

CURRENT THEOLOGY

SAINTS AND MARTYRS: SOME CONTEMPORARY CONSIDERATIONS

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[The author looks at recent theological literature on saints and martyrs under the following rubrics: the saintly life as a theological resource, recent reflections on the communion of saints, and current reflections on martyrdom, especially martyrs in the 20th century.]

POPE JOHN PAUL II's zeal in promoting the beatification and canonization of saints is without parallel in the modern history of the Catholic Church. With well over 700 beatifications and more than 200 canonizations, the pope has exceeded all of his predecessors over the past two centuries combined. Some commentators predict that the pope will soon have beatified or canonized more persons than all previous pontiffs in the period from the 16th century when such records started being kept. There is no doubt that the papal predilection for beatifications and canonizations reflects his passion for different strategies of catechesis and evangelization as he travels the world. The pope says, in effect, that every land has produced and can produce persons who are extraordinary in holiness and moral character.¹ His visits to various parts of the world almost always provide moments to single out someone who will be, to use the traditional parlance, raised to the altars. The papal emphasis on this process has not only been the subject of comment within the Church but has also caught the sometimes bemused attention of the secular press.²

Every beatification or canonization is, of course, a political statement in

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¹ Some "uncanonized saints" are described in George H. Gallup, Jr., and Timothy Jones, *The Saints Among Us: How the Spiritually Committed Are Saving the World* (Ridgefield, Conn.: Morehouse, 1992).

² See, among many examples, the cover story "Saint Makers," *US News and World Report* (January 11, 1999) 53-60. In a few instances papal canonizations trigger outpourings of popular acclaim. According to the Catholic News Service

the sense that such public gestures of the Church desire to make plain preoccupations, emphases, and iconic representations that are part of the larger church program. It should not seem odd then that John Paul II would canonize a Polish priest martyr at Auschwitz such as the Franciscan friar Maximilian Kolbe who was conspicuous for his Marian devotion. Likewise—and this point has not been made clear in the sometimes heated discussion after the event—the papal decision to canonize Edith Stein cannot be detached from the following facts: she was an intellectual who converted from atheism; she was an academic; she was a Carmelite; and, finally, she died as a victim of Auschwitz. The fact that Edith Stein was held up as a model of someone who combined the intellectual and spiritual life that John Paul II had promoted in his encyclical *Fides et ratio* says more about papal intentions than all of the other speculation about his motivations and sensitivities. Of course, many of the other persons who have been honored fall into predictable categories: founders and foundresses of religious communities; martyrs; a number of lay persons to counterbalance the preponderance of vowed religious and clergy; and so on.

Beyond the obvious motivational factors driving the papal desire for “making saints” one might further inquire about current thinking regarding the whole issue of sainthood from a theological perspective. Framed in that sense, my present study is a continuation of the survey I published several years ago on literature about sainthood.³ This note, however, will focus more closely on theological rather than historical studies, even though a number of recent historical studies have appeared which provide context for theological reflection.⁴

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

No modern theologian has reflected more systematically on the place of saints in the study of theology than Hans Urs von Balthasar. A recent

(May 2, 1999) 300,000 persons attended the beatification of the Capuchin stigmatic Padre Pio.

³ Lawrence S. Cunningham. “A Decade of Research on the Saints: 1980–1990,” *Theological Studies* 53 (1992) 517–33.

⁴ We have a complete translation of Jacobus de Voragine’s *The Golden Legend*, trans. Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993) as well as useful anthologies such as *Sainted Women of the Dark Ages*, ed. JoAnn McNamara et al. (Durham: Duke University, 1992) and *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints’ Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University, 1995). Three interesting historical studies deserve mention: Aviad Kleinberg, *Prophets in their Own Country: Living Saints and the Making of Sainthood in the Later Middle Ages* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992); Raymond Van Dam, *Saints and Their Miracles in Late Antique Gaul* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993); and Barbara Fay Abou-El-Haj, *The Medieval Cult of Saints: Formation and Transformation* (New York: Cambridge University, 1995).

monograph on Balthasar's Christology has studied in detail how the Swiss theologian integrated a consideration of the saints into his constructive work on the mystery of Christ.⁵ The saints, Balthasar wrote, had a peculiar charism by which they were able to "reimmerse" themselves "in a 'contemporaneity' with the Gospels so as to bequeath the legacy of their intimate experience to their spiritual children."⁶ As McIntosh rightly points out, commenting on that passage and others similar to it, Balthasar insists that there is within the historical saving event(s) of the life of Jesus Christ an eternal verity that crosses time, and that verity can be made present in the act of passionate belief. This, notes McIntosh, reflects a lifetime engagement with Ignatian spirituality.⁷

The saints, then, are a living out of the gospel reality by which its inner depth becomes transparent in their life and their doctrine. From this fundamental baseline flow certain other convictions central to Balthasar's thought. His volume *A Theology of History* argued, for instance, that the great saints make the gospel real in ways pertinent to the age and culture in which they live.⁸ In that sense, the lives of the saints reveal not a new revelation but a deepening appreciation and uncovering of the essential gospel meaning of Jesus Christ, so that the saints in a conspicuous manner not only "imitate" Christ but participate (as do all Christians) in the eternal meaning of his reality.

Since the lives of the saints, by showing forth new and unexpected understandings of the gospel message, set forth new and deeper meanings of faith in Christ, they are a fit subject for theological investigation.⁹ Balthasar strenuously objects to the reduction of the saintly witness to the category of edifying or "spiritual" reading. In obedience to that principle, Balthasar himself did serious monograph-length studies not only on figures like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor, but also on less traditional figures like Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and Sister Elizabeth of the Trinity. His interest in the saints was part of his larger concern to heal the breach between spirituality and theology, a concern that he signaled early in his theological career.¹⁰

Balthasar's interest in the saints, of course, actually was a concern with

⁵ Mark McIntosh, *Christology from Within: Spirituality and the Incarnation in Hans Urs von Balthasar*. Studies in Spirituality and Theology 3 (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1996) 16–29.

⁶ *Mysterium Paschale*, trans. Aidan Nichols (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990) 38.

⁷ *Christology from Within* 23.

⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

⁹ This is also the burden of the essay of Karl Rahner, "The Church of the Saints," in *Theological Investigations* 3, trans. Karl and Boniface Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 91–105.

¹⁰ "Theologie und Spiritualität," *Gregorianum* 50 (1969) 571–87; also "Theology and Sanctity," *Exploration in Theology* 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989).

a certain kind of saint, one whose life and “doctrine” are available for study, investigation, and reflection. He presupposed a saint who is somehow recoverable in history and about whom we can say something with assurance. His understanding of saints (at least from the perspective of his theological project) did not include those figures (ranging from some of the apostles to some of the figures in the hagiographical sources) about whom we can say nothing with any confidence. That simple fact merely underscores the wide range of meanings included in the word “saint,” which can refer to figures of hagiographical embroidery or to one’s own sainted grandmother. In fact, the very task of defining the meaning of the word saint is in itself rather thorny.¹¹

Elizabeth Johnson’s recent study of the communion of saints neatly sidesteps this problem of definition. In her Introduction she states that her understanding of “saints” is not restricted to those “paradigmatic figures, those outstanding individual figures traditionally called ‘saints.’” Nor, she goes on to say, is her classification of the saint restricted to those who are dead (indeed, her primary referent is to the living).¹² What Johnson wishes to avoid is that socially constructed hierarchical understanding of the communion of saints as a three-tiered cosmos—involving the saints triumphant in heaven, the saints militant on earth, and the saints suffering in purgatory—so beloved in the past of muralists and painters of large panels. Finally, she wishes to prod theologians and others to take seriously the tradition of the saints as a rich resource for Christian living.¹³

The broad definition Johnson employs allows her to revision the doctrine of the communion of saints within the framework of feminist theology and, further, with a quite precise intentionality and audience in mind, namely, “to interpret the symbol in such a way that it will serve the practical and spiritual well being of all women, releasing redemptive possibilities of life.”¹⁴ The word “all” is important here, since Johnson is acutely aware of how many women find themselves alienated from the concept of the communion of saints. Johnson herself is at pains throughout her work to distance herself from any social structured concept (what she calls the

¹¹ Some details about studies devoted to this issue are found in my “A Decade of Research” 518–25.

¹² Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998) 2–3. For a brief summary of Johnson’s main argument, see her “A Community of Holy People in a Sacred World,” *New Theology Review* 12 (May, 1999) 17–26.

¹³ Johnson is not alone in her sadness at the lack of interest in the saints. From a liturgical perspective, see the analysis and suggestions in Richard Mazziotta’s “When the Saints Went Marching Out: Re-Imagining Holiness Two Decades Later,” *Commonweal* 119 (October 23, 1992) 14–16. For an ecumenical perspective, see *The Communion of Saints*, ed. Horton Davies (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

¹⁴ *Friends of God* 40.

“patronage model”) of the communion of saints. The phrase “all women,” one presumes, does not mean women to the exclusion of men.¹⁵

In the second part of her study Johnson surveys the long development of the doctrine of the “communion of saints,” noting how complex that development was over the course of time. Her own desire is to revision the communion of saints as an exigent reality, a community in which forgotten stories are told, hope engendered, solidarity enhanced, and, as the title of her book indicates, the communion of friends of God and prophets is celebrated. That title permits Johnson to see the communion of saints in a fashion that is all embracing and more than ecumenical and interreligious in its scope.

Johnson comments that she wrote her book to recover the saints and the communion of saints from the neglect that they have suffered in the contemporary period despite the flurry of “saint making” activity in the papacy of John Paul II. Her program is to reimagine the whole issue of sainthood and the communion of saints in a contemporary perspective. This approach, of necessity, must bracket the experience of many people who still find solace, for better or worse, in the traditional cult of the saints. The end result of her book is a suggested praxis for liturgical and nonliturgical celebrations in honor of the men and women who stand as prophetic witnesses and as “friends of God” in the contemporary world.

Although Rose Hoover’s essay on the communion of the saints does not reflect Johnson’s strongly feminist orientation, Hoover does make one point with which Johnson might agree.¹⁶ Starting from Paul’s still startling affirmation that the “whole of creation has been groaning in travail together until now” (Romans 8:22), she links together the messianic hope of a renewed creation, promised through the resurrection, to the fact that this new era is already inaugurated. She then singles out figures who have incarnated the faith in a harmonious life lived for God with others and creation itself. She cites the paradigmatic case of Saint Francis of Assisi, but even more tellingly she calls on the Ignatian “Contemplation to Obtain the Love of God.” Ignatius Loyola there reminded believers how God dwells in creatures, which he goes on to specify as elements, plants, animals, and finally, human beings created in the image and likeness of God. She wisely notes that for Ignatius this is not simply a matter of reflection but of wonderment (*mirar como Dios habita en las criaturas*) at the sacramental world in which we dwell.¹⁷ Hoover’s vision of the communion of

¹⁵ Johnson says explicitly that the communion of saints “embraces all men and women who hear Holy Wisdom’s call” (*Friends of God* 220).

¹⁶ Rose Hoover, “The Communion of Saints: Lest the Journey Be Too Long,” *The Way* 30 (1990) 216–30.

¹⁷ The Ignatian citations are from Hoover, “The Communion of Saints” 223. For

saints is a holistic one: it embraces the past energized by the resurrection, made explicit through the witness of the saints, and pointing eschatologically toward the future. The communion of saints, in short, provides solidarity in the present and hope projected for the future. Hoover's large plan is for Christians to stand in solidarity with those who help us remember that it is within the sacred arena of a graceful and God-given creation that we join together in the communion of saints.

Elizabeth Koenig's recent essay on the communion of saints¹⁸ is not as expansive in scope as Hoover's, since she concentrates her energies on communion with those whom we have already named as fellow members of the faith. Koenig remarks that our common activities of prayer, worship, and service are not meant to be opportunities to transcend the materiality of our existence; we transcend *distraction*, which is to say (bringing Ignatian language to bear) that we imagine in tandem with the gospel narrative the paschal mystery of the life, death, and Resurrection of Christ.

In order to pray free from distraction we must learn to let go of the isolation of our own self (no matter how much we affirm solidarity with our tongue) in order to "keep company" with Jesus who himself prays as well as with others who pray in his name or after his example. In other words, our prayer "should ground us, make us more incarnate, as the praying of Jesus did."¹⁹ The burden of Koenig's argument, in short, is to ground the life of prayer as an individual experience which is always, of necessity, a shared experience that looks back to the company of saints, keeps fresh through the metahistorical reality of the prayer of Jesus, while it remains pertinent to our own obligation to be in communion with those who are around us.

MARTYRS

Another topic concerning the saints which has received a good deal of attention in these days is martyrdom. Martyrdom, after all, was one of the dynamic features of the growth of the early Church.²⁰ Contemporary interest in this topic has the endorsement and personal interest of Rome. As part of the papal plans for the millennial celebrations adumbrated in *Tertio millennio adveniente* Pope John Paul II has asked for the compilation of a

another ecological perspective, see Thomas F. McKenna, "Saints and Ecology," *New Theology Review* 7 (August, 1994) 47-60.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Koenig, "Keeping Company with Jesus and the Saints." *Theology Today* 56 (April, 1999) 18-28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 27.

²⁰ Recent historical studies to be noted include the essays in *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, ed. Diana Wood (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), and G. W. Bowersock's *Martyrdom and Rome* (New York: Cambridge University, 1995).

modern martyrology, listing as far as possible all those who have died in this century because of their faith. Readers will also remember that a theology of martyrdom was part and parcel of the spiritual reflections of the papal encyclical *Veritatis splendor*.

In *Veritatis splendor* the pope argued that the tradition of martyrdom in the Church is one way to understand the solemn obligation to avoid any action which is intrinsically evil, since the martyr is one whose "fidelity to God's holy law, witnessed to by death, is a solemn proclamation and missionary commitment *usque ad sanguinem*."²¹ The encyclical goes on to say in the same section that while martyrdom represents the high point of moral truth, all Christians must be ready to be consistent witnesses even "at the cost of suffering and grave sacrifice." In other words, John Paul extends the notion of martyrdom in this instance to include those public acts of witness by which Christians stand against the countervailing forces of culture.²²

This concept of the martyr as witness helps explain why the pope, in a rather unprecedented ecumenical gesture, wishes to compile a modern martyrology which will include not only Catholic but Orthodox and Protestant martyrs who lived in this century and died in defense of their faith. Beyond those famous figures who are now part of our common Christian memory, the number of those who died only because of *odium fidei* is staggering. Beyond those who perished under the hand of totalitarian regimes in the past, the present day brings us frequent stories of Christians being killed in various parts of the world from Indonesia and India to parts of Africa and China.

In *Tertio millennio adveniente* the pope cites a number of reasons why a modern martyrology is desirable and indeed required. He says that the Church at the end of the second millennium has been, like the Church in its beginnings, a Church of martyrs; the contemporary fact of martyrdom is the "common inheritance" of Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans, and Protestants.²³ Second, in imitation of the early Church, these witnesses must not be forgotten, even those who are "nameless." Finally, undertaking the task of a new martyrology is a convincing form of ecumenism, since it illustrates

²¹ I cite the translation in *Origins* 23 (October 14, 1993).

²² Alvaro de Silva pursues this theme albeit in a somewhat hortatory fashion ("Martyrdom and Christian Morality," *Communio* 21 [Summer, 1994] 286-97).

²³ The ecumenical side of the veneration of saints has been contextualized in Susan Rabe, "Veneration of the Saints in Western Christianity: An Ecumenical Issue in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 28 (Winter, 1991) 39-62. *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary*, Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue 8, ed. H. George Anderson et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) has important historical and theological essays.

the "ecumenism of the saints." The pope then adds that this "*communio sanctorum* speaks louder than the things which divide us."²⁴

The papal emphasis as well as current reports about the persecution of Christians should trigger more reflections on the theological character of martyrdom. One already notes in the literature attempts to provide theological reflections on martyrdom.²⁵ A good framework for such reflection can be found in the essay on martyrdom by Rino Fischella.²⁶ Fischella emphasizes that martyrdom is an expressive language. It demonstrates the power of choosing to be faithful to the gospel and it makes a prophetic judgment against any culture which professes an *odium fidei*. The language of the martyr says something very profound about three fundamental issues: one's sense of what it means to be a human being, liberty in the face of death, and the prospect of eternal life. Those issues point to a greater truth, the love by which one gives up one's life for another person (John 15:13).²⁷

Fischella broadens this vision of martyrdom by noting how *Lumen gentium* situates martyrdom under its broad consideration of the universal call to holiness. In *Lumen gentium* no. 42 martyrdom finds its deepest meaning within the ecclesial tradition and, more profoundly, in the mystery of Christ. The martyr is a disciple "transformed into an image of the Master who freely accepted death on behalf of the world's salvation." The martyr, in the sense made explicit by Nicholas Lash, "performs" and "reenacts" the Word of God by imitating the example of Christ even unto death.²⁸ In that sense one could say that the martyr (and the saint, more broadly conceived) exegetes the Word of God, not by reflection but by action.

As we begin to anticipate life in the new millennium, the pope draws our attention to the those conspicuous persons who gave up everything including their lives for the sake of the faith. To do honor to their memories it is imperative that their stories not be lost. Hence, the first task of the Christian tradition is to tell their story.²⁹ The second task, one especially incumbent on the theologian, is to reflect on the meaning of their witness as a

²⁴ *Tertio millennio adveniente* no. 37.

²⁵ Alvaro de Silva, "Martyrdom and Christian Morality" 286–97; Michael Figura, "Martyrdom and the Following of Jesus," *Communio* 23 (Spring, 1996) 101–9.

²⁶ "Martyrdom," in *The Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, ed. Rino Fischella and René Latourelle (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

²⁷ The "sign value" of the saint is discussed by Robert L. Wilken, "The Lives of the Saints and the Pursuit of Virtue," *First Things* 8 (December, 1990) 45–51.

²⁸ Nicholas Lash. "What Might Martyrdom Mean?" in *Suffering and Martyrdom in the New Testament*, ed. William Horbury and Brian McNeil (New York: Cambridge University, 1981) 183–198.

²⁹ Some recent attempts would include: Diana Dewar, *All for Christ: Some Twentieth Century Martyrs* (New York: Oxford University, 1980); James and Marti He-

resource for a faith that seeks understanding. We must grasp the whole spectrum of meanings embedded in sainthood, martyrdom, and canonization, in order to do justice to the cloud of witnesses (Hebrews 12:1) who are with us in our tradition and in our contemporary experience.³⁰

fley, *By Their Blood: Christian Martyrs in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996); *Martyrs: Contemporary Writers on Modern Lives of Faith*, ed. Susan Bergman (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).

³⁰ The canonization of Edith Stein has brought all of these questions into sharp focus as attested by the essays collected in *Never Forget: Christian and Jewish Perspectives on Edith Stein*, ed. Waltraud Herbstein, O.C.D. (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1998). Furthermore, the many martyrs in Central and South America present a rather poignant case in that many of them died at the hands of people who saw themselves as "good" persons living in culturally Catholic countries; see: Javier Limon's "Suffering, Death, Cross, and Martyrdom," in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 702-15, esp. 714.

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