

Lord Day 21 b
17 January 2010

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we confess, “I believe the communion of the saints”. Do you really believe in the communion of the saints? Or are you merely giving lip service to this confession? We must strive to understand what this confession means and that this confession will live in our hearts. The truth of the holy Catholic church and the truth of the communion of the saints are closely related. The holy Catholic Church is the communion of the saints, seen from the viewpoint of its spiritual unity with Christ her head and with the one another and the exercise of its gifts for the salvation and edification of its members. From question and answer 55, we received the instruction on the communion of the saints. Let me read this question and answer to you.

Question 55. What do you understand by “the communion of the saints”?

Answer: First, that all and every one, who believe, being members of Christ, are in common, partakers of him, and of all his riches and gifts; secondly, that everyone must know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members.

The theme of the sermon is: I BELIEVE THE COMMUNION OF THE SAINTS.
First, what is it. Secondly, How is this manifested.

First, what is it? As in the previous confession, “I believe an holy, Catholic Church”, and this confession, “I believe the communion of saints” is an object of faith, which means that I believe that there is such a communion of the saints. Though the communion may not always be clearly manifested and many influences often mar this communion of the saints, nevertheless, I believe that the communion of the saints is a reality. It exists now in the gathering of believers and their children in this world and will fully and most gloriously revealed when the whole church of Christ has been gathered out of the world. Furthermore, Christ shall present her to the Father, without spot or wrinkle in the heavenly perfection. We do not confess that “I believe IN the communion of the saints”, then we would rely completely upon the fellowship of the saints for our salvation and this would be contrary to the teaching of Scripture.

What is this communion? It is an existing bond of fellowship that is rooted in the essential and spiritual unity of the believers in Christ and operates through the individual diversity of all the saints. All true communion requires a unity. Let me illustrate it. When a large choir renders Handel Messiah, that chorus constitutes a communion of singers. Their unity rests in the fact that they all sing the oratio, their individual diversity is found in the diversity of the many voices. If they did all sing different songs there would be no bond of unity. Were all the voices were identically the same, no communion or fellowship is possible. This communion is a communion of the saints. The saints are one in Christ, as the catechism expresses that all believers “are in common partakers of him, and of his riches and gifts”. There is one Christ and He is the Head of the whole Church. That one Lord has received the Spirit, and through that Spirit He dwells in the whole Church, His body and in all its members. And this dwelling Christ is the sole basis and fountain for the unity of the saints. Through that indwelling Lord there is a communion with all the children of God. There is also a communion of life, the life of the risen Lord. This is a communion of

love, the love of God that is shed in our hearts and that is revealed as the love of God in Christ towards one another. They have the same faith, the same knowledge of God; the same righteousness, the righteousness of God in Christ towards one another. They have the same faith; the same faith in the knowledge of God in Christ; the same hope, the hope of the glory of God. They speak fundamentally the language of Zion, of faith and love to God so that they know and understand one another; and they unitedly strive for the same purpose: the glory of God in Christ. In them is the same mind, the mind of Christ; the same will, the will of their Lord, and they all speak the same thing, the Word of Christ. And so their unity is a unity of life, love, faith, of hope and purpose, which is the ground of the communion of the saints.

This communion is a spiritual fellowship. The believer does not confess a brotherhood of men. Even though he does not deny that there is a certain natural affinity among men, rooted in the fact that God made all mankind of one blood, he denies that this affinity from a spiritual viewpoint is a real communion of saints. For sin entered into the world and sin is darkness and in darkness there is no fellowship. But out of that world lieth in darkness through which Christ gathers His Church, and in the Church establishes a new communion, the fellowship of God in Christ, according to which we walk in the light and have communion with one another. The communion of the saints is particular, exclusive and antithetical. It does not embrace all men. It is incapable of taking up its fellowship mere men as this is due to God's election, and to the act of Christ whereby He gathers unto Himself all whom the Father gave Him out of the world.

This is not a communion of select friends, or of men that are attracted to one another by common natural characteristics. Nor is this communion determined by or dependant on certain likeness in social standing in the world: rich or poor, learned and unlearned, great and small, masters or servants, bosses or employees. The communion of the saints is not a caste system. Rather, it overcomes all differences of men, it cuts through all natural traits of character and unites men of the most diversified and opposite type. They have been called out of darkness into the light of God and Christ dwells in them, and by his grace, they have been called unto the new life that unites them into a common bond as it is taught in Eph. 4.4-6, *There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*

There in the body of Christ is an endless diversity of individual members. And because of this endless diversity of individual members, they are interdependent, they supplement each other and they are in need of each other. This diversity is seen in the following ways; first, there are natural differences, in nationality, race and character. These natural traits serve the communion of Christ, so that the grace of Christ does not destroy it, but rather uses it for its reflection and glory. Look at how different is David from Asaph, Amos from Isaiah and John from Paul. And also this difference is predestinated by God in order that through the wonderful grace and knowledge of God might be reflected in all glory. This may be applied to all the saints. The almighty and eternal God also predestinated the individual character, temperament, ability and personality of every one of his saints, in such a way that, in heavenly glory, when the entire multitude of the redeemed shall sing the praise of Him that called them. Each may do so in their own way, with his own voice and together

constitute one mighty and harmonious chorus, causing the new creation to rebound with praises to God.

Secondly, the diversity of spiritual gifts. There are gifts of wisdom and knowledge and these are not restricted to the saints on earth, but they are carried into eternity. And in the new creation of the new heavens and new earth, millions of saints will have their distinct individuality. Christ will give them a new name, which no one knows except the one who will receive it, which tells us the individuality of the members of Christ. In heaven too, there will be diversity of spiritual gifts and positions. The servant whose pound had gained 10 pounds and was put in authority over 10 cities, he that gained 5 pounds and was given authority over 5 cities. And shall not the apostles sit on thrones of judgment, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. But also in the church on earth, and in each local congregation, this communion exists, and must be reflected. This is clearly taught when the apostle Paul says, “but to everyone is given grace according to the measure of Christ”. And in I Cor. 12.4 to 14, 4 Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. 6 And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal. 8 For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; 9 To another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; 10 To another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another *divers* kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues: 11 But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will. 12 For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also *is* Christ. 13 For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether *we be* Jews or Gentiles, whether *we be* bond or free; and have been all made to drink into one Spirit. 14 For the body is not one member, but many.

And then, the apostle develops the figure of the body and its members in detail and applies it to the church as the communion of the saints in I Cor. 12.15-27, 15 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? 16 And if the ear shall say, Because I am not the eye, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? 17 If the whole body *were* an eye, where *were* the hearing? If the whole *were* hearing, where *were* the smelling? 18 But now hath God set the members every one of them in the body, as it hath pleased him. 19 And if they were all one member, where *were* the body? 20 But now *are they* many members, yet but one body. 21 And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. 22 Nay, much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble, are necessary: 23 And those *members* of the body, which we think to be less honourable, upon these we bestow more abundant honour; and our uncomely *parts* have more abundant comeliness. 24 For our comely *parts* have no need: but God hath tempered the body together, having given more abundant honour to that *part* which lacked: 25 That there should be no schism in the body; but *that* the members should have the same care one for another. 26 And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. 27 Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular.

And how is this communion of the saints manifested? It is manifested in the life of the individual believers in relation to one another. The catechism speaks of this when it mentions the calling “that every one to know it to be his duty, readily and cheerfully to employ his gifts, for the advantage and salvation of other members. This means, firstly, that the saint who lives from faith, and in the consciousness of this communion will feel himself drawn irresistibly to the assemblies of the people of God, and diligently attend them. This is true as it applies to the public worship, the gathering of the saints for the purpose of the ministry of the Word and Sacraments and of united prayer and praise. Secondly, living in the consciousness of the communion of the saints, he will be deeply filled with the sense of his own individual helplessness and insignificance and understand that he will have only significance only in the fellowship of the body of Christ.

Even as in the human body all the members are interdependent, and no member has any power by itself, in separation from the body, so each individual believer can have significance only in connection with, and dependence upon the all other members. No member occupies an independent place, no matter how richly he may be endowed with spiritual gifts and talents. Though he is a theological giant, the most brilliant preacher, the greatest reformer, still he does not stand and labour alone, but functions only as a member of that body. In the grand oration that is sung by the Church to the glory of God in Christ, there are no soloists. The believers who live from the faith of the communion of the saints is no separatist or schismatic for he is part of the body of Christ, nor will he exalt himself above the other members, but he will with lowliness and mind esteem other better than themselves.

And finally, in the consciousness of the communion of the saints, all seek to know and to occupy their own place in the church. You employ your Christ-given gifts of grace for the well-being of the church, and for the salvation and edification of all the other members. The church has one purpose: the glory of God in Christ and to reflect that glory in word and work in the church. They are of one mind to realise their calling. And this calling includes suffering: if one member suffers, the whole body suffers and so, no member lives unto himself. And he is filled with a deep sense of his obligation to employ all his gifts to the realisation of the high calling. You fail in the communion of the saints when we hide or bury our God-given gifts in a napkin and so deny the blessings of grace upon God’s people. Or, by false modesty which is pride to refuse to use your gifts to serve, when we say, “no, don’t ask me. Why don’t you ask others first. And when no one wants to serve, then come and ask me”. What! Serving God is a great privilege.

God gave you the gifts so that you will exercise them for the edification of God’s people. If you have the gift of teaching, then teach! If you have gift of leading a choir, lead! If you can sing in the various parts, then sing! and take it seriously. If you have the gift of encouraging others, be a Barnabbas or son of encouragement. Look out for others who are in great need. Pray for those who are discouraged. Speak to them and minister to them God’s Word. Make a yearly trip to Penang. There are peculiar trials for a small congregation. Your presence will greatly encourage them. Office-bearers, both elders and deacon, exercise your God-given gifts for the spiritual welfare of the church. Rule the church as God’s under-shepherds. And if you have the opportunity to preach and teach, do it with all your might for that may be your last opportunity to do

it. It was Richard Baxter who says, "I preach as a dying man to dying man". Care for the poor with love and compassion in your heart.

Beloved, do you believe in the communion of the saints? If you do, then exercise your gifts in the church, and the result will be that the church will flourish, believers edified and they will rejoice with the blessed church. Amen.