

MARY IN THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS: SOME ISSUES

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The wider picture: eschatology and the saints

In the first place some reflection is needed on 'saints'. Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike affirm belief in *communio sanctorum* as confessed in the Apostles' creed. It forms both the vision and presupposition of the 'real yet imperfect communion' which (under God) we share. Interpreted as 'communion of the saints' it is scarcely a communion-dividing matter, pointing to the 'real' part of this saying. Read as *communio in sacris*, however, it indicates the 'imperfect' aspect of the divine *koinonia* which we share, though *in sacris* is by no means an empty reference - our common participation in the ministries of baptism, the scriptures, prayer and the ministry of memory immediately come to mind.

In ARCIC's work the emphasis has fallen on *koinonia* as the communion of the divine life into which the Church is being called. 'Church' in our documents overwhelmingly refers to the people of God of this *present* age / time: it rarely includes the 'Church triumphant' perspective. The only substantial reference seems to be para 48 of *Church as Communion*, which function to offer a (rather late in the argument?) 'pilgrimage' perspective on the life of the earthly Church. Occasional references to the goal of a 'transformed creation' appear (eg *Church as Communion* 16, cited in *Gift of Authority* 7), but thus far in ARCIC documents this has not been related directly to the notion of the 'saints'. A briefer reference is in *Salvation and the Church* 22, a similar 'pilgrimage' reference, but the point here is turning the edge of possible problems surrounding penitential practice, rather than an eschatological perspective *per se*.

More 'trans-earthly' notes appear in *Life in Christ*, especially in terms of our 'shared vision' of a humanity whose full reality we are yet to become - the dimension of hope (7-8). However, this dimension is noticeably absent from the concluding section, 'Communion and the Church' (96-102). This gradual shift towards taking eschatology on board in ARCIC's published work can be seen more fully in *Gift of Authority*, especially the appreciation that the 'Amen' we utter is "at the heart of the great liturgy of heaven" (13). It is also present in the recognition that "the full vision of the kingdom of God" functions as a 'future' criterion for the discernment of the apostolic Tradition (25). Yet it is (surprisingly?) absent from the conclusion (63) which could perhaps be seen as remaining rather 'this-worldly'.

The topic of 'Mary in the communion of saints' thus invites reflection not only on 'saints', but the wider issues of eschatology generally. Most generally, how does the vision of a 'transformed creation' shape our understanding of present realities, notably of church and the means of grace?

More particularly, in what ways do differing attitudes to the 'assumption' of Mary reflect varied understandings of the relation between 'future' and 'present' (using a 'time'-based model) and between 'eternity' and 'time' (using a 'space'-based model)?

NB: Cranmer's 42 Articles contained four articles on eschatology: these were dropped in the 1571 (definitive) revision, leaving the Church of England with little distinctive eschatology beyond the denials of Article 22, and the personal eschatology reflected in its funeral services (see liturgical notes).

Some particular issues

These particular issues which could be seen as dividing Anglicans and Roman Catholics would appear to require study:

a) *Possibly differing understandings of eschatology: how do these affect 'communion' now?*

How are the 'faithful departed' regarded in each Communion?

Anglicans assume that all who die in Christ already enjoy the full benefits of God's saving work in Christ, even if 'in waiting': this is particularly clear in funeral rites. Roman Catholics posit this only of canonised saints: this involves a definitive sentence of the Bishop of Rome declaring that this particular person has already entered eternal glory and shares the Beatific Vision. (At least since the tenth century only the Bishop of Rome can make this declaration.) Purgatory (however understood) is the reality for other believers.

Anglicans (at least since the English Reformation) are also comfortable with using the term 'saints' to refer to earthly and sinful members of the church, a reading assumed to be grounded in the New Testament (eg in epistolary greetings).

The questions for ARCIC include the following. Are these differences about terminology, the meaning of 'canonised', the 'intermediate state' (and purgatory in particular) a communion-dividing matter? More deeply, do we assume different models of relationship between 'past' and 'present' in using scripture - and how far does this matter?

One consequence of differences about the faithful (present or departed) may be differences about the believer's assurance of salvation. The agreement in Salvation and the Church about 'assurance' and 'presumption' (10-11) is both careful and wise: but is it adequate in respect of the eschatological perspective raised here?

b) *Prayer and the saints generally*

The Australian ARC (AustARC), prompted by the (then forthcoming) beatification of the first Australian, Mary McKillop, in 1997 issued a short text, *The Saints and Christian Prayer* (subsequently published in *Anglican World* and other places). Some of what it said about prayer to /

with the saints is also applicable to Mary:

There are different approaches to the matter of our prayer to the saints, and the saints prayer for us. Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike direct personal and liturgical prayer to God, through Christ, in the Spirit. Anglicans and Roman Catholics alike also obey the biblical injunctions to pray for one another and for the world. Many Roman Catholics and some Anglicans ask the saints, as well as their earthly neighbours, to pray for them. These requests for prayer may be made in personal devotion and in the prayers of the liturgy.

In personal prayer, we may remember any of the faithful departed who have inspired us. A petition like "Saint N, pray for us" is liturgically possible for Roman Catholics, though it is not found in official Anglican texts in Australia. Some Anglicans decline to invoke the saints, lest they obscure the uniqueness of Christ's work. Those who do use such petitions seek to evoke the communion of the whole church, and the solidarity of all the faithful, living and departed.

'The prayers of all the saints' (Revelation 8:3-5), and the saints' communion in Christ with us, remind us to keep praying. For Roman Catholics and those Anglicans who invoke the saints in prayer, this solidarity in Christ provides the theological context for such invocation. When such Christians draw to the saints' attention the needs of the living, asking them to pray for us, they are making a statement about solidarity among Christian people. We find courage to approach the source of all grace in company with others. We insist on the truth of the church as communion, and correct the deprived notion of the church as an assembly of individuals. The saints are our friends, our older brothers and sisters in Christ. They are willing to share with us the strength of their trust in the Lamb of God. Their desire for us is the same union with Christ that they themselves enjoy.

Some may address the saints in prayer by direct **invocation**: "Saint Francis and Saint Clare, the Holy Spirit has joined us in one communion: pray for us."

Some may find more helpful a kind of **informal and imaginative conversation**, seeking the saints' guidance and encouragement for the pilgrim church: "Saint Francis and Saint Clare, give us the benefit of your experience; how shall we love God and care for God's creation, here and now?"

Others may prefer to shape the invocation of God by remembering the stories of the saints (**evocation**): "Holy God, remember how you gave Saint Clare and Saint Francis a love for the poor; help us, now, to embrace Christ in the least of our brothers and sisters."

c) *What is distinctive about Mary in the communion of saints?*

Anglicans universally affirm Mary's distinctive role as *theotokos*, and her historic significance as the 'first disciple', but most would not have a sense that these are 'present' realities. More definitely, Anglicans do not regard Mary as having a 'present' ministry as different in kind to that of other saints, though it would certainly differ in degree for many.

Roman Catholics see Mary as occupying a distinctive place due to her continuing role as *theotokos*, and also eschatologically, denoted by her 'assumption'. She shares 'eternal glory' unambiguously, and thus has a 'present' ministry. In this respect her 'apparitions' are of particular significance, particularly that at Lourdes in which she appears as 'Immaculate Conception'. These apparitions have not officially endorsed by the Church, though some of the miracles worked at these places

have been endorsed, and (as seen this year) some of the witnesses have been beatified and / or canonised. Yet they have strengthened this sense for many Roman Catholics that Mary is very near at hand, and may be approached in a familiar way in prayer, both in 'conversation' and as 'invocation'.

The questions before ARCIC which arise from this reflection include the following. To what extent are differences over Mary's place among the saints communion-dividing? More particularly, when full communion is reached, would Christians who invoke Mary in prayer be accepted as not at all compromising the Christological ground of prayer? Would Christians who accept Mary as theotokos, yet deny her a distinctive role among the saints, questioning her 'apparitions', be accepted as not at all compromising the catholic faith?

Some liturgical notes

Anglicans are very much at home with the sense of praying with the saints / company of heaven, but mostly use this language in association with the Sanctus rather than the concluding eucharistic doxology, as is more common in Roman eucharistic prayers. As regards collects, Anglican ones for the saints (including Mary) reflect on their *past* earthly example as a stimulus (under God) to present discipleship towards the full life of God in glory, which the saints are assumed to share now. Roman Catholic ones tend to work out of their 'present' as well as 'past' ministry.

On the other hand, Anglican eucharistic prayers for use with a funeral rites commonly contain the words "with N and all the saints ...", which is almost certainly too 'strong' for Roman Catholic use, apart from canonised saints. BCP (1662) assumes that the person being buried is with Christ, though is scrupulous in not saying so directly - what is sometimes called the 'doctrine of charitable assumption'. The final collect prays "that, when we shall depart this life, we may rest in [Christ], as our hope is this our *brother* doth". Anglicans are thus generally happy to 'commend to God' a faithful departed person in the immediate context of the funeral, but about commendation beyond this time there are divided opinions, and no authorised prayers (including All Souls' Day) hint at purgatory as a reason for praying *for* the faithful departed.

Interestingly, purgatory is nowhere named directly in the revised (Roman Catholic) *Order for Christian Funerals*, which is decidedly 'warm' about the person's state with Christ. It would be instructive for the liturgical prayers and Marian Prefaces to eucharistic Prayers to be examined. They certainly reflect on the present glorified state of Mary and also claim her intercession.

Are the varying (yet converging) liturgical texts communion-dividing? How far can / ought they to be narrowed / clarified? What is *intended* in 'prayers for the saints' or 'prayers for the faithful departed'? Need differences in such intentions be communion-dividing?