



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

Date: 2 November 2003
Title: "Of Saints and Sacraments"
Comment: Sermon delivered on All Saints Day 2003, addressing the subject of how the "Communion of Saints" is viewed in the Anglican tradition.
Author: Rev. Tyler A. Strand, Rector

"Of Saints and Sacraments"

Despite our location hidden up a driveway away from the ever-more-busy McKinley Road, Holy Trinity is still well-enough known that people visit us from time to time. Some of those visitors are students from various schools whose religion teachers have given them the assignment of comparing a local church with their own, usually Catholic one. These students are almost always very polite and sometimes well prepared, and their questions are always quite similar. One of them that I have grown accustomed to is "Do you believe in *saints*?" The response they get depends somewhat on how they have phrased the question, but they always seem prepared to hear a definitive and very Protestant 'No!' I know what they're asking: Does the Anglican Church observe the cult of individual saints in the same way as the Roman Catholic Church does? Are there saints' days and statues and novenas? Do we ask the saints to pray for us?

But for me to take the easy way out and say that we hold only the reformed teaching about the nature of sainthood would be to deny some of the facts about our particular tradition within the non-Roman world. In fact, we do observe saints' days in our calendars and have special texts and readings assigned for them. We do in fact hold to the basic Christian teaching about the Communion of Saints as the body of all faithful people, living and dead, who are part of Christ's Body, the Church. And we do believe that our intercession for each other does continue beyond death, since that "communion of fellowship and prayer" doesn't end and even death can't keep us apart if we are one in Christ. That is especially important to remember on this holiday: the merger of All Saints and All Souls into a celebration of the Communion of all the Faithful, living and departed.

Anyone who has done any reading in the New Testament knows that for early Christian writers, the word 'saint' (or 'holy one' in Greek) refers to all of the members of the Church, living or dead. The saints on earth are expected to care for each other, encourage each other, and pray for each other, but so do those who have died whom the book of Revelation describes as offering prayers to God that rise up like clouds of incense. Originally, this universal prayer circle was the source of great comfort to those who knew that they would be with their loved ones again. It was only gradually that abuse crept in to the Church's customs and individual saints came to be treated like the patrons of special interest groups or, worse, as power magnates whose influence could be bought with special favors, candles and promises. That is what the Reformers detested about late medieval practice: it hid Jesus from being our primary intercessor and it made our relationship with the saints one of *utang na loob*: obligation owed to creditors, not a community of friends.

For some people, "high church" practices about the saints, like pictures and mention in our worship, that survive within our Anglican Christian tradition still look uncomfortably like those of the Roman Catholics. I can understand their initial unease and I always try to explain such uses. However, I also believe that unless we keep the saints in mind, we will risk ignoring some very basic Christian teachings about our life in Christ. One of these is that we are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses" who are cheering us on as if we are in an athletic contest, and who are our fellow citizens in the Kingdom of God. This is where the idea comes of having the special role models of exceptional saints. It is a simple fact that not all Christians can or ought to be held up as examples of how to live the Faith successfully and well, just as not all politicians, celebrities or even clergy are equally honorable or should be imitated to the same degree. A Saint Paul, a Saint John, a Saint Francis or even an "eventual Saint" Teresa of Calcutta deserve to be role models for us all. That is how the Communion of Saints works for us, both as the source of example and as a source of encouragement.

There is another teaching of our Faith that is of special importance to us on this holiday, too, and that is the unity we have with those of our Christian family and friends who have died: those of the "rank and file," the ones who may not be big name saints, but who lived out their own "sainthood" in lives of simplicity, dedication and love. These, too, continue their membership in the Church even though we may not see them with us here, and they too benefit from our prayers in a real way, since we have been told to "pray without ceasing" not only for ourselves, but for others.

We should not presume to say with certainty how our prayers help those who have died, any more than we can always know exactly how our prayers for the sick or those in need help them in this world. But pray we must, and pray we do in obedience to our Lord.

Finally, it might be asked, what is the best way to pray "with the saints" since we can't exactly phone them up or drop by, nor should we fall back into questionable practices like invoking the saints as if they were gods and goddesses who can grant our wishes by their own power. There is a way that we can know ourselves to be especially close to the whole communion of saints in heaven and on earth and that is when we gather together to celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the Holy Communion. It is here that we come closest to already being in the Kingdom of God, and we know ourselves to be surrounded by "angels and archangels and the whole company of heaven" when we call God holy, holy and even more holy. Here, then, we are also united with those who have died, our families and friends who we believe to be gathered around the throne of God the way we are gathered around this altar. Here we can know that our shared focus, our common prayer, and our fellowship in Christ in this holy meal bring the whole family together.

St. Monica, mother of the Christian teacher Augustine of Hippo, lived with her famous son for many years and then decided to return to her native North Africa. On her way, though, she took sick and knew that she was being called to a very different home. As she lay dying, she told her son this: "It doesn't really matter where you bury my body as long as you remember me at God's altar." She took the Communion of Saints in the Eucharist seriously, and so should we.

One of the local customs one sees here in the Philippines during this holiday is the gathering of families and whole clans in the cemeteries to share a meal. This has both pre-Christian and also early Christian precedent going back as early as the first years of the Church and can be a powerful affirmation of the unity of Christ's people both in heaven and on earth. But we don't have to go to the cemeteries for this: we have it right here in our family gathering on Sundays when we share the meal that Christ commanded us to keep in the company of our family both here and in the world to come, gathered around the Lamb of God whose death has destroyed death and who has brought us together "from every family, language, people and nation, a kingdom of priests to serve our God."

"Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us, therefore let us keep the feast" with and for the whole Communion of Saints.

Author: Rev. Tyler A. Strand

Date: Insert date

File: ce_031102