

## XXV.

**The Communion of Saints.**

“There is one body and one Spirit; even as ye are called in one hope of your calling.”—*Ephes. iv. 4.*

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To classify Love among the works of the Holy Spirit is not a new invention. In this connection, to assign Love such a conspicuous place may be new, but the doctrine itself is as old as the Apostolic Creed, which confesses: “I believe in the *Holy Ghost*; in the Holy, Apostolic, Christian Church, *in the communion of saints.*”

For what is the communion of saints otherwise than Love in its noblest and richest manifestation? And how is it here presented but as the very fruit of the Holy Spirit? The work of the Father is confessed *first*; that of the Son in the Incarnation *second*; and coming to the work of the Holy Spirit, the Church confesses that this is not in the creation, nor in the Incarnation, but in the communion of saints, which, among men, is Love’s tenderest and most glorious expression.

“Communion of saints,” *i.e.*, the rule of Love, not among the selfish, the half-hearted, or still untried, new beginners, but among the initiated children of God, whose life is from God; a communion the foretaste of which is enjoyed on earth, the full enjoyment of which can be found only in heaven; a communion sweet and blessed, because it is unalloyed, and proceeds only from holy impressions; not springing from man’s heart, but shed abroad in him from above when from a sinner he became a saint, and developing in him more warmly and tenderly as in his person the new man becomes more pronounced; a communion found among saints, not by chance, but because it is born from the fact that they are saints, rooted in their being saints, and derived from Him who sanctified them to be saints. Hence it is a love which death can not destroy; which, stronger than death, shall continue as long as there are saints, unquenched, forevermore.

From which it is evident that the fathers had a thorough grasp of the magnificent thought that the Spirit’s real, characteristic, and perpetual work is the *shedding abroad of love*; and they have expressed it in a beautiful and artistic form. The Holy Spirit was to them not a mystic Person in the Godhead, to whom they looked up in holy wonder, but God the Holy Ghost working with omnipotent power within and around them. Hence they followed the confession of the Holy Spirit by that of His creation, *i.e.*, the Holy, Catholic, Christian Church, which is the body of Christ; and that by the confession of the communion of saints, wrought by the Holy Spirit in the Church.

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The *Church* and the *communion of saints* are two things. The former originated and existed before there was the slightest sign of the latter. The Church exists and continues, tho in unfavorable times the communion of saints suffers loss. The new-born child is unconscious of his relation to the family. He lives, but without any attachment, inclination,

love, or bond of union for the family. Love does indeed exert its influence upon him, and cares for him, but does not yet live in and through him. Hence there is no communion between him and the other members of the family. And the same is true of the Church. She can exist, live, and increase before there is any conscious communion of saints. For which reason the communion of saints may languish, apparently disappear, yea, even be turned into bitterness.

Hence the *Church* and the *communion of saints* are two things. First the Church which is the body, then the communion of saints, which is its support and nourishment.

Wherefore it reads, not, *I see or taste*, but, *I believe* the communion of saints. Communion of saints belongs to the things invisible and unknown, which on earth are part of the tenor of the faith, and which in the New Jerusalem shall be turned into a rich and blessed experience. For this article of faith speaks, not of a communion of a *few* saints, members of the same small circle, but of “the communion of *saints*”; and this rich and comprehensive confession may not be belittled by a narrow conception of it. Communion of a few saints is not a thing unknown on earth; there is scarcely a spot where some of God’s dear children do not live together in sweet fellowship. But such a little circle is by no means *the* body of Christ; and such sweet fellowship would be injurious if the fact were overlooked, that it must be a communion of all God’s saints on earth—of the present, the past, and the future.

To one living in an obscure hamlet faith in the communion of saints is the consciousness that he belongs to an exceedingly wealthy, numerous, holy, and elect family; and that instead of ever getting estranged from it, he shall ever be more closely united to it. It is the sacred knowledge that all the saints of the Old and New Covenants, all the heroes and heroines, the whole cloud of witnesses, together with apostles, prophets, and martyrs, and the redeemed in heaven, are not aliens to him, but with him belong to the same body; not only in name, but in reality, as shall once be gloriously manifested. It is the precious comfort for the lonely heart that, in all the ends of the earth, among all nations and peoples, in every city and village, God has His own whom He has called out and gathered unto life eternal; and that I share with them the same life, possess the same hope and calling, and sustain to them, however imperceptibly, the tenderest and holiest communion; yea, the firm and positive assurance that if the earth came suddenly to an end, and they only were to be saved who, being possessed of an eternal principle, had the power to bloom forever, that then all God’s saints would come out as one holy family, in which holy circle the least of His servants would glitter as precious gems.

And therefore this glorious communion should no longer be belittled by confining it to one’s own small, often shallow environment. Of course there is no objection, when friends living in the same place, meeting together in the Lord, understanding one another, and edifying one another through the Word, speak of their small circle, in connection with the communion of saints. For, wherever in love and worship saints dwell together, there indeed



the communion of saints breaks through the clouds, and vouchsafes unto them a glimpse of its brightness and glory. But, altho such dwelling together in unity stands in connection with the communion of saints, and is a result of it, and affords a foretaste of what it some time shall be, it is only a very small part and faint reflection of reality. In such a circle, however good, devout, and holy, the hearts become exclusive. Compared to the great and wide world-circle, they can not be otherwise than a small company. And this necessarily imparts to it something private and exclusive; while the communion of saints is the very *opposite*; not *exclusive*, but *inclusive*. It is not an idea which closes the door and shuts the windows; but, throwing doors and windows wide open, it walks through the four corners of the earth, searches the ages of the past, and looks forward into the ages to come.

Communion of saints opens its arms as wide as possible. O my God! how can I encompass and embrace all the dear children whom Thou throughout the ages hast regenerated and still dost regenerate, the redeemed both in heaven and earth! There are a few of former generations whose books lie open upon our table, so that with Calvin we can pray, or with Augustine glory in a sin-pardoning God, or with Owen lose ourselves in the contemplation of the excellencies of Christ, or with Comrie walk in the paths of righteousness divine. But what are these few that speak compared to the thousands who are silent; who were each in his own way divinely endowed and adorned with spiritual gifts; who in heaven will once appear bright with crowns, our brethren and sisters now and forevermore? The communion of saints cries out: "Lengthen thy cords and strengthen thy stakes." For it is a communion not with hundreds, but with thousands; not with ten thousand, but with millions; a multitude that no man can number, as drops of water in the crystal sea which is before the throne of God.

And this communion of saints will be real: not limited as in this earthly life, where living together in the same city we meet each other at the utmost ten times a year; but an actual living together the same life, eating together at the same board, drinking from the same cup, thinking the same thought, exhilarated by the same felicity, adoring the same unfathomable mercies of our God.

In Europe our fellowship with thousands is now much fuller and richer than our fathers ever knew it. The means of communication are wonderfully improved and multiplied. Telegraph and telephone afford men communication not confined to place nor distance. They were never dreamt of before. It never entered the mind of man that in fifteen minutes a saint in America could exchange thoughts with a brother in Europe. This communion of saints was therefore to them an unsolved riddle. But to us the veil is partly lifted. Actually we see something of it: intercommunication of thought in minutest detail, not confined by distance, crossing the oceans, uniting continents. And yet, what are telegraph and telephone compared to the powers of the age to come? And thus we grope in the dark and wonder



how it shall be when distance shall be no more, when material aids shall be superfluous, when God's children, active in whatever part of heaven, shall enjoy full, rich, and intimate communion, one in Immanuel, all partakers of the same Love.

Why is the communion of saints an article of the creed of the Church on earth? (1) Because *in the invisible world it is even now a reality*; (2) because it is *implied in the nature of the case*; and (3) because it is *already active in the germ*.

*First*, it exists already *in the invisible world*; for there is a triumphant Church above. Millions upon millions are fallen asleep in their Lord, and have entered the halls of the eternal Light. And altho to them the full glory of the Kingdom is not revealed, tarrying as it does until after the judgment Day, and the absence of the glorified body still detracts from the full communion of saints, yet even now the departed saints and martyrs live in such heavenly felicity that the word of the Psalmist, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity," can be applied only to that heavenly company.

*Second*, and altho in that sense it is not found on the earth, yet it is implied and does exist *in the nature of the case*; and as such it must be the object of faith. We profess to believe in the Holy Spirit, who does not live apart from the Church, but has descended in the Church and in all the members of Christ, in whom He dwells and works; which fact He seeks to bring to their individual consciousness. And since it is the essence of self-denial on the part of the saint to let the Holy Spirit work in him more and more, being only a colaborer himself, it is evident that the activity of faith must have this one result: that there is in all God's saints but one Worker, working in you and me and in all who love the appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a fact of which all are conscious, the effect of which must be the most intimate harmony of life, one growth from the same root, and a strong mutual attraction between all the members. In the one Holy Spirit the work in the souls of all must concentrate. It may not appear on the surface, but underneath the surface all these waters must flow together in the communion of saints.

*Third*, and this is verified by experience; for we clearly discover the *germ* of it in the earth. To some extent it is evident in our own intimate circle: in the reading of old books, and in the singing of old hymns; it is evident when we hear how God's work prospers or suffers in other places, in other countries, and among other nations. For, whatever the differences, this we notice, that it is the same language of love spoken at the ends of the earth; that among all men it is the same casting down and raising up of the sinner; one blessed, divine communion of which men testify in every human tongue. Yea, more, there are but few of God's children who have not at some time in their lives seen their spiritual horizon enlarged, and heard, as it were, the Song of the Lamb ascending from the ends of the earth, and unnumbered multitudes crying: "We also glory in the Love that is eternal, merciful, and divine; we also are pilgrims to Zion, the City of the Living God." This is the activity of

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faith which, escaping from the present limitations, glories in the unbounded communion of God's saints, who still bear the cross, or who already wear the crown.

**XXVI.****The Communion of Goods.**

“If we walk in the light, we have fellowship one with another.”— *1 John i. 7.*



The communion of saints is in the Light. In heaven alone, in the halls of the eternal Light, it shall shine with undimmed brightness. Even on earth its delights are known only inasmuch as the saints walk in the light.

This communion of saints is a holy confederacy; a bond of shareholders in the same holy enterprise; a partnership of all God’s children; an essential union for the enjoyment of a common good; a firm not of earth, but of heaven, in which the members have each an equal share, which is not taken from their own wealth, but bequeathed in their behalf by Another.

Do not think that this savors too much of secularism. Even the Lord Jesus compared the kingdom of heaven to a merchant, and to one who had found a treasure in the field. And our Catechism also explains the communion of saints as the possession of a *common good*, saying that it includes two things:

First, to be partakers of Christ and of all His riches and gifts.

Second, the obligation to employ these gifts for the advantage and salvation of other members.

Originally communion of saints was taken in the absolute sense of including *communion of earthly possessions*. Hence the peculiar phenomenon in Jerusalem of having all things common. They sold their possessions and they put the proceeds in the common treasury, which was in the hands of the apostles. And from this the poor and they who were formerly rich were supported. Hence there were no poor nor rich, but there was equality:

With reference to this communion of goods, opposite opinions are held. Some have taken it as an indication that all Christians ought to renounce their private possessions, and live after the manner of monks, as members of one family; while others have disapproved of it as an extravagance of Christian fanaticism. Both extremes are untenable.

It appears from Scripture that this generous and enthusiastic effort to escape from the plague of poverty was not only unprofitable to the few, but that it caused terrible suffering which extended over the whole Church. At least, in his epistles, St. Paul speaks again and again of the poverty-stricken saints of Jerusalem, who were always in need of a collection and in danger of starvation. In other places that did not have a communion of goods there was a surplus; and in Jerusalem, where on a large scale possessions had been divided, the people suffered lack. This shows convincingly that division of property, or communion of goods, is not the way ordained of God to overcome poverty or to attain a state of higher mutual prosperity. The subsequent efforts of various sects at Rome to realize a similar ideal

