Communion of Saints: Key to the Eucharist

One of the most beautiful articles in the Apostles’ Creed is that which speaks of the “communion of saints.” Understanding these three words can sow the seeds of deep spiritual growth. As we shall see, there is a strong link between our understanding of saints and our understanding of the Eucharist. In this Update I’d like to name four ways in which we can understand the significance of the communion of saints, including a reflection on the communion of saints in light of the Eucharist.

Mortal saints

First of all, we can understand “communion of saints” as referring to ourselves as the community of believers. On the feast of all saints, we might hail one another with the words “happy feast day,” indicating by such a greeting that we think that despite our sinfulness, we are saints in the sense that we belong to the community of people called to be saints.

There is biblical justification for giving the “communion of saints” this meaning. St. Paul quite regularly addressed his letters to the saints of the Church to which he wrote: the saints (the holy ones) at Ephesus, the saints at Colossae, for example. True, when he wrote to the Corinthians, he hesitated a bit and finally addressed them as “called to be saints.” That’s quite understandable if you know anything about the people who belonged to the Corinthian Church! On a “sanctity scale” ranging from one to 10 most of them were probably about a three!

“Saints,” then, is a time-honored way of referring to the members of the Church. Now we may all be different numbers on the scale of sanctity. Some of us may be threes, like the Corinthians. But there may also be among us, perhaps, a number of eights and nines, with quite a few in between. I doubt, though, that there are any 10s among us—well, maybe one or two, but not many, surely. (Perhaps you would like to stop a moment and ask yourself which number you occupy on the scale of sanctity; or if you are really brave, you might ask your spouse or your best friend what he or she thinks your number is! It may be an insightful, if humbling, experience.)

We rightly deserve to be called saints, as people baptized into Christ. For Baptism unites us to Jesus, the Holy One of God. And united to Jesus we are united and related to one another. We constitute a communion. The communion of saints is another way of designating the Church.

Immortal saints

There is a second way in which we use the term “communion of saints,” namely, to designate those who have entered through death into the fullness of God. Thus, the communion of saints in this context refers to the blessed in heaven: Saints Peter, Paul, Francis, Clare, Catherine, Anne, Joachim, etc., as well as our Aunt Minnie, Uncle Mike, cousin Amanda and all the others who have lived as holy children of God.

We used to speak of these people as belonging to the “Church Triumphant.” But this was only an analogy. The blessed in heaven, of course, do not belong to any Church, as we know it. They
don’t need the Church anymore. They have already achieved what the Church exists to help them achieve, namely, full union with God.

In heaven the ecumenical goal is fully realized. No longer are there Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims or Buddhists. Those are earthly ways to think of humanity. Of course there are persons, unique in their own individuality. Yet unique though they are, they are now perfectly one with God. On that scale of sanctity I mentioned, they have all made it to 10s, but each one a marvelously different 10.

Communion of saints—all of us!

There is a third way in which we use the term “communion of saints.” It is really a combination of the first two. This combined communion of saints includes all of us who are more or less saints (some more, some less) plus all those who have entered into full communion with God. We are all related because Baptism is so strong a link that not even death can break it.

It is especially this more expansive understanding of the communion of saints that we celebrate each November on the feast of All Saints. To use James Joyce’s words, it’s a “here comes everybody” feast. Everybody belongs, no matter how high or low they may be on the sanctity scale.

How are we—saints in process—related to the saints who have entered into the fullness of divine life? Elizabeth Johnson, in her splendid book on the communion of saints called Friends of God and Prophets, speaks of two different paradigms for understanding that relationship: “one an egalitarian model that names [the saints] as companions and friends, the other a patriarchal [model] that casts certain privileged dead into positions of patronage.”

In the first model they are that wonderful “cloud of witnesses” spoken of in Hebrews (12:1) who are our friends, encouraging us, rooting for us, also challenging us to complete the work they had begun.

In the second model, they are seen as heavenly intercessors around the throne of God who manipulate heavenly strings for us. We are their clients and they are our patrons. Dr. Johnson quotes another author, sociologist Stephen Wilson: The saints are seen “as advocates pleading causes before a stern judge, as mediators, as go-betweens, as intriguers or wire-pullers at the court of heaven.” In this scheme of things the saints are arranged in a hierarchy, with Mary as the arch-intercessor.

It is not difficult to understand how the 16th-century reformers rebelled against this notion of patronage and saintly mediation, especially as it was misunderstood by many. Jesus was and is the one mediator. The reformers were not interested in any other mediators between Jesus and us.

The medieval Church had gone to one extreme in exaggerating the client/patron system, just as the 16th-century reformers went to the opposite extreme by pretty much ignoring the saints. The liturgical changes of Vatican II, in the 1960s, attempted to strike a balance. The highest priority
was given to the paschal mystery of the Lord as the heart of the Church’s celebration. The veneration of the saints was given an important, but subordinate, place in the life of the Church.

It is the model of saints as friends that predominates in the liturgy. In the Eucharist we remember the saints, and we honor them. But we see them as disciples of Jesus who join us as we worship, just as our worship is joined with their unceasing praise of God. Notice how in the liturgy we don’t pray to the saints as objects of worship, but rather to ask them to pray to God with us. All of us, in heaven and on earth, are worshiping God together.

A story

The union of the saints in heaven with us in the Eucharist is expressed in a delightful story about a parish priest on a small Greek island in the Aegean Sea. One day a visitor asked the pastor, “How many people usually worship here on Sunday?” The priest’s answer was, “Oh, about ten to twelve thousand, I would suppose.” The visitor was somewhat bewildered. “This is a tiny island,” she said, “and the church is small. Where do all these people come from and how can they possibly fit into so small a church building?”

The priest smiled and then said to the visitor, “All the people who ever lived on this island since it received the gospel message are still here. Just think of what we say in the sacred liturgy: ‘Therefore with all the angels and the saints and the whole company of the faithful we praise your glory forever.’ Don’t you realize,” he added, “that when we sing the Trisagion [Holy, Holy, Holy] we are joining with all the holy ones who have ever worshiped in this church?”

How appropriate it is for us to be aware that when we gather to celebrate the Eucharist many more are present and active than mortal vision is able to see. It is worth noting too that it is not they who join us, but we who join them. We and the saints are related as friends, especially friends around the altar, but also friends in carrying on the unfinished tasks which they left to us.

Eucharist: Communion of holy things

Thus far I have described three ways in which we may reflect on the communion of saints. The first was thinking of the saints as friends; the second was the medieval patronage model of saints in heaven; and finally the third brings the first and second together—saints are living in heaven and on earth. What these three have in common is that they see the saints as persons—and holy persons.

But there’s one more way of thinking about the saints, one that is informed by our common experience of the Eucharist. The key to this understanding is in the Apostles’ Creed. I certainly won’t expect you to follow me through a Latin lesson, but suffice it to say that there is more than one translation for the phrase communio sanctorum, the phrase in the Apostles’ Creed from which we get “communion of saints.”

Communio sanctorum, besides meaning a “communion of ‘holy persons,’” can also mean a “sharing or a participation in ‘holy things.’” In fact, this may well be its most basic meaning. The holy things mean the elements of the Eucharist, or the sacraments with the Eucharist as the
sacrament of sacraments. In discussing this way of understanding the communion of saints, I should point out that there is no mention of the communio sanctorum in the Nicene Creed, nor was it included in the old Roman creed that was the predecessor of the Apostles’ Creed. Among surviving texts of the Creed, the earliest mention of the communio sanctorum is found in a fourth-century commentary by Nicetas, the bishop of Remesiana (in modern-day Yugoslavia). There are indicators that it may have been imported from the East.

It matters little whether “communion in holy things” was the primary or at least the original meaning of communio sanctorum. Our understanding of the term is enriched when we take it to mean the commonly shared sacraments, especially the Eucharist. We call our partaking of the eucharistic bread “Holy Communion.” In the Byzantine liturgy the distribution of Holy Communion begins with the priest saying, “Holy things for holy people.” It is a phrase that in a sense brings together all the various meanings we have been discussing.

Before and after

It is helpful in reflecting on the communion of saints to take note of what comes before and after it in the creed. Directly before the term “communion of saints,” the Creed speaks of the “Church.” In relation to what goes before, the communion of saints is another way of saying “Church.” It is the communion of the faithful: believers who have faults and failings and sinfulness, yet who have forsworn sinful ways and who strive day after day—some days better than others—to live as disciples of Jesus.

But if you consider what comes after the term “communion of saints,” namely “the forgiveness of sins,” then communion of saints refers to the sacramental life of the Church, which culminates in the Eucharist. For the “forgiveness of sins” is a reference to Baptism. This becomes clear when you look at the Nicene Creed and see that it has no reference to the communion of saints, but does express belief in “one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins.”

When we read the Apostles’ Creed today, our inclination is to think of the “forgiveness of sins” as a reference to the sacrament of reconciliation. Clearly when the Creeds were formulated “forgiveness of sins” was a reference to Baptism.

As the Church through its history reflected on the many ways in which Jesus expressed and exercised mercy and forgiveness, it came more and more to see forgiveness as an essential element of a Church made up of people called to be saints, but conscious of all too frequently lapsing from that calling. The good news of the gospel is that the forgiveness of God is abroad in our world and given with wonderful divine largesse.

The Eucharist is preeminently the sign and bearer of God’s mercy and grace. True, the forgiveness of sins belongs to Baptism, and, as it later developed in the Church, to the sacrament which we call the “Sacrament of Reconciliation.” But there is a sense in which it is the Eucharist that is preeminently the sacrament of forgiveness. That’s why we pray, at Eucharist, “Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world....”
The Council of Trent speaks of the Eucharist in this way: “The Lord is appeased by this offering, he gives the gracious gift of repentance. He absolves even enormous offenses and sins.”

There is, then, appropriateness in speaking of the Eucharist before the forgiveness of sins in the Creed. The famous Jesuit theologian, Karl Rahner, in a small tract on the sacraments called The Sacraments of the Church, writes that the Eucharist “simply cannot be put on a level with the other sacraments and listed along with them.”

That is why he begins his study of the sacraments not in the usual way—with Baptism—but with the Eucharist. Another famous Jesuit theologian who helped shape the Vatican II Church, Henri de Lubac, has said that the Eucharist is “sacrament in the highest sense of the word, sacramentum sacramentorum.” It embodies the whole mystery of salvation. While the Church exists at all times, it is at the Eucharist, the “source and summit of Catholic worship,” that the Church achieves its highest actuality. The Eucharist is, indeed, holy things for holy people.

The term communio sanctorum, then, is a window not only into the communion of saints, but also into the mystery of the Eucharist. In exploring four different ways of understanding the term, as we have, we see how rich a term it is, one that can cross boundaries. For it means at once a communion of “holy people” as well as a communion of “holy things.” Indeed, by extension it could embrace the sacred communion of life that is God’s good creation.

In its widest sense the communion of saints is about what Elizabeth Johnson calls “a communal participation in the gracious holiness of God.” When we participate in the Eucharist, we join all the saints in that holy and wondrous communion.

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