

October 26, 2003

St. Demetrios of Thessaloniki

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

When the saints on earth beseech the Lord, new things begin to happen. First, they happen in heaven, and then they happen on earth, so that God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. This is the meaning of intercession.

To appreciate the correct context and dimensions of the intercession of the saints, it is useful to consult the picture of it that the Bible provides. In that picture, intercession truly commences, not on earth, but in heaven, and it begins, not with speech, but with silence. "When he opened the seventh seal," says our definitive source on this subject, "there was silence in heaven for about a half hour" (Revelation 8:1). Why silence in heaven? Perhaps that silence at the seventh seal corresponds to the divine rest of the seventh day (Genesis 2:2; Hebrews 4:1-11).

One recalls also the ominous silence that preceded the unleashing of God's judgment on Egypt at the time of the Exodus. When did God's almighty Word leap down from heaven "as a fierce man of war into the land of destruction," visiting Egypt with ten plagues? It happened, we are told, "while all things were in quiet silence" (Wisdom of Solomon 18:14-16). Here in Revelation as well, there is deep silence just prior to the falling of the final plagues, when God's trumpets of judgment are sounded (Revelation 8:6-12).

Likewise, the intercession begins, not with men, but with angels. Seven of them, actually. St. John portrays the scene: "And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and to them were given seven trumpets" (Revelation 8:2). Seven angels? Yes. In fact, one of those seven had introduced himself earlier in the Bible: "I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels, which present the prayers of the saints, and which go in and out before the glory of the Holy One" (Tobit 12:15; cf. 1 Enoch 20:1-7). These are the angels of the intercession, permanent ministers before the Throne of God.

These holy seven are soon going to blow their seven trumpets. Why? Because incense is about to be burned, and the burning of

incense is to be accompanied by the sounding of trumpets (2 Chronicles 29:27-28). Indeed, there is quite a bit of this incense to be burned:

"Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand" (Revelation 8:3-4).

The prayers of the saints, offered on earth, are ennobled and enriched by their incorporation into the heavenly worship. These earthly prayers ascend to God in communion with the prayers offered in heaven by "the spirits of just men made perfect" (Hebrews 12:23), symbolized in the twenty-four elders in whose hands are "golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints" (Revelation 5:8).

It is from the incorporation of these earthly prayers into the heavenly worship that things will now begin to happen on earth: "Then the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire from the altar, and threw it to the earth. And there were noises, thunderings, lightnings, and an earthquake. So the seven angels, who had the seven trumpets, prepared to sound" (8:5-6).

Things change on earth in response to what happens in heaven. It is from God's very altar that the divine judgment is poured upon human history. Corresponding to the seven trumpets that brought down the walls of Jericho, that ancient city which threatened Israel's full entrance into the Promised Land, the seven angels will now sound seven trumpets introducing the divine intervention in the affairs of men (8:7-21; 11:15-19). The course of history is altered. This is what happens when the saints pray.

Thus, the biblical teaching on the intercession of the saints is inseparable from the Church's faith in the communion of the saints. This creedal confession testifies that all worship is one, whether in heaven or on earth. To speak to God, to praise and bless Him, is to join our voices to a much larger liturgy that includes the heavenly Jerusalem, an innumerable company of angels, the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are registered in heaven, and Jesus the Mediator of the

new covenant (Hebrews 12:22-24). This communion of the saints is what causes the earth to change, and the things that happen thereon. Such is the meaning of intercession.

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