Introduction
Catholics are often accused of “worshipping” Mary and the Saints, of “praying to” Mary and the Saints instead of praying directly to Jesus. Our critics argue that Jesus is the ONLY mediator between God and humans, then why are we “worshipping” and “praying” to the saints? Why don’t we pray directly to Jesus, who will mediate before God for us?

Clarification one: Catholic teaching is very clear that we do NOT “worship” Mary and the Saints. We “venerate” them and hold them in “honour” and “esteem” because of who they are and the quality of life they lived. Further, if God Himself honours them, who are we to dishonour them!

Clarification two: Praying to the saints and asking them to “intercede” for us is based on sound biblical and theological foundations, solidly backed by tradition from the early practices of the Church. Further, experience has taught us that when Mary and the saints intercede for us, God answers their prayers. People down the centuries have received innumerable graces and favours from God through the intercession the Saints. Can experience be discounted?

It is in the light of the above, this article wishes to provide the reader with sufficient biblical and theological foundation to understand and defend their practice of faith. This article is not exhaustive, and should be supplemented by further reading.

What is the meaning of intercessor?
An intercessor is a person who intervenes on behalf of another, especially by prayer. (Ruth 1:16; Jeremiah 7:16; 27:18; Job 21:15; Genesis 23:8; Isaiah 53:12; Jeremiah 36:25). It is to plead, to petition, to entreat, to supplicate on behalf of another, especially by prayer.

Human experience of intercession
Within our human experience, we ask others, maybe our parents or friends to intercede, plead on our behalf before other human beings, especially when we want some favour to be done for us. The favour maybe to get a job, to receive a financial help, or whatever. We use words like, ‘please put in word for me’, ‘please use your influence’, ‘please plead on my behalf’, ‘kindly recommend my name for the job’, etc. And this works. When someone intercedes or pleads or says a good word on my behalf, I get my work done or I receive the favour that I am asking for.

Is it Biblical to intercede for others?
Man's intercession for his fellow-man is found in various stories in the Bible. One of the famous story, found in the very first pages of the Bible, is that of Abraham pleading for the people of Sodom, whom God wanted to destroy because of their sin. Abraham pleads and intercedes with God for the righteous, on their behalf, even without being asked to do so. (Genesis 18:22-33) Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people in it? And Abraham goes on and on ... will you destroy
the whole city for lack of fifty, forty, thirty, twenty, ten? Till finally he wins from God the lives of the righteous.

Like Abraham we have many others examples in the Bible of human beings interceding for other human beings.

- Moses is another classical example who intercedes for the sinful people of Israel before God, who in his anger, decides to destroy them - Exodus 32:9-14. The Lord said to Moses: I have seen these people, .. they are a stiff-necked people ... Now leave me alone so ... that I may destroy them... Moses pleads and intercedes with God, why should your anger burn against your people ... Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel ... Then the Lord relented ...

- The prophets, time and again, interceding for the people. David interceding for the life of his dying son. Esther interceding for her people. And on and on ....

- And then we have the famous example of how the early church prayed for Peter when he was imprisoned – Acts 12:5-10. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him. In a miraculous way the gates of the prison were thrown open and Peter was freed and found in the temple.

St Paul in 1 Timothy 2:1-4 gives us a very clear teaching on intercessory prayer

- I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people ... This is good, and pleases God our Savior,...

- Paul also gives another important teaching which should be understood in the context of intercessory prayers, namely, Jesus Christ, the God-Man, as the ONE AND ONLY MEDIATOR between God and man, For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people - 1 Timothy 2:5. This fact should never be discounted when we talk about intercessory prayers. When Jesus said, Ask and it will be given to you (Mathew 7:7) he also added I will do whatever you ask in my name, ... You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it - John 14:13-15. Hence because Jesus is the only God-man and the only Mediator of the New Covenant, all intercessory prayer is directed to the Father in and through Jesus Christ alone.

- The above teaching by no means prevents us from asking our fellow Christians to pray with us and for us (1 Timothy 2:1-4. In fact Jesus teaches us truly I tell you if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven - Matthew 18:19-21.

- In particular, we should ask the intercession of each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. [For] the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective - James 5:16.

Biblical teachings regarding saintly intercession

Following the teachings of Jesus, Paul and James, who ask us to pray and intercede for each other while we are on earth, it is only right then that we also ask those Christians in heaven, who have already had their sanctification completed, to pray and intercede for us, for the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects (James 5:16).

Church Fathers regarding saintly intercession

- Origen (3rd C), one of the great teachers, has this to say regarding intercession by saints, But not the high priest [Christ] alone prays for those who pray sincerely, but also the angels . . . as also the souls of the saints who have already fallen asleep.” Origen very
clearly states that the souls of the saints who have died also pray for those who request their intercession.

- Cyprian of Carthage (3rd C), St. Augustine of Hippo (4th C) and other Fathers of the Church express similar thoughts as that of Origen.

**Church’s teaching regarding saintly intercession.**

- It was for the first time, in the Council of Trent in 1545 that the teaching on intercession through saints was officially laid down. The Council declared that: *...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, aid, and help for obtaining benefits from God, through His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, Who alone is our Redeemer and Savior.*

- The Catechism of the Catholic Church, CCC 2683 *The witnesses who have preceded us into the kingdom, especially those whom the Church recognizes as saints, share in the living tradition of prayer by the example of their lives, the transmission of their writings, and their prayer today. They contemplate God, praise him and constantly care for those whom they have left on earth. When they entered into the joy of their Master, they were "put in charge of many things." Their intercession is their most exalted service to God's plan. We can and should ask them to intercede for us and for the whole world.*

- It is in this context that we ask Mother Mary to intercede for us. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us, sinners now and at the hour of our death. At the wedding feast of Cana, Mary was the one who went to Jesus, her Son, and whispered in his ears, *they have no wine* and then she told the people *Do whatever he tells you,* John 2:5. She continues to whisper to her beloved Son Jesus our problems and difficulties and to intercede on our behalf before the Father.

- Following the teachings of the Church we ask the Saints, and those righteous people who have gone before us, to pray and intercede for us. If St Anthony responded to the prayers of the people of his time, will he stop doing so now that he is no more with us? Now in fact, he being beyond space and time, is more ready to reach out to the pains and sufferings of his brothers and sisters and to intercede for them. He who enjoyed such closeness with Jesus, continues to whisper our prayers and petitions into the ears of Jesus and obtain for us the favours, that seem sometime humanly impossible.

**The Priest and Intercession.**

- It is the special duty of the priest to intercede for and on behalf of people of God.

- In Joel 2:17 the priests are called upon to intercede for the people, *Let the priests, who minister before the Lord, weep between the portico and the altar. Let them say, ‘Spare your people, Lord. Do not make your inheritance an object of scorn, a byword among the nations. Why should they say among the peoples, ‘Where is their God?’*

- In Malachi 1:9 appeals to the priests for intercession to God, *Now plead with God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?’*—says the Lord Almighty.

- In 1Maccabees 7:33-38 we find the priests interceding on behalf of the people against their enemies.

- In Hebrews 5:1, the main task of the high priest is to *represent the people in matters related to God.* In Hebrews 5:7 *during the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions.* In Romans 8:34, Christ Jesus who died, more than that, who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.
Now after his resurrection he is the High Priest (Hebrews 5:5,10) who was tempted in every way and is able to empathize with us in our weakness, Hebrews 4:14-16 and now offers up prayers and petitions on our behalf (Hebrews 5:7).

Every priest receives his priesthood from the High Priest, Jesus Christ, in the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 5:6,10). And therefore as a priest of God, he is called to empathize with people in their weakness and offer up prayers and petitions on their behalf.

A priest is a priest forever and so is St Anthony. As a priest on earth, he prayed for people and now as a priest, even after his death, he continues to pray and intercede for people and their needs.

Theology of Intercessory prayers.

The theology of belonging to one mystical Body of Christ and the Communion of Saints supports the prayer of intercession. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy - Colossians 1:18. Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it -1 Corinthians 12:27.

CCC 947 Since all the faithful form one body, the good of each is communicated to the others... We must therefore believe that there exists a communion of goods in the Church. But the most important member is Christ, since he is the head.. Therefore, the riches of Christ are communicated to all the members, through the sacraments. As this Church is governed by one and the same Spirit, all the goods she has received necessarily become a common fund. (Also read CCC 2684).

As the Virgin Mary and all the saints in heaven are alive and are members of His one mystical Body and share in the one Communion of Saints. Therefore, Catholics do not have any difficulty in asking Mother Mary and the Saints to pray for us and to intercede on our behalf and by their powerful intercession to obtain for us God’s favours and graces.

Even the angels (though they strictly do not belong to the communion of saints) intercede and pray for us. See that you do not despise one of these little ones; for I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven - Mathew 18:10.

Conclusions.

Intercessory prayer is asking others to pray for us, especially the Virgin Mary, the Angels and the Saints. We have sufficient biblical and theological support for this view which is well grounded in the tradition of the early Church. If St Anthony loved the poor and sympathised with them while he was on earth, will he forget them now that he is in heaven? He was a pastor par excellent, assisting people during his earthly ministry, will he stop pasturing to them from heaven? He who was a dedicated and committed priest of God, who offered prayers and sacrifices on behalf of his people, will he now stop interceding for them before God in heaven? He who was very close to our Lord, while here on earth, is surely very close to our Lord in heaven too, will he then not place our prayers and petitions before our Lord. No doubt then thousands of people all over the world seek his intercession and intervention for their problems, difficulties and miseries here on this earth. And everyone has gone home happy that they have received favours and graces asked for. No wonder he is called “Everybody’s St Anthony”!!! St Anthony of Padua, pray for us.

(Note: Scripture and other quotations have been given in italics and are taken from internet sources).