than we can possibly imagine?

The Road of Prayer

The road from emulation to the veneration of saints is the road of prayer—specifically, prayer to the saints. It is here we encounter a few rousing objections from other Christian traditions. First, a story, then a few reflections.

I wrote a book called *Touching Heaven* in which I discuss how I acquired my patron saint (or, perhaps, how my patron saint acquired me). After an exhilarating exchange with a fellow pilgrim in the forest near Russia’s ancient Valaam Monastery in the summer of 1993, the role of my principal intercessor fell to St. John, the Forerunner and Baptizer of our Lord. Several days later, I was riding in a boat with then Deacon James Paffhausen (now Metropolitan Jonah, a bishop of the Orthodox Church in

America or OCA). I mentioned this conversation with a fellow pilgrim to him and then asked him how best to cultivate a relationship with one's patron saint.

Here is what I was expecting in reply: First, collect all the literature you can find about the historical figure—his writings, if any, his context, his sociological significance, his worldview; get a sense of his upbringing, his education. Also, harvest lots of details about his culture. Then, notice how the saint is referred to liturgically—his hymns and any significant details about his icon. Finally, peruse the available literature of how he is perceived by others, and trace how the figure is interpreted down through the ages. That's what I was expecting, but this is what I got: "Pray to him." *Pray to him*. Prayer, in this sense, is fellowship, and fellowship forms relationships. Again: *Prayer is fellowship, and fellowship forms relationships*.

The Bible strictly forbids any attempt to summon the spirits of the dead or to try to engage them in conversation (*Leviticus 19:31; 20:6; 1 Samuel 28*). It is not the act of prayer that is forbidden, but the act of sorcery or séance. Sorcery is self-indulgence, something dark designed to satisfy some curiosity or fascination with the afterlife. However, Christian prayer that blossoms into fellowship with the saints is rooted in our Lord Jesus Christ who conquered death and always has Christ as its focus—His will, His glory, His agenda.

We pray to saints not so that we might gain information or some advantage in this life, but so that *their* Christ might increasingly become *our* Christ. "Help me," we say to the saint, "pray for me, so that I might be as you already are—saved." As mentioned earlier, if these are among the "righteous ones" whose "effective, fervent prayer" matters much, then requesting their intercessory prayer on our behalf is a great help in time of need.

Idolatry and Unbelief

The Protestant objection against prayer to the saints typically includes the accusation of idolatry. Prayer to anyone or anything other than God would, it is charged, rouse His jealousy. But an Orthodox Christian should respond with the imagery of Holy Scripture: those who are righteous and holy do not obscure, but *magnify* God, the way that—though it's an impersonal analogy—a magnifying glass enlarges into greater detail whatever is being viewed through it.

Precisely, God glorifies those who magnify Him. God was "magnified" through Joshua when the prophet obeyed God by placing twelve stones in the Jordan River under the ark of the covenant (*Joshua 4:8–14*); God was "magnified" through Solomon, who had "a perfect heart to keep [His] commandments" and therefore would sit on the throne of his father David (*1 Chronicles 29:18–25*); God is "magnified" by all those who rejoice and who love His salvation (*Psalms 70:4*); God was "magnified" in the Jews and Greeks of Ephesus who believed in Him after the name of Jesus was discovered to cast out demons (*Acts 19:13–20*); and in the first chapter of his *Letter to the Philippians*, St. Paul's prayer was that God be "magnified" in his body, whether he lived or died. Obedience, peace, love, joy, compassion, self-control, faith, martyrdom—the more these and other holy qualities are manifested, the more the God of holiness is magnified. As the psalmist says, "God is wonderful in His saints" (*Psalms 68:35*).

So, properly speaking, we ask the saints, those men and women of holiness, to pray that God would be magnified in our lives just as He has been magnified in theirs. The Christian understands that it is God alone who saves. By "intercessory prayer to the saints," therefore, we mean asking the saints to pray to God on our behalf. And, because of their perfection, saints can never grant anything or answer any prayer that is in any way contrary to the will of God. Because the "christification" of the saint has been definitively established by the Church, what the saint desires for us will always be in complete conformity with what Christ desires for us.



For those Orthodox Christians who struggle at every moment to live what they believe, the benefits of the saints will be personal, experiential, direct, and a great help along the road of salvation. Notice throughout the Gospels how often our Lord affirmed the faith of those who asked for His help *before* His help was given—"Go, your faith has made you well"; "Go your way; as you have believed, so let it be done for you"; "Be of good cheer, daughter, your faith has made you well"; "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed."

Everything Is Like an Ocean

Our task may be as simple as Metropolitan Jonah's advice on that boat leaving Valaam: Pray to the saints, ask for their prayers, ask for their help, and absolutely without fail give thanks to God for whatever comes. In this moment—as I write and as you read—we celebrate Christ, and we do so by celebrating those lives that have become Christ-like.

A final positive word: Because everything is like an ocean, be greatly encouraged that your righteous act—however small it may appear to you, however hidden or unnoticed— is used by God in extraordinary ways. Your kind word, especially when none is spoken to you; your thoughtful gesture,

especially when none is offered to you; your silent prayer, especially when you don't feel like praying; your act of charity when no one is looking—each of these is another string in the great cord of holiness that suspends the world and keeps it from falling into desolation. "Everything is like an ocean; a touch in one place sets up movement at the other end of the earth." There is no such thing as a private act or private thought, for good or for evil, because we are connected in mysterious but real ways. If you ever despair, wondering if what you do for God matters, remember: each single act of holiness is like a stone thrown into an ocean—the ripples go forth, and we do not know whom they touch or where they end.

