

RECOVERING THE INTERCESSION OF THE SAINTS IN THE REFORMED TRADITION

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I WILL NEVER FORGET SITTING ONE AFTERNOON before a wood carving of Our Lady of Guadalupe in the chapel of Christ in the Desert, a remote Benedictine priory in northern New Mexico. Having come to the monastery for an eight-day retreat, I was dealing with the recent death of my mother and asking also what a Presbyterian minister teaching at a Jesuit university had to learn about contemplative prayer.

I sat with her for several hours – this mother affectionately known to Mexican-Americans as *La Morenita*, ‘the little dark one’. Wearing a red dress with a dark blue cape studded with stars, she had hollow cheeks, an aquiline nose, the tan skin of a Latin American woman. I sat easily in her presence without talking, thinking how much it reminded me of the hours spent in silence at my mother’s bedside in the nursing home before she died. We all seemed to be comfortably present to each other in that moment – the mother I had loved and struggled with for years, the Mother of God whose gaze continually led me to the wooden carving of her crucified son nearby, and the motherless son who was myself, having come to the desert searching for the unlikely solace of fierce landscapes.

This experience would come to mind several months later as I sat with a graduate class talking about Catholic devotional practices in nineteenth-century American life. We were looking at old holy cards and discussing the devotion of Catholic laypeople to particular saints. One of the Protestant students in the class (out of an Evangelical background) was asked her opinion about all this, and she admitted it seemed a bit strange, adding that she herself was not accustomed to talking to dead people.

Suddenly in that moment we all recognized a point of significant divergence between Roman Catholic and much of Protestant thought about the saints. Some Protestants have long been prone to separate

³³ *Office de Taizé* (Taizé, 1964), p 369.

³⁴ Mother Teresa of Calcutta and Brother Roger of Taizé, *Mary: mother of reconciliations* (New York, 1989).

³⁵ Kathleen Norris, *The cloister walk* (New York, 1996), p 47. Her earlier book, *Dakota: a spiritual geography* (New York, 1993), speaks of her love of rural Presbyterian churches and Benedictine abbeys along the plains of South Dakota.

radically the Church Militant from the Church Triumphant, viewing the faithful departed within the latter as essentially so many 'dead people'. By contrast, as F. W. Faber (of Oxford Movement fame) put it with characteristic bluntness in the nineteenth century:

What strikes heretics [or Protestants] as so very portentous about us [is that] . . . we talk of the other world as if it was a city we were familiar with from long residence, just as we might talk of Paris, Brussels, or Berlin. We are not stopped by death . . . [nor] separated from our dead. We know the saints a great deal better than if we had lived with them upon earth.¹

In the classroom that afternoon, I found myself identifying far more readily with this former Calvinist convert to the Roman Catholic Church than with many Protestants out of my own tradition. Having often sat in places like the chapel at Christ in the Desert, feeling perfectly at home praying with the Mother of God and my own departed parents, I realized that 'talking to dead people' was something I had long taken for granted.

I am posed with the question, then, as a Reformed theologian significantly influenced by Catholic practice, of how to reconcile my own exercise of prayer with the tradition out of which I come. This article is an effort to re-examine attitudes toward the saints in the Reformed tradition as it has come down to us from the sixteenth century and is increasingly re-worked by contemporary theologians and liturgists.

I want to argue that praying with the saints – recognizing them as sharing a common intercession with us – is altogether consonant with the emphasis in Reformed theology upon the Church as *communio sanctorum*.² While obvious excesses in popular Catholic practice in the sixteenth century led Calvin and others to minimize the role of the saints in the life of prayer, any reasons for failing to develop a full-fledged Reformed theology of the communion of saints today have long ceased to exist.³ While Reformed Christians like myself may hesitate in speaking of prayer 'to' the saints – because of a concern to maintain the mediatorial centrality of Christ – it is not only possible, but even necessary, to speak of prayer 'with' the saints, inviting them also to pray for us.⁴

The saints in sixteenth-century Reformed thought

John Calvin, in sixteenth-century Geneva, remained very critical of the idea of the intercession of the saints, even though he admitted that it

was rooted in a correct principle, namely, 'that death is not destruction, but a crossing over from this life to another'.⁵ He was willing to grant that the love and caring of those who had departed this life 'is also contained within the communion of the body of Christ'.⁶ In fact, in his Reply to Cardinal Sadoletto, he went so far as to concede:

By asserting the intercession of the saints, if all you mean is that they continually pray for the completion of Christ's kingdom, on which the salvation of all the faithful depends, there is none of us who calls it in question.⁷

The Second Helvetic Confession, published by Heinrich Bullinger in 1566, made it very clear that the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant 'both have fellowship and union one with another'.⁸ Similarly, the Scots Confession of 1560 insisted that the Kirk triumphant be honoured and joined to those who still struggle in the present life.⁹ Sixteenth-century Reformed theology, therefore, remained firmly committed to the idea of the Church as a communion of saints.

What caused Calvin to reject the intercession of the departed faithful in the prayer life of the Christian community were the abuses that he witnessed within the cult of saints among unlettered people in his own day. As he saw it:

Illiterate females and almost all the peasantry, in praying to Hugo and Lubin, use the very form of prayer which was given us by the Son of God. Thus a block of wood will be our Father in heaven.¹⁰

Wanting to give supreme importance to the intercessory role of Christ in the mystery of prayer, Calvin found himself caught between his commitment to the shared communion of those who had died in Christ with those who were still alive *and* his reaction to a perceived threat of idolatry. It was the latter that drove him to an undue emphasis on the withdrawn and stoical isolation of those who had died in the Lord.

'Even though I grant they pray for us,' Calvin said, 'still they do not abandon their own repose so as to be drawn into earthly cares.' He argued that the saints are not caught up in 'particular desires', but 'yearn for God's Kingdom with a set and immovable will'.¹¹ In effect, Calvin stated that we should not bother them, but instead 'leave them to enjoy their rest'.¹² This rigid, almost Neoplatonic separation of those who had died from those with whom they continue to share communion in the Body of Christ seems contradictory, however, to his bold emphasis upon the *communio sanctorum*.¹³

Calvin's doctrine of the Church was, in general, a very strong one, insisting on the inclusion of the elect throughout all ages.¹⁴ With Cyprian, he simply declared that one cannot have God as one's father without also having the Church as one's mother.¹⁵

For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast . . . and keep us under her care and guidance . . . Furthermore, away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation . . . It is always disastrous to leave the church.¹⁶

The Genevan Reformer's fear of excesses in the popular cult of the saints in sixteenth-century Europe was what kept him from developing the theological consequences of the ecclesiology he held so dear.

Calvin readily urged the 'imitation' of the saints, but balked at the idea of recognizing their intercession. Throughout the Reformed tradition, great emphasis has always been placed upon the exemplary role of the saints in modelling the devout life – from John Foxe's *Book of martyrs* and Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* to the very recent evocation of the saints in Kathleen Norris' *The cloister walk*.¹⁷ As early as 1566, Bullinger affirmed that:

We do not despise the saints or think basely of them. For we acknowledge them to be living members of Christ and friends of God . . . We also imitate them. For with ardent longings and supplications we earnestly desire to be imitators of their faith and virtues, to share eternal salvation with them, to dwell eternally with them in the presence of God, and to rejoice with them in Christ.¹⁸

Building on this sixteenth-century foundation for celebrating the communion of saints in the Reformed tradition – and given the development of twentieth-century Roman Catholic thought on the same subject – it becomes obvious that the time has long passed for Christians in the Reformed tradition to move beyond imitation alone, to recognize also the important role of the intercession of the saints within the communion of the faithful.¹⁹

The reappropriation of the saints in twentieth-century Reformed liturgy

Often in the history of Christian spirituality it is the exercise of liturgy that leads us more fully into the doctrinal implications of the faith we had long confessed, though not clearly enough understood.

Theologians describe this in terms of the traditional maxim, *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The pattern (or law) of 'the way one prays' is constitutive of the pattern (or law) of 'the way one believes'.²⁰ The Church's liturgical and devotional practice is not simply a subsequent 'result' of doctrinal convictions; it often *moulds* those theological understandings themselves. Perhaps this is especially the case with respect to the reappropriation of the saints in the liturgical life of twentieth-century Reformed Christians. The communion of saints is sometimes 'prayed' more effectively in Reformed circles than it is 'believed' (as a confessional statement).

J. A. Ross Mackenzie has argued extensively for the inclusion of the Virgin Mary in the worship life of Reformed Churches.²¹ He points to the statue of the Mother of God in the cloisters of St Mary's Abbey on Iona, where Reformed believers use antiphons drawn from the Gaelic tradition in calling upon Mary to succour and shield them.²² The restored Iona community has been a source of renewed liturgy and music within the Reformed tradition since its founding in 1938.

Similarly, Max Thurian of the Taizé community urges the use in Reformed worship of the four most ancient feasts dedicated to Mary: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Purification (or Presentation of Jesus in the Temple), and even the Entry of Mary into God's rest.²³ He sees this as fully commensurate with Calvin's own emphasis on the imitation of Mary. Calvin once affirmed, 'This is the greatest praise that we know how to give her . . . that we avow her as our teacher and that we are her disciples'.²⁴

Even within the Presbyterian Church (USA) there have been recent calls for the reincorporation of the sanctoral cycle in Reformed worship. Craig Douglas Erickson argues for a return to the calendar of saints on the grounds that 'praying the prayer of the church in the company of the saints serves as a corrective to individualized piety and its tendency toward theological narrowness'.²⁵ A 'calendar of commemorations', he adds, would remind the Church 'that history is to be taken seriously, that the Holy Spirit is boundlessly creative, that the incarnation is indeed a reality'.²⁶ The Task Force on Daily Prayer of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has actually developed such a calendar, incorporating traditional canonized saints from both Eastern and Western traditions, as well as others who have functioned as 'signs of God's sanctifying grace' (from Calvin, Mozart and George Herbert to Sojourner Truth and Toyohiko Kagawa).²⁷ This ecumenical calendar offers some interesting juxtapositions, placing Aquinas, Yeats and Dostoyevsky on the same feast day of January 28 and reminding us that

Thomas Merton and Karl Barth died on the same day, 10 December 1968.

Stanley Hauerwas argues that such a recovery of the saints also has the effect of restoring prophetic power to the Christian community. 'Sainthood is about power,' he insists.²⁸ It is not about people being 'reduced to being saintly, people who are eternally nice'. As Peter Brown demonstrates in his book *The cult of the saints*, early Christians valued these extraordinary human beings as 'men and women of power, capable of protecting this small and relatively uninteresting group of people called Christians'.²⁹ These saints delineated a counter-cultural spirituality able to revitalize the Church at its core. Whenever irascible souls such as these are lost, the faith community also loses its tartness and edge. As Methodist historian H. B. Workman once said, Protestantism, in its deep suspicion of the cult of the saints, 'has too often driven out the eagle to save the sparrows'.³⁰

Two of the most interesting movements of liturgical experimentation and theological renewal in twentieth-century Reformed thought are found in the communities of Iona and Taizé, where the recovery of the saints has gone hand in hand with the task of joining liturgy to justice. George F. MacLeod, a minister of the Church of Scotland, founded the Iona Community on the eve of the Second World War as a way of restoring life to Reformed worship and responding to social ills on the streets of Glasgow. The community focused itself around the rebuilding of the ruined thirteenth-century Benedictine abbey on the island of Iona, off the western coast of Scotland. In its vision of renewed church life, the community intentionally merged Catholic and Reformed sensitivities, devotional discipline and political activity, a call to corporate unity as well as to individual responsibility.

Evoking the witness of all the saints who had preceded them there on the island of Iona, MacLeod said:

I only know that if we are to make it, then we must call back Columba, who insisted the Faith had to do with history and not just with hysteria. We must call back the Benedictines, who insisted on one Church (and we must not be content with our miserable divisions as our witness – God forgive us – to reconciliation! Why should men listen to our advice on reconciliation till we ourselves unite?) Yes, and we must call back the Reformers, with their insistence on personal commitment.³¹

He knew that neither the unity of worship nor the power of justice could be fully realized apart from the continued participation of the saints in the life of the community. To this day, on every Wednesday, a

pilgrimage is made around the island, stopping for prayer at Columba's Bay, the Hermit's Cell, Dun I (the highest point on the island), and Reilig Orain (graveyard for the ancient kings of Scotland, Ireland and Norway). Contemporary *peregrini* thus share in the memory of the wandering Celtic saints of centuries past.

Brother Roger Schutz, the son of a Swiss Reformed pastor and his wife, first came to the tiny village of Taizé near the German border of eastern France in 1940. Having just finished a dissertation on early Christian monasticism at the University of Lausanne, he was seeking a site for a community where people from France and Germany, from Reformed and Catholic Christianity, could come together to address liturgical and social issues. The result was an ecumenical monastic community that moved over the years from sheltering Jewish refugees in the early 1940s to attracting huge numbers of young people addressing questions of international injustice within a context of common prayer.³²

Once again, as in the Iona Community, the Rule of Taizé sets this life of prayer firmly within the communion of saints. The Virgin Mary, the apostles and martyrs, and saints through all the ages are regularly evoked within the daily worship of the community. The *Office de Taizé* offers a brief calendar of saints, with readings and prayers, affirming that:

The communion of the saints unites all Christians in a common prayer, a common life in Christ. It joins the Church of today with the Church in every age, the Church Militant here on earth with the Church Triumphant in heaven.³³

Brother Roger has joined Mother Teresa in co-authoring a small book of reflections and prayers about the Virgin Mary and the poor.³⁴ The presence of the intercession of the saints is a very important and continuing reality in the life of the Taizé Community.

In my own experience at the Benedictine monastery of Christ in the Desert, I was surrounded not only by the Virgin Mary and my recently deceased mother, but by *all* the desert saints from John the Baptist to Charles de Foucauld, from Evagrius of Pontus to the irreverent and reluctant witness of Edward Abbey. It was perfectly obvious there that *we need* those saints . . . to root us in our history, to keep us honest, to connect us with the grand (and crusty) company of heaven.

Kathleen Norris is another Presbyterian (and a Benedictine oblate) who is far more familiar with Benedictine monasteries than myself. Her recent book, *The cloister walk*, is a reflection on her own lengthy

stay at the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research at St John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. Patterned after the sanctoral cycle, her book is a delightful evocation of the saints. One day at morning prayer in the abbey church, the words of St Bernard made her realize the poverty of much of the worship she had known in the past. The abbot of Clairvaux lamented that, 'the saints want us to be with them, and we are indifferent . . . Let us long for those who are longing for us.'³⁵ This, finally, is the heart of the mystery we call the *communio sanctorum* – a family of people (both dead and alive) who long to be with each other in the shared communion of prayer.

NOTES

¹ F. W. Faber, *All for Jesus* (London, 1853), quoted in Ann Taves, *The household of faith: Roman Catholic devotions in mid-nineteenth-century America* (Notre Dame, 1986), p 48.

² Karl Barth stressed the notion of the Church as *communio sanctorum* in his *Church dogmatics* (IV/2, section 67, part 2), pointing to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum communio* as one of the finest books he knew on the theology of the Church.

³ Calvin spoke of particular abuses of the cult of the saints in his treatise *Against the worship of relics* (1543), mentioning, for example, the excessive veneration of the arm of St Anthony in Geneva (later proven to be the leg of a stag) and part of the severed head of John the Baptist maintained with great solemnity at Calvin's birthplace in Noyon.

⁴ Calvin himself questioned the intercession of the saints largely because of his commitment to Christ alone as *Mediator Dei*. 'Regarding the saints,' he said, 'let us not even dream that they have any other way to petition God than through Christ' (*Institutes* III. xx. 19–21). He feared also that a distorted view of God as 'stern judge and strict avenger of iniquity' made recourse to the cult of saints necessary so that God could be 'rendered exorable and propitious to us' ('Reply to Sadoleto', in *Tracts and treatises on the reformation of the Church* [Grand Rapids, 1958], I, p 62).

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes* III. v. 10. All translations from Calvin's *Institutes* are taken from the edition in two volumes by John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles.

⁶ *Institutes* III. xx. 24.

⁷ Calvin, 'Reply to Sadoleto', *Tracts and treatises* I, p 47.

⁸ Second Helvetic Confession, chapter XVII, paragraph 4. Translation from Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century* (Philadelphia, 1966). The highest authority among Reformed confessions has generally been granted to the Second Helvetic (Swiss) Confession.

⁹ Scots Confession, chapter XVI. Translation from James Bulloch, *The Scots confession: 1560* (Edinburgh, 1960).

¹⁰ Calvin, 'Antidote to the Council of Trent', in *Tracts and treatises on the reformation of the Church* III, p 46. In his *Necessity of reforming the Church*, Calvin criticized the practice of 'allotting a peculiar province' to particular saints, so that 'one gives rain, another fair weather, one delivers from fever, another from shipwreck'. This, as he saw it, neglects the intercession of Christ, confiding 'less in the Divine protection than in the patronage of saints' (*Tracts and treatises* I, p 155).

¹¹ *Institutes* III. xx. 24.

¹² Calvin, 'The true method of giving peace to Christendom and reforming the Church' (1547), *Tracts and treatises* III, p 322. In this context he is wrestling with the fact that in the early Church Chrysostom, Epiphanius and Augustine had all approved of prayers for the dead.

¹³ With reference to the 'communion of saints' in the Apostles' Creed, Calvin said: 'The saints are gathered into the society of Christ on the principle that whatever benefits God confers upon

them, they should in turn share with one another' (*Institutes* IV. i. 3). In his commentary on Hebrews 12:1, he went on to celebrate the 'dense throng' of witnesses by which the Church is intimately surrounded, declaring: 'The virtues of the saints are so many testimonies to confirm us, that we, relying on them as our guides and associates, ought to go onward to God with more alacrity' (*Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids, 1949], p 311). 'We ought not to refuse the Lord's favour of being connected with so many holy men,' he added (p 307).

¹⁴ *Institutes* IV, i, 7.

¹⁵ *Institutes* IV. i. 1.

¹⁶ *Institutes* IV. i. 4.

¹⁷ Two books, each entitled *Visible saints*, by Geoffrey Nuttal (Oxford, 1957) and by Edmund S. Morgan (New York, 1963) reflect on the exemplary understanding of the saints in English and American Puritanism respectively.

¹⁸ *Second Helvetic confession*, chapter V, paragraph 4. Bullinger further added: 'We confess that the remembrance of saints, at a suitable time and place, is to be profitably commended to the people in sermons, and the holy example of the saints set forth to be imitated by all'.

¹⁹ *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, produced by the Second Vatican Council in 1963, declared: 'Let the faithful be taught, therefore, that the authentic cult of the saints consists not so much in the multiplying of external acts, but rather in the intensity of our active love. By such love . . . we seek from the saints "example in their way of life, fellowship in their communion, and aid by their intercession". 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' (*Lumen gentium*, chapter VII, section 51).

²⁰ Anthony J. Tambasco discusses this principle in the context of his relating Marian piety (*lex orandi*) to Marian doctrine (*lex credendi*). Cf. *What are they saying about Mary?* (New York, 1984), pp 65ff.

²¹ Cf J. A. Ross Mackenzie, 'Honouring the Virgin Mary: a Reformed perspective', *The Way Supplement* 45 (Summer 1982), pp 65–77, and 'Mary as an ecumenical problem' in Alberic Stacpoole (ed), *Mary's place in Christian dialogue* (Wilton, 1982), pp 34–40.

²² J. A. Ross Mackenzie, "'This Virgin for a good understanding": reflections on intercessors' in Alberic Stacpoole (ed), *Mary and the churches* (Dublin, 1987), p 19. Cf Ronald Ferguson, *Chasing the wild goose: the Iona Community* (London, 1988), p 190.

²³ Max Thurian, *Mary: mother of all Christians* (New York, 1964), pp 186–187. John Macquarrie's book *Mary for all Christians*, (Grand Rapids, 1990), summarizes some of the work of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary (centred in Wallington, Surrey), providing also an ecumenical office of Mary the Mother of Jesus (pp 139–160).

²⁴ Sermon XI ('On the harmony of the Gospels'), *Corpus Reformatorum* vol 35, cols 120ff.

²⁵ Craig Douglas Erickson, 'Reformed theology and the sanctoral cycle', *Reformed Liturgy and Music* XXI, 4 (Fall 1987), p 229.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 231.

²⁷ 'A calendar of commemorations', *Reformed Liturgy and Music* XXI, 4 (Fall 1987), pp 233–245.

²⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, 'On the production and reproduction of the saints' in *Unleashing the Scripture* (Nashville, 1993), p 100.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p 101. Cf Peter Brown, *The cult of the saints* (Chicago, 1981).

³⁰ Quoted in the article on 'Saints' by Gordon S. Wakefield in *The Westminster dictionary of Christian spirituality* (Philadelphia, 1983), p 350.

³¹ George MacLeod, sermon on the occasion of the Queen's visit to the Abbey in 1956, quoted in Ronald Ferguson, *Chasing the wild goose*, p 93. Cf Ronald Ferguson, *George MacLeod: founder of the Iona Community* (New York, 1990), and Robert K. Gustafson, 'New directions for the Iona Community', *Quarterly Review* 5 (Spring 1985), pp 49–58.

³² Cf Sophie Gilliat, 'Brother Roger of Taizé: a contemporary Christian mystic', *Theology* 98 (1995), pp 289–296; Douglas A. Hicks, 'The Taizé community: fifty years of prayer and action', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 29 (Spring 1992), pp 202–214; and J. L. G. Balado, *The story of Taizé* (New York, 1981).