CITIZENSHIP WITH THE SAINTS

THE Communion of Saints is an article of faith recalled daily in the Creed, and its acceptance is implied in most common acts of religion, prayers to the saints in Heaven, prayers for the souls in Purgatory, prayers for one another. These practical and frequent applications of this article of faith, however, seldom seem to rouse curiosity as to the implication of the belief itself. Yet its importance in the ordinary things of Christian life gives meaning, for instance, to the feast of All Saints. The latter is more than a makeweight feast for all the saints who cannot otherwise be fitted into the calendar. It is, in a sense, our own feast; it is a reminder of the capabilities for grace which we all possess; it is a counsel to see more profound possibilities in the familiar sides of our daily life.

The principle of the doctrine of the Communion of Saints is enunciated in the Catechism of the Council of Trent: 'Every pious and holy action done by one belongs and is profitable to all through charity which seeketh not her own.'[1] St. John had already expressed the same thing: 'That which we have seen and have heard we declare unto you: that you also may have fellowship (κοινωνία—joint participation) with us and our fellowship may be with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.'[2] The Catechism of the Council of Trent gives the doctrine its widest possible meaning, a sharing of merits among all members of both the visible and invisible Church, on earth, in purgatory and in heaven. St. John enunciates the principle which St. Thomas has thus expressed: 'The merits of

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[1] *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, Part I, art. 9.

[2] I John i, 3.

Christ are communicated to all, and the merits of each one are communicated to the others.'[3] Christ merited on Calvary as the Head of the Mystical Body, and the organic unity of head and members make these merits available to the members in the same manner as the fruits of the human brain are enjoyed by the hands, eyes, and other members of the human body. Moreover, these merits have a specific effect: they make men eligible for a supernatural reward by giving them a share of the divine life, by making them godlike. St. Thomas tells us that Christ has the power to share His grace as Head of the Church with all his members.[4] This means that since the members of the body share the nature of the Head they have powers similar to those of the Head, and therefore in their own degree are capable of merit. These merits in turn, because of the organic unity between member and member, become available to others, again in much the same way that the hand, though it cannot have the power that the mind has of seeking out causes and initiating processes, can work for the good of eyes and ears.

There, in rather bare terms, is the skeleton of the Church's doctrine of the Communion of Saints. In more practical human language, we believe that we can obtain grace through the saints in heaven, not because of any merely natural human bond, but because of a supernatural bond, Jesus Christ Himself, Who, through charity, which is the sharing of His divinity with us all, makes us one body. So the Catechism of the Council of Trent says that the source of life of the Communion of Saints is charity, and therefore it extends to the angels, to all, in fact, who are in a state of grace. Evidence of the Church's belief in this solidarity can be found in her liturgy from the earliest times. The purer forms of liturgical prayer on

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[3] *Expos. in Symb.*, 10.

[4] IIIa, viii, 1.

saints' days are always petitions asking the saints to intercede *for* us *to* God *through* the Son, and in some cases through the Holy Ghost too. The family relationship, so to say, always remains the same: the more privileged members of the family put the requests of the more lowly to the Father through the Eldest Son.

This, however, is but one development of the doctrine. From the words of St. Thomas and the Catechism of the Council of Trent it is undeniably clear that not only can the angels and saints in heaven pass on their merits to other members of the Church, but the faithful on earth also can merit grace for one another and for the souls in Purgatory. St. Thomas makes full allowance for this by interpreting *communio sanctorum* as a common fund of holy things, the merits of all shared out. The Catechism of the Council of Trent calls it *bonorum communicatio,* a common store of goods which can be shared by all who lead the Christian life in charity (*qui in charitate vitam christianam degunt*)—a wide enough term in all truth. This is the side of the question that has received least attention. The fact is that we can merit grace for others here on earth before reaching heaven. Christ does not intend us merely to intercede for ourselves and wait for our requests to be granted, but wishes us to be active in putting forward the needs of others. This creates a bond of union deeper and stronger than that of any earthly society. When we put our merits at the disposal of others we exercise in its highest form citizenship, public spirit, patriotism—call it what you will— in the City of God. It is the citizenship of a universal kingdom, and therefore has universal applications.

While so much, both sense and nonsense, is being talked of public spirit and citizenship, the City of God is rarely invoked as an ideal. This is so marked that Lord Halifax aroused great interest when, speaking of the spirit of a nation, he declared, in effect, that a nation is a Christian nation only so long as its national loyalties are integrated

in its Christian loyalty. His words stand out, startling and challenging, in a sea of plagiaristic mediocrities. He reminds us that if we are to learn to be good citizens of our native land we must first be worthy members of the City of God. The reason for the failure to make national patriotism a Christian virtue is only too often the failure to make real and vital the practice of Christian patriotism in the widest sense of the word. Our petitions to God for our friends have often been swamped by meaningless routine. Many a time we waken too late to the realisation that prayer for our fellow-men is a duty as well as a bond of unity. Had Christians remained conscious of their solidarity with Christ, the angels, the saints and their fellow men in the Body of Christ, and had they borne in mind the integration of all forms of patriotism in this community, pride of race and nation would never have been allowed to usurp the place of Christian patriotism. This is not merely an indictment of totalitarian nations, but a warning to us also. But so long as we are Christians first, British as part of our Christianity, so long, in other words, as we remain conscious of our part in the Communion of Saints we shall have raised patriotism to the rank of a supernatural virtue. We can retain this consciousness to-day by continual exercise of our Christian citizenship in prayer for our fellow Christians the world over, for even the upheaval of war cannot be a bar to the universality of Redemption. The Blood of Christ was shed for the whole human race, however much men may care to call themselves friends or enemies. On Calvary there are no enemies but those in Hell. The merits of Calvary extend over the whole world, and to-day, in spite of all the machines of war, they are being universally shared, offered and received through the prayers of the members of Christ for one another.

Once again the Church's belief is made clear in the liturgy. The Canon of the Mass is full of this idea: we, the members of Christ, pray to the Father through Christ

for the living and 'offer up to thee this sacrifice of praise, ... for the redeeming of their souls, for the hope of their safety and salvation': we unite ourselves with all the saints beginning with Our Lady, 'by whose merits and prayers' we pray 'that in all things we may be guarded by thy protecting help. Through the same Christ our Lord.' Then the Church is so confident in the power of her plea that she dares to demand that the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ 'for us.' When the sacrifice is offered we make it *our* sacrifice and 'do offer unto thy most excellent majesty of thine own gifts bestowed upon us a clean victim, a holy victim, a spotless victim.' Lastly, as if to make the Body of Christ complete in every detail, before praying for the dead, the Church begs Almighty God 'to command that these things be borne by the hands of thy holy angel to thine altar on high'; not even the angels are to go without explicit mention in this comprehensive concept of the great family of the Church.

In the comparatively short space of the Canon of the Mass the liturgy sets out in its full splendour the whole wealth of the family of the Mystical Body: all ranks are included in the act of sacrifice. We offer it for ourselves, for our friends living and dead; we offer it not only for them, but with them, not only with them, but with the Blessed Virgin and the angels and saints in heaven: with all of them through Jesus Christ.

The Communion of Saints as typified in the liturgy is a world at variance with the world of to-day. The liturgy knows a body of people which is indivisible and indestructible, the strength of which lies in its organic unity. Yet the human dignity of its individual members is not destroyed; on the contrary, man's individual nature is fulfilled and given supernatural perfections by incorporation in Christ. One of the profoundest natural needs of the individual man is satisfied, the need for social intercourse, giving to others and sharing their gifts. No man can live

a completely solitary life and remain human, 'It is not good for man to be alone.' The life of the Christian, too, is perfect in so far as he lives on and contributes to the *bonorum communicatio* of the whole Church. This communion affords man the opportunity to fulfil this side of his nature: it preserves the relations of the faithful on earth with the angels and saints in heaven and with the souls in Purgatory: the relation of all with God. So long as the universal relationships are preserved in the liturgy and practice of the Church, it is impossible to compromise with systems which seek the well-being of the individual, whether individual man or individual race, at the expense of mankind. The Christian life is a giving to one's fellow-men throughout the world, regardless of race or calling.

The paradox of Christian life is that in so far as the individual Christian sacrifices himself for his fellows, so far does he prosper his own individual life. For thus he approximates to Christ as Victim and Mediator. When he offers his own prayers and sufferings for his fellow men he does so in union with and as a brother of Christ, thereby strengthening that union and brotherhood, and continuing the work begun in the Mass where he offered himself as Victim with Christ. Unfortunately this aspect of the doctrine of sacrifice has been very much obscured by the liturgists themselves, who have been so anxious to emphasise the pre-eminence and transcendence of the Eucharistic sacrifice that they have rather overlooked the idea of sacrifice as being applied to mortification, self-sacrifice. In point of fact it is a necessary complement of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. We all share, at Mass, in the Priesthood and Victimship of Christ, but this incorporation is of little value if it ceases to function the moment we step out of the church porch. To be full and true, this sacrifice must prolong Priesthood and Victimship throughout our lives. This is indeed the meaning of the word self-sacrifice—offering oneself as Priest and Victim. When undertaken in virtue of our incorporation with

Christ in the Mass, self-sacrifice, even in what may seem only petty matters, has a social value, because it is not only the curbing of our own personal desires, but is the renewal of the sacrifice of the Mystical Christ and therefore merits some share of the grace of Calvary which is made available to the whole Church. That was the idea behind St. Thomas's saying that the merits of each one are communicated to the others. Self-sacrifice is indispensable if the corporate life of the Church is to be lived integrally and healthily.

In like manner prayers for others link the Christian more closely to Christ the Mediator. St. Paul says: 'there is one God, and one mediator of God and men, the man Jesus Christ.'[5] But his insistence on the oneness of the mediator does not exclude other mediators by participation. He never hesitates, for example, to beg the prayers of his brethren for himself and his work: 'I beseech you, therefore, brethren through Our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the charity of the Holy Ghost, that you help me in your prayers for me to God.'[6] Again, St. James: 'Pray one for another that you may be saved.'[7] From the earliest times the Church understood the power of men's prayers for one another as a power shared with Christ the Mediator. St. Paul always urges that the prayers of the brethren for him should be offered through Christ. By the Redemption, man was given a part in the apostolic work of Christ. In the same way that the priest administering the sacraments continues the work begun by Christ, all the faithful in their prayers for one another continue the prayer of Christ; 'I pray for them. I pray not for the world, but for them whom thou hast given me: . . . And not for them only do I pray, but for them also who through their

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[5] I Tim. ii, 5.

[6] Rom. xv, 30.

[7] James v, 16.

word shall believe in me.'[8] By continuing this prayer every Christian shares the mediatory power of Christ and becomes a real *Alter Christus*, while at the same time he consolidates his relation to all the other members of Christ.

Springing as it does from the fact of the corporate unity of the Church this prayer of mutual assistance, as we may call it, is most active where the Church is most active as an organic whole, namely in the liturgy. In the Mass it is very clear how the Church wishes to emphasise this element of mutual dependence and help. In the less familiar liturgical ceremonies it is equally apparent. In the administration of all the sacraments the priest, or bishop, begs the intercession of the saints, and exhorts those present in the church, and indeed all the faithful, to pray for the recipient. Thus in the ordination of priests the bishop addresses the congregation, and through them all the members of the Church: 'Dearly beloved brethren, let us pray God the Father Almighty that He would multiply His heavenly gifts upon these his servants whom he has chosen for the charge of the Priesthood.' A similar prayer, differing very slightly in form, is found in the giving of each of the other Orders down to the Tonsure. What is not sufficiently realised is that the faithful do have a share in these less common sacraments as well as in the Mass, and that their prayers, whether they advert to the fact or not, are in some degree efficacious for the candidates for Holy Orders, or the children who are to be baptised, or the man and woman about to be married. In addition their prayers are applied to-day to all the war intentions which the Church has included in the liturgy. They are put into the liturgy and not left to private prayer alone. For circumstances now combine to make men hate one another, and while the truth of the Communion of Saints, the great Christian family, remains unchanged, it stands in grave danger of being lost to the minds of men. Hence

[8] John xvii, 9 and 20.

its functions should be continuously before their eyes, and the duty of prayer for fellow men should be put in the first place. This cannot be better understood than by careful examination of the spirit of the liturgy.

The driving force behind the liturgy is the integral unity of the faithful. Unity is the spirit which charges the liturgy with its power and which makes it the vehicle of Catholic life in the fullest sense of the word, with all its social as well as personal applications. Thus the Communion of Saints, which crystallizes this unity, is the link between liturgy in the formal sense of the word and the rest of life. It is that complementary factor which many theologians have sought in order to draw liturgy out of the unreality and obscurity of the museum and establish it in its rightful place as a formative power in the Christian life. Liturgy can and should exercise great influence on man's personal life through his social life, because 'since the liturgy always treats man as a whole, . . . it is obvious that its whole tendency makes for a more intense unification of man's moral life.'[9] This tendency has been called the *Vision of the Liturgy*—this ideal of making man in his individual nature perfect by making him share more perfectly in the life of the Christian family and at the same time making that family more perfect. The liturgy naturally unites body and soul in the individual man, and at the same time unites individual men in the Body of the Church. That is the Church's answer to those who accuse her of making her members decadent by turning them into mere cogs in the machine, it is her answer to the false theories of racial purity and suchlike. Those who wish for a finer and healthier individual in the race had better first try to create finer and healthier Christians, who will learn to further their own individual well-being through seeking the good of their fellows. In this way alone can the apparent dilemma be solved, man can do his duty to

[9] Theodore Wesseling, O.S.B., *Liturgy and Life*, p. 95.

himself in doing his duty to his brothers in Christ. His merits are made available to his fellow men and he draws closer to his ideal, Christ. In so far as a man is in a state of grace this is necessarily true, for St. Thomas tells us that these merits work by the very nature of the deeds themselves.

None the less it is desirable that men should be conscious of this fact, for St. Thomas also teaches that these merits can and should be applied through the intention of the individual. It is patent that the knowledge of the good he can do his fellow men by his prayers and virtue is an incentive to the Christian to increase and improve them, just as the knowledge that he has an unfailing source of grace in their merits is a reason for comfort and encouragement. Yet it is not enough for this knowledge to be a mere intellectual appreciation of the terms of the dogma; to be fruitful it must be an integral human realisation, both emotional and intellectual, of the implications of the doctrine. One of the most effective and at the same time startling ways of awakening ourselves to this fact is to recall that we have, most of us for years, been performing externally all the actions symptomatic of a most complete Christian social life, that we have had, so to say, all the instruments to hand, but, to judge from results, have been unaware of the significance of what we were doing. This might arouse Christians to a more conscious and habitual fulfilment of the office of Apostles and Sufferers with Christ. No Christian would think of denying the doctrine of Apostleship with Christ. Yet to admit and even understand the doctrine does not mean to realise it in practice; for the practice of Christian virtue presupposes not only an intellectual grip of doctrine, but a complete human understanding and appreciation of the Christian family, a thing at once intellectual and emotional, a thing of the whole man.

Such wisdom, for wisdom it is, is acquired not by books but by liturgy, thoughtfully, consciously and deliberately

practised. In liturgical worship the Christian realises his potentialities as a member of the Christian family: he takes part in the family life with his whole self, body and soul. So long as he does this purely as a matter of routine he is working only at half pressure, so to say; to be worthy of his fellow citizenship with the saints he must become conscious of his vocation. He does this by continual reflection on the significance of the liturgical actions he performs. In other words, the liturgy is there to hand for us if only we will use it to become finer members of the Christian family. By our actions we worship God with our whole being, and by continued thoughtful repetition they will produce those habits of soul which are the distinguishing marks of Christian public spirit—a consciousness of our calling as apostles and victims with Christ—of the universality of Redemption—of our brotherhood with all men—and finally a giving and receiving of the fruits of this brotherhood by offering our own merits for our fellows and begging their merits for ourselves. Only the practice of such Christian citizenship can hope to build out of this world the City of God, where the desire of Christ shall be fulfilled: 'By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another.'[10]

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[10] John xiii, 35.