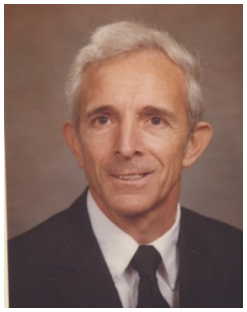
Do You Believe in the Communion of Saints?
by Paul Landolfi, SM



Brother Carmine Annunziata (Kenya) emailed me and jokingly complained: "Why wasn't I listed among the saints? Is it just for the few?" He was referring to an earlier article in which I had reviewed the situation of our fourteen Marianists whose cause is before the Roman congregation. Brother Carmine believes in the communion of saints. I think his statement hit the nail on the head. He is simply echoing the call of our Blessed Founder, Father Chaminade, who tells us, We must be a nation of saints!

I cannot count the number of times I've heard Brother Carmine tell brothers and students, "*You're a saint*!" when they had done something true, helpful, or good. This is what holiness is—love of God and love of our brothers and sisters, fellow pilgrims on the way to eternity. It is right and just to place our "saints" in a special category, give them special honor, pray through their intercession, but we should never forget the "unknown Marianist Family saints" who lived and died in the presence of God. We do not say much about them, but they are in heaven with God, and they are really on our side.

Brother Carmine reminds us, with a twinkle in his eye, that by our Baptism, dedication to Mary, and God's rich mercy, we share the very life of God. If St. Paul called his fellow Christians, "Saints," then we can certainly do the same.

Every day, people are asking us to pray for special intentions . Listen to the Prayer of the Faithful at Mass. Here are brothers and sisters asking all of us to pray for their special needs. We, united with Jesus and filled with love for them, pray to Jesus and ask him to show us his mercy. We pray for others, but we are still pilgrims on the way to heaven, so we turn to our brothers and sisters in heaven to join their prayers to ours.

Here is an abridged article on the communion of saints that might encourage us to pray to God through the intercession of the saints in our Marianist Family.

This Vital Fellowship

Vatican II chose to express the doctrine of the Communion of Saints in a very descriptive phrase – *this vital fellowship.* The Communion of Saints is not an abstraction but a lived reality. Living is what this vital fellowship is all about. Another translation names it *a living communion.* This is about persons, living and dead, whom we believe do not merely pass into nothingness but continue to relate to one another in varying ways.

Formerly, we spoke of the Church Triumphant, the Church Suffering, and the Church Militant to designate the communion of saints. Today we speak of the Pilgrim Church, the Expectant Church and the Heavenly Church. While this focuses on our horizontal sharing with each other, it really is dependent on the vertical dimension—our union with Jesus, our Head. This vital fellowship will be effective to the degree that there is first a profound union with Jesus.

This vital fellowship is very clearly seen in the Eucharist, where the entire Church membership (those in heaven, those in Purgatory, those on earth) gather in unity with each other and all are united with Jesus the Lord . His Body and Blood nourishes us; His Holy Spirit animates us. This is what the Church, now on pilgrimage, is meant to be.

How did this doctrine develop? Only in the fourth century was the term communion of saints first used. The Virgin Mary was revered as the first believer and the perfect disciple. Apostles and those closest to the Lord were always held in honor. During the persecutions the martyrs were also seen as close to God. After death they were highly venerated and their relics preserved. Others sought their intercession. Gradually such reverence was shown for all who lived a holy life.

In chapter 5 (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*), "The Universal Call to Holiness," we realize that this vital fellowship encompasses the whole Church, earthly and heavenly. It is firmly rooted in the Incarnation, God becoming human and entering into fellowship with us in Christ. This fellowship with Christ is also the basis for our fellowship with all believers because we all share the same Life.

How do the various members of this fellowship interrelate? The abiding characteristic of this vital fellowship is love. Love will be forever. Even now on earth the love we share will outlast death. With this perspective it is evident that the love of the saints in glory is not less than it was on earth. But there is another factor. Their life is centered in God. God is the terminus of everything they experience. By its very nature their life is intercessory. They desire only what God wants, and God's will is that everything in heaven and on earth be subject to Christ and through Christ to the Father. To honor the saints is the best way to praise the God who glorifies them. To invoke them for their help is to ask them to exercise their love for us, something they have never ceased doing. They continually see us in God and continually beseech the Lord that his will may be accomplished in us as it has been in them.

There are some in this vital fellowship that are in special need of the supporting love of the others. These are those who have died, but for some reason or another, are not yet able to receive all the love that God wishes to bestow on them. They cannot help themselves. It is for the saints and for those who are still pilgrims to continually place them in God's love so that they may be

purified of every hindrance and receive the beatitude which God wishes for them and which they earnestly desire.

The faithful on earth, members of the pilgrim Church, live their lives each day desiring to be completely united with the Lord. He has set the conditions for this—love for one another as He has done. We are called to exercise mutual charity with our fellow pilgrims; pray for our brothers and sisters still awaiting the moment of glory; and venerate and call upon the saints with thanksgiving to God for all He has done for them.

When we consider this vital fellowship in terms of the sharing of love between the members, many of the apparent difficulties are resolved. The saints do not love less now that they share in the glory of the Risen Lord. There is no hoarding, fighting for position, envy. In Christ they belong to each other. Continually they desire what God Himself desires – that all may be one in God.

So we turn to our " Marianist saints." They are the first and principal members of our Marianist Family. We turn to them and ask for help , both in large needs and in small ones.

As I finished the first draft of this presentation, I was able to watch the canonization of St. Junipero Serra on television. It was beautiful. I thrilled as they prayed to recently canonized saints and blesseds in the Litany of the Saints. There have been so many in recent years. Let us keep praying faithfully for the many intentions people present to us. The communion of the saints is happening every day. May we all be privileged to witness some day soon the canonization of our fourteen "saints."