

# **Praying about the Saints**

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**The Catholic Church has a long and important tradition of praying to the saints. We erect images in our churches and in our homes. We place holy cards inside our prayer books. We wear scapulars and medals around our necks. We designate saints as patrons for certain needs and pray for their intercession accordingly: St. Jude for helpless causes, St. Anthony for lost articles, St. Peregrine for the healing of those with cancer. We pray to St. Joseph for the sale of a house and bury his statue till he responds.**

**As lively as we Catholics find these devotions, it sometimes surprises people that at mass Catholics address nearly every prayer to God the Father, a few to Christ, but no mass requires a prayer to Mary or to the saints.**

**Still, because we value the saints, we mention them at mass. I've called this talk "Praying about the Saints" because that is what we do at the eucharist. Outside mass we have customs for praying to saints, but this talk dwells on what you experience at mass. I'll speak first about the four main eucharistic prayers and the confiteor - words you may hear at any mass. Then I'll share three sample collects - or opening prayers - that the priest may say once a year on a saint's day.**

## **The Eucharistic Prayers and Confiteor**

**First, the eucharistic prayers. Mary is mentioned in every eucharistic prayer because she is the saint par excellence. She is the mother of God and a model for discipleship. I will start with Prayer II, which is the most popular eucharistic prayer because it is the shortest eucharistic prayer. Near the end, after we have prayed for the dead, we pray for ourselves, asking that we may be "coheirs to eternal life" "with the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God." We do not pray to Mary; the entire eucharistic prayer is addressed to the Father - except for the memorial acclamation that you sing to Christ. "We proclaim your death, O Lord," for example. But we pray about Mary. We believe that she is an heir to eternal life, and we pray that God will have mercy on us to make us coheirs "with" her.**

**You find something similar in Eucharistic Prayer III, which asks the Father "that we may obtain an inheritance with [the] elect, especially with the most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God." In Prayer IV we pray "that we may enter into a heavenly inheritance with the Blessed Virgin Mary." Even Eucharistic Prayer I, referring to Mary and many other saints, says, "we ask that through their merits and prayers, in all things we may be defended by your protecting help." It prays not exactly that we may enter heaven but that the saints may help defend us from what may keep us from getting there.**

**Eucharistic Prayer I names more saints than any other, grouped in two sets. The priest may omit most of them, so you may not often hear their names.**

The first set starts with Mary, of course. Pope St. John XXIII added Joseph to the list in November 1962, right after the Second Vatican Council opened and more than a year before it proposed any of its own liturgical reforms. St. John XXIII showed that the liturgy can change, and who was going to argue with adding St. Joseph? Joseph was the patron saint of many of the Eastern Rites, and he was the baptismal patron of St. John XXIII, Giuseppe Roncalli. Pope Francis added Joseph to more eucharistic prayers in 2013. After Mary and Joseph, Eucharistic Prayer I lists twelve apostles, though Judas is omitted and Paul stands in. The sequence of their names does not match any listing in the gospels, but largely follows the order of their feasts in the old calendar. Then come twelve martyrs: the first six were bishops (beginning with Linus, Cletus and Clement), five of them were popes. The next two were clerics, and the last four were laymen. All but one of them lived in the city of Rome, and that explains how they got into this prayer, which was composed there. Cyprian, the outlier, came from northern Africa, but was well known in Rome.

A second set of saints comes near the end of Eucharistic Prayer I. It starts with John the Baptist, who parallels Mary's position in the first set. Then come seven more men: three from the bible (Stephen, Matthias and Barnabas) and four more male martyrs in chronological order (starting with Ignatius). Seven women martyrs then parallel those men: three of them lived in Rome (Felicity, Agnes and Cecilia), two in Sicily (Agatha and Lucy), one in northern Africa (Perpetua) and another in Sirmium in modern day Serbia (Anastasia). All of them had followings in Rome. One theory is that Perpetua got into the list by accident. There are two early saints named Felicity, one from Rome and one from Carthage, north Africa. The one in Carthage was a slave to the matron Perpetua (both of them martyred for the faith when they were catechumens). On their feast day in February they are listed as Perpetua and Felicity, the slave coming last. But in this eucharistic prayer, their names are in reverse order. Perhaps the compilers of this prayer intended to include the Roman Saint Felicity, but somebody thought it was the African Saint Felicity and erroneously tucked that plucky Perpetua into the list that used to include only Italians.

The earliest record we have of our first eucharistic prayer comes from the fourth century, and that version did not include the names of these saints; they were added some centuries later. So when the Second Vatican Council authorized new eucharistic prayers, these respected the earlier custom of limiting the names of the saints. This also expressed ecumenical sensitivity because other Christians do not share the same enthusiasm for saints as we Catholics do. In Prayer III, the priest may add the patron saint of the parish or the saint of the day, but otherwise the eucharistic prayers focused on other matters, praising God for the wonderful deeds of history and asking that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ.

The confiteor is one option for the penitential act at the beginning of mass. In it we speak in the first person singular, "I confess," to God and to our brothers and sisters, and we address Mary, the angels and saints; we ask everyone to pray for us. It's the only time at mass when we may actually address the saints. Aware

of our sin, we seek intercession from those who behold the face of God. Prior to the Council we also addressed Saint Michael the Archangel, Saint John the Baptist, and the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul. But as in the eucharistic prayers, the names of the saints in the confiteor have been streamlined for clarity.

## Three Collects

Now, I'd like to tell you about some of the collects at mass on the day we honor individual saints. These collects are short prayers; people rarely pay attention to them. But if you know the biography of the saint, the collect comes to life.

I'm giving you just three examples, all from the month of November. The General Roman Calendar lists the saints honored at mass and in the Liturgy of the Hours. The calendar does not include every saint. All the saints are listed in a book called the Roman Martyrology - though it includes everyone, not just martyrs. Christopher, for example, no longer appears in the General Roman Calendar with his own day for mass, but he still is among the saints in the Martyrology. He did not get kicked out of heaven. The Martyrology was updated after Vatican II, and then updated again a few years ago. Since then, even more canonizations have happened, so the new book is already out of date. We do not yet have an English translation of the Martyrology, but the work on it has begun. That work has uncovered some mistakes in the Latin, so it is taking a while.

In addition to the general list of saints' feast days for mass, each conference of bishops may add its own. The people of Ireland, for example, have more saints than we do in the US. Just for the month of November, for example, their bishops have added Saints Willibrord, Laurence O'Toole, Colman of Cloyne and Fergal of Salzburg. In November we have three more, so this month we nearly keep up with the Irish with Saints Frances Xavier Cabrini and Rose Philippine Duchesne, as well as Blessed Miguel Agustín Pro.

For the collects in this talk, I've chosen November because we're in that month, and, figuring those of you who follow daily mass would like to hear about a saint falling on an upcoming weekday, I've eliminated the ones who fall on weekends this year: Leo the Great, Margaret of Scotland, Gertrude, Elizabeth of Hungary, Clement, Columban, Miguel Agustín, the Vietnamese Martyrs and Andrew. The rest are still too many to speak about after a dinner like this. Martin of Tours, Josaphat, Albert the Great, and Catherine of Alexandria are all terrific, but somebody has to get cut from this talk, or you'll never get to the bathroom. I'm choosing the remaining three - Charles Borromeo, Rose Philippine Duchesne and Cecilia - because Charles is such a great guy, Rose Philippine has local connections, and Cecilia is the patron of church musicians. I've drawn the following biographical sketches from Butler's *Lives of the Saints*.

Charles Borromeo, born in 1538, was a bright kid and a stutterer. When his uncle became Pope Paul IV, he made Charles a cardinal at the age of 21. A few months later he named the 22-year old Charles the bishop of Milan and gave him several other jobs. When that pope died, Pius IV reconvened the Council of Trent for its final session, and Charles took part in it for the first time. He helped draft

the catechism, one of the first fruits of that council. Charles also helped reform the liturgical books and even commissioned a new musical setting of the mass from a composer he admired, a guy named Palestrina. In Milan Charles encouraged people to go to Mass and the sacraments, educated and reformed his corrupt clergy, and convened a provincial council. He founded seminaries, arranged priest retreats, promoted confessions, and created the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine or CCD to teach the catechism. He cared for the poor and the sick, becoming an absolute model for pastoral ministry. Let us pray the collect that the missal positions for mass on November 4:

Preserve in the midst of your people,  
we ask, O Lord, the spirit with which you filled  
the Bishop Saint Charles Borromeo,  
that your Church may be constantly renewed  
and, by conforming herself to the likeness of Christ,  
may show his face to the world.

Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.

**Rose Philippine Duchesne was born in Grenoble in 1769. She grew up in a comfortable home where she developed an imperious personality. She got interested in religious life and the missions, especially when she heard a visiting Jesuit talk about native American Indians. She joined the Visitation Sisters in Grenoble but the French Revolution closed the convent. When the Vatican signed a concordat with Napoleon, she tried but failed to restore her community and so joined the Society of the Sacred Heart. William Dubourg, the bishop of the Diocese of Louisiana and the Floridas, which included all of Missouri at that time, recruited Rose Philippine and four other sisters to come to New Orleans. From there they boated up the Mississippi River to St. Louis in 1818. They lodged in St. Charles and opened the first free school west of the Mississippi. In Florissant Rose Philippine built a shrine to John Francis Regis, a French saint she admired and later the patron of the first log cabin church in Kansas City. Rose Philippine opened a novitiate and then a second house in Grand Coteau, Louisiana, before returning to Missouri. She crossed what is now this diocese to enter Sugar Creek in Linn County, Kansas, and begin a mission to the Potawatomi Indians. However, the language was too difficult, and her strength began to fail. She returned to St. Charles, where she died in 1852 at the age of 83. Let us now pray the collect for her mass, which may be celebrated on the anniversary of her death, November 18.**

Almighty God, who filled the heart of Saint Rose Philippine  
Duchesne

with charity and missionary zeal,  
and gave her the desire  
to make you known among all peoples,  
grant us to follow her way  
and fill us with that same love and zeal  
to extend your kingdom to the ends of the earth.  
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,  
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.

**Cecilia lived in third century Rome. The acts of her martyrdom were not recorded until the fifth century and are therefore not reliable. Imagine how difficult it would be for you to give an accurate testimony about someone in your family who died without any other records in the year 1819. All we have is a legend, but Cecilia surely existed and remains popular, so she appears in the calendar. Cecilia was raised as a Christian and wanted to devote her life to God, but her father betrothed her to a pagan named Valerian. As her wedding day dawned, Cecilia prayed for help by singing to God “in her heart” - and this is what made her patron of church musicians. After her song she told Valerian that if he tried to consummate the marriage, the angel that protected her would hurt him. As proof, she said he would see the same angel if he got baptized. Valerian believed her and got Pope Urban I to baptize him. When Valerian returned, he saw next to Cecilia an angel who then placed a crown of flowers on each of their heads. Later, Valerian was martyred for burying the bodies of Christian martyrs, and Cecilia buried his body. Then pagan authorities asked her to sacrifice to false gods. She refused and was sentenced to death. They tried suffocating her in a steam bath. She survived. An executioner took a sword to her neck. She survived three more days and died at her home, which is now the site of the Church of St. Cecilia in Trastevere in Rome. The legend is inspiring, but because it has little verifiable about it, the collect for St. Cecilia’s Day on November 22 is remarkable. It implies that the facts are unknown, but it reminds us that stories can still inspire. Let us pray.**

O God, who gladden us each year  
with the feast day of your handmaid Saint Cecilia,  
grant, we pray,  
that what has been devoutly handed down concerning her  
may offer us examples to imitate  
and proclaim the wonders worked in his servants

by Christ your Son.

Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, for ever and ever.

## **Conclusion**

**The Catholic Church's devotion to the saints is well known and well practiced. The Roman Missal retains references to the saints in the heart of every mass, and honors them with special collects on the days assigned to their memory. Those who participate in these liturgies of Church, giving thanks and praise to God when they pray about the saints, also derive inspiration. It is the hope of every one of us that even if no one remembers our lives centuries after we die, God will remember us and give us company among the Saints.**