

Editorial: The meaning of the *Communion of Saints*

Generally speaking, voices opposed to an understanding of Christian existence as a state perduring in itself may be characterized as follows: the more isolated and alone an "individual" (Kierkegaard) is with God, the more genuine and existential a Christian he or she will be. From a biblical point of view, however, a believer can abide only "in the brotherhood of the breaking of the bread" (Acts 2:42), as one who has been called "to join the Son" (1 Cor. 1:9) in the "communion with the blood of Christ" by drinking from the cup and in the "communion with the body of Christ" by the breaking of the bread (1 Cor. 10:16). All this is to take place as a result of the "fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor. 13:13) in communion with him and among ourselves through him (cf. Phil. 2:1). Yet, at the same time, communion with Christ also means that we "share his sufferings" (Phil. 3:10), a fact which also guarantees to the faithful God's "share in [their] consolations" (2 Cor. 1:7), indeed, the "share in the glory that is to be revealed" (1 Pet. 3:1). The whole of St. Paul's teachings on the Church as the body of Christ, where each believer functions as a member of this body for the well-being of the whole as well as for that of each of the other members, ultimately seals the central meaning of the Christian idea of community [*Gemeinschaftsidee*].

Thus, it comes as no surprise that the statement "communion of the holy" also became a part of the apostolic creed. The date and its more specific significance are hotly disputed because, in the phrase *communio sanctorum*, the second word can be interpreted in Latin as either masculine or neuter, that is to say, it can mean either "communion among holy persons" or "communion of holy things" (the sacraments and, above all, the Holy Eucharist). Which was the original meaning? Kelly, who summarizes and illuminates the issue, refers to the question as "perhaps unsolvable."¹ To summarize

¹J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds. Their History and Theology*, 3d ed., (New York: D. McKay Co., 1972).

briefly, he states that the formula entered the creed towards the end of the fourth century. It appears clearly for the first time in Niketas of Remesiana (near Nish) in the fifth book of his baptismal instructions. However, it is possible that it may have existed in an earlier formula—perhaps stemming from St. Hieronymus. Its origins may very well be found in the East where such formulae were used for sacramental purposes, but not as statements of faith. Niketas and the entire West interpreted "*sanctorum*" as a masculine form; the "*sancti*" in question were primarily understood as the martyrs and the saints in a more restricted sense, but then also all believers in Christ, including even angels and Old Testament patriarchs and prophets. Compared to this masculine interpretation of the word, there was also an occasional neuter one, as can be gleaned from a rescript of Emperor Theodosius dated 388 which excludes the followers of Apollinarius and others "*a communione sanctorum*" (apparently from the Eucharist). This use is occasionally found during Carolingian times and, more frequently, beginning with the end of the eleventh century. Abelard's statement is typical; he claimed that it was "the communion which makes the saints into saints whose saint-hood is confirmed through the participation in the divine sacrament . . . Yet, we can also interpret "*sanctorum*" in a neutral sense, thus referring to the sacrament of bread and wine."² St. Thomas Aquinas appears to establish an intrinsic relation between both meanings when he states in his explanation of the creed: "Because all the faithful form one body, the good of one is shared with all others. We, thus, believe that there exists in the Church a communion of goods or of good (*bonorum*). Yet, the most important part is Christ because he is the head. Thus the good which is Christ is shared among all Christians and this sharing is accomplished through the sacraments of the Church in which the power of the sufferings of Christ takes effect."³ "*Bonorum*" can also be masculine, a fact which harmonizes better with the simile of the body discussed above.

Beyond the grammatical controversy there are two crucial distinctions to be made. First, both aspects are inseparable: personal holiness in a qualitative sense cannot be sepa-

²*Patrologia Latina*, 178, 629f.

³Mandonnet, *S. Thomas opuscula omnia IV* (1972), p. 381.

rated from the holiness of God which is mediated by the sacraments. This is supported by the complete, explicit baptismal and Eucharist theology of the New Testament as well as its at least implicit theology of penance, which the Middle Ages often thought was included in the following article of faith, the "forgiveness of sins." Secondly, there is the aspect of "community" or, as formulated by later theologians, the "exchangeability of merits" on which was based not only the invocation of the saints in heaven, but also a much deeper belief, namely, that each person who is in a state of grace can be fruitful for others, indeed, according to St. Paul, the "greatest merit," that is, love, "does not seek its own interests" (1 Cor. 13:5): "No one should seek his own advantage, but that of his neighbor" (1 Cor. 10:24).

There is no need here to describe in detail the successive deepening of the idea of *communio* not only in the sense of a "togetherness" and mutual love, but also as an "active life for each other" and, thus, as an act of "representation."⁴ In conclusion, two names must be brought to mind: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Communio Sanctorum. Dogmatische Untersuchungen zur Soziologie der Kirche* (1930), and Georges Bernanos in whose work the Catholic interpretation of *communio* is central.⁵

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⁴Cf. J. Czeny, *Das übernatürliche Verdienst für andere*. (Fribourg, 1957); A. Piolanti, "La reversibilità dei meriti" in *Tabor* 25 (1959), pp. 160-176, as well as E. Mersch's authoritative *The Whole Christ: The Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Mystical Body in Scripture and Tradition* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1938).

⁵Cf. my book *Gelebte Kirche: Bernanos* (1954), esp. pp. 414-475.

Catholicism and the Communion of Saints

Hans Urs von Balthasar

The Church of the apostles was an organism by virtue of the Eucharist and the selection of the apostles by the Lord, and thus also a hierarchically organized community.

I.

One may be surprised to learn that, in addition to the traditional four attributes of the Church—that it is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic—a further attribute was considered to be foundational and was introduced into the Creed—the communion of saints. I would like to demonstrate how this additional attribute further clarified and concretized the four others, how it sets the Catholic Church apart from all other Christian churches.

For a deeper understanding, we must turn to the work of Jesus Christ, particularly as it transcends the confines of the Old Testament. Indeed, it would be difficult to speak of a Communion of Saints in the Old Testament, which would be something different from the unity of the people which Yahweh led out of slavery with his strong arm and whom he restored as his people and as a community of priests. Yet, aside from membership in the chosen people, the individual in the Old Testament experiences a rather peculiar isolation: Elijah's desolation when he cries out: "I, I alone, am left"; Jeremiah's entirely solitary mission, Hosea's and Job's confusion about the meaning of their missions. They are all alone, none in communion with any other man.

The one word which characterized most deeply the existence of Jesus Christ is representation. The servant of God in Isaiah had already prophesied this, but nobody had been able to interpret the prophecy; it was left untouched. Representation is what happens on the cross when the innocent one dies for the sinner and, dying, takes him with him into Paradise. Through his death he raises those without hope from the Old Testament *sheol*. During the past few decades, exegetes—among them particularly Heinz Schürmann—have insisted on referring to Jesus' entire existence as a "pro-existence" until the concept had finally become established to stay among German exegetes. Using a terminology which we will not follow, Karl Barth referred to Jesus as the (only) human being who "exists solely for others," whereas the rest of men "coexist with others." During the time of the Council of Ephesus, the concept *admirabile commercium*, that is the "miraculous exchange," became popular; since then it has had its place in liturgy and theology ever since throughout the centuries. The exchange we are talking about is the exchange between Christ's holiness and man's sinfulness: "Give me your sins so that I can give you my holiness," speaks Jesus on the cross. He is the serpent that was raised in the desert: he who looks up to this creature which symbolizes all the evil in this world will be healed from the deadly serpent bites. This deed, which reverses the course of human nature by changing our fellow men most deeply, is unique in history—irrespective of all those healer gods born of human imagination—and it uniquely characterizes Catholic Christianity.

Why? Because the incomparable and inimitable deed of Christ marks so deeply the salvation he brought with him that a part of it can be transferred to the people. The New Testament illustrates this quite clearly and unequivocally. The Eucharist of Jesus is the link: "Do this in remembrance of me." We already learn in Acts that those who continue in the "fellowship of the breaking of the bread" will, thus, "have everything in common" externally and be of "one heart and one soul" internally. Both aspects belong together, so much so that those who, like Ananias and Sapphira, do not share everything with the community will, through their deeds, reveal their internal lies and their selfishness; they will prove themselves to be outside of the fellowship of the breaking of the bread. For, as St. Paul most clearly recognized, those who share in this fellowship together form "one body" by virtue of

the eating of the one bread and the taking of the one cup. It is this "one body" which he will soon describe in detail as a communion of inseparable parts. The reason is not just because they are unable to do without each other: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you,' nor can the head say to the feet, 'I do not need you.'" Rather, they cannot exist independently because the many parts of the body share the blood of Christ and because he shares his 'pro-existence' with each part: so that there "may be no division inside the body, but that the parts may have the same concern for one another (*hyper allelon*). If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it. If one part is honored, all parts share its joy."

The fact that this concern for each other can never be merely an external affair—such as, for instance, the care of the sick or monetary aid—is illustrated by St. Paul: "Who is weak and I am not weak? Who is made to fall and I am not indignant?" He is not alone in this: "Imitate me as I imitate Christ!" The same thought can be traced throughout the New Testament. To mention only two examples: John's parable of the true vine in which the branch that remains on the vine bears fruit in plenty, not for itself, not for God alone, but equally for all others. For St. John forbids any form of separation of the love of God from the love of one's neighbor, just as Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, attributes to himself all the good and evil done to the least of us. And this is because he is the Crucified who can and wills to "draw all to himself," because he wants to return to his flock all those whose selfishness has led them astray. Then all are indebted to the One for their solidarity, each of the saved recognizes salvation in the other person: "Nobody shall seek his own advantage but that of his fellow man." "Love is never selfish."

II.

Have these Scriptural directions always been adhered to by Christianity? In as much as we are all sinners and selfish, we have sadly to deny it. Yet, before the time of the great schisms, they were clearly an ideal to be followed. This is borne out by the ever fresh developments in the teachings of the Fathers about the "miraculous exchange" (especially in St. Augustine, but also in many others). However, one must beware of a possible fallacy: in the Fathers, this exchange only took place between Christ and his Church. They often state

that the Church was a whore until Christ purified her and made her a virgin. This view became untenable the moment theology began to focus on the fall of man instead of Christ, with the result that one had to differentiate sharply between the chosen and the damned. To put it systematically, our absolute knowledge of the eternally damned had to be postulated. Clearly, the idea of 'exchange' was difficult to maintain, unless one were to insist that Christ suffered in vain for the majority of mankind, that is, the *massa damnata*. God's plan of salvation is foiled and refuted by the sinner. What, then, are we to do with the miraculous exchange?

The subtle hints in St. Augustine, which are still hidden behind his praise of love, are given prominence in the Protestant churches. In Luther, the miraculous exchange no longer takes place between Christ and his Church, but between Christ and the "wretched whore," that is, the soul. Henceforth, the idea of salvation receives a new focus which is essentially individualistic: the article of the justification of the sinner by faith. Protestant confessional writings proclaim this to be the center of Christian revelation, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, that is to say, in the words of Käsemann, the "canon within the canon." Salvation occurs essentially between God and the individual believer. The emphasis with which Kierkegaard describes the "individual" in his or her relationship to God and his or her polemical distance from a secularized Church may sound splendid, yet it nevertheless adds up to an obvious loss of the communion of saints.

For the emphasis which is placed upon the faith of the individual drastically changes the face of the Church. From now on, there is the (invisible) church of the true believers, the chosen ones, and the external and visible church of the congregation that gathers for worship and, together, recites the creed. Which one of these churches still corresponds to what St. Paul describes as the "body of Christ?" Actually neither one of them. For the church of the chosen is not the one described by St. Paul, a church that contains "honorable" and "dishonorable," that is to say, holy and sinful parts. Certainly, the external church is capable of many good works, but these are no longer the direct result of justifying faith; they can also be performed by the others, that is, those who have been damned. To put it more dramatically: the church of the apostles was an organism by virtue of the Eucharist and the selection of the apostles by the Lord and, thus, also a hierarchically

organized community. ("Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the Church first apostles . . ."). The reformed church is essentially the sum of those who have been predestined, externally the sum of those who have gathered for worship. In the Catholic Church, the office (with Peter as the symbol and guarantor of unity) belongs to the organism: the Church is, as proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council, the *communio hierarchica*. The reformed churches lack this element of an organic constitution. That is why their offices are individual in nature and derivative of their respective functions; they can be assigned and reclaimed at will. This is most intimately connected with the all-important article of justification, where the Church can never seriously be held to be the "body of Christ," redeemed and instituted (as representative of all mankind) by him.

In the event that Protestant seriousness concerning the article of justification should dwindle from within, there will still remain something which the history of Protestantism has engendered, but which unfortunately has also developed in the Catholic Church in as much as she has lost her sense of the "body" and the truth of the Eucharist: a church sustained by ethics, good works, social consciousness, and the liberation of those who are politically and socially downtrodden—essentially a caricature of the communion of saints.

III.

Great efforts have been made to reunite the churches in recent times. The central theme which kindles the discussions is, on the one hand, faith, and on the other, order. A lot of time and effort is being expended in two directions: first, to regain a common creed (these efforts have been quite fruitful and will eventually lead to real success); secondly, to discuss the problem of church leadership, which has sometimes led to courageous and open discussions of the issue of the papacy. Typically, one will be able to reach the (uncrossable) limit: from a Protestant point of view, office, even the office of unity, can be quite useful, perhaps even indispensable, but is (*jure humano*) still merely a function which is designated by the Church. From a Catholic point of view, office will remain an aspect within the organism which takes its mission from Christ (*jure divino*).

These discussions will continue to fail until the

ecclesial aspects of faith and order have become united with the aspect of the *communio sanctorum*. The latter makes the Church Christ-like, regardless of whether one conceives of her as his body or his bride (both merely aspects of one and the same principle). That will be the point when the concept of the *sanctorum* will come to fruition; for this aspect constitutes—as already taught by the Fathers—the communion with those who have become holy and Christ-like in heaven, in whose “pro-existence” the still sinful Church may place her trust. It is also the communion of “saints” on earth, since we all can and should already do many things for each other. The more so, the more a Christian has succeeded in expressing in his life the form of Christ, that is to say, the pro-existence, the unselfishness of love.

The ecumenical dialogue ought to devote equal effort to this second aspect, which alone will guarantee progress in the first. From a Catholic point of view, this means that it will be fruitless to discuss the papacy if one will not, at the same time, discuss the Virgin Mary, and it will be just as fruitless to discuss Mary and the veneration of the saints if one does not discuss Peter and office, for both are rooted in the *communio* of saints which is so strongly emphasized by St. Paul. “I speak to you as sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10: 15-17).—Translated by Albert K. Wimmer □