

A Constructive Lutheran Theology of the Saints

Robert W. Bertram

[Address at the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA, Burlingame, California, February, 1986. Later published in Dialog, vol. 31, No. 4, pp. 265-271. Reprinted with permission]

ABSTRACT

A positive [Lutheran] theology of the saints needs to address the Reformers' concern about the practice of invocation of the saints interfering with the sole mediatorship of Christ. At issue is how merit is communicated from Christ. The Catechisms' answer is "through the communion of saints" as the believing community communicates Word and sacraments through the sanctifying work of the Holying Spirit. The response of faith appropriates the benefits of the Spirit's hallowing within the living community of saints of the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Sinners are thus "sainted" as their faith, fragmentary though it is, counts as Christ's whole righteousness. The temptation has been to re-emphasize the subject of the holying process, the Holy Spirit, to the demotion of God's address through the Spirit's spokespersons in the church's "Predigtamt" or preaching office of the Gospel. Yet, distinct from prayer (our address to God), proclamation (God's address to us) in the living communion of saints received by faith "salvations" us. Even honoring the departed saints for their example can be part of the community of saints' proclamation of the Gospel. (Stephen C. Krueger)

Beyond What-Ifs

1. The assignment calls for “a positive [Lutheran] theology of the saints.”¹ It is to be positive, that is, in the sense of complementing the Augsburg Confession’s largely negative warning against invoking saints. When that warning was quickly rejected at the Diet of Augsburg by the Pontifical Confutation (1530) and instead the practice of invocation was officially insisted upon and in danger of being enforced, Melancthon responded in his Apology by escalating his earlier warning into a frontal polemic, in effect a confessional refusal. By the time of the Smalcald Articles (1537) the invocation of saints, because it had been so tied to the sacrifice of the mass, struck Luther as hopelessly and non-negotiably unacceptable.² What, then and now, might be a constructive Lutheran alternative?

2. Friendly Roman Catholics today, offering to help identify such a constructive alternative, have asked, “If it could be shown that the invocation of saints did not interfere with the sole mediatorship of Christ, would Lutherans still object that merit is being transferred?”³ The question, as Lutherans should gratefully acknowledge, does capture the confessors’ basic objection: to invoke departed saints as our mediators “transfers to the saints the trust we should have in the mercy of Christ.. [and implies] that Christ is more severe and saints more approachable.”⁴

3. It is this objection by the Apology which the above proposal by irenic Roman Catholics seeks to respect. “If it could be shown that the invocation of saints did *not* interfere with the sole mediatorship of Christ,” what then? Lutherans might still demur that in view of past experience the question assumes an improbably big “if”, a burden of proof not likely to be forthcoming. But that could sound grudging. Accepting the proposal as a good faith hypothesis, let alone as an ecumenical

hope, Lutherans hardly could “still object that merit is being transferred.” By definition they could not.

4. On the other hand, for Lutherans merely to withdraw their objection against the invocation of saints if and when it does *not* do something, namely, does *not* subvert Christ, seems far too minimalist a response, little more than a concession. That would hardly qualify as a positive Lutheran theology of the saints.

5. Some such minimalist arrangement between the two conflicting parties seems to have been envisioned already by Luther, again mostly hypothetically. In his Smalcald Articles he hypothesizes how the issue of invocation, within the larger issue of the mass, might fare were it discussable in a spirit of dialogue. “If there were reasonable papists, one would speak to them in the following friendly [sic!] fashion.”⁵

6. Specifically with reference to our invoking departed saints, Luther imagines what might happen, not if we stopped addressing them—on that he does not insist though that is clearly what he preferred: that “the saints will cease to be molested in their graves and in heaven”—but rather if we stopped addressing them “idolatrously.” What would happen if we were no longer to “pray to them, keep fasts and festivals for them, say Masses and offer sacrifices to them, establish churches, altars, and services for them...regard them as helpers in time of need...?” In short, what might happen if in honoring them we did so with “no expectation of return?”⁶

7. Luther predicts the outcome somewhat in the spirit of a wager, not without sarcasm. “If such idolatrous honor is withdrawn from angels and dead saints” would the cultus of the saints continue, only now in purified form? No, Luther expected that under such altered circumstances, along with other basic alterations in the mass, the cultus of the saints would fall

into disuse.⁷ Now it might be shown that subsequently such disuse has in fact occurred on a broad scale, also in some Roman Catholic circles. Even so, such a result, however welcome that might be to Lutherans, would still not add up to a positive Lutheran theology of the saints.

Christ's Mediatorship, The Holy Spirit's Mediation

8. For the constructive side of a Lutheran theology of the saints one might turn to Luther's Catechisms, which for Lutherans are still doctrinally normative yet not as polemical as the Augustana and Apology and Smalcald Articles. The section in the Catechisms which most pertains to our theme is Luther's explanation of the Apostles' Creed, the Third Article: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."⁸

9. This shift is not only to a different set of documents but really to a quite different question concerning salvation—that is, different from the question of Christ's mediatorship. Here the question is, how is salvation communicated and how is it appropriated? For suppose there were agreement, as we contemplated earlier, on "the sole mediatorship of Christ" and no longer any hint of "merit being transferred" to us from the saints or from anyone else but Christ. That would still leave unanswered the closely related question, how is Christ's intervening on our behalf—for that is what our sixteenth century predecessors in both camps understood by Christ's mediatorship—in turn *communicated* (in *that* sense, "mediated") to us so that the mercy he once gained for us now becomes our own?

10. Unhesitatingly the Catechisms would reply that the divine

redemption accomplished through Christ alone is in turn mediated—not now in the sense of won or gained or merited but in the sense of transmitted—*through “the communion of saints,”* by means of their mutual communicating of Word and sacraments. That much already should signal that the saints have a decisive role in one another’s salvation. How decisive, we shall soon see.

11. Really, this transmissive sort of mediation, by contrast with a redemptive or intercessory or atoning mediation, is not strictly the work of Christ but of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, the mediation which the “saints” perform in the salvational process is not yet resolved by agreeing on “the sole mediatorship of Christ.” Following the trinitarian distinctions of the creed the Lutheran Catechisms locate the communion of saints within the sanctifying activity of God the Holy Spirit. So a constructive Lutheran theology of the saints belongs at least as much under pneumatology as under christology.

12. This resolute trinitarianism may be difficult to appreciate in an age like ours when revelationist theologies are in danger of restricting the function of Christ to that of God’s “revealer,” thus reassigning to him the transmissive work of the Holy Spirit and effectively retiring the original third “person” of the Trinity. Or what comes to the same thing, it is no longer assumed that there is divine judgment to be undergone and overcome by an interposing Redeemer but only a timeless grace to be made temporally known and effective. Hence the redemptive function of Christ is obviated except in name only and the one thing which is still needed, “revealing,” is taken over by the divine Spirit.

13. By contrast, for sixteenth century Catholics, at least for reforming Catholics but probably also for most pontifical Catholics, there was not only the mediatorship of Christ but also the distinct mediation by God the Holy Spirit. The one was

as indispensable to salvation as the other. The Christ-gained "salvation," *Heil*, would be worthless if it did not result in our being "salvated," *geheiligt*. (The word-play loses something in English translation.) The "wholeness" or "holiness" achieved between God and humanity by the Savior (*Heiland*) would be "all in vain, all lost" if we in turn did not experience its *Heiligung*, its healing or hallowing.⁹

14. Precisely from that activity does God the Spirit derive the name "holy" (*heilig*). It is not simply an adjectival description of divine character but a participial description of divine function. "On account of his work the Holy Spirit must be called a Sanctifier [*ein heiliger*], the one who makes holy,"¹⁰ the Holying Spirit.

15. Likewise the name, "the holy [*heilige*] Christian church, the communion of saints [*der Heiligen*], describes not only the church's character and the character of its members, though it conveys that, too: "a community composed only of saints [*Heiligen*] or, still more clearly, a holy [*heilige*] community."¹¹ But more than that, the church's "holiness" or "saintliness" designates the activity, the function in which the church is engaged. For it is through the church that the Holying Spirit "creates and increases sanctification [*Heiligung*],"¹² hallowing. So while the "mediatorship" is solely Christ's and not the saints', the mediation by the Holying Spirit very much involves the saints. Indeed they are the Holy Spirit's "co-operators."¹³

16. But notice, the saints who are so instrumental in the Holy Spirit's hallowing them through one another are the saints "on earth," those still alive "in the world,"¹⁴ and all of those, including the most ordinary and undistinguished. There is no question of course that the *communio sanctorum* embraces the blessed departed as well—again all of them, including the most

ordinary—but more as silent partners. Necessarily so, because the very nature of the saints' cooperation in the hallowing process, namely, their reciprocal ministrations of Word and sacraments, necessitates that they be alive and mutually responsive.

Faith Comes By Hearing – From Audible Saints

17. The emphasis just now on “mutually responsive” raises the question, what kind of response is here envisioned? Answer: first and always, the response of faith. If the communion of saints is not only a “community”—Luther preferred to translate *communio* as *Gemeine* 15—but is also a communing, a process of intercommunication, an economic activity for a free-of-charge exchange of goods and services, then how do the participants receive these goods and services? As firsthand participants, by faith. The benefits accrue to them not by ascription behind their backs but by a direct offer (*promissio*) inviting their concurrence, not without their knowing or consent but by their self-engagement through faith—even in the case of infant baptism.¹⁶

18. That being so, the question of who all are mediators of our redemption—whether Christ alone or Christ together with other intercessors—still does not address this other question, how what is gained by him is appropriated by us. According to the confessors there is no appropriation, at least not to our “healing,” if it is not an appropriation by faith. Presumably even if what is prayed for is someone else's recovery from illness or divine guidance for the government (all of which is of course urged) the beneficiaries of those interventions are not hallowed thereby except as they themselves “enjoy” them in faith.¹⁷ And as we shall see, their faith is served not by being

prayed for from afar but rather by their being personally addressed in Gospel and sacraments. That direct and sensory appeal to us, the living. *vis a vis*, the departed saints no longer can exercise.

19. The Catechisms stress that the Holy Spirit's first action in holying any saint is to embody that sinner within the church. But that simply means embracing the sinner, infant or adult, within the church's communication of Gospel and sacraments. God the Holy Spirit "first leads us into this holy community, placing us upon the bosom of the church, where he preaches to us and brings us to Christ." The church "is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God."¹⁸ That is why, of the four gifts which the creed enumerates in the Spirit's hallowing—the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting—the communion of saints (which Luther takes as synonymous with church) comes first.

20. However, the reason the church comes first is that, on the receiving end, faith comes first. The church is prior not because of some ecclesiocentrism but simply because, without the church's "communion" of word and sacraments, the end of its food-chain would not be served, the saints' faith. Indeed, "where faith was entirely shoved under the bench...what was lacking here? There was no Holy Spirit to reveal this truth and have it preached...Therefore there was no Christian church."¹⁹ And faith keeps coming first, over and over. "Daily," says the Large Catechism, the Holying Spirit "brings us into this community through the Word and imparts, increases and strengthens faith." By means of the community's Word the Spirit "illumines and kindles hearts so that they grasp and accept it, cling to it and persevere in it."²⁰

21. Faith is always prior in the sense that it is the one

presupposition on which all the other hallowings become ours: the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting. Not that faith qualifies us for these other gifts as one of "our works and merits."²¹ Not that faith comes before the others chronologically—for instance, before the forgiveness of sins—in some experiential sequence, some *ordo salutis*. Nonetheless, faith is that by which the divine grace is "obtained." Through the community's "holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire Gospel" the forgiveness of sins "happens" (*geschiehet*). But faith is how it happens to us, how we "have" it (*haben*).²²

22. Once more, the point in emphasizing the indispensability of faith is to dramatize an essential feature of "the holy community": its members benefit at all from one another's ministry only by believing, so in that respect they are always personally engaged in the benefits becoming theirs. Not only are they done to and done for, also they are responsively and responsibly involved in that very doing, even when all they are being is recipients. The catechumen is encouraged to say, "Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses."²³

23. The Reformers feared that the current sacrifice of the mass risked leaving the members out as responsive, believing participants so long as masses were something "said *for* them" in the nature of intercessions between another intercessor and God—in their behalf, to be sure, yet as third parties not involved at firsthand and not directly addressed. This was all the more the case when members for whom the mass' invocation was made were scarcely aware of it (*ex opere operato*) or were absent altogether or even dead.²⁴

24. For the Reformers faith was not only basic but was itself a part of salvation (*Heil*), of being *geheiligt*. All the more

noteworthy, therefore, is their entrusting even this basic ingredient of salvation to the instrumentality of fellow saints, sinful saints at that who have not yet been removed by death beyond the dangers of apostasy. "Now we are only halfway pure and holy." But "God forgives us, and we forgive, bear with, and aid one another." "Although we have sin, the Holy Spirit sees to it that it does not harm us..."²⁵ That is what the patients hear from one another and, by hearing it, are *geheiligt*.

25. Put the matter in terms of justification by faith. In the Catechisms Luther may not be speaking explicitly about justification. Yet that is included here under what he calls "faith" and "salvation." So then even for their justification the saints are dependent on one another through their proclaiming and believing. "Sanctification," the theme of the Creed's Third Article, is here distinguished from Christ's historic act of "redemption," not from our justification; the latter is embraced under "sanctification." For what is it that gives faith its holing efficacy, such that it entitles the self even to resurrection and lasting life? Surely not the psychic quality of the believing itself, and not even the fact that the believing is inspired by the Holy Spirit, all of which is still very tenuous and partial. The secret of faith's *Heiligung* is the One it believes, the *Heiland*.

26. Because it is Christ in whom the sinners believe, their fragmentary faith counts as his whole righteousness. That is how the sinners are "sainted," by how generously their faith is counted. Yet that counting, that "reckoning" of their faith as his righteousness comes exactly through their telling that to one another. They are the Spirit's reckoners as well as the reckoned. That is where the "imputing" takes place and is "had", in their reciprocal speaking and hearing. The righteousness of Christ is predicated (*praedicare*) of their faith by their preaching that it is (*predigen*). And in believing the preaching,

mortifying as that is, it comes true—in all its holiness.

Prayer is not a Means of Grace, Proclamation Is

27. The temptation is to emphasize and re-emphasize that the primary subject of this holying process is God the Holy Spirit and not the communion of saints, who after all are only the Spirit's spokespersons. To drive that home one need only recall that the two *post mortem* hallowings, "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting," the Spirit accomplishes without an intermediary community. No doubt that reminder is in order to keep the community humble. But in the process something essential might be missed, namely, how profound a claim is being made for the speaking which the saints do, simply as spokespersons.

28. To concentrate upon the distinction between the Holy Spirit's primary speaking and the secondary, instrumental speaking by the saints might easily overlook another key distinction, between two kinds of speaking by the saints, both Spirited: on the one hand their praying, on the other hand their proclaiming or "predicating." In the former they are speaking only on behalf of themselves, in the latter they speak on behalf of God. The danger is that their speaking the Word and sacraments to one another might be demoted or even subordinated to the quite different sort of speaking they do when they pray.

29. "Prayer is Christianity's highest function," says Luther, "*next to the function of preaching*. In its preaching function [*Predigtamt*]," he says of the church, "God speaks with us; in prayer, by contrast, I speak with God."²⁶ The distinction is crucial for a Lutheran appreciation of the saints and of how through their very human discourse not only do they address God

but, what is more, God is first of all addressing and hallowing them.

30. There is no question of course that prayer no less than proclamation is the work of the Holy Spirit. So is faith. Indeed, "faith is sheer prayer."²⁷ Of the one as of the other the catechumen professes, "I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts," and so on.²⁸

31. Even so, the "I" who is here confessing or praying is not the Holy Spirit but the catechumen. It is not God the Spirit but the Spirited sinner who "believe[s] in Jesus Christ...or come[s] to him." On the other hand, when the catechumen goes on to add, "In this Christian church [the Holy Spirit] daily and abundantly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers,"²⁹ there the One who is doing the forgiving is clearly the Holy Spirit, not the catechumen or the church, though it is through their words that the Spirit speaks forgiveness. In the one case the church speaks for itself, in the other case for God.

32. In the discourse of believing and praying and repenting and sacrificing and invoking and interceding and thanksgiving, however much of that may be attended and inspired and "caused" by God the Spirit, the subject of the sentences is not God but we. The predicates are in that sense our "works." And God is the addressee. In the discourse of the Gospel, of the Holy Communion, of Baptism, of absolution of the "mutual conversation and consolation" of Christians³⁰ the determinative subject of the sentences is God and not we, even when the sentence has the pastor saying, "I forgive you" or "I baptize you in the Name of the Father," etc. Then the predicates are the works of God, though predicated to us as beneficiaries. We are the addressees, no matter how much the address may be sounded through human

speech.

33. This distinction between our speaking with God in prayer, where we are the subjects, and God's speaking with us in proclamation, where the subject is God, underlies a key objection the Reformers had to the current veneration of the saints. The act of veneration itself was our "work" in the sense just defined and was thought to be meritorious, a means of gaining grace and favors. "With our own worship of the saints," Luther recalls, "we had to earn grace."³¹ Especially as that cultus was colored by its placement within the mass as sacrifice, the "works" of invocation themselves were imbued with the "expectation of return" on the grounds that the addressees, the saints or God, would then reciprocate the honor paid them by the invoker.

34. Thus the Reformers' objection to the current cultus of the saints was not only that the saints were in danger of replacing the sole mediatorship of Christ. True, that was "worst of all," the sin of "idolatry."³² But closely related to that aberration was the supposition that when "we pray to them, keep fasts and festivals for them, say masses and offer sacrifices to them, establish churches, altars and services for them, regard them as helpers in time of need," our doing so wields a kind of meritorious leverage upon their attentions. It is conceivable that this inflating of one's own act of invocation, thus a self-idolatry, could occur even if the invoking were directed to Christ alone and not to the saints at all.

35. If that is a major peril, that veneration and invocation, being our works (as indeed they are) are misconstrued as themselves means to divine grace, then that peril does not abate simply by the congregation's being given a larger share in the mass, say, as co-invokers. The sort of participatoriness which the Reformers most sought in the mass was the participation by

faith. And for parishioners to be graced into believing, and thus “salvationed” (*geheiligt*) they first needed another, quite different order of discourse, the *Predigtamt*, the church’s mission of declarative predication, whether that comes literally through preaching or through sacraments—God speaking with us.

36. It is clear that “a positive Lutheran theology of the saints” must reckon with how Lutherans have traditionally subordinated prayer (or any analogous forms of our speaking with God) to the Word and sacraments. The latter enjoy pre-eminence as “means [*media*] of grace.” But “prayer is not a means of grace.”³³ This is said by a contemporary Lutheran theologian who otherwise accords prayer a very exalted role. So did Luther: “The church on earth, unified in face of every offensive against her, has no greater power or work” than prayer³⁴—that is, as the “work” of the *church*, our speaking with God. Yet even such prayer, as Regin Prenter puts it, “is not a means of grace but a result of grace.” It is “entirely dependent upon the proclaimed gospel.”³⁵

37. But then the most “positive,” most complimentary thing that can be said of the saints is that that selfsame “proclaimed gospel,” prior to all their own speaking with God, nevertheless comes only and always through their own proclaiming of it. It is their quite human communicating of Gospel and Gospel—“signs” which are dignified as the *instrumenta* for the Spirit’s holying.³⁶

38. If the greatest honor paid the communion of saints is that their mutual ministry of Gospel and sacraments is the very means through which sinners are “salvationed” by God, then that is also the most fitting way to honor those saints who have died, namely, to incorporate the lives they once lived into the church’s *Predigtamt* now, as “examples,” and all to that same proclamatory purpose: the strengthening of our faith,” “as a

means of confirming [our] faith and as an incentive to imitate them in public affairs.”³⁷ Although the blessed departed—“maybe” those already in heaven, hardly those still in their graves³⁸—may also pray for us, it is especially their thankworthy, proclaimable, imitable living out of their faith while they were still alive which continues to serve, even posthumously, in the Spirit’s holying of the rest of us, as “God speaking with us,” as means of grace.

Robert W. Bertram
Burlingame, CA
February, 1986

References

1 Minutes, meetings of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA, Marriottsville, MD, 21-24 February, 1985, pp. 47-48. Other recent efforts of this sort are: Georg Kretschmar and René Laurentin, “The Cult of the Saints,” in _____, 262-285; Gerhard L. Müller, “*Die Heiligenein altes und neues Thema der Ökumene*,” Herder Korrespondenz, 11:38 (Nov, 1984), 522-527; K.E. Skydsgaard, *One In Christ*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957, 185-220.

2 Described in my earlier (unpublished) essay, “Mary and the Saints according to the Lutheran Confessions,” presented to the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA, Marriottsville, MD, 21-24 February, 1985.

3 “Questions” addressed to Lutherans by the Catholic caucus, meeting of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Dialogue USA, Techny, IL, 19-22 September, 1985, Question #10.

4 Ap 21:15; BS ???; BC 231.

5 SA 2,2:2; BS ???; BC 293.

6 SA 2,2:26,28; BS ???; BC 297.

7 Ibid.

8 SC 2:5,6; BS ???; BC 345. LC 2:34-70; BS 653-???; BC 415-420.

9 LC 2:33-36; BS 653; BC 415.

10 Ibid.

11 LC 2:37,49; BS 654, 657; BC 415, 417.

12 LC 2:53; BS 657-658; BS 417.

13 Martin Luther (tr. by J.I. Packer & O.R. Johnston) *The Bondage of the Will*, London: Jas. Clarke & Co., 1957, pg. 184. WA 18:695.

14 LC 2:51,42; BS 657, 655; BC 417, 416.

15 LC 2:49; BS 657; BC 417.

16 Although Luther maintained what has hardly been a unanimous consensus among Lutheran theologians, namely, that baptized infants can believe, his main argument against “the sectarians” was that, “even if infants did not believe,...still their Baptism would be valid and no one should rebaptized them.” The whole purpose of baptism is to evoke faith, at least eventually, yet never by some magical transfusion “through the water” but rather by giving persons their own external “object” to grasp, a once-for-all public objectification of their personal “victory over death and the devil” through Christ, even though they may not believing grasp that “object” until “afterward.” LC 4:55,23,29-30,41,56; BS ??????; BC 443, 439, 440, 441, 443.

17 LC 2:38; BS 654; BC 415.

- 18 LC 2:37,42; BS 154, 155; BC 415, 416.
- 19 LC 2:43-44; BS 155; BC 416.
- 20 LC 2:62,42; BS 660, 655; BC 419, 416.
- 21 LC 2:43; BS 655; BC 416.
- 22 LC 2:39,55,54; BS 654, 658; BC 416, 418, 417.
- 23 LC 2:51-52; BS 657; BC 417.
- 24 Ap 24:1-15; BS ???; BC 249-252.
- 25 LC 2:58,55; BS 659, 658; BC 418.
- 26 WA 34,1:395,14-16.
- 27 WA 8:360,29-32.
- 28 LC 2:6; BS ???; BC 345.
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 SA 3,4; BS ???; BC 310.
- 31 WA 51:495-496.
- 32 SA 2,2:19; BS ???; BC 296.
- 33 Regin Prenter, *Creation and Redemption*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967, p. 484.
- 34 WA 6:239, 3-11.
- 35 Op. cit., 485.
- 36 CA 5:2; BS ???; BC 31.
- 37 Ap 21:5,36; BS ???; BC 229, 234.

38 SA 2;2:26,28; BS ???; BC 297; Ap 8-9; BS ???; BC 230.

[A Constructive Lutheran Theology of the Saints \(PDF\)](#)