

The Early Church Fathers on Intercession of the Saints

Asking those who have gone before us for their prayers is an ancient practice. Examples can be found in the catacombs as well as the writings of the Early Fathers. This is a part of the doctrine of the communion of saints. The saints in heaven are not worshiped or thought to have any power in and of themselves. They are merely asked to pray for and with us. We believe they can do this in part because of what we read in Scripture. We know that those in heaven care for us (Luke 15:7). We also know that they present our prayers to Jesus (Revelation 5:8). Finally we see that they add their own prayers to ours (Revelation 8:3-4).

Origen

But not the high priest [Christ] alone prays for those who pray sincerely, but also the angels... as also the souls of the saints who have already fallen asleep (*On Prayer* II [A.D. 233]).

Pectorius

Aschandius, my father, dearly beloved of my heart, with my sweet mother and my brethren, remember your Pectorius in the peace of the Fish [Christ] (Epitaph [A.D. 250]).

Cyprian

Let us remember one another in concord and unanimity. Let us on both sides always pray for one another. Let us relieve burdens and afflictions by mutual love, that if one of us, by the swiftness of divine condescension, shall go hence the first, our love may continue in the presence of the Lord, and our prayers for our brethren and sisters not cease in the presence of the Father's mercy (Letters 56 [60]:5 [A.D. 252]).

Anonymous

Atticus, sleep in peace, secure in your safety, and pray anxiously for our sins (Funerary inscription near St. Sabina's in Rome [A.D. 300]).

Pray for your parents, Matronata Matrona. She lived one year, fifty-two days (ibid.).

Cyril of Jerusalem

Then [during the Eucharistic prayer] we make mention also of those who have already fallen asleep: first, the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, and martyrs, that through their prayers and supplications God would receive our petition... (*Catechetical Lectures* 23:9 [A.D. 350]).

Anonymous

Mother of God, [listen to] my petitions; do not disregard us in adversity but rescue us from danger (*Ryland's Papyrus* 3 [A.D. 350]).

Hilary of Poitiers

To those who would wish to stand, neither the guardianship of saints nor the defenses of angels are wanting (*Commentary on the Psalms* 124:5:6 [A.D. 365]).

Ephraem of Syria

Remember me, you heirs of God, you brethren of Christ; supplicate the Savior earnestly for me, that I may be freed through Christ from him that fights against me day by day (*De Timore, Anim. in fin.* [A.D. 370]).

Liturgy of St. Basil

By the command of your only-begotten Son we communicate with the memory of your saints . . . by whose prayers and supplications have mercy upon us all and deliver us for the sake of your holy name (*Liturgy of St. Basil* [A.D. 373]).

Gregory Nazianzen

May you [Cyprian] look down from above propitiously upon us and guide our word and life; and shepherd this sacred flock . . . gladden the Holy Trinity, before which you stand (*Orations* 17 [24] [A.D. 376]).

Gregory of Nyssa

Do you, [Ephraem] that art standing at the divine altar . . . bear us all in remembrance, petitioning for us the remission of sins, and the fruition of an everlasting kingdom (*Sermon on Ephraem the Syrian* [A.D. 380]).

Ambrose of Milan

May Peter, who wept so efficaciously for himself, weep for us and turn towards us Christ's benign countenance (*Hexameron* 5:25:90 [A.D. 388]).

John Chrysostom

He that wears the purple . . . stands begging of the saints to be his patrons with God, and he that wears a diadem begs the tent-maker [Paul] and the fisherman [Peter] as patrons, even though they be dead" (*Homilies on 2 Corinthians* 26 [A.D. 392]).

When you perceive that God is chastening you, fly not to his enemies . . . but to his friends, the martyrs, the saints, and those who were pleasing to him, and who have great power [in God] (*Orations* 8:6 [A.D. 396]).

Augustine

A Christian people celebrate together in religious solemnity the memorials of the martyrs, both to encourage their being imitated and so that it can share in their merits and be aided by their prayers (*Against Faustus the Manichean* [A.D. 400]).

Jerome

You say in your book that while we live we are able to pray for each other, but afterwards when we have died, the prayer of no person for another can be heard . . . But if the apostles and martyrs while still in the body can pray for others, at a time when they ought still be solicitous about themselves, how much more will they do so after their crowns, victories, and triumphs? (*Against Vigilantius* 6 [A.D. 406]).

Leo the Great

On Wednesday and Friday next, therefore, let us fast, and on Saturday keep vigil with the most blessed Apostle Peter, by whose prayers we may in all things obtain the Divine protection through Christ our Lord. Amen (*Sermon* 17 [inter A.D. 440-460]).