

# **The Saints and Christian Prayer**

*An Agreed Statement from the  
Australian Anglican-Roman Catholic Conversation*

What is a saint? How does a person become one? Will an Australian soon be officially recognised as a saint? These were some of the questions raised in 1995 when Pope John Paul II visited Australia for the ceremony to mark the beatification of Mary MacKillop. The celebration caught the imagination of many Australians, and it provided the stimulus for this paper on prayer and the saints, prepared by and for Roman Catholics and Anglicans

AustARC is a group of Australian Anglicans and Roman Catholics, appointed by our two churches. Our membership includes bishops, theologians, teachers and parish clergy. Our role is to listen and to talk to one another, in the service of continuing growth in faith and fellowship between our two churches. We also draw on the work of ARCIC, the Anglican Roman Catholic International Consultation, whose members are our colleagues in ecumenical conversation at the international level. AustARC offers this statement on “The Saints and Christian Prayer” to help Australian Roman Catholics and Anglicans at all levels of the churches join in the conversation.

For many centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has had an official process for deciding whether a particular Christian may be described as a saint. When enquiries establish that a person has shown outstanding holiness, the process begins in which beatification and canonisation are the final steps. Saints are included in the church’s calendar, and are honoured in the church’s devotion.

The Anglican Church has no official process for declaring people to be saints. Many people mentioned in the New Testament, and many more whose reputation for holiness was established before the Reformation of the sixteenth century, are called ‘saints’ by Anglicans. Men and women who lived more recently, including some Australians, are remembered in the Anglican Church’s calendar, and are described as “holy men and women”.

The authorised prayers of both Anglicans and Roman Catholics include many references to the saints. Yet the role of the saints in Christian faith, life and worship has often been controversial since the days of the Reformation. In this paper there is an attempt to talk about the saints and Christian prayer in ways that will help us find our common ground, rather than going over old divisions.

After the text of the agreed statement, we offer you some questions for reflection and discussion. We hope that both the statement and the questions will help groups of Christians from our two traditions to understand ourselves and each other better.

Bishop Pat Power  
Roman Catholic Co-Chair

Bishop John Stewart  
Anglican Co-Chair

# **The Saints and Christian Prayer**

## **An agreed statement**

**AustARC**

**November 1997**

### **The whole church praises God**

At the heart of Christian worship is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Spirit of the risen Jesus draws us into communion with God and with each other. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, the church on earth joins its prayers with the church in heaven. In the words of the Eucharistic prayer, leading up to the “Holy, holy, holy”, we direct our praises to God with angels and saints, apostles and prophets, holy men and women of every age.

### **The saints of the church**

In this paper, the word ‘saints’ is used in three senses: for the living disciples of Jesus Christ; for all the faithful departed; and for those among the faithful departed whose lives have been of particular encouragement to Christians in subsequent generations.

‘Saints’ is used in the New Testament as a designation for and address to the community of Christ’s disciples. Men and women, made holy by God’s call, heard and heeded the apostles’ exhortation to deep faith, strong hope, and generous love as they followed Jesus Christ in their mortal life. As the first generation of disciples died, the faithful continued to include among the saints those who had fallen asleep in Christ.

Christians in subsequent generations have often needed to be reminded that holiness is a calling to be lived out on this side of the grave, and that the saints are not merely the members of the community who have died in the faith of Christ. In the present discussion, we affirm the unity in Christ of the saints, living and departed. And we want to show how that unity may be expressed in faith and prayer.

The faithful departed were mortals like ourselves, finite creatures of God’s own making. They were redeemed as we are, by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and now these saints participate in the eternal life he promised to all who believe in him. Their lives showed, as we pray that ours may also show, the fruits of the Spirit who strengthened them for the mission with which the risen Christ entrusted his friends. We recognise that death has not separated them from the love of God in Jesus Christ, but rather that they have come to the place which he prepared for them in his Father’s house.

### **The saints testify to the grace of God in human lives**

These saints lived heroic lives of faith, hope and love.

Some received and used the Spirit’s gifts in such large measure that the world was perceptibly changed for the better by their lives, and, in the case of the martyrs, by their deaths. Their call to discipleship found them in or led them to highly visible roles in the world at large, and to those roles they brought the passion for justice, truth, and love which the Spirit had implanted in them. Their names may still be held in honour centuries after their deaths. They bear witness to us that God moves in human history, and that no earthly task is too big for the Spirit’s gifts at work in us.

Some saints spent their lives in less dramatic circumstances, or were called to renounce positions of worldly power for the sake of the gospel. Although their names may not be so well remembered, nor their

stories so often told, these saints, too, glorified God in their generations. They bear witness to us that God still touches individual human hearts, and that no human life is too obscure to show forth the self-giving love of Christ.

All the saints, great and small, famous and hidden, named and unnamed, owe their holiness to the grace of Jesus Christ and to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. When we call the saints to mind, and join our prayer with theirs, we are in awe, not of them, but of God, who can do such mighty works in us mortals.

### **The saints inspire us to praise God**

We praise God for the saints. We thank God for giving us in them such an eloquent testimony to the possibility of true discipleship in every place and time and culture. Because of them, we celebrate the diversity of the Holy Spirit's gifts.

### **The saints inspire us to serve God**

The importance of the saints extends beyond the initial impact of their earthly lives, dramatic or obscure as those lives may have been. We tell the stories of their lives and deaths, and we know they participate in our praise of God. We thank God for what the saints did, but we may also thank God for what they still do. For Christians today, the saints provide role models for discipleship, examples of holiness, patterns of prayer, visions of hope. In these ways the saints continue to make an impact in later generations. They also remind us of another dimension, a heavenly dimension, to our prayer.

One of the things we therefore treasure about the saints is the power of their stories. The Christian imagination flourishes through story-telling. The earliest disciples rehearsed the stories of the evolution of their own discipleship in order to call others to follow Jesus Christ. Even today, telling the stories of those who have died, as well as hearing the testimony of those who are still living, elicits faith and leads to sacrificial service. Acknowledging the blessedness of those who have died still helps to spark the longing for that blessedness among the living.

### **Jesus Christ in Christian prayer**

Anglicans and Roman Catholics together recognise Jesus Christ as our unique mediator, our intercessor, advocate, and guide. The New Testament, and particularly the seventeenth chapter of John's gospel and the epistle to the Hebrews, presents Christ interceding with the Father for his brothers and sisters. This image of Christ as intercessor is much used in both traditions. It underpins the abiding formula of prayer "through" the Son. Prayer to Christ as God is also used in both traditions: "Christ, have mercy" is an example of such prayer. The principles of direct access in prayer to God through Christ, and of Christ's own divine authority to receive and answer prayer, are thus firmly established in both traditions. In this context, we may approach the matter of any address to the saints in prayer. The invocation of the saints in prayer must not detract from the authority and accessibility of Christ for the faithful when we pray. It must not endanger, but must express the adequacy of Christ's work.

### **The saints as patrons and partners**

Many Anglican and Roman Catholic buildings, schools, hospitals and communities are dedicated in the name of a patron saint. Such a dedication indicates a delight in partnership with those who have gone before us. It does not indicate a reliance on official patronage. We may need to moderate some inherited understandings of patronage. For example, in the patronage system of various cultures, access to the goodwill of an overlord can be obtained only through the good graces of a patron. By extension, Christians have sometimes appealed to the saints as necessary agents of patronage, and have thus failed to recognise the reality of their own, direct relationship to God. Both Roman Catholics and Anglicans affirm that Christ is the unique mediator, and patron saints continue to enrich the identity of Christian

communities, encouraging us in mission by their examples of discipleship.

### **The saints join us in prayer**

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 liturgical 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.

### **Prayer builds solidarity and communion**

"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.

### **Prayer as invocation**

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"

### **Prayer as conversation**

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?"

### **Prayer as evocation**

Others may prefer to shape the invocation of God by remembering the stories of the saints: "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".

### **Prayer in a communion of praise**

Both our traditions will thus celebrate the evidence of divine grace in the lives of the saints, and our solidarity in Christ. Some will be especially anxious to avoid obscuring Christ's saving work by prayer to the saints. Some will be especially concerned to enable Christ's saving work to be gloriously proclaimed by prayer to the saints. Together we will continue to praise God in joyful communion with the saints.

## **Questions for reflection and discussion**

1. How important are the saints, or particular saints, to you?  
How do you learn about them, and why are they important to you?
2. In the Creed, we say that we believe in “the communion of saints”. What do you understand by this phrase?
3. How would you argue the case for, and the case against, invoking the saints (i.e. asking them to pray for us)?
4. How does your tradition safeguard the uniqueness of Jesus Christ’s role in God’s dealings with us?
5. How does your tradition highlight the solidarity in Christ of all Christians, both the living and those who have died in the faith?
6. The statement talks about three ways of acknowledging the saints in our prayer: invocation, conversation, and evocation. With which of these are you most comfortable, and why?
7. There are many matters on which Anglicans and Roman Catholics differ in the ways we express our faith and practice. How serious do you think are the differences between us in the matter of the saints?
8. What difference has this statement made to your own understanding of the role of the saints in Christian prayer?
9. If you are discussing the statement in a group, see if the group can come up with a prayer that refers to a saint or saints, and that all of you are happy to pray, and to which you can all say “Amen”.