

## THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS AND THE MYSTICAL BODY

In the ninth article of the Apostles' Creed we affirm our belief in the Communion of Saints. This formula, which did not enter the Creed until about the fifth century, has never been explained in any solemn declaration of the Catholic Church. As a result, we must rely upon the organs of the Church's ordinary *magisterium* for a satisfactory statement of its meaning.

There are extant four distinct ways of interpreting the term *Communio Sanctorum*. The first method would make the word *Sanctorum* neuter, the genitive of *Sancta*. Thus the *Communio Sanctorum* would be the common possession of holy things, the corporate enjoyment within the Catholic Church of those agencies which our Lord has instituted to help men live the life of grace.

The other interpretations accept *Sanctorum* as masculine, the genitive of *Sancti*. The English formula "Communion of Saints" is fitted to express only these interpretations. In this way the *Communio* could be understood either as the fellowship or association within a definite society or as the society itself. When the word *Communio* is understood as designating a society, then this organization is either identical with or distinct from the Catholic Church.

The explanation according to which the *Communio Sanctorum* means the common possession of means for salvation was recognized and approved by the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*. The *Catechism* taught that the formula *Communio Sanctorum* was added as a kind of explanation to the preceding expression about the Holy Catholic Church, and it goes on to explain that "the unity of the Spirit by which it [the Church] is ruled makes whatever is granted in it common, for the fruits of all the Sacraments belong to all the faithful."<sup>1</sup> According to the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, not only the sacraments and the fruits of the sacraments are beneficial to all the members of the Church together, but also the charisms or the *gratiae gratis datae* are truly common possessions.<sup>2</sup>

Very few theologians, however, attempted to explain the *Communio Sanctorum* entirely as the common possession of instruments for salvation. Usually the proponents of Catholic teaching interpret this phrase to mean the fellowship or association with our Lord and with

<sup>1</sup> *Catechismus Concilii Tridentini, Pii V Pontificis Maximi Jussu Promulgatus*. Pars I, art. 9, Cap. 25 (translation ours).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *loc. cit.* Cap. 24-28.

the blessed in heaven and the souls in purgatory enjoyed within the Catholic Church. Those in the state of grace in this world receive the full benefits accruing from this association. However, Catholics in the state of mortal sin are not wholly cut off from this communication. They receive some share from their fellowship with the Saints of God inasmuch as the blessings consequent upon the Communion of Saints tend to bring them to repentance and thus to eternal life.

No man can enjoy this fellowship apart from the Catholic Church. Those who enjoy the Communion of Saints either are actually members of the Catholic Church or really intend to become members. Thus those in the state of grace, the persons who derive the full benefit from their association with the Church triumphant and the Church suffering, possess that charity which demands the love of the brotherhood. Every person in the state of grace intends to live and to die within the unity of the Catholic Church, even though, for want of proper instruction, his intention should be merely implicit.

Some theologians have used the term *Communio Sanctorum* as a definition of the Catholic Church itself. In so far as the Catholic Church extends into heaven and purgatory, it may well be defined in the formula "the society of the saints who serve God under Christ." Naturally, those who use such a definition are at pains to insist that the term *sanctorum* in the definition is not equivalent to *iustorum*. It is heretical to teach that the membership in the Church of Jesus Christ is restricted to those in the state of grace. It is theologically correct to state that the Church is the congregation of the saints, in the sense that all of those who are gathered within it either possess or profess holiness. Those in the Church triumphant and in the Church suffering actually possess holiness in the sense that they all possess the life of habitual grace. The members of the Church militant do not all possess charity, but they at least profess the holy faith of Jesus Christ, communicate in His holy sacraments and live under the holy rule He has placed within His Church.

Unfortunately, in our own day, certain writers have reacted against this last interpretation of the *Communio Sanctorum* in such a way as to sponsor another explanation, not in conformity with the Catholic traditions. In this group are certain of the finest theologians of our times. Father Dieckmann, S.J. teaches that the *Communio Sanctorum* is really distinct from the *Corpus Mysticum*, insisting that the Communion of Saints has a greater extension than the Church.<sup>3</sup> Father

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *De Ecclesia Tractatus Historico-Dogmatici*, Tom. II, Friburgi Brisgoviae, 1925, No. 935, pp. 235-36.

Gruden, accepting the teaching of Dieckmann, carries his conclusions still further, and holds that the Communion of Saints is really "an invisible society, a 'church' or 'ecclesia' in the broad sense."<sup>4</sup> According to this theory, there are members of the Communion of Saints who are not members of the Church, and conversely there are members of the Church who do not belong to the Communion of Saints.

Radically, this view is based upon a misinterpretation of the threefold definition of the Catholic Church. The strictest definition of the Church designates it as a society visibly distinct from the other religious organizations operating in the world. According to this definition, the Church is the society of those who are united in the profession of the same Christian faith and in the communication of the same Sacraments under legitimate pastors, and in particular under the one Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff. The broader definition of the Church identifies it as the society which is the true Israel, the continuation in the world of the body of believers in Christ existent since the days of our first parents. According to this broader definition, the Church is the congregation of those who believe in Christ.

The broadest definition of the Church represents this organization as the assembly which extends into eternity. After all, the members of the Catholic Church on earth are really "fellow citizens with the saints and the domestics of God."<sup>5</sup> St. John the Apostle preached that the faithful might have fellowship with him, "and that our fellowship may be with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup> The Church, considered in this light, is properly defined as "the society of the saints, serving God through Christ."

The traditional theologians of the Catholic Church never intended to designate three separate organizations with these three types of definitions. The three kinds of formulae described one and the same society, but looked upon that society as it were from three distinct angles. They labored to prove that all three of these definitions applied to the Catholic Church alone among all the various religious societies existent in the world. Certainly they did not think of the Church in the broadest sense as in any way an "invisible society" distinct from the Catholic Church.

If we take the term Communion as meaning a society, then the Communion of Saints is nothing more or less than the reality described

<sup>4</sup> *The Mystical Christ*, St. Louis and London, B. Herder Book Co., 1936, p. 161.

<sup>5</sup> *Eph.* 2:19.

<sup>6</sup> *I John* 1:3.

in the broadest definition of the Catholic Church. It is the convocation of the saints, serving God under Christ. There is certainly no theological warrant for supposing that this body constitutes a social unity distinct from that of the visible Catholic Church here on earth. A brief survey of the history of the formula Communion of Saints should serve to make this point clear.

One of the earliest mentions of the formula *Communio Sanctorum* with reference to a Creed is found in the *Explanatio Symboli*, attributed to Nicetas of Remesiana, and written around the beginning of the fifth century.

After the profession of the Blessed Trinity, you profess that you believe the holy Catholic Church. But what else is the Church but the congregation of all the saints? For from the beginning of the world the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the prophets, the apostles, the martyrs and the rest of the just who have been, who are, and who will be, constitute one Church because, sanctified in one faith and manner of life and signed with one Spirit, they are made into one body: of which body Christ is the head, as we have been taught and as it is written.

Again, I say more. Even the angels, even the powers and the heavenly virtues gathered together in this one Church, for the Apostle teaches us that all things, not only those which are on earth but also those which are in heaven are reconciled in Christ.

Therefore believe that you are going to achieve the communion of saints in this one Church. Know that this Catholic Church, the communion of which you ought firmly to retain, is established throughout the entire world. There are other Churches, which are false, but you should avoid these.<sup>7</sup>

As far as the author of this treatise is concerned, the Communion of Saints was certainly a fellowship to be found within the Catholic Church alone. He stresses the very concept of the Church which Fathers Dieckmann and Gruden have disliked, and which they have proposed as that of an "invisible society," a Church merely in the broad sense of the term. But Nicetas identifies the Church, which is distinguished here on earth as a society distinct from the conventicles of the Marcionites and the Manicheans, as the organization which includes the saints and even the angels, and the society within which men may attain fellowship with the blessed in heaven.

Commenting on Psalm 149, St. Augustine too recognized the Church which he defended as existing both on earth and in heaven.

<sup>7</sup> *MPL* 52, col. 871. Nigne ascribes this work to Niceta of Aquileia.

It has begotten us. It is the Church of the Saints. In part in pilgrimage, in great part dwelling in heaven, it has nourished us. In so far as it dwells in heaven, it is the blessedness of the angels. In so far as it is in pilgrimage in this world, it is the hope of the just.<sup>8</sup>

In his *Enchiridion* the great Father of the Church insists that the angels are not members of the Church in the same manner as the men who have been redeemed by our Lord. At the same time he states again that the Church on earth is a part of the organization in which the angels in heaven are included. It is interesting to compare the two passages. Speaking of the difference between the Church of the angels and the Church militant, St. Augustine stresses the visibility of this latter as contrasted with the comparative invisibility of the angelic choirs.

The Church among the holy angels and the powers of God will be apparent to us when we shall be joined to it in the end in possessing the same eternal happiness. But that which is in pilgrimage from it on earth is better known to us because we are in it and because it is made up of men like ourselves. This latter has been redeemed from every sin by the blood of a Mediator without sin. . . . For Christ did not die for the angels.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time St. Augustine adverts to the doctrine of the Communion of Saints, (without however using this term), when he teaches that the angels in heaven and the faithful on earth belong to the same organization.

Here [this Church] is considered as a whole, and not merely according to the part which is in pilgrimage on earth, praising the name of the Lord from the rising to the setting of the sun, and singing the new canticle after the ancient captivity. [It is considered also] in that [part] which has always, since it was established, been joined to God in heaven and which has never experienced any evil of loss. This latter stands blessed in the holy angels, and it helps, as it should, that portion of itself which is in pilgrimage. Both portions will be one in their lot for all eternity. Now they are one by the bond of charity, because the whole was established for the worship of the one God.<sup>10</sup>

The part of the Church which is in pilgrimage here on earth is of course the Church militant, the true Church of Jesus Christ, which Augustine defended so ably against the heretics of his own time. This

<sup>8</sup> *MPL* 37, col. 1952.

<sup>9</sup> *Cap. 16. MPL* 40, col. 260-61.

<sup>10</sup> *Cap. 15. ibid.* col. 258-59.

true Church was the Catholic Church, the organization which will contain good and bad members until the day of the general judgment. The members of this one Church were in fellowship with the blessed and the angels in heaven. The Church, with its perfect and imperfect members was the recipient of aid from the angelic hosts. There was, according to St. Augustine, a real and dynamic association with the blessed in heaven in and through this visible Catholic Church. There is certainly no warrant for teaching that the Communion of Saints is a sort of invisible society, distinct from the Catholic Church, since social union with the blessed in heaven is to be found through the visible Body of Christ.

What St. Augustine proposes as invisible is simply the union of the angels within the Church of God. He preached that they are joined to us now, and that they will be united to us for all eternity in a common worship of the Triune God. In his writings the Church militant is represented as *in pilgrimage*, as temporarily absent from its true home in the courts of heaven. Yet, during the course of this pilgrimage the Church militant remains in communication with its associates in the eternal homeland. Certainly there is no reason to say that the Saints in heaven belong to any society distinct from the Church, and including in its membership all of those persons in the state of grace here on earth.

St. Thomas Aquinas, treating explicitly of the Communion of Saints, taught that the good of one member of the Church was communicated to all the other members.

The Communion of Saints. As in a natural body the operation of one member contributes to the good of the entire body, so it is in the spiritual body which is the Church. And because all the faithful are one body, the good of the one is communicated to the other. As it is said in the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 12, [v. 5]: *Every one members one of another.* Hence among the other matters which the Apostles have taught us that we must believe is the doctrine that there is a communion of goods in the Church, and this is the thing called the Communion of Saints. Among the other members of the Church, the principal member is Christ, because He is the Head, as it is written in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians, [v. 22]: *He hath made Him Head over all the Church.* Therefore the good of Christ is communicated to all Christians as the power of the head to all its members, and this communication takes place through the Sacraments of the Church.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Expositio super Symbolo Apostolorum.* (This opusculum is numbered 33 in the Mandonnet edition and 6 in the traditional Roman collection.) The translation is ours.

Many of the great counter-Reformation theologians wrote about the Communion of Saints. None of them considered it as an invisible society in any way distinct from the Catholic Church. Thus Frederick Nausea, the famous Bishop of Vienna (†1552), interpreted the Communion of Saints as the common possession of spiritual goods by the members of the Church triumphant and the Church militant. At the same time, however, he designated the Church itself as the Communion of Saints.

So Christian piety believes that Church to be holy which is the Catholic Church and the Communion of Saints. Both still fighting here on earth and triumphing in heaven it shares universally one God, one Pastor, one faith and one baptism, the same merits and prayers, the same sacraments and especially the Eucharist which is the sacrament of all unity and concord.<sup>12</sup>

In his paraphrase of the ninth article of the Apostles' Creed Nausea offers a still more complete statement of his belief.

I believe also the Communion of Saints. That is I believe that through the sacraments of this Church and also through the faith of this same Church I have been united in a certain communion with Christ our Head and with all the saints, and that I have been made one with them, in such a way that whatever good Christ and His saints either already dead or still living have ever merited, comes in its entirety to me as long as I believe sincerely and remain within the Church, and that it will avail unto my salvation so that I need never despair of attaining eternal life.<sup>13</sup>

The *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, which appeared twenty-two years after the *Catholicus Catechismus* of Nausea, followed the same line. Fellowship with the Father and with Christ is to be found in the Communion of Saints. There is a common possession of spiritual goods among the members of the Church. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* insisted that the faithful in the state of mortal sin are not entirely cut off from this fellowship, even though the full benefit of the Communion of Saints comes only to those who live the life of habitual grace.<sup>14</sup> The *Catechism* makes no reference to the members of the Church triumphant or the Church suffering in its exposition of this article.

<sup>12</sup> Lib. II, p. 20<sup>v</sup> (translation ours). The dedication of this book was written in 1552 in Vienna. The time and place of publication are not mentioned.

<sup>13</sup> *Loc. cit.* (translation ours).

<sup>14</sup> *Cf. loc. cit.* Cap. 24-28.

John Hessels (†1566), writing at Louvain four years before his death, identified the Church absolutely with the Communion of Saints.

The Church is said to be the Communion or the society of saints because all the saints are gathered together in it, as one body united through one spirit, through the bond of peace and charity.<sup>15</sup>

The great Cardinal Stanislaus Hosius (†1579) was perfectly willing to accept the term Communion of Saints as a definition of the Church as long as the word saints was not considered as synonymous with those in possession of the state of grace. He adverted to the fact that St. Paul had saluted the members of the primitive Church as saints, regardless of the perfection of their spiritual lives. However, Hosius taught that the expression signified the community of spiritual goods within the Church and insisted that these goods were the common property of those within the Church militant and the Church triumphant.

This Communion of Saints must be understood in this manner. All the merits of the saints, both those who still fight at our side here on earth and those who now triumph in heaven after they have fought the good fight and have received the crown of glory, are communicated to us, plead for us, aid us.<sup>16</sup>

St. Peter Canisius (†1597) explained the Communion of Saints so effectively that most catechisms since his time have followed his method.

In the fourth place [we believe] that the Communion of Saints is in the same Church, in such a way that those who dwell within the Church as within the house or the family of God retain a certain fellowship and union among themselves and, as members of one body, aid each other by their mutual duties, merits and prayers. Among these there is unity of faith, agreement in doctrine and the same use of the sacraments. They are careful to retain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.<sup>17</sup>

In his smaller catechism he explicitly adverts to the fact that the Communion of Saints exists in such a way as to include not only the

<sup>15</sup> *Brevis et Catholica Symboli Apostolici Explicatio*, Louvain, 1562, Cap. 70, p. 39<sup>v</sup> (translation ours).

<sup>16</sup> *Confessio Catholicae Fidei Christianae*, Cap. 31. In the *Opera Omnia* Vol. I, Cologne, 1584, p. 71 (translation ours).

<sup>17</sup> *Summa Doctrinae Christianae*, Cap. 1, no. 17. In Father Streicher's critical edition (Rome and Munich, 1933), *Catechismi Latini*, p. 89 (translation ours).

faithful on earth, (St. Peter Canisius does not limit this communion to those who enjoy the state of grace), but also the blessed in heaven and the souls in purgatory.<sup>18</sup>

The old Baltimore Catechism taught that "the Saints and we are members of the same Church, because the Church in heaven and the Church on earth are one and the same Church, and all its members are in communion with one another."<sup>19</sup> It defined the Communion of Saints as "the union which exists between the members of the Church on earth with one another, and with the blessed in heaven and with the suffering souls in purgatory."<sup>20</sup> The revised version teaches that the Communion of Saints means "the union of the faithful on earth, the blessed in heaven, and the souls in purgatory, with Christ as their head."<sup>21</sup>

Cardinal Gasparri's Catechism repeats the teaching of the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*. "The second part of the Ninth Article of the Creed—the Communion of Saints—is connected with the first part as in some sort explaining it, for it teaches us what benefit the members of the Church may gain from the holiness obtained in and through the Church." Cardinal Gasparri asserts that "by this second part of the Ninth Article of the Creed we mean that between the members of the Church—in Heaven, in Purgatory, and on earth—there exists, by reason of their close union with one another under Christ their Head, a mutual communication in spiritual riches."<sup>22</sup>

The Catechism *Catholic Faith* adverts explicitly to the fellowship which constitutes the Communion of Saints as existing within the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ. "By the Communion of Saints we mean that the members of the Church in Heaven, in purgatory, and on earth, are all one family of God, loving and helping one another as members of the Mystical Body of Christ."<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, however, *Catholic Faith* speaks of "membership" in the Communion of Saints

<sup>18</sup> *Institutiones et Exercitamenta Christianae Pietatis*, Cap. 1, no. 14. In *op. cit.* p. 241 (translation ours).

<sup>19</sup> Lesson 31, q. 336.

<sup>20</sup> *Loc. cit.*, q. 338.

<sup>21</sup> Lesson 13, q. 170.

<sup>22</sup> *The Catholic Catechism*, drawn up by his Eminence Peter Cardinal Gasparri. Only authorized English translation, by Reverend Hugh Pope, O.P., Third printing, New York, P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1932, q. 170, pp. 110-11.

<sup>23</sup> Q. 143.

as something distinct from membership in the Church.<sup>24</sup> This terminology is not sanctioned by Cardinal Gasparri's Catechism, on which *Catholic Faith* is based. The Cardinal spoke of the enjoyment of this fellowship. He did not consider the Communion of Saints as a society in any way distinct from the true Church.<sup>25</sup>

In the article "Communion of Saints" in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Joseph Francis Sollier teaches that this communion is "the spiritual solidarity which binds together the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, and the saints in heaven in the organic unity of the same mystical body under Christ its head, and in a constant interchange of supernatural offices."<sup>26</sup> In his book *The Communion of Saints* Charles McGinnis writes that "In one word, the expression, Communion of Saints, comprises the Church Militant, Triumphant, and Suffering."<sup>27</sup> His definition of the Communion of Saints as well as the definition set forth by Archbishop Ireland in the introduction to his work, accords fully with that of Sollier.<sup>28</sup> The same definition, for all intents and purposes, is to be found in the brilliant article on the Communion of Saints by Father Bernard in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*<sup>29</sup> and in the treatise on the Communion of Saints by the scholarly French Franciscan, Valentin Breton.<sup>30</sup>

In the light of the literature on the Communion of Saints, the following conclusions are amply justified.

I: If the term, Communion of Saints, be used to designate a society then this social unit is none other than the Church which is the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ.

II: The term is ordinarily used to indicate a fellowship within a society. The society within which the fellowship exists is the Catholic Church. Thus the only persons who enjoy this fellowship are those who either are or intend to become members of the Catholic Church.

III: The members of the Church receive the benefit of their association with the blessed in heaven through the sacraments and the corporate and private acts of worship existent within the Church. Thus the common spiritual possessions of Catholics are at once the

<sup>24</sup> Cf. q. 144.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. q. 172.

<sup>26</sup> Vol. 4, p. 171.

<sup>27</sup> *The Communion of Saints*, St. Louis, B. Herder Book Co., 1912, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> McGinnis' definition is found on page 26, that of Archbishop Ireland on page vi.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Vol. 3, col. 447.

<sup>30</sup> *The Communion of Saints*, St. Louis, B. Herder Book Co., 1934, pp. 120-21.

channels through which men receive favors from God, through which the souls in purgatory are benefited, and by which the saints in heaven are honored.

IV: There is no invisible Church, no religious society distinct from the Catholic Church, of which men in the state of grace are members. The only society which can rightly be denominated as the Communion of Saints is the true Church of Jesus Christ, the Mystical Body.

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## Answers to Questions

### HOLY NAME COMMUNION SUNDAY

*Question:* The *Manual* of the Holy Name Society asserts that the members are obliged to receive Holy Communion with the Society on Holy Name Sunday. Please state how this is to be reconciled with the decree of the Congregation of the Sacraments, explained in the March issue of the *American Ecclesiastical Review* in the article "Holy Communion Through Coercion."

*Answer:* The decree to which reference is made implicitly answers this question, for it repeats the ruling of the decree *Sacra Tridentina Synodus* to this effect: "If there are any institutes of either solemn or simple vows, in whose rules and constitutions, or calendars, Communion is attached to certain days and ordered to be received on those days, these rules are to be considered merely directive and not preceptive" (Bouscaren, *Canon Law Digest*, Vol. II, p. 214).

Now, if the rules of a religious order commanding the members to receive Holy Communion on certain days are merely directive, not preceptive, *a fortiori* the same is true of the rules of a society of lay Catholics, such as the Holy Name Society. In other words, the rule of this Society concerning the reception of Holy Communion by the members on Holy Name Sunday of each month is to be regarded as a counsel, the omission of which will not render a member liable to any penalty, such as expulsion from the Society.

### PROMISES IN MIXED MARRIAGES

*Question:* Do the promises, which must be given by both parties for the validation of a mixed marriage, regarding the Catholic baptism and education of all the children (Canon 1061, 1, 2), refer only to those children who may be born afterward, or also to those previously born to the couple—for example, after a civil marriage?

*Answer:* From a decree given by the Holy Office on January 16, 1942 (*Acta Apost. Sedis*, Vol. 34, p. 22) it is evident that the promises required in the case proposed need to be extended only to children who may be born later, and not to any who have previously been born to the couple. This decision is a reversal of the opinion quite