

Apologetic on the Orthodox belief in intercession
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Our Church believes in the intercession of the Virgin Mary, the Angels and the Saints. Those who don't share our view regarding the intercession of the saints usually cite 1Jn 2:1: "We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous". They also cite St. Paul: "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1Ti 2:5)

In support of this important dogma, our church emphasizes the following:

1) There is a major and essential difference between the Advocacy of our Lord and that of the Saints: the Advocacy of Christ is a propitiatory one...

This means that our Lord is our advocate when we sin having made Himself the propitiation of our sins, who paid the wages of sin on our behalf. Christ's advocacy with the Father is based on the fact that He has carried *instead of us* the iniquity of us all (Is 53:6). In this capacity He stands as a mediator between God and men. As a matter of fact, He is the only mediator between God and men; having satisfied the Divine justice required by the Father, and granting men the forgiveness of their sins by dying on their behalf as a propitiation for their sins.

This is the meaning of the words of St. John the Apostle for he says: "*If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world*". (1Jn 2:1,2)

This clearly exemplifies the propitiatory nature of Christ's advocacy. It is an advocacy on behalf of a sinful man; "if any man sin". A sinful man needs propitiation. And the only One who offered this propitiation is Jesus Christ the righteous. Only he can be our advocate, through the blood He shed on our behalf.

The same intent appears in St. Paul's designation of the Lord Christ as the only mediator between God and men: "*one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; Who gave Himself a ransom for all*" (1Ti 2:5). He mediates being the Redeemer who gave Himself and paid the wages of sin on our behalf.

No one would argue this unique role of the Lord Christ as sole advocate of mankind. Intercession of the Saints on behalf of men has nothing to do with propitiation and redemption. It is intercession on our behalf before Christ.

2) Intercession of the Saints is merely a prayer on our behalf, it is a supplicatory intercession far removed from Christ's propitiatory advocacy.

The bible supports this kind of intercession: "*pray one for another*" (James 5:16). Even the Saints requested others to pray for them. St. Paul asks the Thessalonians: "*pray for us*" (2Thes 3:1). The same he asks of the Hebrews (Heb 13:18), and of the Ephesians "Praying always with all prayer and supplication. For all the saints; and for me, that utterance may be given unto me" (Eph 6:18). Similar requests for prayer are innumerable in the Bible. Now, if the Saints request our prayers, shouldn't we request theirs? And if we ask others to pray for us who are still striving, in this life and are "subject to like passions as we are", shouldn't we rather ask for the prayers of those who finished their course and are living in Paradise with Christ? Have they lost their favor after departing from earth to Paradise? or is it only lawful to ask for their prayers here on earth but not where they are so

close to Christ in Paradise? And if we request men to pray for us, shouldn't we rather ask the Angels to pray for us?

3) God often requested the intercession of the righteous on behalf of other people:

God often asked for, approved, and allowed this to happen. We shall give some examples for intercessions that God accepted:

a. The story of the Patriarch Abraham and King Abimelech:

Abimelech sinned in taking Sarah (Abraham's wife) unto his household, but he did this in "the integrity of his heart" for Abraham said of her that she is his sister. Now the Lord came to Abimelech in a dream and warned him that he would surely die. Then the Lord said unto him: "*Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live.*" (Gen 20: 1_7) The Lord could have forgiven him as soon as he restored the woman to her husband, but He added the condition that Abraham pray for him that he may live. Here we see an example of God asking specifically for the intercession of Abraham on behalf of Abimelech.

b. The story of Job the righteous, and his three friends (Job 42):

In a similar manner the Lord requested Job's intercession and prayer on behalf of his three friends, as a condition for forgiving them. The Bible records this as follows: "*The Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, My wrath is kindled against thee and against thy two friends... Therefore take unto you now seven bullocks and seven rams, and go to my servant Job, and offer up for yourselves a burnt offering; and my servant Job shall pray for you: for him will I accept; lest I deal with you after your folly*" (Job 42: 7_8). In both incidents, God Himself addresses a person, and yet declines to grant the forgiveness of a sin unless a particular Saint prays on behalf of that person. God does so in order to exalt his Saints and honor them before people, and He accepts, even requests such intercession.

c. The intercession of Abraham on behalf of Sodom:

The Lord could have inflicted His punishment on the city of Sodom without involving the Patriarch Abraham in this affair. And Abraham did not intervene of his own initiative. It was the Lord Who discussed the matter with Abraham and thus gave him a chance to intercede on behalf of those people, and accepted his intercession. The Lord saw fit that this incident should be recorded in the Bible that He may exalt Abraham before the whole world, and demonstrate to us to what extent He honors His Saints...The Bible records this as follows: "*And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?!*" (Gen 18:17)... And the Lord discussed the matter with Abraham, and gave him a chance to intercede on behalf of the city in case there were 50, or 45, or 40, or 30, or 20, or even 10 righteous people in the city, that the Lord may spare the city for their sake.

This does not only serve to demonstrate the favor that Abraham has with God, but also the favor that all the righteous have with God, seeing that God would have spared a whole city for their sakes. "*And the Lord said, If I find fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes*"...."*I will not do it for the forty's sake*" ..."*I will not destroy it for twenty's sake*", "*I will not destroy it for ten's sake*". (Gen 18:26_32).

The use of the words "for the sake of..." is Theo_ logically significant, since it exemplifies God's saving of certain people for the sake of others. It gives a clear indication of the intercession of the righteous on behalf of the sinners, and of God's approval of such intercession, even before such intercession is invoked or offered...

d. The intercession of Moses on behalf of the people of Israel:

God condemned the people of Israel to destruction because of the golden calf. Nevertheless, He did not execute His Judgment immediately, but rather discussed the matter with the Prophet Moses, thus offering him a chance to intercede on their behalf, and indeed, accepted his intercession. And as Abraham addressed the Lord saying: "*That be far from Thee to do after this manner*", Moses say's to Him: "*Turn from Thy fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against Thy people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel Thy servants, to whom Thou swarest...*". The Bible tells us after this "*And the Lord repented of the evil which He thought to do unto His people.*" (Ex 32: 7_14)

So far, we have cited examples of the prayer of the living on behalf of the living. Those who departed, have even more favor with God, so much so, that God spared people for their sakes even without their prayers. How much more would He, had they prayed for someone: As an example we cite God's acts of mercy and compassion for the sake of His servant David. On account of King Solomon's sin, God decided to divide his kingdom, however, God tells him concerning this matter: "*Notwithstanding in thy days I will not do it for David thy father's sake: but I will rend it out of the hand of thy son. Howbeit I will not rend away all the kingdom; but will give one tribe to thy son for David my servant's sake..*" (1Kings 11:12,13).

God repeats the same account when He speaks with Jeroboam: "*behold I will rend the kingdom out of the hand of Solomon...but he shall have one tribe for my servant David's sake...*" (1Kings 11:31,32) "*...I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand: but I will make him prince all the days of his life for David my servant's sake..*" (1Kings 11:34). God repeats the same expression "*for David my servant's sake*" 3 times in the same chapter. On account of this the psalmist pleads with God saying: "*For Thy servant David's sake turn not away the face of thine anointed.*" (Ps 132:10).

If such is the favor that David has with God, how much more would be the favor that the Virgin and the Angels have? and the favor of John the Baptist (greatest ever born of a woman)? And how much would be the favor of the martyrs who suffered and died for His sake? And since we find no fault in asking for the prayers of our fellows on earth, why shouldn't we ask for the prayers of those who "*shine as the brightness of the firmament*" (Dan 12:3). And why shouldn't we ask for the prayers of those who Fought the good fight, finished the course, kept the faith..(IITi 4:7). And if intercession (which is actually prayer on our behalf) is considered an advocacy, and as such is unacceptable, then the prayers offered by any person on behalf of another would also be an unsolicited advocacy, since we have only one advocate! And if this is so, then the Apostle must have erred (God forbid), when he said: "*pray one for another*" (Jas 5:16), since the relation between God and man is a direct one, and in view of the Divine love needs no body else's prayer!

It follows also, that all the prayers on behalf of others that are mentioned in the Bible are meaningless and contrary to Divine love!! (According to them), since God loves His children and does not need others to pray on their behalf to remind Him of His parental care and love for them!

And then we will be at a loss when we try to explain God's purpose when He asked for Abraham's prayers on behalf of Abimelech and of Job's prayers on behalf of his friends. Prayers of people (whether departed or striving) for others is a proof of the mutual love that exists between them. It is a proof of the faith of those living that those departed are alive and that their prayers are acceptable before God. It is a proof of the honor that God bestows upon His saints. It is for the benefit of mankind that God allowed this form of intercession. It constitutes a bridge between the inhabitants of heaven and earth.

A question often asked by those who don't believe in intercession:

Do Angels and saints know our affairs on earth and can they receive our prayers?

The answer is an emphatic yes for the following reasons:

1. There is no doubt that the knowledge of those in heaven is far more than that of those on earth. Saint Paul tells us: "*For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*" (1Co 13:12). This means that our knowledge will increase as we reach the "other world" and many mysteries will be revealed to us once we shed this carnal body that restrains the spirit. There and then our knowledge shall increase and we shall depart from the circle of "*knowledge in part*" to a much wider circle of knowledge.

2. Angels know our affairs on earth as is evident from the Lord's saying: "*there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repented*" (Luke 15:10). The affairs of those on earth are thus known to the heavenly be they angels or spirits of the righteous. They know those who repent and they rejoice for their repentance for how can they rejoice if they don't know?

3. Angels know our prayers because they carry our prayers to the throne of God. The evidence for this is abundant especially in the book of revelation where we are told that the prayers of the saints are offered before God from the hands of the Angel and from his censer. (Rev 8:3_5) The same can be said of the "*four and twenty elders*" (priests) in Rev 5:8 "*having every one of them Golden vials full of odors which are the prayers of the saints.*" This is evidence of their knowledge of our prayers, which they offer to God. The same can be said of our Guardian Angel "*Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you that in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven.*" (Mat 18:10)

4. Another example is the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:25, where Abraham tells the rich man: "*Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receives thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things..*" How did our father Abraham know about the lives of both Lazarus and the rich man? Again when the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers to "*testify unto them lest they also come to this place of torment*" Abraham answers: "*They have Moses and the prophets*" (Luke 16:28,29). How could Abraham have known about Moses and the prophets knowing that he departed from earth hundreds of years before the birth of Moses and the other prophets? Obviously he knew about all these things. How could he not know when the Lord says of him: "*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.*" (Jn 8:56).

5. The testimony of the spirits of the martyrs: Saint John tells us in the book of Revelations: "*I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held. And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long O Lord, Holy and true, dost Thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on earth? And white robes were given unto every one of them, and it was said unto them, that they should rest yet for a little season, until their fellow_servants also and their brethren, that should be killed as they were, should be fulfilled.*" (Rev 6:9_11). You see, those martyrs knew after their death, that the Lord had not yet avenged them, and they cry unto God: How long willt Thou suffer that iniquity be victorious on earth? And how long willt Thou suffer that the strong in the flesh destroy thy children? And how long will they continue shedding their blood? How could those martyrs know about these things? They knew indeed, and when their "*fellow_servants shall be fulfilled*" they will know.

6. Another amazing incident involving Elijah the prophet is recorded in 2Ch 21. The story is told of King Jehoram who slew all his children, made high places (for the worship of idols), and wrought that which was evil in the eyes of the Lord.. *"And there came a writing to him from Elijah the prophet saying thus saith the Lord....because thou hast not walked in the ways of Jehoshaphat thy father....behold, with a great plague will the Lord smite thy people and thy children..."* This, in spite of the fact that Elijah was taken up to heaven several years earlier! How could this happen? and how did Elijah know after his departure from earth? and how did he manage to send this message?.

7. The departed saints live, the Lord explains this to the Sadducees: *"have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God saying: I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. God is not a God of the dead, but of the living."* (Mat 22:31,32). Those saints are living, so why consider them dead by not asking for their prayers? Both Moses and Elijah appeared with the Lord on Mount Tabor during the Transfiguration. Moses who died in the flesh 14 centuries earlier, was seen with the Lord alive same like Elijah who was taken up to heaven.

Let us now consider some biblical examples of the intercession of the Angels:

The book of Zechariah tells us of an Angel interceding on behalf of Jerusalem, *"Then the angel of the Lord answered and said: O Lord of hosts, how long wilt Thou not have mercy on Jerusalem..."* his intercession was indeed accepted by the Lord *"thus saith the Lord: I am returned to Jerusalem with mercies, my house shall be built in it saith the Lord of hosts"* (Zech 1:12_16). Another example is the Angel interceding on behalf of Joshua the high priest, when Satan was standing to resist him, we hear the Angel say *"The Lord rebuke thee, O Satan...is not this a brand plucked out of fire?"* The intercession of the Angel was indeed accepted for we are told concerning Joshua: *"Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, behold I have caused thy iniquity to pass from thee.."* (Zech 3:1_4).

We are also told of Israel when he blessed the two children of Joseph his son that he said: *"The Angel who redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads."* (Gen 48:16). Angels are described in the epistle to the Hebrews as *"ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation."* (Heb 1:14) If they have a ministry on behalf of people here on earth, how much more would be their ministry on our behalf in heaven where they belong? Let us finally answer another objection that is put forward: Some say that we should not *"pray to the saints"* only to God. Indeed! for in asking for their help we are not praying to the saints but actually asking them to pray on our behalf.

We ask for the saint's intercession because of the great favor they have with God. We ask for their intercession because God allowed and accepted such intercessions. We believe in intercession because we believe in the life of the world to come. Because we believe that the saints who departed are alive. We ask for the intercession of the Saints to honor them for God himself honors them by accepting their intercessions. *"If any man serve me, him will my Father honor."* (Jn 12:26). We believe in intercession because we believe in the unity of the body of Christ (the church) we are all members of the one body whether we are here on earth or there in heaven.

We intercede for them by praying for those who departed, and they intercede for us, and this exemplifies the true unity of the body of Christ. By believing in intercession we practice humility, deeming ourselves needy for the prayers of those saints who have pleased God.