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Liturgy and the Communion of Saints

A friend once asked me if I felt lonely in the Church. He was referring to the fact that St. John's is an "old" Prayer Book parish. My friend is the member of a large avant-garde congregation in Atlanta, where every form of the new church exists. For him, the newer liturgies, and the current "issues" of the day, are exciting and lively. The thought of a traditional church, with the old language, the old hymns, and the old morality, seemed lifeless to him, out-of-date, irrelevant, an anachronism at best, a prejudice at worst. I told him I did not feel lonely because I believe in the Communion of Saints.

That was, of course, a true albeit provocative answer. I could have told him of the number of parishes that use the "old" Prayer Book within the Diocese of Georgia, and those in other dioceses of the Episcopal Church, and those beyond, making mention of the provinces of the Anglican Communion where the 1662 Book of Common Prayer remains the doctrinal standard, while permitting other alternative service books. Many of these parishes are our fellow companions in the faith and their clergy my dearest friends.

But I chose to emphasize something else, which is the substance of our religion and the essence of the life of the Prayer Book. It is the Communion we have with all the Saints of God.

St. John speaks of this communion as a fellowship, in the Greek language, a *koinonia*. It is a word that has a wide range of meaning. It can be used simply of social conversation and political association. But it tends toward a sharing at the deepest level of human existence, and thus it is used even of sexual intimacy. For Christians, *koinonia* is a participation in the very life of God through Christ Jesus.

St. John writes, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship (*koinonia*) with us: and truly our fellowship (*koinonia*) is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ." And St. Paul, using the same word as St. John, writes, "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion (*koinonia*) of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion (*koinonia*) of the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16).

For St. Paul, this participation - fellowship - communion, in the life of God through Christ becomes deeper and more profound. Having spoken of our participation in Christ through the Blessed Sacrament, St. Paul goes on to say, "For we being many are one bread, and one

body: for we are all partakers of that one bread" (1 Corinthians 10:17). We are united in communion to God and then to one another.

The great and noble spirituality of the "old" Prayer Book is found in the depth at which this fellowship is realized. Communion is not simply a sacramental act. It is an activity of spirit, lived simultaneously in the awareness of sin and of the grace of redemption. This spiritual reality which the "old" Prayer Book provides through the language of religious poetry, the newer liturgies neglect.

For instance, it is an indubitable truth of Christian moral theology that as for ourselves - in and of ourselves - "there is no health in us." The Prayer Book declares that we have followed too much the "devices and desires of our own hearts." There is no part of human nature that is pure before God. Martin Luther understood this as bondage of the will, John Calvin as total depravity. There was Augustine's point that the soul flows out into the world in errant love, and must be gathered up to God. The newer liturgies have sought to eliminate this profound spiritual awareness. But in doing so they have lost the first moment of deep, true, repentance and conversion. Instead of nourishing the spiritual activity of our fellowship, they have diminished it.

True communion begins with this depth of the awareness of our sin, and moves from it into the height of grace. For instance, in the "Prayer of Humble Access," the older version reads "Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood..." (the words in italics are omitted in the newer liturgies). What the old includes and the new leaves out is the truth that the grace of Jesus Christ extends not just to the soul but to our polluted bodies as well. We desire to be fully clothed with the righteousness of Christ, both within and without. Do we not?

But there is no more complete picture of our redemption, and of the height of our communion, than in Cranmer's prayer of consecration. It is there that we find the "tender mercy" of God. We remember that the Father sent his only Son to die upon the cross for our redemption, and that Jesus made there on the cross a "full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world." It is here, in a way wonderful, explicit, and absolute, that we are lifted up with him on the cross, and all our heinous life put to death. It is in this prayer of consecration that we are brought into God's own redeeming fellowship. And so, partaking of Jesus' body and blood, we share with one another and with all the Saints the "innumerable benefits" of his passion and resurrection. These are the holy mysteries so well articulated in the "old" Prayer Book.

In the final analysis, the reality of liturgical communion does very much rest in the area of theological language. Only a language both theologically true and religiously poetic is suitable for the communion, the spiritual activity of mind and heart, which we have with our precious Lord. In English speaking countries, that was accomplished in substance some five hundred years ago. The "old" Prayer Book remains the most glorious form of liturgy for the Communion of Saints.

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