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PURGATORY, PARDONS AND INVOCATION OF SAINTS

BY

BRENDAN SOANE AND OLIVER O'DONOVAN

We were asked to reflect on the exchange between Cécily Boulding and Julian Charley on "Catholic practices of concern to Evangelicals". We have done this, and offer the following comments. We are inclined to think that it would be better that the work on justification should be completed first, and these matters saved for further consideration at a later stage. But we found that we could agree on certain lines of approach, which might be useful as pointers whenever we come to deal with the questions fully.

Of the five matters mentioned in Article 22 of the Church of England, we have not felt it necessary to discuss "worshipping and adoration, as well of images, as of reliques". These questions did not seem to engage either of the original contributors. Neither have we taken any further Julian Charley's observations about the status of absolution pronounced by a Priest, as we felt that this was another matter which did not bear directly on the question of indulgences. That left us with "Purgatorie, Pardons and also Invocation of Saintes".

The Controversy

Each side has contributed something important to a Christian understanding of the problem. On the one hand Roman Catholics have properly insisted that the Gospel has a relevance to human death, and is not concerned merely with guilt, as some Protestant presentations might tend to suggest. The triumph of the Gospel must therefore be claimed also in relation to the dead, which implies that we must be able to speak confidently about the purification and perfection of human beings even beyond the limits of this life. On the other hand, Anglicans have been right to insist that every aspect of Christian devotion and thought about the dead must be disciplined by the Christ-centred character of the Gospel. The reason that the Reformers rejected certain practices was that they did not see how these practices were susceptible of a thoroughly Christ-centred interpretation. They did not reject them merely because they were "grounded upon no warrantie of Scripture" but because they feared they were "rather repugnaunt to the worde of God". In thinking through these practices and beliefs today, we are bound to take such a concern seriously.

Hermeneutical Principles

In reaching a new understanding of these doctrines (and practices, insofar as they suggest or convey some doctrinal stance), there are three things which must be noted :-

1. The central core of the doctrine, to which a council or some other authoritative statement has actually committed the Roman Catholic church is frequently much less wide-ranging than the developments of it which have arisen in discussion and exposition.
2. Some doctrines are expressed in concepts that require a symbolic, rather than a literal interpretation.
3. Some doctrines have different interpretations current among theologians, which relativise any one interpretation at least to the extent of opening it to criticism from others.

Two Main Areas of Concern

We distinguish two principal areas of concern :-

1. The question of indulgences, which applies not only, and not even primarily, to the dead, but more immediately to the living.
2. The relationship of believers to the dead in Christ, a relationship which extends far beyond the question of indulgences. We think it more helpful to approach each area separately, rather than via their point of interception, which is the controverted question of indulgences for the dead. A correct approach to each side of this problem on its own may have the result that the problem itself dissolves before it is reached!

1. Indulgences

To speak of indulgences is to speak of the intercessory role of the saints for one another, and of the Church as a whole for its members.

The notion of a "treasury" must be interpreted Christologically. The treasure which the church claims in its prayers is nothing other than the salvation wrought for man in Christ. (See K. Rahner on "Indulgences" in Sacramentum Mundi).

The way in which prayers "help" is not mechanical, but is a matter of mystical sharing in the power of the ascended Christ. This power is not "at our disposal", in the sense of being under our control. But it is always available to the prayers of the church (Matthew 18 : 19, 20). The prayer of the individual believer participates in the prayer of the whole church in union with Christ.

What is meant by "indulgences" is specifically prayers for forgiveness, but forgiveness understood totally, as the working out of God's redemptive grace in a reintegrated life in Christ.

The concept of "satisfaction" in the sufferings of penance is derived from the uniquely satisfactory character of Christ's sufferings. Because, as we struggle against sin, we are united with Christ in his struggle against evil, we may "complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions" (Colossians 1 : 24) without in any sense adding something new which was not given to us in them. Again, our struggles in prayer may be of mutual help only because his struggle was uniquely vicarious. The logic is : because, and only because, he did it for us, we may for one another.

But it would require a much longer discussion of reconciliation to take this question further. The only point of importance here is that we help one another, through prayer, in our response to the redemptive work of God in us.

2. Our Relations with the Dead

In speaking of the dead, it is necessary to take the hermeneutical cautions seriously, as we are referring to a time - space framework of which we have no direct knowledge. If we say that "the dead are somewhere now", it is not only the "somewhere" but also the "now" which confronts us with conceptual problems, and the appropriateness of this analogical use of our time - space language must be treated as an open question philosophically. This is not to prohibit symbolic and imaginative constructs, but merely to issue a caution about the way in which they are used.

Purgatory is among such symbolic constructs. The heart of the doctrine of purgatory is the perfecting of the individual saint in Christ. To express this in terms of a continuing process "after" death is not improper, but must be understood as an attempt to grasp an eschatological reality by

analogical concepts.

Christians must affirm the unity of the living with the dead saints in the church. But it is a unity in Christ, to be grasped by faith and not by sight. The reformers were anxious to maintain this principle as a discipline on our thinking about the dead and the practices that followed from it, while the Catholic tradition has been concerned not to lose sight of ~~it~~ as an aspect of the evangelical confidence in which we should live.

critical
qualification

the original
affirmation

In speaking of the perfecting of dead saints we must not forget its context in the final appearance of Christ's kingdom and the perfecting of the whole world-order. Our prayers for the dead are not directed to an independent process of individual perfection, but look forward to the saint's inclusion in the final appearance of the Kingdom of God, and so follow from the petition of the Lord's Prayer, 'thy Kingdom come'.

On the appropriateness of the invocation of the prayers of the saints, we would wish to limit our comments to the cautions expressed above. The crucial thing is to agree upon the norms for theological discussion of our relations with the dead. Once such agreement is in place, differing judgements may be made about such practices without offence to either party.

Brendan Soane

Oliver O'Donovan

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