

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

The Communion of Saints and Ancestor Veneration:
A Study of the Concept "Communion of Saints"
with special reference to the Southern African
Religious Experience

A Thesis Submitted
In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of Religion

By

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LUKE LUSCOMBE LUNGILE PATO

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the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface	i
Introduction	1
Chapter One:	
Sanctorum Communio in Historical Perspective	4
Chapter Two:	
The Synthetic Approach to the Sanctorum Communio	18
Chapter Three:	
Prayers for the Departed and Invocation of Saints	41
Chapter Four:	
Communication with the Dead: Worship or Veneration	73
Chapter Five:	
Sanctorum Communio in African Religious Experience	89
Footnotes:	
Introduction	103
Chapter One	104
Chapter Two	108
Chapter Three	113
Chapter Four	121
Chapter Five	125
Bibliography	127

PREFACE

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INTRODUCTION

It was about a decade ago when I first read the study by G. C. Dosthuizen entitled, Post-Christianity in Africa. My first impressions were that the author had failed to appreciate the predicament of the Church in Africa. My impressions were soon changed, however, when I came to his admission that the basic problem of the Church in Africa is the Church herself, for "in so many ways it is unrelated to Africa."¹ Today that out-cry is more true than ever before.

Yet today many black African Christians have come to realize the apparent foreignness of the Church in Africa and hence the need for the Church to adapt herself to the African environment and to speak to the Africans in the language they will best understand. Among other things, this realization involves an acknowledgement of the fact that there is a whole heritage in the non-Christian African culture with which the Church and its leaders must consciously attempt to come to terms.

It must be emphasized, however, that such adaptation ought not to involve an attempt to preserve everything in the traditional religion and culture of the people simply because it is theirs. The Scriptures must remain the normative focal point and must be presented in their full splendour. The Gospel must always be seen

as a message of salvation from God Himself, and therefore must give direction for a way of life which the people can live while remaining authentic citizens of their own nations.

This thesis is an attempt to find a way towards the positive solution of the so-called "ancestor worship" and that in a manner which will make Christianity immediately relevant to the African environment. It is to be noted that since the coming of Christianity to Southern Africa, the concern of the black African Christians with their dead ancestors was given the name of "ancestor worship" and treated as participation in idolatry. Accordingly, the African Christians were forbidden to continue the practices which spring from the ideas they hold about their deceased ancestors. At the same time it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the concern with the ancestors is still a vital part of the lives of most African Christians.

Now, it is our considered contention in this thesis that the idea of the "ancestor worship" is actually very similar to the Christian concept of the communion of saints. Both concepts serve to describe the relations between the living and the departed. Of course, this requires a proper understanding of both the communion of saints and the "ancestor worship".

In order to achieve this understanding in some depth, this project is undertaken on a limited scale in regard to the Roman Catholic and Anglican understanding of the communion of saints on the one hand, and to the tradition of the Xhosa-speaking people of South Africa² on the other. It may be noted that the author is an

Anglican priest who belongs to the Xhosa-speaking people. Occasional references are also made to some of the significant positions both in the Protestant and other African societies.

The first two chapters interpret the different meanings given to the phrase sanctorum communio. We have adopted a historical approach with special attention to relevant doctrinal matters.

The third chapter examines the modes of expression of the communion of saints and notes the inherent dangers of idolatry.

The fourth chapter delineates the Xhosa custom of the so-called "ancestor worship", assessing its significance in the life of the people, and showing why the Xhosa people have resisted the rejection of their concern with their dead ancestors.

The final chapter articulates the concept of the communion of saints in African religious experience, inquiring whether the fellowship of the communion of saints ought to be limited to the Christian dead, and noting that the idea of the "ancestor worship" can make an authentic contribution to the believers' relationship to Christ.

CHAPTER ONE

Sanctorum Communio in Historical Perspective

A. Preliminary Remarks.

The Apostles' Creed in its present form conventionally labelled T,¹ is an expanded version of the many variants of the old Roman baptismal confessions labelled R.² In the process of R's development into T, certain additions were inserted. Among them was the expression "sanctorum communio", translated in the English version as the "communion of saints". Theologians generally agree that this expression was the latest of the additions made to T.³ As may be seen from the variations of this phrase, the precise meaning was not yet fully specified by the churchmen who inserted it into the creed. Consequently, so much uncertainty and speculation surrounds this addition that it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the dispute over the precise meaning of the words "sanctorum" and "communio" has hindered the development of the doctrine of the communion of saints.

The problem, of course, is intensified by the fact that both in the Greek and Latin versions, the substantively used adjective "saints", according to gender, could be either masculine or neuter--and hence permits two interpretations. When taken as a neuter, the word "saints" (sanctorum) could refer to "holy things", especially the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. As a masculine "sanctorum"

could refer to "holy persons", namely, "saints". In Christian language, however, the word "saints" has a two-fold meaning. It could mean the holy ones of special sanctity or Christians generally. These possibilities in the translation of "sanctorum" prevent any attempts to attach a fixed meaning to this clause.

However, those who take sanctorum as a masculine interpret the phrase as either "fellowship of holy persons" both living and departed,⁴ or "fellowship of holy persons" with exclusive emphasis upon the living.⁵ But, as will be seen in the course of this discussion, there is yet another interpretation which tends to confine "fellowship of holy persons" to the saints who have received special honours.⁶ At the same time, those who take sanctorum as a neuter, interpret the clause as "participation in holy things".⁷

Of these two traditional schools of interpretation, both claim originality in regard to the meaning of the sanctorum communio. Here great caution is certainly in order, since a problem like this cannot be definitively solved, as there is very little evidence to go upon and the arguments are fairly evenly balanced. Without a doubt it is on account of some such considerations that yet another school of interpretation has emerged.⁸ Here the double meaning of sanctorum is retained and its two genders are explained as belonging inalienably together. That is, the phrase is interpreted as a 'fellowship of holy persons through participation in holy things'. This interpretation does not altogether settle the exegetical problems which have been already mentioned. Nevertheless, it goes beyond linguistic dispute over the original meaning to the very foundations

of the communion of saints.

Now in such a difficult situation our purpose is not only to find out the basis on which each approach relies, but also to determine the central meaning that each view attaches to the clause. In order to accomplish this, we have focussed our attention on three basic questions, viz, (1) when and where was the addition made to the creed; (2) what was originally the precise meaning of the terms "sancti" and "communio" and; (3) what were the motives which led to the making of the addition. Obviously, these three questions are intimately connected with each other. The answer to the last two follows from the reply given to the first; at the same time the last two cannot be answered except in conjunction with one another.

B. The Personal View

(1) Provenance.

The basic argument of the school of interpretation which attaches a personal meaning to the communion of saints rests on the observation that the clause cannot be found outside the creedal setting and outside Gaul but is encountered only in the literature current in the Gallic church of the fourth and fifth centuries.⁹ In other words, before the end of the fourth century this clause did not appear in any creedal settings.¹⁰ Most important, this addition could not be found in any of the Eastern creeds prior to its appearance in the Gallican church confessions.¹¹ Accordingly, it was argued that the meaning of the communion of saints ought to be sought in the literature of Gaul.

The first witness to whom appeal is made is Faustus, Bishop of Riez in the south of France between 449 and 462. In the work attributed to him De Spirito Sancto, Faustus speaks of the words "sanctorum communionem" as occurring immediately after "sanctam ecclesiam".¹² Also, in another work attributed to him, Tractatus De Symbolo, Faustus makes a similar point. Caesarius, Bishop of Arles between 470 and 542, likewise mentions this phrase as part of the creed.¹³ Outside Gaul the addition is commented upon by Nicetas of Remesiana.¹⁴ But it is a matter of controversy from where or from whom Nicetas derived the clause. Harnack contends that Nicetas obtained the idea from St Cyril of Jerusalem.¹⁵ This theory, however, has not met with subsequent approval. Several theologians¹⁶ have argued that it is highly unlikely that St Cyril could have successfully induced Nicetas and the West to adopt the clause, without the same influence having a similar effect on the creeds of Jerusalem or on the rest of the Eastern churches. Furthermore, J.N.D. Kelly has argued that "there is nothing to indicate that St Cyril of Jerusalem had any knowledge of Communion of Saints," and that "the passages Harnack cited . . . in support of his theory are altogether too vague."¹⁷ Most likely then the evidence would seem to favour the view that Nicetas actually borrowed the phrase from a creed he found in the Gallic church. However, according to yet another suggestion,¹⁸ the words as they were commented upon by Nicetas had first appeared in a creed attributed to St Jerome who in turn was influenced by St Cyprian's idea of the "malorum communitio". From the creed attributed to St Jerome the

phrase eventually found its way to the West from where it was obtained by Nicetas. This theory, as may well be expected, has not received universal approval by the theologians who attribute the origins of this clause to Southern Gaul. Their argument is that, before the end of the fourth century, there is no baptismal confession from the East which would contain the phrase sanctorum communicio, i.e., *κοινωνία τῶν ἁγίων*. Furthermore there is no proof that sanctorum communicio is the translation of the Greek original, for the simple reason that the existence of the original has not been found.¹⁹ In short, these considerations force us to abandon any reliance upon the analogies that could be drawn from the Greek usage of the terms "sanctorum" and "communicio". Consequently the safest approach is to look for the meaning in the writings of the Latin, i.e., Western church. Without a doubt this is the most plausible general approach to the origins of sanctorum communicio. One must note with some amazement that Theodor Zahn and F.J. Badcock, who contend that (1) sanctorum communicio is the translation of the Greek concept *κοινωνία τῶν ἁγίων* and that (2) the concept came from the East to the West, simply do not consider the alternative, viz., that the movement could have been the other way round. Moreover, they rely too much upon the meaning of the terms "sanctorum" and "communicio" prior to their creedal combination and use. Accordingly, they assume that what ought to have been the meaning of these terms supplies the key to what was actually meant in the creed. Therefore, the approach which deduces the meaning of this clause from the literature in the West, appears more appropriate.

(2) The Meaning and Purpose of the Clause.

Because the theologians in favour of the personal meaning of "sanctorum communio" agree that the roots of the communion of saints are to be sought in Southern Gaul rather than in the Greek-speaking environment, they derive the meaning of the phrase from the sources current in Gaul beginning with the fourth century. With the exception of sermon 241 falsely ascribed to St Augustine, all other known sources interpret the communion of saints in a personal sense. And even sermon 241 may be understood as interpreting the sanctorum communio in a personal sense.²⁰ The key passage from this sermon is:

Since, therefore, you believe in the holy, universal church, having the sanctorum communio, for where there is holy faith, there is also holy communion, it is necessary for you to believe also in the resurrection²¹ of the body and the forgiveness of sins.

In this passage the actual meaning of the sanctorum communio is ambiguous. For, in the first place, the author identifies "sanctorum communio" with the "holy, universal church". But in the second part the clause is identified with the "holy communion" and the "forgiveness of sins"--a clear reference to the sacraments. Consequently, Zahn has suggested that "sanctorum" as used in this passage is in the neuter gender and therefore refers to the sacraments, especially the Lord's Supper.²² According to Zahn the preacher understood sanctorum communio as the participation in the holy gifts offered in the sacraments.²³ Such is not, however, the case according to Kelly:

What he [i.e. the preacher] is saying is that because we believe in the holy Catholic church, and because faith brings holy fellowship, we therefore enjoy the fellowship of saints, and so ought to believe in the resurrection and the remission of sins even while we are in the body.²⁴

Kelly obviously stresses the personal meaning of this clause.

This, we contend, is a clear case of the ambiguous nature of the sanctorum communio. And so, even if Kelly's explanation is correct, we ought to realize that the sacramental meaning is not altogether impossible. For if the "fellowship of saints" is brought about by "faith" as well as by things holy (sancta), then both the neuter and masculine meaning of "sanctorum" contribute to the bringing to light the complete meaning of the Communion of Saints.

However, clear evidence of a personal meaning is furnished by a commentary attributed to Nicetas:²⁴

After the confession of the blessed Trinity you profess that you believe in the holy, universal Church. What else is the Church but the congregation of all saints? From the beginning of the world, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the prophets; the apostles; the martyrs; and the other first who were and are and will be, are one Church, because sanctified by one faith and conversation, signed by one Spirit, they are made into one body; the head of which is Christ, as it is written. I go even further. The angels, the virtues, and the powers from above are included in this one Church, for in Christ all things were reconciled, not only those on earth but also those in heaven (Col. 1:20) as the apostle teaches. Therefore, in this Church believe yourself to be gathered into the communio sanctorum. You know that this is the universal church, which is constituted all over²⁵ the world, the communion of which you must firmly retain.

First of all we may draw attention to the fact that Nicetas joins the words "sanctorum communio" to the preceding article, "the universal church", and thus regards it as a definition of the Church.

Accordingly the Church is an institution made up of holy persons. The Church is "the congregation of all the saints", past, present and future--indiscriminately! Obviously, Nicetas uses the word "saints" in the scriptural sense as a synonym for "Christians" in general.²⁶ Moreover, for him the communion of saints embraces not only the living Christians but also the dead as well as those who will be the members of the Church in the future. Thus "Communio" for him represents the "relationship" in which the members of the Church, the Body of Christ, stand to each other. "Communio" then constitutes the inmost essence of the Church. (Yet while clear, this explanation is not without some difficulties.)

It has been noted that Nicetas' explanation appears also to point to the ultimate fellowship of the saints which is anticipated and partly realized in the fellowship of the Church universal.²⁷ In this sense his explanation has adopted a specifically eschatological position, for he calls the existing church not only an assembly of saints, but also one which will attain the fullness of fellowship in the future. In this regard Benko feels that Nicetas' reference to the future contradicts the concepts of "fellowship" and "sainthood". According to Benko, there is no need for an eschatological hope if the Church is already made up of "saints" and enjoys the "fellowship" of saints.²⁸ Benko's criticism, however, is not completely convincing. Nicetas' position is clearly scriptural. Nicetas views holiness and fellowship not as possessions of the members of the Church, but as qualities of life to be appropriated in the ongoing life of the Church.

Another important source to which appeal is often made in support of the personal meaning of the "Sanctorum Communio" is a passage from a homily attributed to Faustus of Riez:

Let us believe in the communio sanctorum, not as though they shared the prerogatives of God, but for the honour of God: let us do homage to the fear and love of God manifested in them; they are worthy of our veneration, inasmuch as by their contempt for death they induce in us a spirit of devotion to God and of eager longing for the life to come.²⁹

Faustus here speaks of the communion of saints as he is expressing the honour due to these holy dead, probably the martyrs and other departed Christians of special sanctity. Accordingly "communio" is the relationship in which the departed saints of special honour stand to each other. It is indeed strange that Faustus appears to narrow down the meaning of the word "saints" by confining it to the technical modern acceptance of the word. Some writers have found a rationale for this by claiming that Faustus used the expression "communion of saints" against the supporters of Vigilantius who condemned the veneration of saints.³⁰ In this way Faustus was trying to defend as well as to control and to guide the growing cult of the martyrs.³¹ This notion appears clearly in another text ascribed to Faustus:

It follows: that we pass over to sanctorum communio. This sentence in the creed puts to shame those who blasphemously deny that the ashes of the saints are to be held in honour--who do not hold that the glorious memory of the blessed martyrs is to be venerated by doing honour to their shrines. Such persons sin³² against their creed and have lied to Christ at the font.

In this statement polemical considerations appear to predominate. Some critics, however, feel that if the purpose of the addition was to emphasize the legitimacy of the cult of the saints, a less ambiguous formula would have been selected, especially since during the fifth century the word "saints" already had different meanings.³³ This argument is, indeed, plausible. Nevertheless, even if the purpose of the insertion into the creed was motivated by polemical considerations, the truth contained in the suggestion ought not to be ignored. First, from the way Nicetas spoke about the phrase we have observed that it enjoyed a wide interpretation and was not necessarily polemical. That is to say, according to Nicetas the word "saints" included the living believers as well as the departed saints and martyrs. Thus it could well be that Faustus was trying to keep within common-sense bounds a popular enthusiasm for the fellowship with the departed saints. Perhaps Faustus never intended to preserve the word "saints" exclusively for the departed. His main objective could have been to clarify the practice of the veneration of saints in relation to the worship of God. Similar views can be found, for instance, in sermon 242 falsely attributed to Augustine:

Communion of Saints: that is, we are bound with fellowship and the communion of hope with those saints who have³⁴ passed away in this faith which we have embraced.

This passage pinpoints our problem as it shows that the living have a "fellowship" and a "communion of hope" with all the departed saints (i.e. Christians), by virtue of faith which all have embraced.

And so, although it should be admitted that this passage is not explicitly polemical, it seems to be concerned with the relation of the living to the departed Christians.³⁵

As might have been expected, Faustus' explanation has not passed without some criticism. Swete regards Faustus' view as an "after-thought" and comments: "the interpretation which Faustus and his age assigned to the Communion of saints erred by excluding the living, not by including the dead."³⁶ In other words, Swete understood the "communion of saints" to be the fellowship of holy persons, living or departed.

In short, the central issue in regard to the personal meaning of sanctorum communio is whether the word "saints" embraces both the living and the departed or refers exclusively to the departed. Most critics think that sanctorum communio refers to the Christians of all ages in general³⁷ and regard Faustus' interpretation as an after-thought.³⁸ A few interpreters state that Faustus and Nicetas are in essential agreement,³⁹ since in the earlier period the only meaning assigned to the phrase was 'fellowship of saints, living or departed'.

Now we must turn to the consideration of the views of the other school of interpretation which attaches an impersonal meaning to sanctorum communio.

C. The Sacramental View

While many scholars have done research on the sacramental meaning of the Communion of Saints, and several have contributed

valuable insights (notably Badcock and Zahn), none have contributed as much as Stephen Benko. In this section we shall pay very close attention to the work of Benko, at the same time also consulting other interpreters.

Part one of Benko's book deals with 'The Development of the clause Sanctorum Communio in the History of Doctrine'. Here Benko is specifically concerned with the development of the baptismal creed in the ancient church. He notes: "the third article [of the creed] developed out of the confession of Christ which emphasized the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection which were imparted through baptism."⁴⁰ That is, baptism was initially regarded as imparting both the forgiveness of sins and the benefits of Christ, eventually culminating in the resurrection. In the period from Cyprian to Ambrose, however, a crisis occurred when the idea of baptism as the means of conveying the death and resurrection of Christ could no longer be reconciled with the growing need for penance after baptism.⁴¹ According to Benko, Cyprian then took a decisive step: he pointed to the Eucharist as a means of establishing communion with Christ!⁴² The resulting tension was ultimately resolved through a theological compromise, viz. the two sacrament doctrines of St. Ambrose and St. Augustine.⁴³ St. Augustine, observes Benko, recognised both Baptism and the Eucharist as means of personal salvation which incorporate and preserve the believer in the Body of Christ. Benko claims that St. Augustine formulated this idea through his concept of the "communio sacramentorum".⁴⁴ This concept expressed what had been sought

after for a long time, namely the belief that there are two sacraments which effect the forgiveness of sins.⁴⁵ In the Creed "sanctorum communio"⁴⁶ was used instead of "sacramentorum communio", because sancta is a shorter term and stylistically more suitable than sacramenta. Moreover, because both Baptism and the Eucharist, as sacraments, were described as sancta, the expression could not have been misunderstood.⁴⁷

Benko is prepared to summarize the findings of his detailed research as follows: "the expression sanctorum communio in the creed is the result of the protracted struggles connected with the doctrine of the forgiveness of sins. It expresses the belief that the remission of sins is granted through participation in the Eucharist, as well as by Baptism."⁴⁸ Accordingly Communion of Saints means participation in holy things.

Regarding the provenance of the phrase, Benko emphasizes the distinction between the idea and the form of its expression.⁴⁹ As for the idea of sanctorum communio Benko finds its origin in the East, specifically in the formula Ἐν βάπτισμα εἰς ἀφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν. At the same time Benko views the form of the expression as a product of the West. Contrary to Zahn⁵⁰ and Badcock⁵¹ who claim that sanctorum communio is the Western equivalent of the Eastern expression κοινωνία τῶν ἁγίων which unquestionably refers to the sacraments, Benko is of the conviction that this cannot be proven.⁵² Benko points out that this expression did not exist in the creeds of the East. He also notes that most of the creeds do not contain any statements that could be seen as synonyms with Communion of

Saints.⁵³

Although such observations may be very helpful in solving the exegetical problems centred around the phrase sanctorum communio, they do not offer a completely satisfying explanation. Namely, although stressing the common sharing of things (sancta) in the communion, Benko does not sufficiently consider the persons who do this sharing and thereby constitute the Communion of Saints. It is therefore at this point that we shall turn to the next viewpoint which, although it does not settle the exegetical problems of this clause, nevertheless provides a useful basis for the development of this doctrine.