

VENERATION OF THE SAINTS

To venerate means to publicly acknowledge someone's virtues or good deeds. The person may be alive at the time, but mostly veneration is done after a person passes away. Veneration of the saints has very strong Biblical roots and is well steeped into Christian tradition.

We have many Biblical examples of veneration of the saints and I would like to share some of them with you.

Perhaps one of the Oldest instances of veneration is found in an ancient book of the Old Testament, the Book of Job. Here we find Job venerated by none other than God Almighty, Job 1:8 And the LORD said unto Satan, Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil?

The Book of Deuteronomy venerates Moses the Prophet, Deut 34:10 And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face,

The Book of the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach has a whole section at the end devoted entirely to the veneration of the saints of the Old Testament,

sirach 44:16 Enoch pleased the Lord, and was translated, being an example of repentance to all generations.

sirach 44:17-18 Noah was found perfect and righteous; in the time of wrath he was taken in exchange [for the world;] therefore was he left as a remnant unto the earth, when the flood came.

An everlasting covenant was made with him, that all flesh should perish no more by the flood.

sirach 44:19-20 Abraham was a great father of many people: in glory was there none like unto him; Who kept the law of the most High, and was in covenant with him: he established the covenant in his flesh; and when he was proved, he was found faithful.

sirach 46:11-12 And concerning the judges, every one by name, whose heart went not a whoring, nor departed from the Lord, let their memory be blessed. Let their bones flourish out of their place, and let the name of them that were honoured be continued upon their children.

The New Testament has many examples of the veneration of the saints, St. Paul speaks about the cloud of witnesses in very high regard,

Heb 11:32-38 And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets:

They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

The Gospel according to Luke gives us two marvellous examples of veneration,

Luke 1:28 And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.

Luke 1:42-45 And (Elisabeth) spake out with a loud voice, and said, Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For, lo, as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in mine ears, the babe leaped in my womb for joy. And blessed is she that believed: for there shall be a performance of those things which were told her from the Lord.

Perhaps the most impressive example is the Lord himself venerating John the Baptist,

Matt 11:11 Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist:

In another instant the Lord not only venerates the woman who anointed him, but also decrees that a memorial shall be made to her,

Matt 26:13 Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.

Here we have a direct order from Christ not only to venerate the saints, but also to commemorate them in our public worship. This is why we say at the beginning of the Commemoration of the Saints in the Liturgy, "As this O Lord is the command of Thine only begotten Son that we share in the commemoration of Thy saints." It's a command of the Lord!

We have ample proof that the Church remained faithful to the command of the Lord, to venerate and commemorate the saints and I would like to share with you some examples.

Cyprian, a North African Bishop who lived in the first half of the third century (200-258) wrote a letter of recommendation for someone who was going to be ordained a deacon,

"He is advancing in the footsteps of his kindred; he rivals his parents and relations in equal honours of divine condescension. His grandmother, Celerina, was some time since crowned with martyrdom. Moreover, his paternal and maternal uncles, Laurentius and Egnatius, who themselves also were once warring in the camps of the world, but were true and spiritual soldiers of God, casting down the devil by the confession of Christ, merited palms and crowns from the Lord by their illustrious passion. We always offer sacrifices for them, as you remember, as often as we celebrate the passions and days of the martyrs in the annual commemoration"¹

You see, the only references he gives to this candidate is that his grand mother and two uncles were martyrs! Note also that he says that the church commemorates them annually by offering the sacrifice or oblation in their name.

Saint Gregory the wonder worker who is mentioned in our commemoration of the saints, left us some wonderful examples of the veneration of the saints especially the holy Virgin Mary.

"She proved herself prudent truly in all things; neither has any woman been born like her in all generations. She was not like the primeval virgin Eve, who, keeping holiday alone in paradise, with thoughtless mind, unguardedly hearkened to the word of the serpent, the author of all evil, and thus became depraved in the thoughts of her mind; and through her that deceiver, discharging his poison and refusing death with it, brought it into the whole world; and in virtue of this has arisen all the trouble of the saints. But in the holy Virgin alone is the fall of that (first mother) repaired."²

This comparison between the first Eve and the Virgin, the second Eve was very popular

¹Epistle XXXIII - Cyprian to the clergy and people about the ordination of Aurelius, Celerinus and Numedicus

²First homily on the Annunciation to the holy Virgin Mary.

among the Fathers. In the same homily, he compares the Virgin to the saints of the Old Testament, showing her to be much greater than they,

“Thou knowest, O Mary, things kept hid from the patriarchs and prophets. Thou hast learned, O virgin, things which were kept concealed till now from the angels. Thou hast heard, O purest one, things of which even the choir of inspired men was never deemed worthy. Moses, and David, and Isaiah, and Daniel, and all the prophets, prophesied of Him; but the manner they knew not. Yet thou alone, O purest virgin, art now made the recipient of things of which all these were kept in ignorance, and thou dost learn the origin of them.”

He continues to venerate the Virgin extolling her virtues,

“For of all generations she alone has risen as a virgin pure in body and in spirit; and she alone bears Him who bears all things on His word. Nor is it only the beauty of this holy one in body that calls forth our admiration, but also the innate virtue of her soul. Wherefore also the angels addressed her first with the salutation, “Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee;”

And since the angels venerate her, St. Gregory invites all the faithful to join in venerating the holy Virgin,

“Come, therefore, beloved brethren, and let us take up the angelic strain, and to the utmost of our ability return the due meed of praise, saying, "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee!" For it is thine truly to rejoice, seeing that the grace of God, as he knows, has chosen to dwell with thee--the Lord of glory dwelling with the handmaiden; "He that is fairer than the children of men " with the fair virgin; He who sanctifies all things with the undefiled.”

The ancients saw many types and symbols of the Virgin in the Old Testament, one of these is the Arc of the Covenant,

Come, then, ye too, dearly beloved, and let us chant the melody which has been taught us by the inspired harp of David, and say, "Arise, O Lord, into Thy rest; Thou, and the ark of Thy sanctuary." For the holy Virgin is in truth an ark, wrought with gold both within and without, that has received the whole treasury of the sanctuary.

Like many of the ancient fathers, St. Gregory uses many metaphors to describe the Virgin,

She is the ever-blooming paradise of incorruptibility, wherein is planted the tree that giveth life, and that furnisheth to all the fruits of immortality. She is the boast and glory of virgins, and the exultation of mothers. She is the sure support of the believing, and the succourer⁽³⁾ of the pious. She is the vesture of light, and the domicile of virtue.⁽⁴⁾ She is the ever-flowing fountain, wherein the water of life sprang and produced the Lord's incarnate manifestation. She is the monument of righteousness; and all who become lovers of her, and set their affections on virgin-like ingenuousness and purity, shall enjoy the grace of angels.³

Saint Gregory even tells us that all creatures venerate the holy Virgin with us,

³Gregory the wonder worker: second homily on the annunciation

Thy praise, O most holy Virgin, surpasses all laudation, by reason of the God who received the flesh and was born man of thee. To thee every creature, of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth, offers the meet offering of honour. For thou hast been indeed set forth as the true cherubic throne. Thou shinest as the very brightness of light in the high places of the kingdoms of intelligence; where the Father, who is without beginning,, and whose power thou hadst overshadowing thee, is glorified; where also the Son is worshipped, whom thou didst bear according to the flesh; and where the Holy Spirit is praised, who effected in thy womb the generation of the mighty King.⁴

In another homily, St. Gregory gives us his own meditations on what the Lord God might have told the Angel Gabriel, when he ordered him to announce the Good News to her,

Go thou, therefore, to the Virgin Mary. Pass thou on to that animate city whereof the prophet spake in these words: 'Glorious things were spoken of thee, O city of God.' Proceed, then, to my rational paradise; proceed to the gate of the east; proceed to the place of sojourn that is worthy of my word; proceed to that second heaven on earth; proceed to the light cloud, and announce to it the shower of my coming; proceed to the sanctuary prepared for me; proceed to the hall of the incarnation; proceed to the pure chamber of my generation after the flesh. Speak in the ears of my rational ark, so as to prepare for me the accesses of hearing. But neither disturb nor vex the soul of the virgin. Manifest thyself in a manner befitting that sanctuary, and hail her first with the voice of gladness.⁵

Note the beautiful metaphors the Church Fathers used to describe the holy Virgin, “the city of God” “the rational Paradise” “the gate of the east” “the second heaven” “the light cloud” ...

Now St. Gregory meditates on what might the angel Gabriel have told God,

But how can Mary sustain the fire of the divinity? Thy throne blazes with the illumination of its splendour, and can the virgin receive Thee without being consumed?" Then the Lord says: "Yea surely, if the fire in the wilderness injured the bush, my coming will indeed also injure Mary;⁶

Now you know why we call the holy Virgin “the fiery Bush that Moses had seen in the wilderness”

Not only was the holy Virgin venerated by the Church, but the martyrs were also venerated in a lavish way by the Fathers of the Church. Here are some excerpts from “The genuine acts of Peter, Archbishop of Alexandria” St. Peter is commemorated in our Liturgy as “The martyr among the priests” Sometimes also we call him seal of the martyrs.

⁴Gregory the wonder worker: second homily on the annunciation

⁵Gregory the wonder worker: third homily on the annunciation

⁶Ibid

Were all the limbs of my body to be turned into tongues, and all the joints of my limbs to utter articulate sounds, it would noways be sufficient to express who, how great and how good, was our most blessed Father Peter, Archbishop of Alexandria.

After apologizing about his own insufficiency to give due praise to this great saint, the writer whose name is Anastasius, the librarian of the Roman Church at the time, continues,

Alexandria is a city of exceeding magnitude, which holds the first place not only among the Egyptians, but the Thebans also and the Libyans, who are at no great distance from Egypt.(4) A cycle of two hundred and eighty-five years from the incarnation of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ had rolled round, when the venerable Theonas, the bishop of this city, by an ethereal flight, mounted upwards to the celestial kingdoms. To him Peter, succeeding at the helm of the Church, was by all the clergy and the whole Christian community appointed bishop, the sixteenth in order from Mark the Evangelist, who was also archbishop of the city. He in truth, like Phosphor rising among the stars, shining forth with the radiance of his sacred virtues, most magnificently governed the citadel of the faith. Inferior to none who had gone before him in his knowledge of Holy Scripture, he nobly applied himself to the advantage and instruction of the Church; being of singular prudence, and in all things perfect, a true priest and victim of God, he watchfully laboured night and day in every sacerdotal care.

Note how this Roman Catholic acknowledged St Peter as the sixteenth successor of St. Mark. He then continues to tell how the authorities, unable to seize the great saint had decided to kill the whole Christian congregation, and how the saint gave up himself voluntarily to die for his flock,

This most sagacious pontiff^d then, perceiving the cruel device of the tribunes, who, in order to bring about his death, were willing to put to the sword the whole Christian multitude that was present, was unwilling that they should together with him taste the bitterness of death, but as a faithful servant imitating his Lord and Saviour, whose acts were even as his words, "The good Shepherd giveth His life for the sheep," prompted by his piety, called to him an elder of those who there waited on his words, and said to him: "Go to the tribunes who seek to kill me, and say to them, Cease ye from all your anxiety, lo! I am ready and willing of mine own accord to give myself to them.

Note how the Librarian of the Roman Church at the time calls St Peter a Pontiff or pope, a word used only to describe the head of the church of Alexandria from the middle of the third century until the ninth century, when the Bishop of Rome started to use it. He goes on with the story,

But they took him up and brought him to the place called Bucolia, where the holy St. Mark underwent martyrdom for Christ. Astonishing is the virtue of the saints! As they carried him along, and beheld his great constancy and strength of mind when in peril of death, on a sudden, a fear and trembling came upon them to such a degree, that none of them could look steadfastly into his face. Moreover, the blessed martyr entreated them to allow him to go to the tomb of St. Mark, for he desired to commend himself to his patronage. But they from confusion, looking down on the ground, said, "Do as you wish, but make haste." Therefore approaching the burial-place of the evangelist, he embraced it, and speaking to him as if he were yet alive in the flesh, and able to hear him, he prayed after this manner: "O father most honourable, thou evangelist of the only-begotten Saviour, thou witness of His passion, thee did Christ choose, who is the Deliverer of us all, to be the first pontiff and pillar of this See; to thee did He commit the task of proclaiming the faith throughout the whole

of Egypt and its boundaries. Thou, I say, hast watchfully fulfilled that ministry of our human salvation which was intrusted to thee; as the reward of this labour thou hast doubtless obtained the martyr's palm. Hence, not without justice, art thou counted worthy to be saluted evangelist and bishop. Thy successor was Anianus, and the rest in descending series down to the most blessed Theonas, who disciplined my infancy, and deigned to educate my heart. To whom I, a sinner and unworthy, have been beyond my deservings appointed as successor by an hereditary descent. And, what is best of all, lo! the largeness of the divine bounty has granted me to become a martyr of His precious cross and joyful resurrection, giving to my devotion the sweet and pleasant odour of His passion, that I should be made meet to pour out unto Him the offering of my blood. And because the time of making this offering is now instant, pray for me that, the divine power assisting me, I may be meet to reach the goal of this agony with a stout heart and ready faith. I commend also to thy glorious patronage the flock of Christ's worshippers which was committed to my pastoral care; to thee, I say, I with prayers commend it, who are approved as the author and guardian of all preceding and subsequent occupiers of this pontifical chair, and who, holding its first honours, art the successor not of man, but of the God-man, Christ Jesus."

See how old is the tradition of asking for the intercession of the saints? St. Peter considers St Mark as responsible for the See or the pontifical chair occupied by him and by all who shall come after him. We are told that at times Pope Kyrillos refused to sit on the Pontifical throne, and when his disciple asks him why, he would reply, "Can't you see St. Mark sitting there? The writer then tells us what happened after the martyrdom of the great Saint,

The faithful of Christ, therefore, remembering all this with pious devotion, brought his sacred body, and caused it to sit upon the episcopal throne. As much joy and exultation arose then to heaven from the people, as if they were attending him alive and in the body. Then embalming him with sweet spices, they wrapped him in silken coverings; what each one of them could be the first to bring, this he accounted to himself as greatest gain. Then carrying palms, the tokens of victory, with flaming tapers, with sounding hymns, and with fragrant incense, celebrating the triumph of his heavenly victory, they laid down the sacred relics, and buried them in the cemetery which had been long ago constructed by him, where too from henceforth, and even to this day, miraculous virtues cease not to show themselves. Pious vows, forsooth, are received with a propitious hearing; the health of the impotent is restored; the expulsion of unclean spirits testifies to the martyr's merits

This tradition of seating the departed Pope on his throne is still practised in our church. Note also how he testifies to the many miracles of cure and exorcisms that came from the relics.

Sometimes we think that in our church we overdo this veneration thing, but, if you bear with me for a few more moments I will give you an example of how bold were the Fathers in their veneration of the saints especially the holy Virgin Mary, Methodius, who lived in the second half of the third century (260-312) left us this beautiful "Oration concerning Simeon and Anna on the day they met in the temple."

For if to the ark, which was the image and type of thy sanctity, such honour was paid of God that to no one but to the priestly order only was the access to it open, or ingress allowed to behold it, the veil separating it off, and keeping the vestibule as that of a queen, what, and what sort of veneration is due to thee from us who are of creation the least, to thee who art indeed a queen; to thee, the living ark of God, the Lawgiver; to thee, the heaven that contains Him who can be contained of none?

That bush which could not be touched,(9) which beforehand shadowed forth thy figure endowed with divine majesty, bare God without being consumed, who manifested Himself to the prophet just so far as He willed to be seen.

The golden pot also, as a most certain type, preserved the manna contained in it, which in other cases was changed day by day, unchanged, and keeping fresh for ages.

Blessed art thou, all-blessed, and to be desired of all. Blessed of the Lord is thy name, full of divine grace, and grateful exceedingly to God, mother of God, thou that givest light to the faithful.

Note how he calls her the golden pot as we do in our midnight praise, and also Mother of God. This is amazing, since it was only after the third ecumenical council that the word Theotokos or Mother of God used in describing the holy Virgin Mary, but here is a man who died before even the first Ecumenical council was convened calling the Virgin Mother of God.

Thou hast lent to God, who stands in need of nothing, that flesh which He had not, in order that the Omnipotent might become that which it was his good pleasure to be. What is more splendid than this? What than this is more sublime? He who fills earth and heaven,(14) whose are all things, has become in need of thee, for thou hast lent to God that flesh which He had not.

Hail! hail! mother and handmaid of God. Hail! hail! thou to whom the great Creditor of all is a debtor. We are all debtors to God, but to thee He is Himself indebted.

If I would say this today, I would be called a heretic! But look how bold they were in venerating the Virgin even then in the third century.

For the hymns which we offer to thee, O thou most holy and admirable habitation of God, are no merely useless and ornamental words. Nor, again, is thy spiritual laudation mere secular trifling, or the shoutings of a false flattery, O thou who of God art praised;

Note that even that early, hymns were already in use in venerating the holy Virgin. We were told that these hymns started to be written after the third ecumenical council. So sweet is his justification of this praise by us mortals by the fact that she is praised by God.

Hail to thee for ever, thou virgin mother of God, our unceasing joy, for unto thee do I again return. Thou art the beginning of our feast; thou art its middle and end; the pearl of great price that belongeth unto the kingdom; the fat of every victim, the living altar of the bread of life. Hail, thou treasure of the love of God. Hail, thou fount of the Son's love for man. Hail, thou overshadowing mount(5) of the Holy Ghost.

Wherefore, we pray thee, the most excellent among women, who boastest in the confidence of thy maternal honours, that thou wouldest unceasingly keep us in remembrance. O holy mother of God, remember us, I say, who make our boast in thee, and who in hymns august celebrate the memory, which will ever live, and never fade away. And do thou also, O honoured and venerable Simeon, thou earliest host of our holy religion, and teacher of the resurrection of the faithful, be our patron and advocate with that Saviour God, whom thou wast deemed worthy to receive into thine arms.

See how he asks the Mother of God to remember us, and see how he asks Simeon the elder to be our patron and advocate with our Saviour since he was deemed worthy to carry him in his arms.

May we be steadfast in our tradition of venerating the saints and asking for their prayers, their protection, their patronage and their advocacy on our behalf and glory be to God forever. Amen.