

'COMMUNIO SANCTORUM'—THE SACRAMENTAL INTERPRETATION

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(1) Personal or real? — Most people reciting the Apostles' Creed today take the words "communion of saints" to mean the fellowship of Christians here with those who are "at rest" or "in Christ", i.e. of the faithful on earth with the faithful in heaven. Moreover, it would never occur to them that the words could carry any other meaning. *O sancta simplicitas!* The unruffled placidity of this understanding is shattered by a single consideration: the English phrase translates the Latin *Communio Sanctorum*, and *sanctorum* is not only genitive plural masculine but also neuter. In the present climate of thought, apology should perhaps be offered that in no way can *sanctorum* be pressured into yielding a feminine plural. Fidelity to the Latin would require the English translation to leave the two possibilities open: *holy people* and *holy things* — what may be called the *personal* and the *real* interpretations.

But this is no more than the tip of the iceberg. *Communio* too has variant meanings. So the number of possibilities reached by permutation and combination when *communio* and *sanctorum* are joined together is prodigious; and such is the ingenuity and industry displayed by theologians, so long have they had to exercise their skills and deploy their arguments, and so incapable have the bewildered faithful proved to be in controlling theological extravaganzas, that most of these possibilities — even the unlikely or outrageous — seem to have attracted advocates. Even if some in fact represent non-entities, the residual number is formidable. At least some of them merit consideration.

(2) "Saints" in the New Testament — No one is likely in these days to deny that the New Testament is the matrix out of which we derive all that can properly be theologically and liturgically done or said. Hence it is with the New Testament that a start must be made. And since the phrase "Communion of Saints" does not occur in the New Testament, we begin by looking at "saints" and "communion" in separation.

The New Testament uses "saints" in three distinguishable ways. (a) saints on earth — it is St Paul's normal usage. Enough

has been said to make us aware of that apparent contradiction of "fornicators" and "saints" at e.g. Corinth. It is easily resolved by Calvin's dictum, that Christ died after all not to make us righteous but to be our righteousness. The same usage is found outside the Pauline corpus in Acts and Hebrews.¹

(b) saints in heaven — outside the Pauline corpus (and occasionally within it) *agioi* connotes those in heaven. Revelation contains enough reference to the prayers of saints to make Protestants uneasy about any too brisk repudiation of the idea.² For the most part, the context in which reference to the saints in this sense occurs is strongly eschatological — e.g. Mt. 27: 52, where at the crucifixion "God's saints were raised from sleep".

(c) saints in both earth and heaven — the evidence is small and not particularly difficult to interpret. Eph. 3: 18 "with all saints" could carry the usual Pauline meaning alone, saints on earth; but an earlier verse of the same letter, 1: 18, refers to "hope" and "inheritance", and so the saints in heaven are clearly in the background of the thought here. However, no clear separation between saints on earth and in heaven is apparent in the New Testament. But a distinction between them breaks surface in Heb. 12: 22f: no doubt we on earth stand presently in the presence of those in heaven, but our unrestricted union with them is seen to be both conditional and future.

The conclusion must be that the evidence of the New Testament justifies thought of saints on earth and of saints in heaven, and also of a certain presumed fellowship between them in which the distinction hardly counts. For *agia* = holy things, there is no New Testament precedent.

(3) "Communion" in the New Testament — The term is used also in three distinguishable ways. (a) absolutely, i.e. without the definite article and without explanatory words — of this usage the New Testament supplies only three examples.³ With nothing supplementary to determine the meaning, the nearest we can get to it is fellowship binding believers together, i.e. *communion with*.

(b) followed by a genitive — something like a dozen examples can be cited.⁴ In most of these, *koinonia* connotes a fellowship in, i.e. participation or *communion in* something. The *koinon ti* is made quite explicit, and it varies: *koinonia* in Christ himself, in the Holy Spirit, in Christ's sufferings, even in the divine nature. Of the first two, Hebrews supplies indirect corroborative evidence by using a variant adjectival or nominal term *metochos*, sharer. One case, Phil. 1: 5, seems to repeat the absolute use of *koinonia* and should be translated simply "your fellowship"; but it is immediately followed again by something on or in which the

fellowship rests or consists: it is “your fellowship in the gospel”. Of great significance for the present purpose are the words that have established themselves in the celebration of the eucharist: I Cor. 10: 16f, where the *koinonia* is clearly defined as a participation in the blood of Christ and the body of Christ, since we all share in the one bread.

(c) followed by a preposition — sometimes⁵ the equivocal “of” is replaced by a preposition which makes apparent the objective reference — *meta* (as four times in 1 John) and *pros* (once in 2 Cor. 6: 14).

The conclusion is not in doubt. *Koinonia* in the New Testament connotes not a fellowship among the faithful, the phrase itself being never used, but clearly a fellowship of the faithful *in*, a joint participation in, something.

(4) *Koinonia agion, Communio Sanctorum* — What happens when the two terms are put together? The question cannot be: what does the New Testament mean by the joint concept?, since it does not occur there. The real question is rather: when *koinonia agion* becomes current usage, albeit in Latin form *Communio Sanctorum*, how does the witness of the New Testament affect it?⁶ That those responsible for compiling the Creed wished to be faithful to Scripture may be taken for granted — it is long before the days of Gregory the Great with whom fatefully tradition comes to be promoted as a rival source of Christian truth. On the other hand, they did not conceive fidelity to Scripture to consist of wooden repetition of the New Testament words or ideas: they aimed at *interpretative fidelity*. Here it is difficult to get beyond intelligent surmise. *Agioi* in the New Testament means holy people. On the other hand *koinonia* means participation in, and only *agia*, i.e. holy things, not *agioi* holy people, appropriately follows. Hence when the two are put together the alternatives emerge: either *agioi* retains its New Testament meaning as the Creed is being compiled, and *koinonia* surrenders its exact New Testament meaning; or *koinonia* retains its New Testament meaning and we must understand *agia* and not *agioi*. We may plausibly believe that those leading Christian thought in this situation in fact did so with open mind, even if the openness consisted of some inclining to one interpretation and others to the other. In a situation of this kind, contextual factors will be decisive.

(5) Between New Testament and Creed — In the period between the New Testament and the emergence of *Communio Sanctorum* as a joint concept preparing to take its place in credal statement, saints especially, as a separate idea, attracted

attention and plays an important role.⁷ Through Apostolic Fathers and Apologists, in the Alexandrines and the Africans (Tertullian, Cyprian), emphasis is increasingly laid upon the saints, more and more clearly separated as the living and the dead (Origen can speak of “two churches”); upon prayer by, and then for, the saints as constituting “effective” communion; and then finally upon the part played in the salvation of the Church on earth by the works and merits of the saints in heaven, and in particular of the martyrs. Origen in his mischievous way goes so far as to impute to Satan “the years of peace” enjoyed by the Church, since the number of martyrs was then so reduced that demand for martyr prayers outran supply, and earthly believers found it difficult to obtain pardon for their sins. Clearly during these two-and-a-half centuries the Church is becoming increasingly accustomed to recognise a division or separation between saints on earth and in heaven, to think of prayer as providing a bridge between them, and to believe that a beneficial traffic passed over that bridge from there to here. This is no doubt a kind of *Communio Sanctorum*, but the meaning has become pretty specialised.

(6) Nicetas — We come now to the time when the Apostles' Creed is being finalised. *Communio Sanctorum* wins a place in the formula and perpetuates its presence there. How does this come about? Nicetas (end of fifth century) is a specially important witness for our understanding how *Communio Sanctorum* appears in the Creed. The work *Explanatio Symboli* reliably attributed to him refers to a creed in which almost certainly *Communio Sanctorum* was incorporated.⁸ An air of obscurity makes Nicetas a rather enigmatic figure. There is doubt about his origins, his place of work, his sainthood, even his identity;⁹ and the assessments passed upon his contribution to the present issue flatly contradict each other. Does he interpret the *sanctorum* he apparently finds in the formulary on which he comments as holy persons or as holy things, i.e. as personal or real? Here are two contradictory answers: in Nicetas *sanctorum* is “treated as a masculine plural”; for Nicetas *sanctorum* is “genitive neuter and means sacred things”.¹⁰

The trouble is that in the crucial passage of his work there are two keyterms that permit variant interpretations. Nicetas talks of present membership of a “*congregation* of all saints”, and also of a future “*communion* of saints”. This latter may mean either a simple expansion of the holy persons whose company is already enjoyed in the “congregation”, or an intensification of that communion in terms and by means of holy things.

The second keyterm used is equally equivocal: *consecuturum*; and this may either be translated "reach" and mean again just another range of holy people beyond those with whom communion has already been established; or it may be translated "obtain" or "acquire", and mean the entering upon another and different dimension of intimacy founded upon communion in holy things.

The ambiguity is probably irresolvable: the witness of Nicetas cannot be cited to support clearly either things or persons as the only proper interpretation of *sanctorum*.¹¹

(7) Contextual factors — Attention has been paid to the evidence of the New Testament and to the development of Christian thought and practice up to the end of the fourth century. Contemporary and immediately contextual factors must now be appreciated.¹² Credal statements are always both motivated and influenced by the context in which they are compiled. The Church as such never sits down in cold blood to write a creed; nor do its representatives suddenly decide: let us state what we believe. It is circumstances that incite credal activity — as Augustine says, *non sponte sed coactu*. Creeds are made when circumstances impose a need to make clear positively what Christianity has to say and negatively to repudiate something that Christianity does not say, i.e. to expound to the faithful in time of doubt, and to repel the traducer in time of heresy. In the present case, two chief circumstantial influences operate: a certain presbyter of Aquitaine, and the redoubtable Augustine.

(a) The presbyter of Aquitaine is Vigilantius (fl. c. 400). We know about him chiefly from evidence that is hostile and so biased. Jerome, for example, was rather horrid to Vigilantius, and mocked him: "*non Vigilantius, sed Dormitianus*". It is evident that he attacked the growing cult of saints and martyrs. Anyone running so counter to such a popular and increasingly widespread practice might expect to have the whole book thrown at him. No stronger counter measure could be devised than to give *Communio Sanctorum* an impregnable place in the Creed. If this is the motive behind its inclusion, as Harnack believes, *Communio Sanctorum* can carry only the personal meaning — holy persons.¹³

(b) The controversy of Augustine with the Donatists is an influence more powerful and also more complex and perhaps equivocal. The Donatists were rigorists, even moral perfectionists. They thought of the Church as a *Communio Sanctorum* in the sense of consisting of actually saintly people; and from its fellowship sinners had to be excluded. For them

Communio Sanctorum bore the personal connotation: *sanctorum* meant holy people. Augustine challenged this understanding of the Church. For him too the Church was *Communio Sanctorum*, but in a quite different sense. The visible Church (*externa communio*) was composed of good and bad (*corpus permixtum*); but it was holy by reason of the *Communio Sanctorum* within in, a core composed of those predestined to salvation and so elect. Augustine so far agrees in a personal understanding of *Communio Sanctorum*. But it is characteristic of Augustine to decline Procrustean accommodation — unless fitted with a double bed or better still with twin beds. His thought finds another outlet and expression: the sacraments enter into the controversy. Augustine was obliged to contradict the Donatist view and to affirm that the validity of the sacraments was not impaired by the unworthiness of the celebrant. In expounding this sacramental emphasis, he amplifies the meaning of *communio*, and refers to “gifts of the Spirit” that are or will be “the common property of all”¹⁴ which can carry only a real interpretation; and again he insists that the *communio ecclesiae* is broken by heretics in that they not only *aliter credunt* (which is obvious) but also *aliter agunt* (which can only refer to deviant sacramental practice).¹⁵ Even more explicit is his recurrent use of the term *communio sacramentorum*.¹⁶

If, then, under pressure to justify the cult of the saints and martyrs, the Church feels obliged to write *Communio Sanctorum* into its credal statements, with an evidently personal interpretation, it is quite unlikely that the massive emphasis laid by Augustine on a sacramental and real sense is simply erased from the Church’s notice, even if for the time being it suffers some obscurity and temporary eclipse.

This conclusion history plainly justifies.¹⁷ The two interpretations persist. “As far as the creeds were concerned (the personal) interpretation of *Communio Sanctorum* . . . had the longest and most continuous history”. Yet the strand representing the real interpretations is not extinguished. Thus in the Middle Ages, “while *sanctorum* was usually taken as masculine in gender, the word *communio* was often regarded as equivalent to “the communion which the saints enjoyed”, i.e. the sacrament of the altar”. Of this St Thomas is also witness: “because the faithful form one body, the benefits belonging to one are communicated to the others. There is thus a sharing of benefits (*communio bonorum*) in the Church, and this is what we mean by *Sanctorum Communio*; the good shared being particularly the seven sacraments, which convey to us the virtue of Christ’s passion.”¹⁸

(8) A linguistic consideration¹⁹ throws light on the situation and brings the survey through the vicissitudes of the Reformation. Two rules can be observed operating: (a) translation into another language can never guarantee exact transmission of the meaning embedded in the original language — the junction is weak, and there may be a leak in exact rendering; (b) at such a weak point, circumstantial factors will weigh in to influence the meaning which the term in the new translation will carry.

In the present case these rules apply as follows. In the Greek, when *koinonia* and *agion* come together, as in post-New Testament times they do, *agion* has a real connotation and means holy things. When Latin supervenes and *Communio Sanctorum* takes over in the West, the two rules begin to operate: (a) *sanctorum* is not a receptacle for identical transmission of what *agion* connotes; (b) the contemporary interest in the cult of the saints inclines towards the personal rather than the real interpretation.

A very similar development is observable at the Reformation: (a) translation into the vernaculars provides an opportunity for some variation of meaning in the terms being translated; (b) Churches influenced by the Reformation felt obliged to discredit the form of sacramentalism practised in the unreformed Church and the aberrant apparatus by which it was operated. Accordingly they opted more exclusively than ever for the personal interpretation of *Communio Sanctorum*. The unreformed Church in fact did not make much use of the real interpretation in terms of holy things; the Churches of the Reformation could not use it at all. Perhaps the Reformers did not quite realise that the personal interpretation for which they exclusively opted owed its vitality and perhaps its survival to a very unreformed interest in the cult of the saints.

The upshot is that English versions of the Apostles' Creed from the fourteenth century have "saints" which is unequivocal; while the German *Gemeinschaft* or *Gemeinde der Heiligen*, and the French *la communion des saints* (occasionally *des saints choses*) favour the same personal interpretation though perhaps not so unequivocally.

(9) The sacramental view of *Communio Sanctorum* — Some conclusions can now be drawn. It is unnecessary to make exclusive choice of one of the alternative options. The precedent for resisting any such polarisation is historically very strong.²⁰ Survey of the past shows that both personal and real interpretations have a long and overlapping history. Even when asking the question: with which interpretation did *Communio Sanctorum* in fact enter the Creed?, we are not bound to one only of the

options. Circumstances are easily conceivable (different parties holding different views) in which *Communio Sanctorum* finds its place in the Creed by common consent but without commanding univocal significance. History would then be teaching us of today to relinquish neither of the options, and to counterbalance any temporary exclusive stress on one by complementary insistence on the other. We ought then to restore emphasis to an element which has for only four hundred years suffered some neglect, since the Reformation and the translation of *Communio Sanctorum* into the vernaculars, but which has impeccable lineage in the Church's past.²¹

Fellowship or communion between persons takes place, if not exclusively, certainly most profoundly and intimately through media. The medium is usually speech — the word, that bridges the gap between individuals and enables traffic to flow and communion to take place. In a more material sense, the sharing of a meal possesses a significance for fellowship which from ancient provenance persists into today — despite self-service cafes and formica table tops. In this light, what shall we say of our communion (a) with others in the pew with us? (b) with those also in the Church catholic, members of the visible Church, here on earth but out of sight? (c) with those at rest? Of course communion is possible with all these without the intervention of any medium. Yet if there should be a medium available, we must suppose that it would intensify communion. It is this that the Eucharist supplies. In it we have more than one identifiable *koinon ti* or thing in which there is participation. There is a common visible rite, recognisably the same wherever celebrated; and there is similar bread and wine used in that rite. These are so far unifying factors between us and our neighbours, and also with the visible Church invisible to us, the faithful from Alaska to Tasmania, from Zagorsk to Dallas.

There is a further and quite pre-eminent unifying factor: the presence of the *totus Christus*. He is chief host and president wherever his table is prepared and set and dispensed. This presence unifies the seen among themselves, and also the earthly seen with the earthly unseen. It also unites saints on earth and saints in heaven. *Here*, the visible "two or three gathered in his name", *there* the eschatologically fulfilled passover of which our Lord himself says he will eat and which Revelation calls the wedding supper of the Lamb. The identity between us here and them there consists in this: both enjoys the presence of the *totus Christus*; the difference is this: we who see each other enjoy his unseen presence (though represented to us by the celebrant),

while those unseen to us enjoy his seen presence (with no representative needed). In the liturgy of St John Chrysostom, the celebrant lays out upon the paten small pieces of bread in commemoration of the saints who are already of that company which no man can number — a visible symbol of their presence with the earthly people of God.²² The entire circle of the *Communio Sanctorum* is thus completed, the visible by sight, the heavenly by symbol. In the midst of that completed circle is the *totus Christus*, the Lord, present *here* by his representative the celebrant, and *there* in person and by sight. Where the *agia* are made available, the *agioi* are in closest fellowship among themselves, and also with him who alone is properly and eternally *agios*.

We should be unwilling to understand the *Communio Sanctorum* with a smaller or slighter meaning than this.

NOTES

1. E.g. 2 Cor. 1: 1; cf. As. 9: 32, Heb. 6: 10.
2. Cf. 1 Thes. 3: 13, Jde. 14, Rev. 5: 8, 8: 3, 4.
3. Gal. 2: 9, Heb. 13: 16, As. 2: 42.
4. E.g. 1 Cor. 1: 9; cf. Phil. 1: 5; cf. Heb. 6: 4.
5. 1 John 1: 3, 6, 7; 2 Cor. 6: 14.
6. See J. P. Kirsch: *The Doctrine of the Communion of Saints in the Ancient Church*—St Louis and London 1911, 261.
7. See *Dictionnaire d'Archaeologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie*—Paris 1907-53, art. "Communion Des Saints".
8. See J. N. D. Kelly: *Early Christian Creeds*—London 1950, 388.
9. See Kirsch, op. cit., 257ff.
10. A. T. Hanson in *A Dictionary of Christian Theology*—London 1969, art. "Com of Ss"; W. Breuning in *Sacramentum Mundi*—London 1968, art. "Com of Ss".
11. See F. J. Badcock: "Sanctorum Communio as an Article in the Creed" in *JTS XXI* 1920, 112.
12. In addition to what is said below, see Badcock, op. cit., 106ff, who traces a geographical route having a Greek origin and investing *koin ag*, C. S., with what can only be a real meaning.
13. See H. B. Swete: *The Apostles' Creed*—London 1894, 86.
14. PsSerm, 240.
15. PsSerm, 241.
16. PsSerm, 214.
17. See Kelly, op. cit., 393-7; Badcock, op. cit.
18. Expos. sup. symb. ap. 10.
19. Badcock op. cit., 106f, gives his own version of the linguistic factors involved.
20. See e.g. A. E. Burn: *The Apostles' Creed*—London 1912, 95, says that the "idea of communion of sacraments must not be set in a false antithesis to the idea of a communion of saints". For the same view there can be cited: from R.C. theology—*Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, Rahner's *Encyclopedia of Theology*, *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vat Co II de Eccl 7.50; from Lutheran theology—*Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*; from Orthodoxy—T. Ware: *The Orthodox Church*, 246.

21. I have not attempted here to outline and assess the argument that as the Nicene Creed refers to the sacrament of Baptism, so in parallel the Apostles' Creed should in CS be denoting the sacrament of the Eucharist. See e.g. G. Aulen: *The Faith of the Christian Church*—London 1961, 309 n 1. Nor do I consider the question whether CS is expository of the "holy catholic Church" or adds a further element to it, and the bearing upon it of the legend concerning the apostolic composition of the Apostles' Creed associated with the name of Rufinus. See Badcock, *op. cit.*, 121. Swete, *op. cit.*, 87.
22. See Pierre-Yves Emery: *The Communion of Saints*—London 1966, 218f.

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