

Chapter 16THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

The article of our faith about “the communion of saints” considers man in an essential aspect of his nature, a being who lives in relationship, who moves within a set of collective interdependent relationships which flow from the principle of the body. Nobody begins unattached, in a state where he/she can realize him/herself and display his/her virtues. Everyone lives in a web that is a part of his very existence<sup>1</sup>. It is clear that we depend on one another. Our lives are in deep communion with each other, interwoven ones with the others through multiple interactions. Nobody lives alone.

Christianity, from its beginnings, focused on promoting unity within humanity, and this starting on the premise that everything proceeds from the same Lord, the only bread, which longs for us to be one body.

Thus, the word “communion” is one of the more profound words in the Christian tradition, it marks the Eucharistic core of the Church, and consequently makes us understand that the Church is the most intimate space of encounter between Jesus and mankind.

It’s worth noting that, when we speak of the “communion of saints” we emphasize the term “communion”, since we’ve already talked about the holiness of the Church. We mean the communion among all Christians, the brotherhood and solidarity, the communion which happens, at first, through the sacrament of baptism: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13).

Baptism – says Benedict XVI – is an event of a genuine encounter between God and man. In the mystery of Baptism, God stoops to meet us; he comes close to us and in turn brings us closer to one another. Baptism means that Jesus Christ adopts us as his brothers and sisters, welcoming us as sons and daughters into God’s family. He thus makes us one great family in the universal communion of the Church<sup>2</sup>.

A place where our bodily unity with the Lord and among ourselves is constantly taking place is at the Eucharistic celebration. The Eucharist is where the Holy Spirit transforms the offerings of bread and wine into the body of Christ, and He transforms the community into one only body, which offers itself to the Heavenly Father, in union to its head, Christ.

In fact, in the classical theology of the Church, the Eucharist has been seen not so much as the soul’s meeting with Christ, but rather as the Christians’ becoming one in the one body of the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, when we take Holy Communion, we conform to Christ, we are assimilated into Him. To be in communion with Christ is by its very nature to be in communion with one another as

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<sup>1</sup>J. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 249

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Homily*, Islinger Feld, Regensburg, 9/12/2006

<sup>3</sup> J. Ratzinger, *The Meaning of Christian Brotherhood*, 68

well. No more are we alongside one another, each for himself; rather, everyone else who goes to communion is for me, so to speak, “bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh”<sup>4</sup> (cf. Gen 2:23) because we are united in the body of Christ.

The very practical social significance of this sacramental event thereby becomes immediately clear as well. Here we are told that through this sacrament we enter, as it were, into a blood relationship with Jesus Christ, whereby blood, according to the Hebrew way of thinking, stands for “life” Thus the passage declares an interpenetration of Christ’s life with ours.<sup>5</sup> And whenever I am united to Christ, I am united to my neighbor.

It is when the Eucharist is understood in the full intimacy of the union of each individual with the Lord that it automatically becomes also a social sacrament in the highest degree<sup>6</sup>.

### *Communion as visualized in the Cross of the Apostolate*

Some of the elements that form the Cross of the Apostolate are crystal clear, they immediately transmit their meaning: so the heart takes us to the Incarnate Son of God, to Jesus in His Passover, to the Word in solidarity with a suffering humankind. The same can be said of the Dove which crowns the Cross; its meaning comes to us from scripture and the iconographic tradition of the Church; it is the Holy Spirit who bathes the heart of Christ with His light and radiates out to the suffering humankind.

Less clear is the meaning of the fire that envelops the cross or the radiant clouds that sustain it. However, in reference to the great theophanies of the Old Testament, it is not difficult to discover in the clouds and the fire the glory of God the Father, the invisible God, source of all life, the God present at life’s creation (cf. Ex 13:21; 24:17; 40:5; 1 Kg 8:11; Is 40:3-5; Jn 12:41).

And in this way we could decipher the meaning of the other elements of the cross: the crown of thorns, the spear, the small cross embedded on the heart. But another things that is not clear at first sight is its social dimension, or Mary’s image, who, however, as we already explained, by being associated to the mysteries of the Trinity and Incarnation, when she became available to God’s will, Mary disappears with God in the clouds, so she can thus participate in His Glory. In other words, the refulgence of the Trinity, which is represented in the Cross through the big frame of light, conceals Mary’s figure.

Therefore, the fact that at first sight you don’t discover the social dimension of the cross does not mean that it is not a part of it. Conchita, who had the vision, was able to contemplate, beyond what was visible, a series of characteristics encompassed in that cross:

My Cross is an unknown book... it’s a very rich mine... it’s a priceless treasure. Whoever meditates on this Cross will, each time, discover new treasures in it, and will never grasp its

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. Ratzinger, *On the Way*, 117

<sup>5</sup> Cf. J. Ratzinger, *On the Way*, 116

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. Ratzinger, *On the Way*, 118

value. There you can find everything, everything... I've seen a deep ocean trove where you can meditate all life long.<sup>7</sup>

In her writings we can find an expression which leads us the way of brotherhood; this happens when the person accomplishes becoming a living reflection of the Trinitarian cross. Concepcion utilized the expression "to be a living cross" in the sense of making flesh the Trinitarian symbolism of that cross. To be a living cross is nothing other than to identify oneself with Christ on the cross. Through symbolic language we find on the cross an invitation to join Jesus' sacrifice in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Our union with Christ on the cross envelops us in the light of God, for "God is light, and only living crosses, divinized, can become involved in Him, and among them the Cross of the Apostolate is just an image" (AC 6, 255: 11/12/1895).

We are talking about "divinized crosses", which let themselves be embraced by the light of God, that is to say, people who share the life of God, conveyed by Christ. This shared life of God is what makes us brothers and sisters of Christ, and therefore, co-heirs.

Therefore, there is the hint of a "social dimension" within the riches of the Cross; this hint comes to us from the Trinitarian mystery. Fraternal life is a manifestation and a sign of the Trinity, whose mystery is presented to the Church as model and origin of the Christian life. The early communities which struggled to live in Christ, with "one heart and mind" (Acts 4:32), is a point of reference for every community.

Fraternity buries its roots in God's fatherhood, a fatherhood through the Son which includes the fraternal unity in that same Son. In order for the Christian fraternity as such to reach its fullness, it needs to include a very profound experience of God's fatherhood and a greater experience of the union with Jesus Christ through grace.

True zeal means to love by sacrificing one self, because there cannot be true love without sacrifice. A soul who loves God, loves his/her neighbors in Him, and he/she sacrifices him/herself as much for them as much as his/her love for God is (AC 6:255-256: November 12, 1895).

### *The prayer of the brothers*

It is significant that the prayer that Christ taught his disciples begins with the words "Our-Father". In this statement the adjective "Our" is no less important than the noun "Father". Jesus did not teach us to call God "Father", but "Our Father", for the Father is God for us only so long as we are part of the community of His children. For "me" He becomes a Father only through my being in the "we" of His children. The Christian prayer to the Father "is not the call of a soul that knows nothing outside God and itself, but is bound to the community of brothers. Together with these brothers we

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. AC 3, 90; 4, 110; *Apostleship of the Cross* (Pg 40 in the Spanish edition)

make up the one Christ, in whom and through whom alone we are able to say “Father”, because only through Christ and in Christ are we His “children”<sup>8</sup>.

The profound faith in “Our Father” must transform us into a new priestly attitude towards God and towards mankind, regarded as brothers. Faced with God the attitude must be one of adoration, trust and love, in front of our brothers an attitude of solidarity that could be called “true surrender”. That is to say, to be Christian is to incorporate oneself to Christ so we become “children in the Son” What man seeks is to be in Christ, become Christ more profoundly. Accordingly, man grows into Christ the more that he becomes “man in himself” – the more that he loses himself, his own particular ego<sup>9</sup>.

Faith in Christ is joining Him on the cross, because only on the cross does He reach fullness: the place of extreme prostration is the true beginning of redemption. We must learn, and in a new way, to live the spirituality of the cross. It may seem to us perhaps too passive, too masochistic, or pessimistic, too sentimental; but if we do not practice the cross, how will we endure when the cross visits us? We need to discover again the liberating strength found in the overcoming of oneself; and how the suffering we embrace intimately transforms the human being; and how the essential growth depends not only on work but also on our sacrifice.

In the beautiful symbolism of the Cross of the Apostolate, - teaches Conchita Cabrera – the dove that hovers above the Cross not only represents the Holy Spirit inspiring Jesus’ sacrifice, but that the Holy Spirit rests on Jesus. And since not only is Cross the one erected on Calvary, but also the one which invisibly is erected in our hearts, the Spirit also rests on them, when he mystically renews Jesus’ sacrifice. And His rest is sweeter in so far as the souls penetrate more deeply into the mystery, and as they better identify themselves with the Holy Cross and they more fully bathe in its unflinching light (AC 62:314: August 31, 1934).

What we want to highlight here is the true key point: the phrase “our-Father” requires that we surrender ourselves to communion with the other children of God. It requires that we strip ourselves of what is merely our own, of what divides. It requires that we accept the others, that we open our ear and our heart to them. When we say the word *our*, we say Yes to the living Church in which the Lord wanted to gather his new family. In praying the Our Father we pray in communion with the whole family of God, with the living and the dead, with men of all conditions, cultures and races<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> J. Ratzinger, *Fraternity*, 51-52

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Brotherhood*, 54

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 141ff.

*The social projection of the community*

Seeking unity does not have the goal of creating a closed circle with its own private purpose, but of promoting service to all. The Christian community has the command of Jesus Christ to “make disciples of all the people, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:19).

To the extent that the Church keeps developing an increasing missionary urge, it will then begin to perform again, and every time with more vigor, its internal fraternity. This responds to the mission that Jesus entrusted to his disciples: “What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops” (Mt. 10:27).

We Christians cannot settle in greeting and loving our brothers, that is to say, those who have the same faith, but we need to follow the Lord’s example who performed his work of love for them who did not know him, nor loved him (cf. Rm. 5:6). And this way of gratuity follows: to love everybody that needs it without expecting a response or thanks.

To the extent that we achieve, as Church, to grow into the unity of an only community, to that same extent we must be aware of that we have the task of helping the salvation of those who do not belong to the community, not of judging them.

Therefore, to become one with Christ means to lose one’s “oneself”, to cease to regard one’s own ego as an absolute. The ethic of Christ is essentially an ethic of the body of Christ, becoming one in brotherhood with all those who are in Christ<sup>11</sup>.

Summarizing: Holy Scripture assures us that we really are the Father’s children and brothers to one another. Such conviction requires us to become more conscious of the social dimension of faith. The words of Jesus to Mary Magdalene: *tell my brothers* “I am going to my Father and your Father” (Jn. 20:17b), clearly express our fraternity with Christ. This text and others (cf. Lk. 22:31; Mt. 28:10) show that the brotherhood of the disciples to one other and to Jesus was closely linked to the fatherhood of God.

The celebration of the Eucharist is the sacrament of the fraternity and should appear as such even in its external manifestation. The Eucharist must be, in a visible way, a sacrament of fraternity so that it can show its meaning, which is none other than building community.

Very much connected to this topic of communion is the concept of “solidarity”. Solidarity means that one feels responsible for others, the healthy for the sick, the rich for the poor, the priest for his lay brothers. This makes us conscious of the mutual responsibility and that we receive to the extent that we give, and that we can only give that which has been given to us.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Brotherhood*, 54-55.