

The Communion Of Saints

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Before they separated one from another, the Apostles summarized the main points of the teachings of their Divine Master into a formula of belief so that their teachings would be the same in the various countries in which they preached. In order to meet various heresies that arose between their time and the year 600, various clauses were added, but the framework goes back to the time of the Apostles themselves. For this reason, this summary is known as the Apostles' Creed, and then, as now, belief in it is the mark of the true Christian.

The essential doctrines of Christianity are to be found summed up in the Apostles' Creed, that formula of belief, which is known and recited by Catholics and non-Catholics alike. In its few words, it contains all the mysteries of Faith. Like the body of a child contains the limbs of a full-grown man, or like a seed that contains the tree with all its branches, so this summary contains in their essence all the essential beliefs of those who acknowledge Jesus Christ as their Master and Teacher.

Towards the end of this Creed come the words, "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints". It is the purpose of this booklet to try to explain as fully and simply as possible what is meant by this profession of belief.

This part of the Creed, the ninth article, as it is called, on first examination, appears to contain two separate doctrines, but this is not so. The Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints are one indissoluble entity.

In previous booklets, 'City Set on a Hill' and 'Upon this Rock', the foundation, divine authority, mission and organization of the Church were explained. Now, we must look at the Church in another light.

The whole purpose of Christ's coming on earth is to be found summed up in Saint John's Gospel (10:10). "I am come that they may have life and have it more abundantly." He had come to bring back souls to that life of union with their Heavenly Father; but He did not leave it at that, — later on, he clarified that statement and showed His followers where they could find this life: "I am the Life" (John 14:6.) Combining these two truths, it is clear that the follower of Christ must live in Christ, and Christ must live in him. Saint Paul, that great Apostle, affirms this truth when he triumphantly exclaims, "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me."

How close this union with Him is to be, Christ explains (John 15:5) in the parable of the Vine and the Branches. Being a Christian does not merely mean believing in Christ, not merely knowing what He taught, but an intimate union with Him. A union as close as that of the Vine and its Branches. "I am the Vine," Christ says. "Abide in Me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abide in the vine, so neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine: you the branches. He that abides in Me, and I in him, the same bears much fruit: for without Me you can do nothing." (John 15:1-5.)

How is the true follower of Christ to attain to this intimacy with Him? How can Christ live in us and we in Him? Saint Paul, himself burning with love of His Divine Master, gives us the true answer in his Epistle to the Corinthians. (1 Corinth 12:12-27.) In a living body, the cells may be said to live in the body: equally the body may be said to live in the cells. If then, we are cells in the Body of Christ then we can live in Him and He in us.

This is where the Church comes in. The Church is the Body of Christ, His Mystical as distinct from His natural body. (1 Corinth 12:12-27.) When Christ was on earth, He acted with His natural body. He taught with His lips, healed with His hands, gave supernatural life with His breath. Now that He has left the earth, He works no longer in His natural body, but in His Mystical Body, the Church. This Church is joined to Him as really as His natural body. "You are the body of Christ," explains Saint Paul. Therefore, Christ lives in the Church, and the Church's life is the Life of Christ. As every cell in the body of a living person lives the life of that person, so every member of the Church is, as it were, a cell in Christ's Mystical Body, and thus a sharer in the Life of Christ. It is in this Body that Christ now acts in the world, as He once acted in His natural body.

It was on account of this real and organic union of His Church to Himself that Christ could say to Saul, "Why persecute you Me?" Not, "Why persecute you the members of My Church?" but "Why persecute you Me?"

This, then, is the Catholic Church. It is the union of all the faithful in the Life of Christ. He is the Vine, they are the branches, and as in a living body the cells and members cannot act independently one of another, and are useless unless they work and live in concord with the remainder of the body, so too, in this Mystical Body of Christ there is not and cannot be disunity or isolation.

The Church, we have stated, is a union of all the faithful. It includes both living and dead. Clearly, those who followed Christ faithfully in their life on this earth, do not at death cease to be members of His Body. They, obviously, come to an even closer union with Him. Hence, the Mystical Body of Christ consists of those on earth living in a state of grace and those who have died in the friendship of God.

The latter are again in two classes or states. We are told in Holy Scripture that, "Nothing defiled can enter Heaven." (Apocalypse 21:7)

That is, before a soul can enter into the Presence of God, it must be free from all guilt and stain of sin. There are many whose lives though not blameless, have not been so wicked as to merit hell for all eternity. Therefore, reason tells us that there must be some place where these souls can be purified of the stain of sin and made worthy to enjoy the Presence of God. Moreover, Saint Paul tells us there is such a place: "Many shall be saved, yet so as by fire" (1 Corinth 3:15). The other class are those who are enjoying their eternal reward in Heaven — the Saints. So that in the Mystical Body of Christ are three states.

(1) The Church Militant, that is, the 'Church fighting,' consisting of the faithful on earth who wage the unceasing battle for Christ against the devil, the world and the flesh.

(2) The Church Suffering, that is, those who have died in the friendship of God, yet are not pure enough to enter into His Presence and are expiating the guilt of their sins in the cleansing fires of Purgatory.

(3) The Church Triumphant. As the name implies, these are the souls who have triumphed over evil, have reached their goal in Heaven and are enjoying their eternal reward. It is this union of the three States in the supernatural Life of Christ, which constitutes the Communion of Saints.

It should be noted that these three states are not separate entities, but in reality one family, an immense family of which God is the Universal Father. In this family, Christ, the Son of man, is as it were, our elder brother. He has brought us back to the Father. He came on earth, worked, suffered and died and still continues to help us in our journey to our Heavenly home. The Saints in Heaven are those of our brethren who have after long journeying, reached their final goal, and who there help us. They know us, they are interested in us. They know the trials and difficulties we have to face, and loving us as they do, they constantly intercede for us.

Imagine a large family. The father is in complete charge of all. The eldest son, in an expedition in which he sacrificed his life to save his brothers, acquired great treasure sufficient to ransom the others from slavery, and the means to return to their father's home. Throughout the world, some of the children have already returned to their home and have added their wealth to the common treasury. Others are on the way, profiting by the help they receive one from another and which they receive from those who have gone before them.

This is a picture of the Catholic Church, the Mystical Body of Christ. God is the Father of the family; Jesus Christ is our eldest brother who ransomed us; Our Lady, the Apostles, the Martyrs and the Saints are our relatives, who, by a holy life and death have gone before us, and who by the example they have set and their constant intercession, are helping us, the remainder, to find the best way to the home of our Eternal Father in Heaven.

Besides being united in one body, the whole Church is united with Christ, as are the members of a body with the head. The same Holy Spirit works in all the members of the Church. "The soul," Saint Augustine says, "animates the organs of the body, and causes the eye to see, the ear to hear, et cetera." In the same way, the Holy Spirit works in and animates all the members of the Church who are in the state of grace. A wonderful explanation of this is to be found in Chapter 12 of Saint Paul's 1st Epistle to the Corinthians. He explains that as in the human body every member has its own special function, yet works with and in close conjunction with the rest, so in the Body of Christ, every member has his own gifts and his own task to perform, not alone but conjointly with the other members. Again, as in the human body all members share the pleasure or pain felt by one, so, in the Communion of Saints. "If one member suffers anything, all the members suffer with it; or if one member glories, all the members rejoice with it."

This point is one that should bring great consolation, since it shows us that the Saints in Heaven are not indifferent to our condition here on earth. They are not beings in some far-away state, who, seeing our trials and difficulties, cannot or do not want to help us. No, they are our brethren close to our Heavenly Father and constantly interceding for us.

Again, all the members of the Church on earth have share in the spiritual wealth of the Catholic Church and help each other by their prayers' and good works. Here, in our every-day lives, we have a share in all the benefits and institutions of the country to which we belong. Unemployment and sickness benefits, pensions, law courts, hospitals, et cetera, are there for the well-being of each of us, and we have a right to share in them because we are members of that state. Again, in a more intimate way every member of a family shares in the common goods such as riches and honours.

If this is true of human institutions, in a far more perfect way does it apply to the Mystical Body of Christ. In the universal family of Christ, every member has a share in every prayer, in every good work. A clear example of this is found in that perfect prayer which Our Lord laid down as the model of all prayers. The very first words, "Our Father, who art in Heaven." indicate to us that we are praying not for ourselves alone. We say, "Our Father" and not My Father because being brethren it is our duty to pray for one another. In this prayer, the individual prays for all, and all for the individual. Hence, we say, "Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." Always using the plural because as Christ said, "All you are brethren" (Matthew 23:8.) So too, is it with all the prayers of the Church.

The Holy Mass, that supreme act of Christian worship, in which a Christian pays to his Eternal Father the highest and most perfect worship, is a glorious example of this mutual help and petition in prayer. When the priest offers up the host which is later to become Christ's Body, he prays, in the Liturgy of Saint Pius V, "Receive, Holy Father, Almighty God, this spotless host, which I, Your unworthy servant, offer unto You, my God, living and true, for mine own countless sins, transgressions and failings, and for all here present; as also for all faithful Christians living or dead; that it may avail both me and them unto health for life everlasting."

Then, in the Canon of the Mass the priest asks God to bless the offerings and says, " We offer them up to You, first, for Your Holy Catholic Church that it may please You to grant her peace, to watch over her, to bring her unity, and to guide her throughout the World; likewise for Your servant our Pope, and our bishop and for all true believers, who keep the Catholic and Apostolic faith." (This may be also translated: Accept these gifts "which we offer You firstly for Your Holy Catholic Church. Be pleased to grant her peace, to guard, unite and govern her throughout the whole World, together with your servant {Name} our Pope and {Name} our Bishop, and those who, holding to the truth, hand on the Catholic and Apostolic faith.")

Now, he goes on to pray in a more particular manner, "Be mindful, O Lord, of Your servants, men and women (he mentions those for whom he wishes to pray), of all here present whose faith and devotion are known unto You. For them do we offer, or they do themselves offer unto You, this sacrifice of praise for them and theirs; for the redeeming of their souls; for the hope of salvation and wholeness, and do now pay their vows unto You, God everlasting living and true." (This may be also translated: "Remember, Lord, Your servants {Name} and {Name} {that is, he mentions those for whom he wishes to pray} and all gathered here, whose faith and devotion are known to You. For them, we offer You this sacrifice of praise or they offer it for themselves and all who are dear to them, for the redemption of their souls, in hope of health and well-being, and paying their homage to You, the eternal God, living and true.")

The Holy Mass besides being the most perfect act of worship is also a vivid example of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. A study of its prayers illustrates better than anything else the close union that exists between the Church Militant, Suffering, and Triumphant.

A simple comparison, once again with the human body, shows us how the members of the Church can give help one to another. In the body, all the members and organs work in harmony, giving help one to the other, and it is only when this harmony is broken or one member fails to give its help to the remainder of the body that sickness occurs. Many times a sound organ comes to the rescue of one that is weaker, and the possession of a sound heart, good lungs or a healthy stomach very often

helps the body to recover from what might very easily have been a fatal illness. Nor do the organs or members work for themselves alone; the eye sees that it may guide the hands and feet, the heart beats that it may supply life-giving blood to all parts of the body.

From this, we can easily understand how the members of the Church, cells and members of the Mystical Body, help each other by their prayers and good works. In fact, we find many instances of this happening. In the Acts of the Apostles, we are told how it was the prayers of the whole Church, which saved Saint Peter when he was cast, by Herod, into prison; how the prayers of Saint Stephen brought about the conversion of Saul. It was the tears and prayers of Saint Monica, which drew Saint Augustine from a dissolute life and made him a great Saint. "Pray for one another that you may be saved," says Saint James, and Saint Paul besought the prayers of his brethren, "I beseech you, therefore, brethren, through Our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the charity of the Holy Ghost, that you help me in your prayers for me to God."

Prayer is a work of mercy, and as such is double-edged. It brings down a blessing not only on the one that prays, but also on the one for whom the prayer is offered.

This important fact applies not only to prayer but also to all good works, as for example, fasting and alms-giving. As a man's debts may be paid off by his neighbours, so too, in some measure, may the debt of sin be paid off by the good works of others. Thus in the early Church, we find penances were often entirely remitted or shortened at the intercession of the martyrs.

It is in the light of being able to help others by prayers and good works that the value of religious orders can be seen. Many persons, not all of them outside of the Church, consider that religious orders, particularly the contemplative kind, do not serve any useful purpose. It is not realized that these religious by their lives of penance and prayer, not for themselves but for the whole world, are, besides serving God in the most perfect manner, the spiritual dynamo, of the world. Without ceasing, their prayers rise up to God and He cannot fail to answer their requests and shower down His blessings on the world.

It was this fact, which inspired, cheered and supported Saint Francis Xavier, that great missionary of Christ. He knew that constantly the Church was praying for him and supporting him by Her good works. If anyone doubts the value of prayers and good works of the contemplatives for souls in the world, he could find no better example than to read the life of the Little Flower, Saint Therese of Lisieux. There is depicted a life of prayer and sacrifice for the salvation of souls in the mission fields.

When Christ was asked which was the greatest commandment, the answer was, "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, and with your whole soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself." (Luke 10.) Later, just before He died, Christ said, "A new commandment I give unto you all; That you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love one for another." (John 13:34.)

The world is to know the true disciples of Christ by the love they bear one to another. But this love is not, and cannot be, a mere expression of the lips. Love must show itself in actions. True love is not only willing but seeks out opportunities of service and sacrifice for the person loved. This is the type of love that must distinguish the followers of Christ. The true Christians love one another by wishing well to one another, by praying for one another and by helping one another in good works.

In other words, this true way of loving our neighbour as ourselves is found in the mutual help we accord each other in the Communion of Saints.

Besides helping each other in the world by our prayers and good works we can apply this help to the souls in Purgatory. There is not space in this booklet for a full explanation of the teaching of the Church on the subject of Purgatory. That such a state exists is a reasonable belief. It was taught in the Old Testament (especially in the Book of Maccabees) and also in the New. Christ Himself speaks about it, (Matthew 12:32.), and we are told, "Nothing defiled can enter Heaven." (Apocalypse 21:7). Therefore, those members of the Church who have died in the friendship of God and yet who, owing to the guilt of sin on their souls, are not in a fit state to enter into God's sight, are cleansed in the fires of Purgatory.

Once dead they can do nothing to help themselves, since "the night comes when no man can work" (John 9:4) and they can no longer do good works to atone for their sins. Hence, they must endure the punishment, which their sins have merited. They cannot help themselves, but we can help them. This fact was believed amongst the ancient Jews. After Judas had defeated Gorgias, he came with his company to bury the Jews who had been slain in the conflict. He found under their coats some of the votive offerings, which they had, contrary to the law, robbed from the idols of Jamnia. Judas at once prayed God that their sins might be forgiven and he sent offerings to Jerusalem for sacrifice to be offered for the sins of the dead. He did not consider their sins to be grievous for he considered that they who had fallen asleep with godliness had great grace laid up for them. The account ends up with these words, "It is therefore, a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from their sins" (2 Maccabees 12:43-46).

In the writings of the early Fathers of the Church is found mention of the Apostolic custom of praying for the dead.

Tertullian (160-240) writes, "the faithful widow prays for the soul of her husband, and begs for him in the interim repose, and participation in the first resurrection."

Saint Augustine (354-430) recounts his mother's words, "Lay this body," she said, "anywhere: let not the care of it in any way disturb you. Only this I ask of you, that you remember me at the altar of the Lord, wherever you are."

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) writes, "Then we pray for the Holy Fathers and Bishops who have fallen asleep before us, and for all who have died in our communion, believing that the souls for whom prayers are offered receive very great assistance."

Saint John Chrysostom (344-407) declares, "Not in vain are oblations made on behalf of the departed: not in vain supplications; not in vain alms."

Therefore, we see that it has been the unfailing belief of the Church from Apostolic times that we can help the souls in Purgatory by our prayers and good works. Can we possibly let their need go unanswered? They are suffering, they cannot do anything for themselves, yet it lies in our power to grant them aid. Any man who refused to help his brother in a need in which he could not help himself would rightly be despised by his fellow men. The souls in Purgatory are our brethren in the Mystical Body of Christ and they have a claim on our help.

"Prayer," Saint Augustine says, "is the key by which we open the gates of Heaven for the suffering souls." The Council of Lyons (1274) laid it down that we on earth can help to diminish their pain by Masses, by prayer and alms-giving and other works of piety.

The Holy Mass is offered not only for the living but also for the dead. Every day in this supreme act of worship the priest prays, "Be mindful also, O Lord, of Your servants and handmaids (here he mentions those for whom he specially wishes to pray), who are gone before us with the sign of faith, and rest in the sleep of peace. To these, O Lord, and to all that rest in Christ, we beseech You grant a place of refreshment, light and peace." (This may be also translated: "Remember also, Lord, Your servants {Name} and {Name} {here he mentions those for whom he specially wishes to pray, men and women), who have gone before us with the sign of faith and rest in the sleep of peace. Grant them, O Lord, we pray, and all who sleep in Christ, a place of refreshment, light and peace.")

Then there are days on which Mass is said especially for the souls of the faithful departed, and each year the Church sets aside one day on which every priest is allowed to say three Masses for the help of our suffering brethren.

Besides at Mass, the Church constantly in Her other services prays for them. Hence, we see that not only can we help these members of the Church by our prayers, but we are encouraged and guided in this matter by the Church. It is only reasonable that since they are our brethren, with a claim on our charity, we should pray for them and aid them by our good works. Moreover, we should be wanting in our duty if we failed them in their hour of need.

To the true Catholic, prayer for the souls in Purgatory is not an onerous duty but an act of love. Again, if viewed in no other light, these prayers can be regarded, shall we say, as an insurance policy for ourselves when we too have died and need all the help we can get. If we have helped the Holy Souls with our prayers when they needed them, they cannot and will not be indifferent to our need later on. If we have aided them to reach their eternal goal Heaven, they, in turn, will by their constant intercession help us to reach ours. They will certainly aid those who help them in their time of sore distress and unceasingly their prayers will rise like incense before the throne of God.

Moreover, it should always be remembered that prayer is a double-edged weapon. It must bring down blessings not only on the one who is prayed for, but also on the one who prays. It is also a work of mercy, and as Christ said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy," and He accepts every deed of mercy as done to Himself. Therefore, they who have exercised this work of mercy towards the souls in Purgatory shall, themselves, find the merciful God. "It is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins."

So far, we have considered that the Communion of Saints is the union of all the members of the Church in Heaven, in Purgatory and on earth. We have also seen that the faithful on earth can help not only one another by their prayers and good works but also the souls in Purgatory, and that they all have a share in the treasury of the spiritual wealth of the Church.

Our next consideration deals, with the Church Triumphant, that is, those who have reached their final goal in Heaven. This triumphant legion consists of Our Lady and all the Saints. We are apt at times to call saints just those who have the word saint attached to their name. This is a mistaken idea, for all those who have reached Heaven are saints. True, there are a great number who have lived outstandingly great and heroic lives in the service of Christ, and who have been specially chosen out by God to be our models; who by the lives they have lived and their glorious fidelity to the love of God, have left behind them a sure way for us to follow and as such are held up to us by the Church that we may imitate them. Yet it should be borne in mind that all who have merited Heaven are also saints and known as such by the Church, who on November 1st commemorates their memory in the Feast Day of All Saints. The fixing of the word, saint, before any of their

names, means that the Church infallibly declares that that person is in Heaven, can be publicly prayed to and honoured and should be an inspiration to us in our own work-a-day lives.

Each and every one of us can find a model in the Saints, for they are from every walk of life and every age. They were not superhuman men and women but ordinary people who in a full and real sense understood and lived in the Communion of Saints. Their guiding principles were the two great Commandments laid down by Christ — an overwhelming love of God, and for His sake an intense love of their neighbour.

All those souls then, who have reached their eternal goal in Heaven, constitute the Church Triumphant.

Since they have gained eternal and full happiness in Heaven, their state is fixed for all eternity. They have the fulfillment of all their desires and consequently are in no need of our prayers, but they can and do help us by theirs.

Since then, they are members of Christ's Mystical Body, they cannot be indifferent to the fate of their brethren on earth, who are still fighting the self-same fight, which they fought and won. They know, since they have experienced them, the trials and difficulties, which we have to face. Since they are special friends of God, and have merited His reward, they know that He will refuse nothing they ask of Him. "The continual prayers of a just man on earth avail so much." (James 5:16). Thus, how much greater must be their continual prayer in Heaven for us.

"If," says Saint Jerome, "the Saints had such power when in the flesh, what can they not obtain for us now they have secured their victory!"

Sometimes it is objected that praying to the Saints takes away from God the honour that is due to Him. This is not so. We know the Saints are special friends of God, and by paying honour to them we are giving greater honour to their Creator, because we realize that without Him they could have done nothing. It was simply and solely by corresponding with the graces He showered on them that they lived such lives of heroic sanctity. Yet it is sometimes argued that we can, and ought, to go direct to God with our prayers and petitions. We know full well that the Saints of themselves can do nothing. When we pray to them, we ask them to use their powerful influence with God on our behalf. After all, we do exactly the same thing in our everyday lives. If we want a very special favour from someone, often we ask a close friend of his to put in a good word for us, because we are confident that his intimacy will stand us in good stead.

In praying to the Saints we adopt this principle. It is their nearness to God, and the fact that they have merited His reward, which gives us confidence in their intercession. Moreover, as we have seen, prayer to the Saints is a logical part of the Communion of Saints. We are asking our triumphant brethren to help us.

History and our own experience show us how great is the power of the Saints on our behalf. Countless miracles have been granted in every age by asking the intercession of the Saints.

The Council of Trent defined this teaching of the Church: "The Saints, who reign together with Christ, offer up their own prayers to God for men. It is good and useful suppliantly to invoke them, and to have recourse to their prayers and help for obtaining benefits from God, through His Son, Jesus Christ, who alone is Our Own Redeemer and Saviour. Those persons think impiously who deny that the Saints, who enjoy eternal happiness in Heaven, are to be invoked; who assert that they do not pray for men; who declare that asking them to pray for each of us in particular is idolatry,

repugnant to the Word of God, and opposed to the honour of One Mediator of God and men, Christ."

This belief in the power of the Saints to help us by their intercession is to be found in many places in the writings of the early Fathers of the Church.

Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386) writes, "We then commemorate those who have fallen asleep before us, patriarchs, prophets, Apostles and Martyrs, in order that God, by their prayers and intercessions, may receive our petitions."

Saint John Chrysostom (344-407) writes: "When you perceive that God is chastening you, fly not to His enemies, but to His friends, the martyrs, the Saints and those who were pleasing to Him, and who have great power."

We believe that every prayer we offer, and every prayer in Heaven of the Blessed Virgin, the Angels and the Saints have their efficacy only through Jesus Christ Our Lord. The Saints simply add their prayers to ours, and although specially pleasing to God on account of their great holiness, they aid us only through the merits of Our Lord.

In conclusion, let us briefly sum up what has been said of the Communion of Saints. It is the union of all the faithful in the Mystical Body of Christ. A union of all the faithful, that is, those on earth, in Purgatory and in Heaven. As Christ worked on earth in His natural body, so now the Church has become His Mystical Body, of which all members in the state of grace live His Life. By baptism, we are admitted, to this close intimacy with Our Divine Lord. We are cells in the Mystical Body, and if we correspond with divine grace we can, like Saint Paul, triumphantly exclaim, "I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me."

As members of Christ's Body, we share in the prayers and good works of all the others, and we too help them by ours. We can also help, in the same way, the souls in Purgatory. The Saints in Heaven, the Church Triumphant, are also our brethren who love and cherish us, and by their constant intercession help us on our way to Our Heavenly Father.

This ninth Article of the Creed, "I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the Communion of Saints," ought to be a source of great consolation to us. It teaches us that no matter how great the difficulties and trials that beset us, we have not to face them alone.

When all the world seems dark and no ray of hope can pierce the blackness, the fact is that the Church is constantly supporting us by Her prayers and good works, and that we have powerful friends in Heaven who will bring us solid and lasting comfort.
