

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

The Communion of Saints refers to the fact that all the faithful, that is all the baptized, are united, and form one body. Clearly, we have a visible unity. The Pope is the head of the Church. There are bishops all over the world united to him. No matter where you go to Mass, in Africa, or Europe or Asia or North or South America, you will be at home and be able to go to Holy Communion. So, we say that all Catholics throughout the world are united by our common baptism and membership in the Church.

However, our unity doesn't stop there. Our unity doesn't end with what we can see. In fact, there is also an invisible unity; it's a unity with all those who have gone before us and who have died in a state of grace, that is, all those who are God's friends. We are united with them too. And this makes a great deal of sense when you think about it.

Just because someone dies, does that mean they are no longer members of the Church? Are they somehow excluded from Christ's body? Are they no longer counted among the faithful? Of course not! In fact, those who have died in a state of grace are just as much a part of the Church as they ever were. So, this means that we are not cut off or totally separated from our loved ones by death. We call that invisible or spiritual unity the Communion of Saints, and there are three states of this invisible unity of the Church.

First, we speak about those of us here on earth who are pilgrims. A pilgrim is someone who is on a journey to a sacred place. We are all on our way to God; we are on a journey to our Lord. So we call ourselves pilgrims. Saint Paul says, we here on earth are "working out our salvation" and "running a race" to heaven. So we are not there yet. So, we here on earth are called "The Church Militant."

Second are those who have died and are now with God in heaven. They sleep in the peace of Christ "where no torment shall touch them." They are joined in heaven by the good angels. We call these saints in heaven "The Church Triumphant" because they have triumphed over sin, Satan and death and have been rewarded by God with everlasting life.

The last state are those who have died in God's grace, God's friends, forgiven of their sins, but who are not yet ready to enter into heavenly glory. They do not yet see God face to face. Instead, these souls are in a special place of purification which we call Purgatory, and once they have completed their purification, they will go to heaven to join the saints already there. We call the souls in Purgatory, "*The Church Suffering*."