

Understanding the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints

By
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Introduction

I was asked once by an Evangelical Non-denominational Pastor, “Why is it that Catholics pray to the saints? Why don’t they go straight to Jesus?” This question came from a man who was raised Catholic. His misunderstanding of this practice was one of many misunderstandings of the Church’s doctrines which resulted in him leaving the Catholic Church. The Pastor now recognizes no hierarchical authority and, like so many other Protestants, limits his belief system to the words written in the Bible and to his own personal interpretation. As a result, in such Evangelical Non-denominational churches, there is no statement of beliefs. In fact, there are tens of thousands different Christian churches, as each pastor and/or their congregations, act on their own and tend to interpret the words of Scripture in different ways. Some congregations even vote on their system of beliefs. Catholics, on the other hand, do believe in Scripture, but believe in it as one of two basic sources of Revelation – the other being Tradition. In addition, Catholics believe that the Holy Spirit guides the Magisterium of the Church in the development of Scriptural concepts. These concepts are spoken and written by the Church, and may be formerly approved by the pope, determined by a council and approved by the pope, or, sometimes, have just “always” been taught. Admittedly, not everything expressed by individuals of the Magisterium is necessarily correct. Individuals may at times state concepts which may be wrong or even heretical, but, in the course of time, the Spirit has guided the Church to discard the false and hold on to those teachings which are true to the teaching of the Apostles. These concepts eventually become doctrines of the Church, which must be held to be true by all, if they are to be truly Catholic.

Doctrines are important. In this case, the question of praying to the saints could have been fully understood (as well as any Mystery can be fully understood), if the Pastor had understood the doctrine of the Communion of Saints. The words, “Communion of the Saints”, is, of course, not found in Scripture, but is a doctrine found in the Apostle’s Creed, one of the earliest creeds of the Church. The description of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints is found in paragraphs 946-962 of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. (This catechism was prepared under the direction of Pope John Paul II thirty years following the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.)

It is important to understand how the Catechism teaches a particular topic. The Catechism, like the Bible (but not equivalent to), is a good read and is profitable to all who read it. However, as with understanding the revelation found in the Bible, to fully understand the Church teachings, such as the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, requires more than a light reading of the text. A deep understanding of verses in Scripture requires a knowledge of many other verses found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Similarly, each phrase in the Catechism can lead to a wealth of

insight and revelation. behind it as well as provide insight and revelation to other doctrines which follow. Augustine's comment that "the New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New" (130), also applies to the Catechism. In other words, one can't fully appreciate the doctrine of the Communion of the Saints without understanding more basic doctrines; while, also, many other doctrines rely on an understanding of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints as their basis for truth. The Catechism helps one to find this inter-relational points, by indicating the paragraph numbers next to the paragraphs under discussion.

Besides referring to other doctrines or topics related to a subject, as noted above, the Catechism will often present a concept, re-address the concept in greater detail, then later summarize the main points in each section. This paper will follow that sequence, and reference many of the side references referred to by the Catechism.

The Communion of Saints is the Church (CCC 946)*

The Catechism begins its description of the Communion of Saints by simply proclaiming, "The Communion of Saints is the Church". Did the Church just make this up? Couldn't the Catechism say, "The Assembly of the Faithful is the Church," or "Those baptized into the Catholic Faith make up the Church", or other such statement? Why choose these words? What is it about the word communion? What is the premise for this statement?

This word communion comes from the heart of Christian beliefs. One of the first uses is found in Augustine's works[†]. There the word used was com- + unus meaning "oneness, union." This concept applies to the Trinity. According to Christianity, God is three persons in one being. The Being we call God is comprised of three persons but only one essence. To be one being, there must be total unity, else one would have separate, discrete beings, with different, distinct characteristics. This is the primary premise. All other premises fall beneath this basic tenet.

A subsequent premise is that God created man "to share in ...divine life" (375). God in His divine nature is pure union. No wonder then when God created human persons with a human nature, God desired to be also in union with them, not as an equal in a Divine to Divine union, but rather in union with their personhood. Those human persons who during their lifetime on earth choose to do God's will, will be gifted with union with God. Being in union with God necessarily requires that all persons who are in union with Him, are in some way or other, in union with all other persons who are in union with God (in the Boolean logic of "if a=b, a=c, then b=c"). Thus, the term "communion" of saints is most appropriate. This collection of persons has also been called many things, such as "The People of God" (781), "The Body of Christ" (787), and

*Numbers in parenthesis refer to paragraphs found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Copyright 1994

[†] As described in the Online etymology dictionary -- www.etymonline.com

“The Temple of the Holy Spirit” (797). These description of the Church simply emphasize a different facet of the Church..

All the faithful form one Body” (947)

The Catechism continues its explanation of the Communion of Saints by stating, “All the faithful form one Body” (947). The secondary premise that God desires to share His divine life with everyone leads to the use of the word **All**. But does All necessarily mean everyone? All is conditioned by the apposition “the faithful”. Evidently not everyone may part of that body, but we do know that the faithful must be. Also implied is that the faithful are human beings, Fido need not apply.

What of the use of the word **form**? God created everything out of nothing (295-299). But who does the forming? Is it the faithful that do the forming, or is the faithful put into the form of one body – the Church? God is the Creator and we are the Creature. Any work we do is ultimately through the power of the Creator. Ultimately, it is God who does the forming.

What of the **one Body**. Could the unfaithful also be included? The Catechism states “The Church is one” (813). However this premise that the Church is one eliminates the possibility that some of the unfaithful may be included. If part of the Church is faithful and part is unfaithful, there would be no true unity. To be part of that body, one must be faithful to God. There can only be one body, one Church. We do know that Christ historically formed the Catholic Church. Are non-Catholic Churches to be excluded? What about those individuals who do not know of or understand the Catholic Church. Are they to be eliminated? How the oneness of the Catholic Church can exist with all the different Christian “Churches” and different faithful is a mystery which we are to accept by virtue of the teaching of Lumen Gentium. Somehow, in a way unknown to us, the offshoots of the Catholic Church and other faithful are tied into and a part of the Catholic Church.

Good of Each is Communicated to Each Other (947)

The premise that God created man to share in the divine life leads to the statement that the Good of each is communicated to each other. Can one be in complete union with someone and still withhold from the other? The Trinity is one – totally. Therefore, man, likewise, cannot hoard his graces, his treasures from others in which he is in union. The mechanism for this sharing is through the Body of Christ - the Church. This means that I, as a Christian, can benefit from all the graces obtained from all other Christians, including those Christians and followers of God who have preceded me. This doctrine becomes a premise for the whole concept of the doctrine of Indulgences (1471-1479) -- a doctrine, which due to misunderstanding, misapplication, and abuse, which in conjunction with other issues, resulted in the sixteenth century’s Protestant Reformation and a further division of the Church. The doctrine of indulgences deals not with the co-

sharing of graces of the saints in heaven, but rather deals with the dispensing of those graces, or as otherwise stated, the merit of those in heaven, including not only the merit of man, but also the merit of Jesus Himself, to those in the world. It is the Church that has the authority on earth to dispense those treasures.

But are Goods simply some ethereal substance which cannot be discerned by the senses, something to be shared only in a heavenly environment? Are tangible, earthly goods also to be communicated to others? As Christians we are obligated to share not only our prayers, graces, etc., but also to share our earthly goods. We ought to take care of the poor. We ought to take care of the needy. We ought to take care of the handicapped. We ought to take care of the sick. Christian charity arises out of the concept of the Communion of Saints. For the benefit of others, we also ought to take care of the environment, of the animals in the world. Thus good stewardship of the earth can also be seen, at least in part, to arise out of the concept of the Communion of Saints.

The Principal member of the Church is Christ (947)

Every successful organization has a head. A head of an organization is to provide focus and direction to the organization. That person could be said to be the principal member of the organization. Christ is described in Ephesians 5 as being head of the Church. Therefore Christ would be the body's principal member. This whole concept relies on one of the greatest of all Christian doctrines, that God became man, referred to as the Incarnation (464). This concept is considered simply unbelievable to other religions. The Church is an assembly of the faithful – the human faithful. To be a member, one must be human person as the Church is referred to as the People of God. Fido cannot be a member, nor are the angels members of the Church (Aliens if they exist and turn out to be persons, perhaps, but that would be the topic of a completely different paper). The Father may have formed the Church, and the Holy Spirit may guide the Church, but Christ by virtue of His human nature is a member of the Church. Christ is the Supreme man, because He is the Supreme God. Therefore, He is the principal member of the Church. The Church is His bride. He is one with the Church. The Church has no other bridegroom than Christ. Naturally, it follows that the Church would be Christocentric. Because Jesus himself is a member, and we are united with Him, then it follows that the very goods of Christ are communicated to all of the Church's members. What Christ has done by His life, death, and resurrection is available to us, provided we have been baptized sacramentally or by desire and do remain in sanctifying grace. In other words, the gift of Baptism which closes the separation caused by the sin of Adam (removes original sin), enables us, provided we do not re-separate ourselves through mortal sin and the loss of sanctifying grace, to receive the benefits of the all the works of Christ. What a gift!

Because He is the principal member, logically there must be others who will have lesser roles. That there is a hierarchy within the Church should be no surprise. As there are spiritual goods to be shared, one must ask how are the goods to be communicated to the members? Because the Church has God-given authority as seen in Mathew 16 where

Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom to Peter in order to run the Kingdom, in the place of Jesus here on earth, until He returns, it has the authority to dispense the treasures received from Christ as it sees fit (and as directed by the Holy Spirit). (1117) Jesus instituted the Church not only to proclaim the Good News, but also to provide us with the sustenance need to strengthen our very souls so that we might remain faithful to Him. This spiritual food, these graces, are found in his word and also in the sacraments, primarily in the Eucharist. One of the primary functions of the Church then becomes to communicate to the saints, the Church's faithful, the sacraments provided by our Lord through the Holy Spirit. In heaven, the saints are already in union. Those going through the purgation have already chosen God. This sustenance given in the sacraments is only needed by those living on earth who must decide whether they choose God or refuse God. It is always the Spirit that conveys this very life of Christ.

Dual Meaning of Communion

The concept of communion needs to be further clarified. The communion we achieve with God is two-fold (948). We are in union with Christ through Holy Things, termed the Sancta. A prime example is the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ, which unlike everyday sustenance which when eaten by us becomes part of our bodies (unites with us), in partaking the Eucharist, we physically become part of Christ's (we unite with Him). We are also in union with God's Holy People, termed the Sancti. Spiritually, we are united to members of the Church, not only in other countries, but, also, in other times.

Further defining Communion in Spiritual Goods - Sancta (949)

As Christians we are to share in the communion of faith. This means the faith is to be common. Faith is not individual. No one has the right to create their own faith, a faith which is different from others. Our faith is to be a faith, based in Truth. There is only one truth, and that truth, scripture tells us, is a person, Jesus Christ. Thus, it is impossible that Jesus can be a man and not God (Arians) or conversely, for Jesus to be God and not man (Gnostics). The two statements are exclusionary. They can't both be true. To be unified we must believe as one. But how do we know what is true? As Catholics, we believe that God has sent the Holy Spirit to guide the Church in Truth. As a result, while we cannot know all truth for then we would be God, we, as a Church, do have statements of beliefs, given to the Church through the guidance of the Holy Spirit through the Church. As Christians, we need to have "a common language of faith, normative for all" (185) These statements are given to us through the various creeds approved by the Church and through the Church. We can share our faith through our communion with others. In fact, this is how are faith was passed to us – from the apostles through their successors, enriched through deeper understanding of the Magisterium as time has gone by, as the faith is shared in each generation. These teachings of the Church, the deposit of faith, our collective faith, are a spiritual good to be shared by all members of the generations. This

sharing of the spiritual good of faith is an important premise for the Baptism of children under the age of reason (or the mentally handicapped). The faith of the parents, of the godparents, and of the Church itself is shared with the newborn infant.

As Christians we also share in special sources of God's graces, the sacraments. Without God's grace man can do nothing. Sacraments are then the sources of grace necessary for man to achieve salvation. (1129) Sacraments are outward signs instituted by Christ that "make present efficaciously the grace that they signify." (1084) According to the Church, Jesus founded seven sacraments, so that we would have available to us abundant sources of grace – spiritual food for the journey. The Spiritual Goods of sacraments are to be shared and have been shared through Christ's instrument, the Church, across time and space. The sacraments are a gift from God to the People of God. Of all, the sacraments, the Eucharist is foremost as the Eucharist allows us to come into direct contact with Christ, thereby come into union with all who are in union with Christ, that is, the Church.

The Communion of Saints also share in the communion of Charisms. "Charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to the building up, to the good of men, and to the needs of the world." (799) The Holy Spirit has given special graces to various members of every rank in the Church – bishop, priest, deacon, religious, laity, teachers, prophets, etc. In the end, these charisms have but one purpose – to build up the body of Christ. All ages share in the buildup of faith in different times and places.

We also share in responsibilities. We all share in the need to provide for the poor, the naked, the sick, and the hungry. We share responsibilities to be a good stewards of our environment and the plants and animals of the world. We share a communion of charity for others. Good acts performed in charity build our communion with each other and buildup the Church. The stance of the Church in battles for the right of life has built up the communion of the faithful and has gained for the Church respect and a following by other Protestant Churches. Conversely, the lack of charity, acts of evil, etc. tear down and harm communion. This has been seen recently in sex scandals in so many dioceses of the Church in America in the latter part of the 20th century. The cover-up by bishops was an even greater scandal to the world, which holds the Church, as the Church does herself, to a higher standard.

Further Defining the Communion of God's Holy People – the Sancti .

As previously stated, the Church teaches that the Communion of Saints includes, not only the sharing of goods, but also the sharing of persons – this means all persons, including those persons whose earthly bodies have died. The premise of this concept is that man has an immortal soul. Each person is a totally unique creation. Personhood cannot be destroyed. A person can never die, or cease to exist. Man is both body and spirit. Only our bodies can die. As humans, we may not be complete without our bodies, but we still remain who we are. Thus we may lose a leg, but we are still human. In fact,

even during our life, our bodies die. Over a ten year period all cells within our body will have died, yet we remain the same person. At full bodily death, we remain a person.

So what happens to our union with the Church when we die? There is no bi-valent state in regards to the afterlife existence in which we can be in union with God, then out of union with God. Those who have God's life within them – sanctifying grace, will enter into complete union with God after death. We say they go to heaven. Those who choose themselves over God, who do not have sanctifying grace within them, will not go into union with God. We say they go to Hell (understanding that the modern use of Hell is identical to the use of the term Gehenna by Christ). This would seem to be pretty straight forward, yet the Church teaches another option, another state so to speak. A state, which in earthly words is temporary, but in reality, since time does not apply outside of the world, is more of a process. This process is called purgation and arises from the premise that "Nothing unclean will enter it.(the new Jerusalem)" Rev (21:27). This process is only for those who die in the state of grace. Most of us, if we examine our conscience, know that there are sins in our life which, while being forgiven, have left behind effects, left behind impurities. We call these the residual effects of sin. They must be cleansed, purify, This is accomplished by what may best be described as a joyful suffering. Joyful, because they know where they are headed and want to be cleansed, suffering however "as if by fire". -- a true purgation. As a result of these premises, the Magisterium of the Catholic Church has identified three segments of the Communion of Saints, or what is more commonly called, three stages of the Church – the Pilgrim Church on Earth, the Church undergoing purification, and the Church in Heaven (954).

The Pilgrim Church

Who or what the Pilgrim Church is, was one of the burning issues of the 20th century. The Church had long taught as attributed to St. Cyprian in the third century that "There is no salvation outside of the Catholic Church" (846), but what about Protestant Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, etc. Have they no place in the Communion of Saints? Eventually, this issue was resolved (although not finalized as we continue to understand different facets of the Church) and described in the Second Vatican Council's Constitution Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*. This statement was reformulated positively to indicate that "all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is His Body." (846). From *Lumen Gentium* (8), "The sole of Church of Christ ... subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible confines." (870)

Stated in another way, Christ became incarnated not only to bring about redemption and to show us how to live, but also to establish His kingdom, the Church. That church was entrusted with the deposit of faith and historically became the Catholic Church. Others though, "through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, but who nevertheless seek out God with a sincere heart, and, moved by

grace, try in their actions to do His will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.” (847) Thus, the Pilgrim Church is comprised of those baptized individuals (baptized either sacramentally or by desire, even if not explicit), who believe in God, and who do His will. While Baptism results in one eternally becoming a child of God. Membership in the Communion of Saints contains no such guarantee. Membership is conditional. There is no “once saved, always saved” option as believed by various Protestant Churches. There are no earthly lifetime memberships. We must continue to believe and to do His will. Otherwise we will, as indicated by Jesus, be pruned from the vine. (Jn 15:1-7)

The Church Suffering

The Church teaches that those who die in the state of grace but have residual impurities in their life must undergo a purifying process prior to entering heaven and participating in the Beatific vision – that is “the contemplation of God in His heavenly Glory” (1028). This process of purification involves some form of suffering. To understand the concept of the Church Suffering, one must understand the concept of Purgatory, or the “place”, for want of a better term, where souls undergo purification. There are two misconceptions many outside the Church, and indeed, some within the Church, have about this concept of Purgatory. Some see Purgatory as a place where a person can rectify the choices and actions made on Earth, even those which are mortal sins, deserving of the fires of Hell. In other words, they believe that Catholic’s think that Purgatory is a second chance. It would be as if those suffering during the cleansing, which I shall simply refer to as being in Purgatory, would suddenly say, “Lord I am sorry that I committed all those sins. Please forgive me, and get me out of this place!” That certainly would be imperfect contrition, and would hardly be suitable for one who is being made “perfect, as the Father is perfect”. (Mt 5:48) But that is not Catholic teaching, nor is the concept that the individual in Purgatory recognizes his sin and desires with perfect contrition to be forgiven, and therefore enters heaven instead of hell. Contrary to this, the Church teaches that “Each man receives his eternal retribution in his immortal soul at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgment that refers his life to Christ: either entrance into the blessedness of heaven – through purgation or immediately, -- or immediate and everlasting damnation” (1022)

The second misconception about Purgatory involves a misunderstanding of suffering. Some see God as a cruel, authoritarian God who lashes out terrible punishments against those who sin against Him. Historically, Purgatory has been depicted in literature and art as a place of fire. God seems to get even with those who have sinned, before He lets them into His heavenly kingdom. The situation, it would seem, is really not much different than hell, except that the souls know that the suffering is limited and will not be eternal. However, the suffering of Purgatory and Hell are quite different. Those in Hell have chosen to be separated from God. The Church teaches that “the chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the

life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs". (1035) In Purgatory, the suffering has a different cause. Suffering does not come from knowledge that one will be eternally separated, but rather it is a suffering which comes from the realization of the wrongs one has committed and a deep regret for committing those sins. So why the image of fire? It is because of human experience. We know that burning is a horrible, painful, physical experience. It is common. Everyone (except for those few who have no pain sensation) has had some experience with a burning sensation. It is the worst that can happen, as must be living with God for eternity. Fire, we also know is a method of purifying substances. What is not perfect, must be eliminated away leaving only what is pure. This metaphor matches the process of purification. The suffering is a good process, a desired process for those in Purgatory. Is it painful? Yes. Mental anguish is always painful. Most suicides arise out of mental anguish, rather than physical pain. When one is really sorry for something they have done, there is mental suffering. Our conscience must be cleared of residual effects of sin before the suffering of Purgatory is removed in order for us to be completely happy in heaven.

Understanding the process of purgation, we see that those undergoing purification are still indeed united to us. We remain in communion with them. They have not been cut off from the vine. Our prayers can be used in intercession with God to ease the pain of suffering for those in Purgatory. Those in Purgatory can also likewise make intercession for us (958).

The Church in Heaven

If we on earth are united to Christ in our less than perfect, less than pure state, then how much greater must the union of those in heaven be with Christ? Thus, we are united to each other. The saints in heaven are not dead. They are active. They never tire. They are no longer space or time limited. They have a closer more powerful relationship with God than we who marred by the concupiscence of life. The saints love us. They can intercede for us. We can share in all the graces they possess. The saints in heaven continue to be active in our faith. They carry our prayers to the Father. We cannot forget our fellow saints in heaven. It is important to read what they left behind, to maintain the deposit of faith that they have left behind. To even ask for their guidance. To paraphrase G. K. Chesterton in his book Orthodoxy[‡], one should ask the Church Fathers for their vote in all issues of faith. Chesterton called this the "democracy of the dead"[§]. One day we hope, after the final judgment, we shall join them in the heavenly kingdom.

Conclusion

Doctrine is important. Without doctrine we can have no consistency or accuracy in belief. We have come a long way from where we started. We have examined a long-standing Christian doctrine – The Communion of Saints. In this process we have touched

[§] Chesterton, G.K., Orthodoxy, p 28, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI

on a number of different Christian concepts – the Trinity, the reason for Creation, the Incarnation, the meaning of Church, hierarchy, Indulgences, the sacraments, infant Baptism, Christian charity, Purgatory, Heaven, and Hell. No concept stands on its own. To understand one concept, one must understand others.

Now is the time to come back to the original question. Should we ignore our brothers and sisters in Christ, just because they are no longer with us on earth? Should we forego the saints and simply go “straight to Jesus”? Should we, as one cell in the body, address the brain? Is there not power in numbers? Do not all people of various religions ask fellow church members to pray for them when problems arise? Why would anyone do this, if it is better just to go “straight to Jesus”? In a way is it not presumptuous to go it alone? Would you go to Congress to address a grievance as an individual, or would you march on Capitol Hill with 100,000 people protesting a wrong? Would you not petition the Queen to go to the King? Would she not have a greater influence? Does not a mother have a unique closer relationship to her son than you or I?

Man was made in the image and likeness of God. By observing the good of man’s relationships with men, can we not discern the good of man’s relationship with God? If it is beneficial for man to intercede other men with many requests from many people, does this not tell you it is also true of God? Should we pray to Jesus? Yes, of course. Should we also pray for intercession from the saints? Yes, of course. The Communion of Saints is real and alive.