

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

By JAMES CORKERY

A FRIEND OF MINE GIVES ME POSTCARDS, pictures by great artists of the Virgin Mary, John the Baptist, St Paul, Joan of Arc, Thérèse of Lisieux. 'They're your heroes and heroines,' he says, 'your pop stars'. He thinks of me as living in a space peopled by these great figures, imagining me poring over their images with all the enthusiasm that my seven-year-old nephew can muster for his football cards of Eric Cantona and Paul McGrath. But the reality is different, not only for me but for Christians generally. The saints, the bright lights of heaven, have dimmed and darkened – even disappeared. They are no longer prominent in our prayers, or in contemporary spirituality. Where have they gone?

Karl Rahner, writing on the saints, notes how for most contemporary people the saints have disappeared into the silence of God. He says that God, today, is experienced largely as mystery: silent, ineffable. And all those who have gone from this life are thought of as lost in the mystery of God. This is true not only of the saints long gone but also of our own dead, to whom we were once personally close. They seem to have disappeared into the silent, infinite, inconceivable mystery that God is.¹ We may not deny that they are still alive in God, but they are inaccessible to us, lost in the darkness of the unfathomable divine. And we have no real sense that we are, or that we can be, in *communication* with them.

Such a picture of the saints and the dead as having disappeared into the silent mystery of God seems unconsoling. But unconsoling, also, was an earlier picture according to which people tended to think that they could pinpoint where the saints and the dead were 'located'. The saints were pictured as being more or less side by side with God, and they were prayed to for the other dead, whose fate remained unknown and often a cause for concern. Catholic households abounded in images of Mary and the saints, who were viewed as half-way figures, as intermediaries between an unapproachable God – or a severely judging Christ – and our needy selves. We entreated this fearsome Christ, or his more approachable mother and the other saints, on behalf of our dear departed ones. The picture was a severe and hierarchical one. If today

God and the holy dead seem shrouded in mystery, at that time God, Christ, the saints, the good dead, the lukewarm dead and we strugglers in the valley of tears all had fairly well defined places in the scheme of things. But these defined places afforded no comfort. Indeed the bright promise of the communion of saints was dimmed by the sinister reality of those still-awaiting souls or, more sinister still, by the possibility that there were some who had died in such a state that they now had nothing good to await. In this picture, the 'patron-petitioner' model of dealing with the saints was to the fore. But the sense of community, solidarity and companionship with the saints in God may not have been as rich as memory is now inclined to tell us that it was.²

I have drawn two pictures. In the former, more contemporary one, the saints have disappeared into the mystery of God. In the latter, largely pre-Vatican II picture, the mystery of God has been obscured, perhaps even substituted for, by the saints. The second picture is theologically inadequate and has, in the past, been a source of division between the Roman Catholic Church and a number of the other Christian churches. For this reason, I begin from the former picture, conscious that not only the different Christian faiths, but also the non-Christian religions, share a basic understanding of God as mystery, as mysterious Holy One. My treatment of the saints, then, will be situated within this basic understanding and experience of God as holy mystery. It will be adequate only in so far as the holiness of the saints is always referred back to the mysterious holiness of God – or, to put it in more explicitly Christian terms, only in so far as the holiness of the saints is retraced to the holiness of Christ.

The holy mystery and the saints

It is important to highlight contemporary experience of God as an experience of mystery. But to say that God is holy mystery, and to leave things there, would be to run the risk of living a life of religious escapism in which God and all things in God, the saints included, were consigned to an ethereal realm in which their significance for us and our world remained both unknown and unknowable.³ In each age, then, the mystery needs to be named, with due apophatic qualification, of course. Since, however, there is no direct, unmediated access to the mystery of God – no one sees the face of God and lives – people have to put a face on God, as it were, in indirect ways. I wish to argue here that the saints, individually and as a communion, can be of invaluable help in making the invisible God visible. In other words, they can play an important role in our naming of the holy mystery and of its significance for people's lives today.

Who are the saints?

If the saints are to shed light on the divine mystery, they will have to emerge from their own disappearance (recall Rahner) into that mystery. Our quest, then, is for 'missing persons'. And we have to know whom we are seeking before we can determine how they can be helpful to us in naming the holy mystery of God. Who, then, are the saints? What is the 'communion of saints' (*communio sanctorum*) in which all Christians who express their faith in the words of the Apostles' Creed believe? Following a tradition that goes back to the first explicit use of the phrase *communio sanctorum*, it can be said that it includes the entire community of the redeemed: past, present and future.⁴ All of these redeemed are united with Christ, and so with one another, whether they are still alive or have already died; and the *communio of saints* refers to the entire body of them. By referring in this way not just to each particular saint, but to all the saints as a body, the notion of the communion of saints brings together individual and cosmic eschatology.⁵ That is, it unites individuals' salvation with the salvation of the world.

In the West, *communio sanctorum* has always been understood to refer to 'holy persons'; and that is the sense in which I use it here. However, there is an ambiguity in both the Greek and Latin genitive plurals that allows each to be translated as 'of holy persons' or 'of holy things'.⁶ Eastern Christianity placed the emphasis also on a sharing of 'holy things', particularly the eucharist. These two usages are actually complementary, because those who commune in the 'holy things' enter into an intimate communion or *koinonia* with God and with one another as members of Christ's body, the Church. This idea is found in both East and West.⁷ A remark of St Augustine, referred to by Henri de Lubac, comes to mind here about how, when we receive the food that Christ is, we become transformed into him whom we receive. In other words, we become incorporated into the one Body of Christ, the Church, the communion of all who are in communion with him.⁸ The saints – recall the Pauline usage in the New Testament – are those who are united in the Spirit through baptism (2 Cor 13:14) and in Christ's blood through the eucharist (1 Cor 10:16–17).⁹ In fact, they are the whole Church united with God through Christ in the Spirit.

The visible communion of saints

Readers may find it a disadvantage to have to think of the communion of saints as including all true believers. Does this not spread the mantle of sainthood so broadly that the saints can now be of little

specific help? At first glance it may appear to; but the opposite is the case. The canonized saints, and the saints long dead, have disappeared into the mystery of God. But the holy men and women among whom we now live, or have recently lived, are much more visible; and being aware that they too are part of the communion of saints restores visibility to this communion and begins to lift the veil of mystery that has been hiding the saints. It is always helpful to go to the invisible from the visible, and recently dead or still-living saints are fairly visible. An important avenue of access today for people who wish to make sense of the saints for their own lives are those heroic figures, closer to our own time, about whom there is a widespread recognition that they have lived Christian lives of exemplary character. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oscar Romero, Jean Donovan, Irene McCormack, the two women and six Jesuits who were murdered in El Salvador, and many others close to God and known personally to the readers of these pages, will come to mind here. The ancient understanding of the communion of saints includes all of them, as well as today's living Christians, in addition, of course, to the canonized, officially recognized saints.

I reiterate that it helps to begin from what can be seen. Christians name the mystery of God through how they are seen to worship and love in the world. Edward Schillebeeckx speaks helpfully of the mystical and ethical thematization of the inexpressible.¹⁰ This is a matter of sacramentality: of making visible what is invisible. In so far as Christians worship with integrity and live lives of love, they reflect their God as holy and loving. Schillebeeckx, emphasizing the ethical thematization of the mystery, says that what God is must emerge from human beings' unrestrained involvement with one another, 'and through building up liberating structures without which human salvation proves impossible'.¹¹ Here Schillebeeckx is speaking not just of individual Christians but, and indeed mainly, of Christian men and women working together. The community of believers, through its working together in love, is intended to reflect the loving community of the Triune God. Human society, according to Leonardo Boff, 'has been eternally willed by God to be the sacrament of trinitarian communion in history'.¹² However, social or structural sin lessens the extent to which we realize our vocation to be a sacrament of the Trinity.¹³ While sin is still a possibility, sacramentality remains fragile.¹⁴ In so far as communities and individuals continue to exist in history, they do so under the dialectic of sin and grace, which means that it remains possible for them to sow weeds as well as wheat and thus to obscure the goodness and holiness of God. But for the company of canonized saints it is different: their sacramentality is no longer threatened by sin.

The invisible communion of saints

The canonized saints are particularly reliable pointers to, or namers of, the unfathomable holy mystery. This is not because they are necessarily holier than the other saints, those already dead but not canonized, or those still living. What is important about these saints is the fact that the Church has been able to make a public, authoritative pronouncement that the ways they lived their lives were genuine examples of Christian holiness, and as such have passed, in all their particularity, from historical contingency to a state of permanent validity.¹⁵ Their lives in history have reached a definitiveness beyond history; this is what their having been canonized means. And what do they do for the Church-on-the-way, for the saints still journeying towards God? Rahner writes:

They are the initiators and the creative models of the holiness which happens to be right for, and is the task of, their particular age. They create a new style; they prove that a certain form of life and activity is a really genuine possibility; they show experimentally that one can be a Christian even in 'this' way; they make such a type of person believable as a Christian type. Their significance begins therefore not merely after they are dead. Their death is rather the seal put on their task of being creative models, a task which they had in the Church during their lifetime, and their living on means that the example they have given remains in the Church as a permanent form.¹⁶

The canonized saints put faces on holiness. They save us from preoccupation with an abstract ideal of holiness, presenting us with real histories that belong to the Church's actual story of salvation and making concrete and visible what an adventure in saintly living is. Individually, and above all collectively, they put a face on the invisible mystery of love that the Triune God is. Rahner talks here about the 'physiognomic element'.¹⁷ It means that concrete holiness – and therefore the saints, not just saintliness itself – is part of the Church's unique history of salvation. The Church could not call itself holy were it not for these in whom it knows infallibly that grace has triumphed. The canonized saints mean that the Church's holiness – even amid all its imperfections – is real; it exists; God has gifted the Church with it in the concrete lives of these exemplary men and women. And their sacramentality is not fragile or threatened, because the Church knows in faith that they no longer stand under the dialectic of sin and grace but that, by the mysterious mercy of God, the latter has triumphed in them.

The communion of saints today

The significance of the communion of saints is perhaps a little clearer now. Saints nearer our own time have become a bit more visible, although their sacramentality remains fragile, for we have no judgement, as yet, about the definitive validity of their lives. The canonized saints emerged as creative models of adventure, genuine exemplars of holiness for their age and, as such, pointers to the holy mystery from which all holiness comes. Their sacramentality is no longer fragile. But there are still problems with their visibility and it is difficult to retrieve them from their hiddenness in God. The nearer are more visible, but fragile; the canonized are more hidden, but strong. It is important, therefore, to keep the two linked, to establish a relationship of companionship, as it were, between those already saved and those who, although they cannot be sure of it yet, will be. Such companionship – it could be called solidarity – would greatly enrich our Christian living today. Instead of stressing the distance (as opposed to the difference) between ourselves and the canonized saints, it would give us the sense of belonging to a community of support and friendship which would bear us up and encourage us, especially in times of struggle and difficulty.

The Second Vatican Council treated companionship with the saints in the context of the unity of all with Christ as members of his body, the Church. The text is thus both christocentric and ecclesiocentric. Fellowship with the saints is emphasized more than once. The saints are models for us by their lives, companions for us by their communion and fellowship, and help to us by their intercession (*LG* 51), although never in a way that detracts from the fact that all that they have they have from Christ (*LG* 50 and 51). *Lumen gentium* states, near the end of Chapter VII:

At the same time, let the people be instructed that our communion with those in heaven, provided that it is understood in the more adequate light of faith, in no way weakens, but conversely, more thoroughly enriches the supreme worship we give to God the Father, through Christ, in the Spirit.

The principles, then, are clear for a theology of the communion of saints. Companionship has become the key to understanding our relationship with them. But this companionship needs developing, especially at a time when the saints can still seem lost in God.

Modern Christians will have difficulty with the idea of companionship with the saints as long as the communion of saints fails to include

the kinds of experience of Christian living that are recognized by many today to be genuine pathways to holiness. A remark of Ernesto Cardenal comes to mind here. Cardenal, in agreement with Léon Bloy that 'the only sadness is not being saints', adds: 'What has changed now is the type of sanctity'.¹⁸ A contemporary theology of the saints, and of companionship with them, will make very little sense unless the type of sanctity they portray answers a need of the world: the world with its ruined environment (Francis of Assisi), the world with its poor and lonely (Vincent de Paul), the world with its spiritual hunger (Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Ignatius Loyola), the world with its thirst for justice (Oscar Romero, Jean Donovan, Ignacio Ellacuría and companions). The saints are God's gifts to the world and they reveal not only what God wants, but also what the world needs. 'What the world needs now is love' was the title of a song. Saints show us what that love can look like. They must be able to be antidotes to the world's illnesses and evils if they are to act as contemporary models of holiness and of God's providential care for the world. For this they may need a representation detached from time-conditioned accidentals; for example, the heroic virtue and theological profundity of St Thérèse of Lisieux need to emerge from nineteenth-century bourgeois piety. I am not saying here that saints may be fashioned at will, or refashioned to suit current purposes. It is not a matter of making saints, but of finding them – and of having the Christian imagination to look in the right places, including new places. The Spirit of God blows where it wills. The Church's calendar of saints does not yet reflect this sufficiently, which is one reason why the saints fail to attract people as companions today.

In addition to recognizing new forms of holiness and to articulating the contemporary significance of more traditional forms, it is vital to notice the unnoticed of history. There are unsung heroes and heroines in Christianity's past. To the extent that they are retrieved, new possibilities for relationships with the saints emerge. I think here of feminist theologians' retrieval of the suppressed and forgotten voices of many exemplary women; or of advocacy-stance theologians of various kinds uncovering the muffled cries of history's numerous victims. The communion of saints will be much enriched, and much more credible, when these voices too are able to be heard in its continual praise of God.

I have placed much emphasis on the sacramentality of the saints: on their making visible the invisible mystery of God. The notion of sacramentality is very suitable in that it presumes transience: of the transcendent in the immanent. God shining through is the main idea;

and so the reference is always back to God. There is no danger, therefore, of losing sight of the fact that the namers of the holy mystery have all their holiness from the very One whom they are given the gift of naming. Catholic sacramental thinking in the past sometimes became excessive and spilled over into a kind of idolatry. However, this is avoidable if the notion of God as mystery is never forgotten. For once it is remembered, sacramental articulation of the holy mystery will always be tempered by apophatic reticence.

The saints are not absent because unseen

We mostly do not think of the saints (or of the humanity of Christ, or of the other realities that mediate God's immediacy to us) when we pray. We think of 'God' (like a person with a name), and of ourselves in simple dialogue with 'him'. The reality is different, however, whether this is noticed or not. I once knew a child who thought that when he closed his eyes no one could see him any more. One can be a child in the faith too; but the fact is that, when we pray, there are many more mediators of God's immediacy present to us than we see. And that is fine – as long as we do not think that they are not there. Things might be different if we were not spirits-in-the-world and if God were not a God-for-us. But the God we have is a God-with-a-world; and the people we are are spirits-in-the-world, needing help always to go from the visible to the invisible. That is why we need the friendship, companionship and sheer visibility of the saints too; and that is why we are a little lost without them.¹⁹

Conclusion

The God of Christianity is turned towards the world. This God is creator: maker and lover of the world in which we live. This God is redeemer: covenant-builder with Israel and intimate of all humankind, especially the most vulnerable, broken and lost, in Jesus Christ. And this God is sanctifier: active in history now, loving the world with an eternal love. No matter how mysterious, awesome and ineffable God is experienced to be, therefore, it remains true that the Christian God is not a remote mystery, but rather a silently present one, surrounding us and bearing up our world. And we are compelled, amid all experience of ineffability, to try to articulate how this is the case.²⁰ As I said at the beginning, and as I hope is more evident now, the saints can be excellent companions and guides for us as we attempt this articulation.

NOTES

¹ Karl Rahner, 'Why and how can we venerate the saints?' in *Theological investigations* VIII (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), pp 6–8.

² On the paradigm shift, following the Second Vatican Council, from the 'patron-petitioner' model of veneration of the saints to a basic model of communion and solidarity, see Elizabeth A. Johnson, 'Saints and Mary' in Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (eds), *Systematic theology: Roman Catholic perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), p 160.

³ Rahner is not guilty of such consignment, even if he does speak of God as *remote* in his article (cited above, note 1) on the veneration of the saints. Note that the word *remote* always appears in inverted commas. Rahner knows that God is not remote; and in later sections of his article he indicates how (see 'Excursus: The proximity of the silent God in Jesus Christ', pp 14–15; and 'The "presence" of the historical Lord', pp 15–16).

⁴ It was first used at the end of the fourth or start of the fifth century by Niceta of Remesiana in a work (*De symbolo*) commenting on what later became the Apostles' Creed. See also Mary Ann Fatula OP, 'Communion of saints' in Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig (eds), *The modern Catholic encyclopedia* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1994), p 186, and Christopher O'Donnell O Carm, 'Communion of saints' in *Ecclesia: a theological encyclopedia of the Church* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, forthcoming); 'Communion of saints' in F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone (eds), *The Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p 323.

⁵ Richard McBrien, 'The communion of saints' in *Catholicism* Vol II (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1980), p 1156.

⁶ Christopher O'Donnell O Carm, 'Communion of saints'.

⁷ Regarding the East, see Mary Ann Fatula OP, 'Communion of saints', p 186. On the West, note that Niceta of Remesiana, in *De symbolo*, speaks of the community of all the saints as 'made holy by one faith and way of life, stamped with one Spirit, made into one body whose head, as we are told, is Christ' (p 49).

⁸ Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), pp 99–100. (For more on St Augustine, see p 92 also).

⁹ See Mary Ann Fatula OP, 'Communion of saints', p 186.

¹⁰ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: the experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Crossroad, 1980), pp 55–61.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p 60.

¹² Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and society* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns and Oates, 1988 [reprinted 1992]), p 24.

¹³ *Ibid.* See also Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Salvation and liberation: in search of a balance between faith and politics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1984), p 62.

¹⁴ See *Salvation and liberation*, p 62.

¹⁵ See Karl Rahner, 'The Church of the saints' in *Theological investigations* III (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1963), p 101 (see also p 99).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p 100 (including footnotes 5 and 6, where Rahner further spells out the significance of his thinking here).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 99.

¹⁸ Ernesto Cardenal, 'Foreword' in Pedro Casaldáliga and José-María Vigil, *Political holiness: a spirituality of liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), p xii.

¹⁹ Some of the ideas in this paragraph were prompted by Rahner's article 'Why and how can we venerate the saints?' and could be developed, perhaps, in the light of it.

²⁰ This paragraph on the Christian God being a God-with-a-world is much indebted to Rahner. See part II, pp 10–21 (pp 10–14 especially) of 'Why and how can we venerate the saints?' See also 'The eternal significance of the humanity of Jesus for our relationship with God' in *Theological investigations* III, pp 35–46.