

What is the difference between the communion of saints and the Body of Christ?

These terms are very similar but do have different shades of meaning.

In the Apostles' Creed we express our belief in the communion of saints, a belief that received further definition at the Councils of Nicaea II (787), Florence (1431-45), and Trent (1545-63). The "communion of saints" refers to the spiritual union or "connectedness" among the faithful in heaven (the "Church triumphant"), the souls in purgatory (the "Church suffering"), and the faithful who are still alive (the "Church militant," or the "pilgrim Church").

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) described the communion of saints as our "vital fellowship with our brethren who are in heavenly glory or who having died are still being purified," noting that all the faithful, living and deceased, "constitute one family in Christ" (*[Dogmatic Constitution on the Church](#)*, no. 51). This "vital relationship" enables us, among other things, to benefit from the prayers of the saints, as well as to offer our own prayers for the souls in purgatory.

For more on the communion of saints, check out *[Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 954-62](#)*, which includes the following quote from Pope Paul VI:

"We believe in the communion of all the faithful of Christ, those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one Church; and we believe that in this communion, the merciful love of God and his saints is always [attentive] to our prayers."

While "communion of saints" refers specifically to the nature of our connectedness to one another in Christ, "Body of Christ" is a biblically rich image of the Church. This image brings out the intimate communion that Christ shares with His disciples. He is the vine, and we are the branches that partake of the life of the vine (Jn. 15:4-5).

Further, despite our unique, individual gifts, talents, and personalities, we are united with Christ through our Baptism. He is the head and we are members of the His body, the Church (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 4:16-17; Col. 1:18). So, the image of the "body" as applied to the Church expresses the unity of Christ with the faithful.

For more on the Church as the Body of Christ, check out *[Catechism of the Catholic Church, nos. 787-95](#)*.

In summary, then, all the faithful—in heaven, in purgatory, and on earth—are united in Christ. This "unity" is the communion of saints. The image of the Church as the Body of Christ highlights this unity we share with other believers—both living and deceased.