

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

(Catechism nn. 488-511; 946-975)

The ‘Saints’

In the Newer Testament the word ‘saints’ refers to the Christian community, called ‘saints’, because God, the One who alone is Holy, has chosen to dwell among them. Of course, this involves a call to live in a way that is consistent with God’s choice. As Paul says to the Philippians:

‘Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ’(1:27).

Today we tend to use the word ‘saints’ for those whose lives have been exceptionally beautiful, and who are presented to us as models of the Christian life.

The Catechism (n. 962) quotes from the Credo of Pope Paul VI (n. 30):

‘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.’

The Catechism speaks of the many wonderful things that ‘the faithful of Christ who are pilgrims on earth’, share with each other. It speaks of communion in faith (n. 949), communion in the sacraments (n. 950), communion in the gifts of the Spirit (n. 951), communion in the sharing of material goods (n. 952), and communion in love (n. 953).

In n. 958 the Catechism speaks of our communion with ‘the dead who are being purified’. If we leave aside some of the ways in which we have imagined purgatory, the teaching itself is quite simple and straightforward. Sometimes when people die they are so pure that we say (not with certainty, of course) that they go ‘straight to heaven’ – a simple expression of recognition of the wonders that God has done for them and to which they have opened themselves in their life, and often especially in their final suffering. At other times it seems obvious (though, once again, we are not claiming certainty) that the person who dies is only half free. There seems a lot that still needs to be purified if they are to be fully receptive to God’s love. The teaching of purgatory is nothing more than a recognition of the fact that, if a person is not fully pure at the moment of death, a process of purification must happen. Who wants to spend the whole of eternity only half-open to God’s love? We are not talking of time, and we have no idea how the purification takes place, only that it is God’s love, as always, that purifies us from all that resists love.

In n. 956-957 the Catechism reflects on our communion with ‘the blessed in heaven’, who continue to intercede for us and who, as models, encourage us to draw into ever closer communion with Jesus. How their love affects us is, of course, mysterious, but we are learning to live with mystery as we get to know more of the wonders of this universe to which we belong.

Central to this article of the creed is the recognition that physical death is not the end of personal existence. Death is the horizon beyond which those who are still alive on the earth cannot see, but it does not end communion, because those who die in communion with God are taken into God’s embrace. We continue to be in communion with the saints who are in heaven with God.

Communion with the Saints

In our desire to avoid a form of prayer to the saints which appears to be (and sometimes is) a putting of a saint where only God should be, we might be tempted to bypass the saints altogether and go, as it were, directly to God. Certain recommended forms of prayer appear to encourage us even to bypass the human Jesus. Thanks to the Incarnation, we have surely learned that to bypass the world is to bypass the real, living God. Our longing is to be in communion with God. To do so we must love God as God is: God who has chosen to create a world and to sustain this world in existence, including, of course, the saints and the human Jesus. In a splendid article in *Theological Investigations* Volume Three (DLT 1967), Karl Rahner SJ writes (page 42):

‘When God becomes more and more truly God for us – the consuming fire, the simply incomparable, the one who in his grace has become near after being most radically distant – then only a mature Christian relationship to God would be still capable of recognising and realising in this burning flame and blinding light that this makes the rest of reality loved by him even more real, even more true and valid, and that in this boundless sea of fire of infinite degree everything is not destroyed but that in it everything finds its real life, not only in itself but also for us.’

We are closest to God when we are there where God is, loving the world into being. Our call is not into communion with an impersonal Absolute, but with the personal God, who is found in creation, especially in the humanity of Jesus. ‘No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son reveals him.’

If we find ourselves inspired by a holy person, we give glory to God when we reach out in prayer together with that holy person whom God loves. We need not go to God alone.

Seeking the mediation of the saints

Some people have a problem with seeking the mediation of the saints. After all Paul says: ‘there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus’ (1 Timothy 2:5). Paul also wrote: ‘It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me’ (Galatians 2:20). There is only one vine. Those united to Christ are branches. He lives in us. There is only one priest in Christianity, Jesus, but through baptism he gives us a share in his life and therefore in his priesthood. As Peter writes: ‘Like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ’ (1 Peter 2:5).

So it is with mediation. It is not Jesus plus his mother, or Jesus plus St Francis of Assisi or St Therese of Lisieux (put the name of anyone living Jesus’ life here), it is Jesus in Mary, in Francis, in your grandmother. They show us something of what Jesus’ contemporaries saw in him, and they attract us to him and through him to the Father.

Mediation

We need to look at mediation from a much broader perspective. God wants everyone to be saved' (1 Timothy 2:4). People have always needed people, and we influence each other for good and for ill. From the beginning of the human race, long before the birth of Jesus, people have been mediating God's grace to each other, however imperfectly, and, if we believe in life beyond death, there is nothing to require this mediation to come to an end with death.

It was God's 'Word', God's communication of grace, God's self-revelation, that kept drawing people to enjoy communion with God. It is this same 'Word of God' that was revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, who revealed the ultimate meaning of God's self-giving as love, and who revealed the ultimate meaning of being human by responding to God, and to others, in love. He is the uniquely perfect realisation of mediation. Any mediation that contrasts with his is shown to be defective. We are all connected and every mediation throughout history finds its ultimate meaning, not apart from him or alongside him, but in him. Jesus said: 'I am the way, the truth and the life, No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). Jesus also said: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' (John 12:32).

We are grateful for the way significant people in our life have mediated grace to us, whether they explicitly acknowledged Jesus or not. Jesus is drawing everyone to himself and so to the Father, and his grace reaches us in ways that are mysterious. If we are helped still by someone who has died, there is nothing to prevent us looking to them for inspiration and help. Is this not a natural way of Jesus drawing us to him and so to the communion with God for which we long?

Saint Mary, the mother of Jesus

It is here that the Catechism (n. 963-975) reflects on the greatest of the 'saints', Mary, the Mother of Jesus. We will pick up material on Mary from an earlier part of the Catechism (n. 488-511). We begin our reflections with the following, from Saint Therese of Lisieux, who is reacting against the exaggerations that were common in sermons on Mary in France in the late nineteenth century.

'How I would have loved to be a priest so as to preach about the Blessed Virgin. One sermon would be sufficient to say everything I think about the subject ... For a sermon on the Blessed Virgin to please me and to do me any good, I must see her real life, not her imagined life. I am sure that her real life was very simple. They show her to us as unapproachable, but they should present her as able to be imitated, bringing out her virtues, saying that she lived by faith just like ourselves, give proofs of this from the Gospel, where we read: 'They did not understand the words which Jesus spoke to them' (Luke 2:50). And that other no less mysterious statement: 'His father and mother marvelled at what was said about him' (Luke 2:33). This admiration supposes a certain surprise. We know very well that the Blessed Virgin is Queen of heaven and earth, but she is more mother than queen; and we should not say, on account of her prerogatives, that she surpasses all the saints in glory, just as the sun at its rising makes the stars disappear from sight.

‘My God, how strange that would be! A mother who makes her children’s glory vanish! I myself think just the opposite. I believe that she will increase the splendour of the elect very much.’

Mary’s Immaculate Conception

The Catechism (n. 490-493) speaks of Mary’s ‘Immaculate Conception’ – a teaching that was proclaimed as infallible by Pope Pius IX in 1854. To grasp what is intended by this assertion we need to examine the notion of Original Sin (see Chapter 7). Every human being, including Jesus, is born into a world that has been affected by the sin, including the sins of our ‘origins’. Everyone from conception is also surrounded by God’s love.

The hereditary and environmental sludge of sin created an environment which afflicted Mary, as it afflicted her son, in special ways. When we speak of her conception as ‘immaculate’ we are saying that, like her Son, and unlike us, she never allowed this ‘Original Sin’ to affect her decisions. Heroically, from the very first moment of her existence (in the poetic terms of the definition, from her ‘conception’), she was never contaminated by sin. She always said Yes to grace. Even when she stood watching her innocent Son being crucified before her eyes, her response was one of pure love. There have been saints whose lives were pure from their most tender years. For this most saintly of women we go to the limits of language, realising that we are entering the realm of poetry and symbol. How else can we speak of such a beautiful mystery?

The Catechism speaks of Mary being predestined by God to be the mother of Jesus (Catechism n. 488). It is essential to exclude the notion of time from our concept of predestination, for there is no time in God. Pre-destined does not imply temporal priority, but priority at the level of reality. The initiative and the grace come from God. What we do and what happens to us is always in response to grace. Her being Jesus’ mother comes from God’s initiative. It is a grace.

Mary’s Virginit

The prologues to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke portray Mary as a virgin (Catechism n. 496-507), and, in fidelity to Scripture, the Church has continued to speak of her as the Virgin Mary. In view of the highly symbolic nature of the prologues, it seems to me best to go to the deepest meaning of ‘virgin’ and for the rest to remain in silence as we contemplate the wonder of what God has done in Mary, and the wonder of her complete and loving response.

Luke’s account of Mary’s conceiving Jesus (1:26-38) appropriately speaks of her intimate communion with God. In Luke’s delicate narrative, it is God himself who approaches Mary offering her love, and Mary says Yes, opening herself to God’s embrace. It is God who comes down upon Mary. It is God who breathes into her his Spirit, pouring his life into her. A virgin is one who gives his or her first love to the betrothed. This is what Mary does. Her first love is for God (Catechism n. 505-506).

The words of God to the young maiden of Nazareth. ‘Hail, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you’, were true then and had always been true.

Mary in Luke's Gospel

The promise made to Mary on that occasion was: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will cover you in his shade ('draw you into his glory-cloud'); therefore the child will be holy. He will be called Son of God'(Luke 1:35). It is the embrace of God that made the conceiving of Jesus possible. It was her being drawn so intimately into God's embrace that accounts for her conceiving of Jesus. God, the source of all life, is, in a special way, Jesus' 'Father'. Mary's response is perfect: 'I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you have said'(Luke 1:38; Catechism n. 494).

God is asking of her only one thing: to say Yes to God's love – which she does with all her heart. God is saying to her: 'I want to love you'. She replies: 'Love me' – and the fruit of that mysterious embrace is Jesus.

In this as in every aspect of her life, Mary is offered to us as a model. The Catechism (n. 967) states:

'By her complete adherence to the Father's will, to his Son's redemptive work, and to every prompting of the Holy Spirit, the Virgin Mary is the Church's model of faith and charity.'

Luke is presenting Mary as the model for all who conceive. How beautiful it would be if every man and every woman were to give their first love to God, so that in our intimate communion our loving was fully open to God's grace. Then the fruit conceived of that love would come from our intimacy with God. Is not this part of the meaning of the sacrament of marriage?

Mary's pilgrimage of faith

Luke follows this with a scene in which Mary is God's instrument of love to Elizabeth:

'Mary set out in haste and entered the house of Zechariah, where she greeted Elizabeth, who exclaimed "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb" ... Blessed is she who believed that the promise made her by the Lord would be fulfilled' (Luke 1:39-45).

Mary is a perfect example of faith. We look to her to learn to believe the promises that God has made to us. We learn from her also to 'treasure' the words that are said to us, and to 'ponder them in our heart'(Luke 2:19). Mary teaches us how to live a reflective life.

In another powerful scene, an old man, Simeon, symbol of all who have looked forward with hope to the coming of the Messiah, holds Jesus to his breast and offers praise to God. Luke tells us that Jesus' father and mother were amazed at what was being said by Simeon about him. He writes

'Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "...a sword will pierce your own soul too'" (Luke 2:33-35).

God's grace does not preserve us from the dreadful things that happen to us from our own sins and from the sins of others. It does enable us to remain pure and to keep loving, whatever the situation. Mary's life, like our own, had its light and darkness. We look to her as a model, because she faced the darkness so beautifully, so courageously.

Luke records another dark scene. As with all the scenes of the Gospel, it is included because it has something to say about all our lives. Jesus is twelve years old and so is expected to obey the Jewish laws and customs. He goes with the parents to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. He goes missing, much to the consternation of Mary and Joseph. After three days of searching they find him in the temple. Luke continues (2:48):

'When his parents saw him they were astonished, and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

The Catechism (n. 972) speaks of Mary's 'pilgrimage of faith'. She, like us, had to walk in faith. Perhaps, rather than thinking of her as 'privileged', we should regard her as 'heroic', for her choices were free and always loving. In the final scene of his Prologue, Luke writes:

'Then Jesus went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and with people'(Luke 2:51-52).

It is left to us to imagine the next twenty or so years. How close must have been the communion between Jesus and his mother. Later, during Jesus' public ministry, 'A woman in the crowd raised her voice and said to him, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that suckled you!"(Luke 11:47).

Mary in John's Gospel

John gives us only two portraits of Mary and they are closely linked. In the first we see her at a wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1-11). Jesus has just chosen his disciples and the first act of his public ministry takes place at Cana. From the outset, John wants us to see that Jesus' ministry is about love, about celebrating life to the full – something that we can do only if we approach Jesus, listen to his word, and 'do whatever he tells you'(John 2:5). Mary is there, representing every woman, every mother, who has longed for the outpouring of the wine of God's Spirit. She goes to Jesus and, on behalf of her people, acknowledges that they have run out of wine. Jesus' reply is not easy to translate.

Cana and Calvary

He begins by checking that she really knows what she is asking for, and assuring her that there is no need for concern. His words are commonly translated as a statement: 'My hour has not yet come'. However, the Greek can also be translated as a question: 'Has not my hour now come?' – a translation that, according to some scholars, best fits the context. The wine will now begin to flow, for Jesus has discerned that his public ministry is now to begin. The six water jars filled to the brim symbolise the fact that the Older Testament has achieved its purpose. Fulfilment, symbolised by the number seven, is now beginning. We have done all we can (we have filled water jars with water). Now we must await the Word of God who alone can transform the water of our hopes and dreams into the wine of God's Spirit.

The second scene is at the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27). The 'hour' that began at Cana has now reached its goal. Now the fullness of God's Spirit is poured out from the pierced heart of the Messiah. And once again the mother is there – this time symbolising the new (renewed) people of God: all those who would become Jesus' disciples and live to the full his life. Jesus entrusts his mother to the Beloved Disciple – any of us can be that disciple if we choose – and he entrusts the Beloved Disciple to Mary – any of us can claim her as our Mother, the new Eve, the Mother of Jesus and the Mother of the Church (Catechism n. 963-975).

Mary and the Church

In Acts 1:13-14 Luke describes Jesus' disciples in Jerusalem, praying for the coming of the Spirit promised by Jesus. Once again, Mary is there: 'In the upstairs room where they were staying, the Twelve were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.'

John has the Spirit being given from the Cross (John 19:30), and he has the risen Jesus giving the disciples his Spirit on the day of the Resurrection (John 20:22). Luke's setting is the feast of Pentecost:

'When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together, when suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit'(Acts 2:1-4).

Mary assumed into heaven

The Newer Testament has no more to say about Mary. Early tradition tells us that Mary went with John to Ephesus and died there. It is not surprising that just as Christians looked to her as the perfect disciple, free from the taint of sin from the first moment of her conception, and the perfect mother; just as they saw her as the one who was perfectly obedient to God's will in everything; so they saw her as the one who showed us how to die, as she had lived, in God's embrace. They knew that God took her to himself, the way God will take us all. To say her 'body' was assumed is to say that everything that comprised her real humanity, mysteriously transformed of course, was caught up in the eternal life enjoyed by her risen Son. Death could not separate her from him.

In 1950, after the carnage of the Second World War in which 'Christian' Europe, for the second time in a few years, had been tearing itself to pieces, Pope Pius XII felt the need to stress that Christian life is very much about the body. We can't pray 'in the spirit' and then treat the body with such disregard. It is every part of us that is taken up into life – transformed, of course, in a way that is beyond our imagining. Everything that makes us human is sacred. Having consulted the bishops throughout the world, the pope defined as an article of faith (and so infallibly) that Mary, the first and holiest of disciples, 'was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory'. This was not intended to separate her from us. On the contrary, it was to remind us that that is our destiny too.

Karl Rahner makes the important point: 'The definition of the Blessed Virgin's assumption does not tell us that this was a privilege which was reserved for her alone' (*Theological Investigations* volume 17, page 122). In the same article he writes:

'No one is in danger of defending a heresy if he maintains the view that the single and total perfecting of man in 'body' and 'soul' takes place immediately after death; that the resurrection of the flesh and the general judgment take place 'parallel' to the temporal history of the world; and that both coincide with the sum of the particular judgments of men and women' (page 115).

As with purgatory, so with heaven, we have to eliminate the idea of time, for time is the measure of things in the world we know. It is not a measure of eternity.

When we imagine our resurrection as happening 'at the end of time', we need to remember that imagining in terms of space and time is part of the hard-wiring of our brains. Beyond death, the notion of time is meaningless. Our prayer and our hope is that Jesus will come to us at the end of our time on earth, at our death, as he came to his mother, and draw us into God's embrace, with the whole of our human reality transformed fully by love.

Mary's Mediation

Finally, the Catechism (n.970) reminds us that Mary's mediation is not independent of the mediation of Jesus. All that was said earlier on the mediation that is part of the communion of saints is relevant here. Jesus is the one and only mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). It is Jesus' life that we share. It is Jesus' Spirit that gives us life. It is Jesus' priesthood, Jesus' prayer, Jesus' mediation that he offers us, for we are his Body. Paul could say:

'It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, loving me and giving himself for me' (Galatians 2:20).

If Paul can say this, how wonderful must be Mary's sharing in the eternal bliss of her son! And we are encouraged to believe that she is always praying for us (we are all inter-connected), longing with all her heart that the love of God as she experienced it in the heart of her Son would be known everywhere, and that the whole of creation would embrace her Son and so be drawn to share the eternal life of the saints.

