

Peace, unity—we all want that. But the peace which Christ brings is very unlike what we usually think of as peace. When he was born, the angels proclaimed peace on earth to men of good will. But when he grew up he said he brought not peace but a sword. His peace, his unity, is not ours: 'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth do I give to you' (John xiv, 27). The peace and unity of God literally passeth our understanding (Phil. iv, 7)—and often all that we might think reasonable and friendly and sensible. It is a peace which is found only in faith and the prayer of faith. And we should be ready for that prayer to lead to sacrifice, our sharing in the Lord's atoning sacrifice.

All that I have been trying to say has been expressed daily in the Roman liturgy long before this octave was thought of. The priest is there before the slain Lamb of God, with nothing of his own but his sins. Presently he and the congregation will take the atoning victim into themselves, and become one Bread, one Body, with him and with one another. But before they do so, the priest in the name of all speaks thus to the Lord before him:

'O Lord Jesus Christ, who saidst to thy apostles, Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: look not on our sins but on the faith of thy Church, and vouchsafe to pacify and unite her in accordance with thy will.'



## ASKING OTHERS TO PRAY FOR US<sup>1</sup>

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**T**HE week of prayer for Christian unity culminates with the feast of the conversion of St Paul on January 25th. St Paul is probably the most energetic and tireless worker for unity whom the Church has ever known. Many passages in St Paul's epistles are devoted to the theme of unity and the epistles themselves bear witness to his work for it.

But when we read these epistles we are struck immediately by

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St Paul's tremendous sense of the power of intercession and its importance in the life of Christians. Thus he writes to the Romans:

'For God is my witness . . . that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers' (Rom. i, 9).

and he tells the Colossians how

'Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always labouring fervently for you in prayers, that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God'. (Col. iv, 12.)

and to Timothy he says:

'without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day'. (2 Tim. i, 3.)

There are many similar passages in St Paul's epistles, and we find him also asking his fellow Christians to pray for him. At the conclusion of his second epistle to the Thessalonians he writes:

'brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified, even as it is with you'. (2 Thess. iii, 1.)

'Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving' he tells the Colossians, and adds 'withal praying also for us that God would open unto us a door of utterance, to speak the mystery of Christ'. (Col. iv, 2, 3.) 'I beseech you brethren' he writes to the Romans, 'that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me; that I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judea, and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints.' (Rom. xv, 30, 31.)

Why does St Paul put such a high value on intercession? One reason is his conviction that Christian prayer is heard by God, even when, as St Paul knew from personal experience, God's immediate answer is a 'no' hiding the greater gift he will bestow in his own time. But there is a more important reason for St Paul, one which touches more deeply on the place of intercession in the divine plan for our salvation. St Paul's vivid awareness of the true meaning of spiritual life enabled him to see an answer to that question which must have puzzled all of us at some time or other: why, if God knows our needs better than we know them ourselves, and since his will is for our good and he has already won the victory for us in Christ, why does God invite us, indeed command us, to ask him for those things which he already wills to give us?

St Paul gives an answer to this question in his second epistle to the Corinthians. He is writing to his friends in Corinth to tell them of the many misfortunes and dangers which he has suffered and the consolations and deliverance which he has received, and he tells the Corinthians how their prayers have helped to procure these mercies:

'Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons, thanks may be given by many on our behalf'. (2 Cor. i, 11.)

We learn two things from St Paul here: First, that all prayer, even when it is a direct petition for some immediate need, is ultimately an act of *thanksgiving*, of praise and worship of God. And this is so because the fulfilment of the prayer of petition is not in the gift which it elicits from God, but rather it is in the opening of the floodgates of thanksgiving which the gift received evokes in us, God's creatures. As our sense of gratitude to God deepens, so we become better able to turn away from preoccupation with ourselves and to worship God as he is, wholly adorable in himself.

And secondly, St Paul reminds us that because the purpose of intercessory prayer does not rest in the gift received but in the act of praise and thanksgiving evoked, this prayer is not limited by time or space or the immediate need which prompts it, and once offered to God it becomes a fresh source of praise for ever and ever. We can see from this that by not asking God for things, and by not sharing in each other's petitions, we are missing many occasions of praising him in heaven. And, moreover, we are withholding from God the thanksgiving and praise which is his due.

But there is something more. We here are bound by the limitations imposed by the sins and imperfections of our earthly existence: often we fail to recognize the gifts which God gives in answer to our prayers and so we fail to thank him for them. And often, too, we fail to thank God even when we do recognize that we have received what we have asked him for. Only the saints in heaven can discern the full measure of God's gifts to us and can also rejoice unselfishly in his bounty. Thus if we ask the saints in heaven to pray for us, we can be certain that they at least will praise God with unceasing thanksgiving for his goodness to us.

Why then do we not more often call on the saints to pray with us and for our petitions? We cannot imagine that they have

ceased to be able to pray to God, or that they no longer care about their fellow-men on earth. We know that the saints are more deeply and truly one with Christ in obedience and adoration of God's will now, in eternity, than ever they were in their earthly lifetimes. Can we imagine that St Paul, who wrote so passionately of his prayerful concern for his fellow Christians, ceased to be interested when he was caught up into the fulness of eternal life in Christ? Is he not rather saying, as he once said to the Philippians:

'I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy'  
(Phil. i, 3, 4)?

If we take St Paul seriously, it opens to us a whole new world of prayer for unity: one in which there is no longer just a question of 'a week of prayer for Christian unity', in which we ask all members of different denominations present here to join. We shall enter a world of prayer which spans eternity, in which we shall ask all the saints to share in offering this petition for Christian unity to God.

Only we must be careful not to think vaguely of the saints as a kind of nebulous shining cloud. The sheer numbers of the saints may give us this sense of an enormous undifferentiated mass. But they are not undifferentiated to God—each saint is unique, uniquely loved by God and uniquely capable of praising in the manner for which God created him. No, the saints are wholly personal, more so since they have been released from the bondage of this world than ever before. Asking the saints for their prayers is not like sending out a general circular letter, it is a personal invitation to each one. We begin by asking the saints whom we know best and gradually we shall find that this circle of friendship is an ever-widening one. We shall find that one saint introduces us to another, perhaps one for whom they themselves had a special love. Each friendship will teach us something new about God, open to us a new window through which God's glory shines in a wholly unsuspected and ever-wonderful way.

We shall get to know more and more among all those friends of Jesus throughout the long course of history who are closest to him in love; and among them, Mary, his mother, who of all the saints most supremely carries in her heart the passion of Christ's love for men and his burning desire that we may all be one in him. For many the idea of asking the saints for their prayers will

be unfamiliar, perhaps even it may seem a scandal. As a member of the Orthodox Church I believe that the Orthodox Christians have a real contribution to offer in this matter: a contribution that will help all of us to pray more deeply and fervently for Christian unity.

For centuries the Orthodox faithful have lived and prayed in conscious fellowship with the saints. To us, asking the saints for their prayers is as natural as asking our friends to pray for us. This is not just a private devotional practice. In the Liturgy of the Orthodox Church, at the Holy Eucharist itself, we explicitly unite our prayers with the prayers of the saints and we ask them for their intercessions. Death cannot separate us from our fellow-Christians and we are all one in Christ in the offering of worship to God. By asking the saints to pray for us we grow in awareness of our unity within the Body of Christ, and we come to realize that this unity extends beyond the barriers of time and space and the finitude of our own earthly lives. And as this fellowship with the saints of all ages deepens, we begin to understand more truly the great mystery of eternal life of which we have already been made partakers by our baptism.

Often when we pray for Christian unity we feel frustrated because the day of its realisation on earth seems so remote, indeed often it seems infinitely unattainable. If, however, we ask the saints to pray for us too, we shall already be drawing closer to the company of heaven: our prayer for unity, instead of seeming barren because it does not immediately result in the end we expect or desire, will itself become a source of new hope and fellowship. We shall be experiencing already that quality of Christian unity which transcends time and space and sin, and is of the very essence of eternal life in Christ. We shall find that our own concepts of Christian unity will progressively give place to an ever-growing wonder and expectation of what the fulness of unity in the Church truly means.

And when the day of fulfilment comes in God's own time, our joy and thanksgiving for God's gift of unity among Christians on earth, will be taken up by the great chorus of the saints in heaven whom we have asked to pray for us:

'that for the gift bestowed upon us by means of many persons, thanks may be given by many on our behalf'.