

The Saints and Us

By Metropolitan Saba (Isper)

Saint Paul begins his letters with one of the following greetings: "From Paul... to the holy brethren" (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians), or "To those called to be saints" (Romans), or "To the Church of God in..." (2 Corinthians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians), or "To the church of God in... who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be saints" (1 Corinthians). Saint Paul's greetings clearly indicate that all believers are called to be saints, and they also reveal that the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and His salvific work sanctify them.

Saint Paul's teaching is firmly based on divine teachings found in the Holy Scriptures, which the Church has faithfully preserved. Here are some examples: in the Old Testament, we read, "Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 20:7), and, "You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:45).

The holiness of the faithful, according to the Old Testament, is derived from the holiness and sanctity of God. People were to be like their God in their behavior. Their relationship with Him was based on faithfulness. The covenant was established on this condition: If you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be my people, and I will be your God (Lev. 26:3, Jer. 30:22). Living according to God's commandments and ordinances is binding for those who consider themselves believers.

In the Old Testament, holiness was defined as separation from impurity. Calls to "wash yourselves, make yourselves clean, remove the evil of your deeds" (Isa. 1:16) are synonymous with the verb *sanctify*. Thus, the beginning of the path to sanctification is to distance oneself from sins, their causes, and all those things that defile a person. With the advent of the New Covenant, the concept of holiness broadened and became more positive. Mere abstention from evil was no longer sufficient; it must be complemented by the pursuit of virtue. Thus, when the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled the Mosaic law, He asked His disciples to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

The pursuit of holiness means the pursuit of perfection, and this is the call for every Christian: "Be holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16); "but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct" (1 Peter 1:15).

On this basis, the saints have held a high position in the Church since its inception. The saints are honored by and companions to the believers, serving as role models and examples for all those who love Christ and follow His path. Christians began by honoring the martyrs first, as they willingly gave their lives, enduring suffering with joy for the sake of their faith and never abandoning it. They also observed the virtues embodied by certain individuals around them, which made them beacons of light that illuminated the lives of the believers; and destinations for guidance and advice for building a Christian life of perfection—that is, a life of sanctity.

The saints are God's intercessors and friends. We keep their memory, honor them, and place icons of them in our homes and churches. We ask for their intercession and seek their guidance because they are our brothers and sisters in the family of God, the Church. Moreover, because we believe in eternal life and consider death not a perishing but, rather, a transition and repose in the Lord, we ask for the same from our loved ones who have gone before us and remember them in our prayers, just like our living loved ones. For all are living members of the Church.

The relationship between believers and the saints who preceded them is familial. Just as a child seeks help from, follows the example of, and emulates an older sibling, so does a Christian follow and seek guidance from the saints. They are a living Gospel. Their lives are practical applications of the commandments found in the Gospel.

In this context of ecclesial communion, some saints may feel closer to you than others. You may be drawn to a particular saint who shares similarities with your life or serves as a role model for you. For example, someone who tended more towards pessimism than optimism may have read the life of St. Seraphim of Sarov and saw that he had the same tendencies at first, but fervently prayed for joy until he became known as the saint of Paschal joy for the rest of his life. Such a person will immediately feel a connection to this saint. Another example would be a person who once lived a life with no moral boundaries and later experienced a conversion seeking a life of purity and repentance. Such a person will naturally find

resemblance in the life of St. Mary of Egypt, who transformed her life completely from a life of sin to one of absolute purity.

On this basis, the Church asks those approaching baptism to choose a patron saint. When someone is ordained a priest or becomes a monk or nun, they sometimes change their name and take one of the saints as their spiritual patron and friend. This personal relationship with the saints is a living, blessed, and fruitful connection. A bond forms between the individual and the saint, and the believer experiences the presence of the living saint in his life. He experiences the saint's assistance, the efficacy of his prayers, and his intercessions.

I present this information today because many inquiries have reached the Archdiocese Office asking about how a patron saint might be chosen for those who do not know their patron saint from their baptism or were not directed to one by the priest or their parents during their baptism. The answer is very simple: Before you is a vast array of saintly men and women from whom to choose. Pick a patron with whom you find similarities or someone to be a role model in your life. Establish a personal friendship with this patron, just as you do with any close friend or companion. Mention their names in your prayers. Ask them to intercede for you and pray on your behalf. Acquire their icons for your prayer corner. Over time, you will feel the strength of their presence in your life. Do not forget to inform your priest and the parish in which you were baptized about the saint's name you have chosen to ensure proper registration for the baptismal certificate.

May God bless all of you and grant you to experience the sweetness of living within God's family, the Church, which consists of the living and the departed, angels and saints, and those who strive on the path of holiness. Thus, we ascend day by day until we become "the household of God" (Eph. 2:19).