

I Believe in...the Communion of Saints (Lord's Day 21 Q&A55)

Readings: Acts 2:40-47; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

In the Apostles' Creed, what do we confess?

We say, "I believe ... the communion of saints."

We usually associate the communion of saints with "warm fuzzies,"
with hand-shakes and hugs and greeters and fellowship dinners.

We tend to think of the communion of saints as dealing primarily with our relationship with one another.

That is not how the Catechism looks at the communion of saints.

When the Catechism looks at this article it first of all looks vertically.

The communion of saints says something about our relationship with God in Christ.

Then, and only then, does it also speak of our relation to each other.

Throughout history the "communion of saints" has been given three different meanings.

First, some understood it to mean "fellowship with holy persons" in a narrow sense, referring to special people such as martyrs and others known for holiness.

Second, some understood it to mean participation in the sacrament.

Third, some understood it to mean a further description of the previous phrase in the Creed, "the holy catholic church."

This third understanding is the interpretation found in the Catechism.

Q&A 54 describes the church as a certain kind of community.

A holy catholic church,

A community of those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

A people who live in faith and obedience to God.

It talks of a world-wide church that is history deep.

A community of believers.

What the concept of the communion of saints tells me is that there is no private Christianity.

Sure, your relationship with God through Jesus Christ is a personal thing, in that you have to, through faith, understand and believe it for yourself.

But when we are saved by the Lord...we are given to each other.

You cannot be a Christian without being a part of the body of Christ.

All members of the holy community 'share in Christ and all his treasures and gifts'. This means that all of us share in Christ, and share what Christ has given us...

And we can't do that in isolation from the wider community.

Communion with Christ

With the church of all ages we say "I believe ... the communion of saints."

This confession first speaks of our relation to Jesus.

Saints are not extra special, extra holy people, people with an abundance of good works they can share.

Saints are simply believers, saints are those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells.

Christ lives **in** each believer through His Spirit.

We realize that this bond which you have with Christ is not limited to just you or to me, but it is true for all of us.

Every believer has that bond with Christ, each one does.

Saints, then, are people in whom the Spirit dwells,
and so they all have a bond with Christ.

According to the Catechism, "the communion of saints" means that we who believe "share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts."

So we share "in Christ."

Or to put it another way, it means we declare ourselves to be "members" of Christ (cf Eph 5:30).

We are in Christ, of Christ, and with Christ.

We are a part of His body just as a hand or a foot is a part of our body.

Imagine that!

We are a part of the body of Christ.

He is the head, and all believers together make up the body.

This tells us of how close, how intimate, how special...

is the relationship between us and the Lord.

This tells us that somehow, in some way, Christ is incomplete without us and we are incomplete without Him.

It tells us that every single facet of our being is, or should be, affected by our union to and with Christ.

Our body, soul, emotions, psychology, hopes, and even dreams are all bound up to and with Christ.

There is no other relationship which is as close, as powerful, as the relationship between Christ and His church.

To share in Christ, to have communion with Christ,

means that we spend time with Him each and every single day.

We need to spend time reading His Word and coming to Him in prayer and worship.

For if we don't, then we really don't have communion with Him, do we?

Communion implies and requires contact...

not occasional contact, not brief contact, not "when I have time" contact.

Communion with Christ requires the habit, the custom, of daily devotions.

"The communion of saints" means that we who believe not only share in Christ but also "in all his treasures and gifts."

What are these treasures, gifts, and blessings of Christ that are ours?

Some of the blessings are described in various questions and answers of the Catechism.

Let me list some of them for you:

"I am and always will be a living member" of the holy catholic church (Q&A 54)

I am gifted for service in the church and kingdom (Q&A 55)

God "will never hold against me any of my sins nor my sinful nature" (Q&A 56)

because Christ has "paid for all my sins with his precious blood" (Q&A 1)

I am set free from the tyranny of the devil (Q&A 1)

Christ "watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head" without His will (Q&A 1)

"all things must work together for my salvation" (Q&A 1)

I am an adopted child of God – "adopted by grace through Christ" (Q&A 33)

I am set "free, body and soul, from eternal condemnation" (Q&A 37);

He freed me "from the severe judgment of God" (Q&A 38);

"He shouldered the curse which lay on me" (Q&A 39);

He has "delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell" (Q&A 44)

my old self is "crucified, put to death, and buried with him" (Q&A 43)

I have the comfort of knowing that death is not the end for me (57) because Christ "assures me of eternal life" (Q&A 1, 58)

if I die before the Lord comes again, I have the comfort of knowing that someday my body will be raised from the grave and reunited with my soul (Q&A 57)

We can also mention that Christ gives us His Father, His love, His name, His inheritance, and His glory.

Faith, hope, and love are ours in Christ.

In fact, the list of treasures, gifts, and blessings that are ours in Christ is endless.

I believe that I "share in Christ and in all his treasures and gifts."

That's the God-ward direction of the communion of saints.

Communion With Each Other

But this confession also has a man-ward direction.

It concerns itself not only with our relationship to God and His Christ, but also with our relationship to our fellow believer.

Where there is a bond with Christ, all these believers having that bond with Christ also develop a bond with each other.

That vertical bond with Christ means that there is going to be a horizontal bond with each other.

To illustrate the point, consider Acts 2.

After Pentecost we read that some 3000 came to faith in that one day.

What do these three thousand individuals do?

Verse 42, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."

These people were interested in each other.

So interested in each other that they asked about each other's well being and needs and did what they could to help each other **in** their needs.

Like what?

Well, there is verse 44.

The "believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need."

They interacted together, found out what their needs were, and if necessary put up a 'for sale' sign in front of their extra house, their extra horse, their extra chariot, sold it, in order to provide for the needs of brothers and sisters who had need.

Notice, we are talking here not of our relationship to people in general;

we are talking here only of the relationship of believer to believer.

According to the Catechism the communion of saints means

... that each member
should consider it his duty
to use his gifts
readily and cheerfully
for the service and enrichment
of the other members.

We don't live alone.

We aren't Christians alone.

We are members of one body.

We are responsible for each other.

How many ministers do we have in this congregation?

That's easy, you might say... We have one minister.

He is the guy talking right now.

Not so! Not at all!

We have one pastor or preacher and we have over 200 ministers.

You heard me right – over 200 ministers.

Because every member is a minister.

Every member has a duty to minister to the other members.

According to the Catechism, it is ministry that lies at the heart of the communion of saints.

And I need to tell you that we do this well as a congregation.

We minister to each other.

I hear stories of people cared and loved by the communion of saints...

And it warms my heart.

The "gifts" that we are to use to minister to one another include all that we have –
temporal as well as spiritual.

Temporal gifts include things like money, time, food, clothing, shelter.

Spiritual gifts are of the sort listed in the first part of 1 Corinthians 12:

wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, distinguishing spirits, tongues, interpreting tongues, apostles, helping, administration (1 Cor 12:8-10, 28-30; cf Rom 12:6-8; Eph 4:11-13).

All these gifts we are to use "readily and cheerfully."

We are not to use them "reluctantly or under compulsion" (2 Cor 9:7);

nor are we to use them out of impure motives,

as did the Pharisees who wanted the praise of men (cf Mt 6:3).

All these gifts we are to use readily and cheerfully "for the service and enrichment of the other members."

Paul says the (spiritual) gifts are given "for the common good" (1 Cor 12:7), (Eph 4:12b-13) ... so that the body of Christ may be built up (13) until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

In other words, within the communion of saints, members make it their business to serve and assist each other so that together we can better serve the Lord.

I think we all realize that our society tends to isolate people.

We live in homes with mini-blinds and curtains over the windows to insure privacy.

Many work in environments where interpersonal relationships rarely have the opportunity to develop.

We can walk through Dandenong Plaza crowded with hundreds of people...
and all of them are strangers.

We can be in a stadium with thousands of others and still be alone.

But in the church we have the opportunity to give and receive,
to nurture and to be nurtured,
to minister and to be ministered to.

Is there a place for you in the church? Yes!

Is there a job for you? Yes!

I need to emphasize that within the communion of saints **every** believer has a role to play for the common good, even those who seem insignificant and unimportant.

In fact, those who by human standards do not seem significant or important quite often have the most crucial role or task.

As Paul reminds us,

(1 Cor 12:21-22) The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" (22) On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable ...

Within the communion of saints, then, every person must help and serve each other.

That's not optional, something to take or leave;

it's a duty. God gives us gifts for this purpose.

Within the communion of saints none of us are free to "mind our own business."
Another's welfare is our concern, another's poverty is our challenge,
another's laughter is our reason for joy,
another's sin or waywardness is our burden,
and another's sorrow costs us tears.

What are your gifts? What is your area of service? How are you a minister?
How does the communion of saints comes to expression in your life?

What are the realities of our communion of saints?

First, that each of us accepts each other!

We may know each other well and be tempted to hang onto the past;

Or we don't like the way someone chooses to live or dress...so we keep our distance.

But a body can't function like that!

The eye can't say to the hand, 'I remember what you did once...so I'm going to disown you.

Jesus Christ made us all part of the one and same body...he put us together...

So we need to accept each other.

But it is more than just accepting each other...we need to, *secondly*, support each other.

To give ourselves for the benefit of others.

In Acts 2, those Christians gave of themselves for each other...

Just as Christ had given himself for them.

We also can't say, 'If I had her gifts, then I would be able to help.'

Paul says that each of us are a part of the body and each part has a vital place in the body.

So don't think about the gifts you don't have...

But use the ones you do have, for the building up of the body.

And the *third* thing that is so necessary may be the hardest, and that is: **be willing to receive help.**

Is it not so that pride gets in the way?

I will manage. If I receive help I will feel like a failure.

Does your knee say that when it itches?

Do your feet reject the help of the eye, so the feet know where to walk?

We are a body, and exactly because we are a body, we need both to **give** for the benefit of the other and to **receive** for the benefit of, not just self, but also of the other.

Conclusion

With the church of all ages, what do we confess?

We say, "I believe ... the communion of saints."

What it comes down to is this: people who have communion with the Lord Jesus also have communion with each other.

Those who share in Christ and in all His treasures and gifts also share in each other.

If, then, we are part of Christ's church, if we claim communion with Christ, then we also have communion with each other.

People who receive the ministry of Christ minister to one another.