

Chapter VII

The Communion of Saints and their Intercession

One hundred years have passed since St.Gregorios of Parumala left this world. This is a good occasion to think about the role of saints in our spiritual life in general and that of Parumala Thirumeni in particular. Often our youngsters ask: Who are the saints? Why do we pray for their intercession? Is it a right type of worship? Let us answer all these questions through the following paragraphs.

Jesus the only Mediator and Saints as our “Friends”

As we have seen in the last chapter the Orthodox Church believes in our communion with the departed. That means, the living can pray for the dead and the dead ones can pray for the living ones. In this background the Church teaches about the Communion of Saints. Saints are people who lived a meaningful life on this earth and those who used the talents given to them by God as honest stewards. During their life here they were holy people who gave spiritual leadership to their contemporaries by showing how one could face the challenges of daily life with the Grace of God. After death they do intercession for the living that ask for it. Among the group of saints we include the patriarchs of Israel (eg. Abraham), the prophets of Israel (e.g. Isaiah), apostles (e.g. Peter), martyrs (Stephen), teachers of the Ancient Church (e.g. Athanasius), venerable monks (eg. Antonius), soldiers who died for Christ (e.g. St.George) and kings who helped the Church in times of turmoil (e.g. Constantine). These are the people who outlived their age and who help the believers even in modern times, centuries after their death.

However, the Orthodox Church does not consider these saints as mediators between God and man, because *Jesus Christ is the only mediator* who gave his life for the salvation of humanity. Instead the saints surround us with a cloud of prayer, a cloud of the glory of God. This cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12,1) would not separate us from Christ but brings us nearer to Him. Sergius Bulgakov calls the saints as “our friends, who stand along with us to pray for us”. Their intercession would add to our prayers. They are our friends, who pray with us and aid us in our Christian ministry and in our communion with Christ. They guide us to have a good contact with Jesus, whom they adore in heaven. If Christ mediates for us, the saints intercedes our prayers.

The glorification of the saints is not founded on the special merits of the saints before God. Rather they by their active faith and love have become like God and show forth the Image of God in its power. The saints are holy because the God in whom they believed is “the Holy One”. In Isaiah 6,3-9 the prophet repeats the

word “holy” when he sees a vision and he finds himself unclean before the Holy One of Israel. During the inter-testament period the future savior of Israel was called “Holy One of Israel”. However, during the Old Testament period the holiness of the people was closely linked with their relationship with the Temple and its cult.

Saints as our Model for Deification

Whereas the *sacred* in the Old Testament was always related to the priestly cult, the New Testament puts the proper sphere of holiness in the prophetic life of the people of God. As per this understanding holiness implies a relationship with God, which is expressed not primarily through a cult but through the life in Jesus Christ with the power of the Holy Spirit. This is the life in which one has to “be perfect as the heavenly Father” (Mt. 5,48) as Jesus Christ asked his disciples to do. The Church is, however, the Body of Christ and those who are saved in the Church receive the power and the life of Christ. In a sense they become *christs* in Jesus Christ. Because Jesus said: “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn 14,23). St. Paul also expresses this indwelling of God with the following words: “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Gal.2,20).

There are three words in Greek, which could be translated as holy. They are: a) *hosios*, which intends a devout or a pious life, b) *hieros*, which gives the meaning of a priestly life; and c) *hagios*, which appears more often in the New Testament, and it means a holy, sacred, consecrated or sanctified life. In the writings of St. Paul the believers are called *hagioi* (saints) in the sense of the “called”, “faithful” or “elect ones” (Rom. 1,7; 1Cor. 1,2; 2 Cor. 1,1 etc.). It is a condition of acceptance at the parousia and of entering upon the inheritance of God’s people (Col.1,12). For St. Paul each believer is a *Temple of God* because the Holy Spirit dwells in him (1Cor. 3,17). One is sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once and for all (Heb. 10,10). Therefore he has to keep holiness in body and spirit (1Cor. 7,34). God disciplines him in order that he may win a share of his Holiness (Heb. 12,10). As an obedient child of the Holy One of Israel he will keep himself away from passions of former ignorance (1Pet. 1,14f). By his saintly life he can even sanctify the people with whom he lives (1Cor. 7,14).

Thus every believer is capable of attaining the bliss of holiness or sanctity. According to true Christian principles the greatness of man lies not in his being the highest biological existence as a rational or political animal, but as a “deified animal”. As per the Orthodox theology the ultimate aim of our spiritual life is called *deification*. It is a stage by which the believer comes face to face with God and he attains the illumination. We are not created up to the likeness of the created world, but we are made in the Image of the Creator. This Image of God was manifested in its ideal nature by the life of Jesus Christ among us. If through Adam we lose the glorious life by sinning and as a result wear “garments of skin”, i.e. a life of passions and pains, through Christ we are called to regain the eternal bliss.

Through baptism every believer is united with the spiritual senses and functions of the Body of Christ and makes them his own. St. Gregory of Nyssa tells in detail about the possibility of what we call Deification. He exhorts us to reverse the sequence of events, which threw Adam and Eve out of Eden. For example, he says, "In the beginning it was pleasure, engendered by deception, that began the fall (Gen 3,6). Then shame and fear followed the passion of pleasure, and afterwards Adam and Eve no longer dared to appear in the presence of the Creator but hid themselves in leaves and shadows (Gen 3,7-8). After this they were dressed in dead skins (Gen 3,21). And thus they were sent as exiles into this disease ridden land...If therefore we are to be released from this life and to be with Christ (Phil 1,23) it is appropriate that we should begin our return by starting out again from the last stage of our departure"(s. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*).

The Saints are people who realised this fact, thus led a disciplined life as per the teachings of the Word of God and thereby became *deified*. They are people who had a close relationship with Jesus, who showed us how to keep the *Image of God* without distortion. Such a life includes both the spiritual and ethical aspects. In some Indian religions there are five enemies, which a saint should win over. They are *Kaam* (immorality), *Krodh* (uncontrollable anger), *Lobh* (greed for money/wealth), *Moh* (love flesh/ material world), and *Ahankar* (haughtiness).

But how can we know that somebody possesses the quality of a saint? Special signs like miracles happened by the intercession of a saint will be a good testimony to prove his sainthood. In the Roman Catholic Church there is a definite practice for declaring some-body as a saint. If the Church finds that somebody could be called a saint, a special commission will be appointed to study his spiritual credentials. In this process of study there will be a *Satan's Advocate* who can raise as many objections as possible to hinder the procedure. If everything goes well he/ she will be called a *blessed one* in the first stage and only later on he will be *canonized*. For example, Mother Theresa has been declared as a *blessed* one and after some years she may be declared as a saint. The Orthodox Church is not so enthusiastic as the Roman Catholic or Russian Orthodox Church in *canonizing* people regularly. It maintains the view that there may be many people among the clergy and laity, who live a sanctified life. But in addition to the list of saints (of the Ancient Church) it has added very few people. The latest is the declaration of Vattasseril Thirumeni as a saint.

Adoration of God Veneration of Saints

When St. Gregorios of Parumala was declared as a saint in 1947 he became the first Indian Christian, who achieved such an honor. Within a short span of life (1848-1902) St. Gregorios was leading an exemplary life before his contemporaries. He became a bishop in his young life and still now he is the youngest among the Indian bishops as per the date of ordination. He was a good thinker, a progressive leader of the people and above all a man of prayer and

fasting. During his life time itself many people considered him as a saint. Even the senior bishops of Malankara found him as a model Christian. Within a short time after his demise people found that prayers made before his tomb were rewarded by God. Miracle stories began to be published one after the other. As in the case of all saints the Church began to address itself to him, asking his intercession before God instead of praying for the repose of his soul and for the pardon of his sins. And now 100 years after his removal from this planet has become a symbol of all Christian saints. Now millions of believers, irrespective of their caste or creed, march themselves to Parumala and bow their heads before his tomb, because they experience some or other blessing through his intercession.

However, I would like to quote a sentence from the famous Russian theologian Sergius Bulgakov here: “Sometimes veneration of saints is seen as approaching the pagan cult of heroes or demigods, even to be equivalent to pagan polytheism” (*The Orthodox Church*, page 119). This may happen at Parumala, because it is gradually becoming one of the leading pilgrim centers of India. Because of the increase in number of the pilgrims and their different religious backgrounds there is a possibility that some sort of pagan worship may be developed there and St. Gregorios may become a *Cultic Deity* at the end. If this happens, Parumala may give a wrong message to the Christian believers and after some decades it may be substituted by another pilgrim centre somewhere else. That is the lesson, which we learn from every pilgrim centre of the world. Therefore the true followers of Parumala Thirumeni have to keep the following principles in their mind:

1. The prayers are not to be addressed to Parumala Thirumeni. We adore God only and what we do at Parumala is venerating a saint.
2. The intercessory prayers to Parumala Thirumeni can't be substitutes for the Holy Qurbana. In some parishes of outer Kerala dioceses a tendency is gradually developing, by which people prefer to go to the Church on Friday evenings instead of Sunday mornings.
3. The overemphasis given to the veneration of relics should be avoided. It is against the Orthodox way of worshipping God.
4. All the Churches are same as far as the sacraments are concerned. Don't go to Parumala for conducting all the sacraments of your life. You will not get any special grace if a sacrament is conducted there. Instead the sacraments become showpieces there because of the increasing number of participants.
5. Don't make Parumala a market place. Remember what Jesus did at the Jerusalem Temple, when he found that people used that pilgrim centre for making money.

The Orthodox theology draws a clear line between the prayers addressed to God and those addressed to saints. We adore God only; only to him we ask for salvation and Grace. He only provides us everything as part of his providence. We pray to God the Father through Jesus Christ and we do this in the Holy Spirit. What we ask from Saint Mary or other saints is just their intercession to God. Therefore all the prayers, which show a tendency for putting saints in place of

God should be avoided. While we adore God, we venerate the saints. Veneration of saints is our response to their communion in our spiritual life.

Lessons we learn at Parumala

Nevertheless, it is important to think in this centenary Jubilee of his departure from this world: In what way can he help the young generation to have a meaningful spiritual life in the 3rd Millennium? The following are the important things, which we can get at Parumala:

1. We come face to face with a role model for young people who want to lead a good spiritual life. Thirumeni was a genius, a man who made a *spiritual career* (in the modern sense). But differentiates him from us is his unblemished life.
2. We learn how a man of flesh and blood overcomes temptations of this world. Let us ask ourselves: If he could do it, then why not we?
3. We get a confident faith in God when we touch the sands of Parumala. It is not like praying in other places. Since we encounter a man who got answers from God and who intercedes for us our faith becomes stronger while praying there.
4. We find a place of calmness for prayer and meditation. It gives us immense relief in a world of stress and strain.
5. We meet people of other status in health, wealth, faith etc. On the one hand we could identify our own strength and weakness. On the other hand we become open for a life in the community of bearing and sharing others' riches and needs.

Let us march to Parumala to meet the 100 year old saint. He will certainly illumine the youngsters of this age old Church of India. Even though the Church and tomb at Parumala belongs to the Orthodox Church, Parumala Thirumeni is the common father of three Christian communities of Kerala, viz. Orthodox, Jacobite and Syro-Malankara Churches. So let him be a saint for all Christians of Kerala. One thing is clear: we can not hide this illumined saint of our Church; he is becoming a light to the nations.