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Then Let Us Keep the Festival: That Christ Be Manifest in His Saints

D. Richard Stuckwisch

In the year leading up to my vicarage, I was beginning to preach with some regularity at my fieldwork congregation. During lunch one day with Dr. William Weinrich in the seminary dining hall, I asked him for advice on how to approach the task of preaching. In the course of our conversation, he noted that a class I was scheduled to have with him that spring, *Early Christian Popular Literature*, would be of particular help in this regard. I have spent the years ever since learning to appreciate and benefit from what he had in mind—namely, the compelling confession of Christ in concrete circumstances lived under the cross. It wears flesh and blood. It struggles with less-than-ideal situations and suffers persecution without knowing in advance the way it will unfold. It lives and dies in the hope of the resurrection, hidden with Christ in God and embodied on earth in men and women, boys and girls, who were like us, and yet like Christ.

Commemoration of the saints is not a vague, internalized, noetic exercise but a specific public activity and narrative, like the witness of the Christian lives we thus recall. It is rooted in real history and set forth in the external word of preaching. It belongs to the corporate confession and prayer of the church's collective memory, an important aspect of her ongoing sacred tradition.

We praise and give thanks to God for the saints who have gone before us in Christ Jesus because they are witnesses of his gospel, their very lives embodying and confessing the Christian faith. What is more, because they are the Lord's and are with him, they belong to us, and we to them, in the one body of Christ. So it is that we remember them and honor them in his name and for his sake. The question and the challenge is how we go about this commemoration and celebration of the saints within the life of the church in such a way that Christ the Lord is honored in them, that consciences are comforted by the Holy Spirit through this proclamation, and that faith and love are thereby strengthened to the glory of God the Father.

I. We Are Surrounded by So Great a Cloud of Witnesses

The first point is simply this: the commemoration of the saints begins not with us but with the Lord our God. We remember them by faith in his word because the Lord remembers them in mercy. The Father actively beholds them and receives them to himself in Christ his Son, and he gives them to us in love as our brothers and sisters in him within the household and family of God.

Over and over again, the Lord declares that he remembers his people, his saints. He remembers his covenant promises to Abraham and to his seed forever, as Moses and the psalmist pray, and as Mary and Zechariah sing and confess (Luke 1:54–55, 68–75). His remembering is not a mental recalling of something he “forgot” but a deliberate activity of love in which he keeps and carries out his promises, fulfills his covenant, and saves his people from sin and death. And as he remembers them, so does he reveal and give himself to them by speaking his word to them and by blessing them with his own holy name. In this way are they able to call upon him in prayer.

God’s self-revelation is not only to and for his people; it also encompasses their history of faith and life in him. So the Holy Scriptures are the foremost commemoration of the saints. That is to say, we know and remember the saints of old because the Bible tells us so. It records the stories of the people of God, both collectively and individually (e.g., Psalms 105–106; Prov 10:7; Luke 1:48; Heb 6:12; 13:7). In this way, God remembers them for us and for our benefit so that we are able to remember them and learn from them as our fathers and mothers in the faith (Isa 63:11–14).

The stories of the saints in the Holy Scriptures are not shallow, superficial, or sugar-coated. They remember the people of God in both strength and weakness, not only in their faith and faithfulness but also in their faults and failings. It is the mercy of the Lord that shines through in every case as he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies his people by the gospel of his forgiveness of sins and as he preserves them from Egypt through the desert into the good land he has promised.

We learn to know the Lord as he is for us from his dealings with those who have gone before us. So, for example, the repentance, reconciliation, and restoration of King David following his adultery and murder (2 Samuel 11–12) and of the apostle Peter following his denials (John 18:15–27; 21:7–17) are stories that confess the gospel to us and strengthen our faith. The Lutheran Confessions are able to cite these cases and point to

them because they are first held up for us in the Holy Scriptures (Ap XII 36). It is not accidental that remembering the saints is beneficial to faith and love. This is why the Bible commemorates them.

The great story arc of the Bible not only shapes the Church Year but also sets before us the lives and legacies of the saints in whom the Lord demonstrates the grace and glory of his gospel. That is so not only in the original record of events but then again in the way that subsequent Scriptures cite those earlier examples in their proclamation of God's word and promises. Consider how often the Psalms, the prophets, and the apostles recall the faith of Abraham, the faithfulness of Moses, the throne of David, and the righteousness of Job. So, too, Elijah, Elisha, and Jeremiah are all set forth as types of the Christ who was to come. And the life and ministry of John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Lord, is actually the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1-4; John 1:1-8). The history of salvation, which is really the story of the Christ, is told and retold in the story of his saints already in the Old Testament but also in the New Testament and beyond. The promises of God are given to particular people in particular places and circumstances, and all of these particularities are taken up into the providential mercies of the Lord to proclaim the coming of the Son into history in the flesh. Everything is fulfilled in Christ Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, the Son of David, conceived and born of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Luke 24:25-27, 44-47).

As the coming Christ is proclaimed in the lives of his Old Testament saints, so is the promise of the resurrection. Our Lord himself demonstrates that promise, and he commemorates the saints with the story of Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). The God "of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," he says, is not the God of the dead but of the living (Luke 20:37-38). The patriarchs are not dead and gone, for the Lord is their God, and all live to him in the hope of the resurrection.

Many more examples could be given of scriptural commemorations of the saints. The Lord remembers Abraham and Sarah, and he calls on his people to do the same: "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you" (Isa 51:1-2). Moses is commemorated at the end of Deuteronomy (34:1-12), Enoch and Elijah are remembered as righteous men who walked with God (Gen 5:24; 2 Kgs 2:1-12), and Moses and Elijah are recalled to witness the glory of Christ in his transfiguration (Luke 9:28-31). King David is remembered by the Lord and in the Scriptures not only for his fall and repentance but for his heart of faith and as a type of Christ. In fact, the coming Messiah is sometimes described as "David," the servant

of the Lord (Ezek 34:23–24; Ps 89:19–29). The righteous and long-suffering Job is commended by the Lord himself in the Old Testament (Job 1:6–8; 2:3) and remembered by James in the New (Jas 5:11). “Righteous Lot” is cited by Peter (2 Pet 2:7–8).

A number of the Psalms rehearse the history of Israel and recall the deeds of the patriarchs, prophets and priests, judges and kings (Psalms 78; 105–106). The Jews of the intertestamental period followed that precedent by honoring the heroes of the faith (Sir 44:1–50:24) and, especially, the martyrs of Judaism, such as the Maccabees (2 Macc 6–7; 4 Macc 5–17).¹

The New Testament apostles certainly did inherit and continue the commemoration of the faithful departed, including catechetical rehearsals of the “great cloud of witnesses” (as in Hebrews 11). The saints of old, who lived and died by faith in the promises of God, are set forth as the legal testimony and evidence of his grace and faithfulness. By their example we are encouraged and strengthened in our own faith and life and, specifically, to join them in fixing our hope on Christ Jesus (Heb 12:1–2). Their witness also demonstrates the intimate connection between faith and the cross so that not only works of love but also persecution, suffering, and death are remembered and extolled as fruits of faith.²

With the coming of Christ into history, the object of faith becomes increasingly clear, as does the witness of his saints. Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of the forerunner, are described as “righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord” (Luke 1:6). Simeon is likewise “righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him” (Luke 2:25); similarly, the prophetess Anna is steadfast in her fasting and prayers, serving night and day in the temple (Luke 2:37). The Lord reveals himself in mercy to these faithful men and women, and he reveals himself to us in them. Mary of Bethany, who anointed the Lord Jesus ahead of time for his burial, is commemorated wherever in the world his gospel is preached

¹ The commemoration of the Maccabees and other Jewish martyrs was influential on subsequent Christian practice, and it was sometimes included with the Christian remembrance of the Old Testament saints. However, it should be noted that the church’s celebration of martyrs and other saints is distinguished by its confession of the cross and resurrection of Christ. The accomplished fact of the Lord’s passion is a decisive line in the sand. It is definitive for the Christian liturgy.

² The deacon Stephen’s preaching is another rehearsal of God’s faithfulness in the lives of his past saints, with his own faithful service culminating in his martyrdom. His death echoes the cross and passion of the Lord Jesus while testifying to his resurrection and ascension (Acts 6–7).

(Matt 26:6-13; John 11:1-2; 12:1-8), and Joseph of Arimathea is likewise remembered for his reverent care of the body of Jesus following the crucifixion (John 19:38-40; Luke 23:50-53). Christian faith and love are always coming to rest and finding their focus in the body of Christ, crucified and risen.

The holy apostles, in addition to peers and predecessors, also point to themselves as examples of the faith. We are admonished to imitate the apostles as they imitate Christ (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1) because the word of God is not only preached and taught but also lived and suffered, especially by those who are called and sent to speak for the Lord. Consider the prophets, such as Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Jonah, who embodied or enacted the very word they were given to proclaim.

The ministry of the gospel does not exist in practice apart from those who are actually called and sent to preach and administer the gospel (Rom 10:14-17). The Word, who became flesh for the redemption and resurrection of the body, cannot be detached from the life of the body. So the words and works of Christ Jesus are continued in the acts of his apostles and in the ministry of those who follow them. We hear and receive him in his ministers because he sends them to deal with us in his name (Matt 10:40; Luke 10:16; John 13:20). The Lord thus builds his church upon the foundation of his apostles and prophets, and Christ himself is their cornerstone.

Similar to King David, Peter is not only restored after his fall but established in a prominent position (John 21:15-19). Together with the other apostles, he is foundational to the faith and life of the church on earth (Eph 2:20; Rev 21:14). One has only to think of Peter on Pentecost and in the home of Cornelius to recognize his pivotal importance (Acts 2:14-42; 10:1-11:18). Peter (the Rock) is a new Abraham (Isa 51:1-2; Matt 16:17-19), and the twelve apostles are collectively the patriarchs of a new Israel. Paul's conversion is another case in point (Acts 9:1-22; 22:3-21; 26:4-23; Gal 1:11-17). His itinerary of troubles suffered for the name of Christ testifies again to the central significance of the cross in the ministry of the gospel (2 Cor 11:16-12:10). Paul and Matthew both hold themselves up as recipients of God's mercy and forgiveness. Matthew the tax collector was called to become a disciple of Christ, an apostle and evangelist (Matt 9:9; 10:2-4). And Paul, the Pharisee and persecutor of Christians, was chosen by God to become the great apostle to the Gentiles as Peter was called to be the great apostle to the circumcised (1 Tim 1:15-16; Gal 2:7-9; 1 Cor 15:8-11).

What the holy apostles, evangelists, and prophets received and did and suffered by faith in the Lord has been recorded for posterity in the Holy Scriptures. Not only that, in addition to the past example of their lives, they also continue to serve the church even now and to the close of the age through their inscripturated preaching (John 20:30–31; 1 John 1:3–4; 2 Pet 1:12–15). God has chosen to give and preserve his word through the words and works of these men whom he called to preach and to write in his name. These preachers and their words, as well as the subjects of the stories they have told, are gifts of God whereby the Lord reveals himself and proclaims his gospel to us and all the world.

We do not simply remember these saints; we actually receive and learn Christ Jesus from them. As there were the Old Testament types of Christ in advance, so are there also these living icons of Christ from the New Testament onward. We learn of him from the apostles and evangelists, the pastors and teachers, the holy martyrs, and all the saints who have followed in his train.

These faithful people from throughout the ages are the good works of Christ Jesus, the fruits of his cross born of his sacrifice in his resurrection from the dead (John 12:24). And their good works, in turn, also follow after him as the produce of his cross (Rev 14:13). They are works of faith and love, including patience in affliction and the bearing of the cross in steadfast hope.

It is in this respect that Paul suffers for the church in his flesh and fills up what is lacking in the suffering of Christ (Col 1:24). There is surely nothing lacking in the Lord's atonement and no contingency on God's reconciliation of the world to himself in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5:18–19). However, the fruits of Christ's sacrifice are still being produced as fruits of the tree of his cross. And the church on earth, which is the body of Christ, continues on a pilgrimage under the cross, bearing the cross and its fruits in the preaching, hearing, and confessing of the gospel. So do the saints suffer with Christ and share his afflictions, and he himself is persecuted by the world in their bodies (Acts 9:4–5) until all that remains to be filled up is completed (Rev 6:9–11).

Time would fail us to consider all the saints who have ever been. Besides, there continue to be more and more saints as time passes. But the precedent and pattern of the Holy Scriptures provide a way of thinking about the saints from throughout the history of the church on earth, and in that light we are able to identify and consider at least some of them for the edification of faith and life.

We do not limit our commemoration and celebration of the saints to those who are recorded in the Holy Scriptures, for we are confident that Christ continues to perform his signs in the presence of his disciples (John 20:30), to preach the kingdom of God in other cities and villages, even to the ends of the earth (Luke 4:43; Acts 1:8), and to send his messengers before his face to prepare his way wherever he will go (Luke 7:27; 10:1). Indeed, he has never failed to provide faithful pastors and teachers for his church on earth for the preaching of his word. According to his promise, we trust that he is present with those who preach and those who hear, with those who baptize and those who are baptized, and with his body and his blood in the Sacrament of the Altar (Matt 26:26–28; 28:18–20). Thus do we rejoice in his saints of all times and places, remembering them with thanksgiving before him.

II. We Believe, Teach, and Confess the Communion of Saints

Commemoration of the Saints in the Early Church

Already in the earliest generations of the Christian church, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna “commemorate” the apostles in their epistles. They cite their preaching, their letters to the churches, and their sufferings and death for the sake of the gospel.³ Such examples are offered as instruction and encouragement, something the apostolic fathers who cite them also take to heart in their own discipleship. In time, Ignatius and Polycarp themselves become links in the chain of holy martyrs and are remembered and honored as such. Ignatius anticipates his own death in his letter to the Church at Rome, and Polycarp recalls it in his letter to the Church at Philippi. Decades later in the middle of the second century, after the elderly Polycarp was publicly martyred while serving as Bishop of Smyrna, the church there made a point of preserving the memory of that event both in writing and in worship.⁴

The document known as *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* demonstrates a venerable precedent for the commemoration of the martyrs in the liturgical life of the church. In so far as it was possible, the body of the martyr was reverently laid to rest in a suitable place where the church would gather on the anniversary of his death, a day that was viewed as his heavenly

³ Cf. 1 Clement 5, 47; Ignatius, *To the Ephesians* 12; Ignatius, *To the Romans* 4; and Polycarp, *To the Philippians* 3, 9.

⁴ Cf. *Polycarp’s Epistle to the Philippians and the Martyrdom of Polycarp: Introduction, Text, and Commentary*, ed. Paul Hartog (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

birthday (*dies natalis*).⁵ Year after year, the holy martyrs were remembered with thanksgiving, their stories rehearsed and retold, not as mere pious nostalgia, nor simply as doxology, but as catechesis and training for martyrdom. The church was learning from the example of the martyrs to take up the cross and follow Christ in faith and love, in life and death.⁶ Suffering and death are not valued for their own sakes nor deliberately pursued, but accepted according to the word and will of God and thus according to the gospel of Christ Jesus.⁷ This document also clarified that even the greatest of the martyrs could never take the place of Christ, the Son of God, but that the martyrs are remembered in love and honored because of their love for him and their witness to his cross and passion.⁸

Another point that is clear in *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp*, as also in the letters of St. Ignatius, is the close connection between the Eucharist and martyrdom.⁹ Lutherans may be more inclined to think of this in terms of Holy Baptism because it signifies the dying and rising of repentance and faith. There is, however, no conflict or competition here. The one who is baptized with the Baptism of Christ is also then given to drink the cup of Christ (Mark 10:38–39), as both Sacraments find their fountain and source in the same cross and passion of the one Lord Jesus Christ. To share his death in Holy Baptism (Rom 6:3) and to eat and drink the fruits of his sacrifice in the Holy Communion (Heb 13:10–13) is to bear his cross as a disciple, whether for life or death (Phil 1:21–24; Rom 14:7–9). So, too, the communion of saints is rooted in Holy Baptism and centered in the Holy Communion of Christ’s body and blood (Eph 4:4–6).

⁵ Cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17.3; 18.3; 21.

⁶ Cf. Robin Darling Young, *In Procession before the World: Martyrdom as Public Liturgy in Early Christianity* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001); William C. Weinrich, “Death and Martyrdom: An Important Aspect of Early Christian Eschatology,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66:4 (2002): 327–338; Candida R. Moss, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Candida R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012).

⁷ Cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 1.1–2; 2.1; 19.1; 22.1.

⁸ Cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17.2–3; also, Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 4 vols., trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 3:448–450.

⁹ Cf. Ignatius, *To the Romans* 4; *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14–15; and William C. Weinrich, *Spirit and Martyrdom: A Study of the Work of the Holy Spirit in Contexts of Persecution and Martyrdom in the New Testament and Early Christian Literature* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981), 124–145.

The saints in heaven and on earth are all one body in Christ because they all partake of his one body and drink of his one cup, which is the New Testament in his blood (1 Cor 10:16-17). In the Sacrament, the church of all times and places is gathered together around the Lamb upon his throne in the midst of his people (Rev 5:11-14). It should come as no surprise, therefore, that from early on the saints have been remembered especially at the Lord's Altar.¹⁰ As the church grew, and as the number of martyrs increased, many of them were named in eucharistic prayer. In subsequent generations, the mortal remains of the most notable martyrs were interred beneath the altar (perhaps in view of Rev 6:9), a practice that certainly confessed a connection between the Sacrament and the saints.

The commemoration of the saints is embraced by and taken up into the eucharistic remembrance of Jesus. As Christ remembers us with his word and with his body and his blood on earth, and as he remembers us before the Father in heaven with his ongoing priestly intercessions for us (Rom 8:34; Heb 7:25), so does the Father remember us and all his children in Christ, his Son. We, accordingly, remember him by faith, by receiving his gifts with thanksgiving and praise, and by calling on his name. In this way and by these means, we live as members of one body in Christ Jesus, bound together with the Father and the Spirit in his holy flesh and precious blood, and so also bound to one another in him and to his Christians of all times and places.

Medieval Developments in the Veneration of the Saints

As the gifts of the Spirit in Corinth could become an embarrassment of riches (1 Corinthians 12-14), so did veneration of the saints blossom and expand in ways that were sometimes hard to contain.¹¹ From Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages, there was an increasing development

¹⁰ See Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), and Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2011), 171-193.

¹¹ For helpful overviews and summary discussions of the materials briefly described in the following paragraphs, see Lawrence S. Cunningham, *A Brief History of Saints* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Richard M. Nardone, *The Story of the Christian Year* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1991); Michael Perham, *The Communion of Saints* (London: SPCL, 1980); Patricia A. Sullivan, *Why We Venerate the Saints* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012); and Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990).

from the honor of local martyrs to the commemoration of confessors and other saints on a wider and wider scale.

As the age of persecution gave way to the legalization of Christianity, the desert monastics came to be viewed as a kind of living martyr. Especially after the *Life of St. Anthony* by St. Athanasius, more and more of those monastics were held up for imitation while they lived and remembered as examples after they died. Bishops and confessors were likewise honored, as well as the apostles and evangelists, and over time the greatest theologians of the church.

In the meantime, the stories of the earliest martyrs were being collected and published in order to promote their remembrance more broadly. Unfortunately, the stories were not always accurate or true. Some of the martyrologies were blatantly fictitious and fantastical, but it was often the case that the more far-fetched the better in popular appeal. On the other hand, with the growing influence of Rome in the West, especially from the twelfth century onward, papal canonization became the norm instead of the exception to local recognition of the saints. That development probably helped to curtail some of the extravagance, but it also contributed in its own way to the burgeoning number and popularity of the saints.

With more and more “universal” saints to consider in addition to the veneration of local favorites, there was a loss of clarity and focus. The caveat of *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* (17.2–3) that our Lord Christ could never be replaced by his saints was lost in the avalanche of saints, both historic and fictional, competing for attention and sometimes for cash. There were certainly abuses in theology and practice, especially in connection with the invocation of the saints, the notion of purgatory, the sale of indulgences, and the supposed treasury of “surplus” merits.

The Lutheran Reformation and the Saints

By the sixteenth century, both Rome and the Lutheran reformers recognized that there were too many commemorations of varying degrees and multiple abuses in the cult of the saints, including fictional stories and fake relics, and the medieval equivalent of television evangelist hucksters.¹² Aside from the obvious matters of purgatory, indulgences, and

¹² See *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VIII*, ed. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992); Maxwell E. Johnson, “The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: A Lutheran Reflection,” in *Between Memory and Hope: Readings on the Liturgical Year*, ed. Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 415–427;

merits, there was disagreement on one point in particular. The invocation of the saints had developed and increased over time to the degree that, in popular piety and practice, it was preferred to the intercession of Christ. Luther himself had grown up with this and was very much aware of such reliance on the saints. The Lutherans at Augsburg, while commending the example of the saints, rejected the invocation of the saints as idolatry (AC XXI). In response to this evangelical critique, the papal theologians vigorously defended and encouraged the invocation of the saints, insisting on its appropriateness and faulting the confessors for denying the practice. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession (XXI) repeated the critique of invocation, especially because there is no word of God commanding it and no promise of God attached to it, not to mention that it so easily lends itself to the false worship of the saints in place of Christ.

The Apology, nevertheless, teaches a threefold honor of the saints that is rightly exercised to the glory of God and for the strengthening of faith and life in Christ. In the first place, we give thanks to God for giving the saints to his church on earth as servants of his word and of their neighbors. Second, we also strengthen our faith by considering examples of the Lord's mercy upon the saints who have gone before, saints who were called to repentance and received the forgiveness of their sins for the sake of Christ. In them we see his mercy toward us who are saved in the same way by his grace through the gospel. Finally, we also honor the saints by the imitation of their faithful example within their respective vocations and stations in life (Ap XXI 4-6).

Echoing the Apology, Martin Chemnitz responded to the Council of Trent with a thorough critique of the invocation of the saints, not only in theory but with an extended discussion of many actual texts that were in use within the Roman Church. He traced the development of the practice from its earliest beginnings to the extremes it had reached by the time of the Reformation. He affirmed the prayers of the saints and angels in heaven for the church on earth but denied that we should pray to them for help or intercession since there is no word of the Lord instructing us to do so. Yet, Chemnitz gave a pointed defense of the Lutheran veneration of the saints, indicating that it is not only appropriate but godly and right to

Cunningham, *A Brief History of Saints*, 54-77; Sullivan, *Why We Venerate the Saints*, 79-95; and Nardone, *The Story of the Christian Year*, 101-119.

remember them with thanksgiving to God.¹³ In his discussion of the Eucharist, he likewise approved the commemoration of the saints therein.¹⁴

Elsewhere, Chemnitz and his colleagues demonstrated that we remember and honor the fathers with thanksgiving by learning from them and by regarding them critically but also charitably.¹⁵ What they have done and said well should be praised and valued, and where they have erred or fallen short in their theology and practice, we should quietly cover them in the mercies of Christ Jesus. One finds examples of this approach in the Formula of Concord and its Catalogue of Testimonies. The same basic principle should be applied in our consideration of the sixteenth-century reformers as well.

Given Luther's often feisty criticisms of the prevailing practices and superstitions associated with the cult of the saints in his day, it is easy to suppose that he, at least, saw no use in remembering them at all.¹⁶ What he rejected, though, was not commemoration of the saints per se but the fables, legends, and superstitions about the saints that had come to dominate the piety and worship of the church and that had crowded out the gospel and faith in the gospel of Christ. Outside the polemical context, Luther contributed to a positive evangelical commemoration of the saints. He preached for a number of the traditional festivals and wrote a preface for a book on the lives of the fathers by one of his students.¹⁷ His earliest hymn commemorated Hendrick DeVoes and Jan Van Esschen who were martyred as "Lutherans" in 1523.¹⁸ And in 1525 he honored Henry van Zutphen, another "Lutheran" martyr, in the style of traditional martyrolo-

¹³ Cf. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 3:353–507.

¹⁴ Cf. Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, 2:501–503, 513.

¹⁵ For example, see Martin Chemnitz, "Treatise on the Reading of the Fathers or Doctors of the Church," *Loci Theologici*, 2 vols., trans. J.A.O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), 1:27–33.

¹⁶ See Martin Luther, "Concerning the Order of Public Worship" (1523) and "An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg" (1523), in *Luther's Works*, American Edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 53:14, 22–23. Hereafter abbreviated as AE.

¹⁷ Robert Kolb, *For All the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987), 11–40.

¹⁸ Cf. Martin Luther, "A New Song Here Shall Be Begun" (1523), AE 53:211–216. For further discussion of the hymn and the history behind it, cf. T.H.M. Akerboom, "'A new song we raise'. On the First Martyrs of the Reformation and the Origin of Martin Luther's First Hymn," *Perichoresis* 4:1 (2006), 53–77.

gies.¹⁹ If one thinks about Luther's preaching and teaching in general, one finds that he remembers the saints in the way that Holy Scripture does. He preaches on Christmas, for example, by considering the stories of Zechariah, Elizabeth, and John, Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, the Shepherds, and the Magi.²⁰

The festivals included in the Lutheran church orders of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were limited in number and in scope, focusing primarily, though not exclusively, on the biblical saints of the New Testament. The list of such occasions varied from territory to territory, but they were by no means rejected in the decades following the Reformation. They languished, however, along with many other traditional practices, in the ensuing centuries in which Pietism and Rationalism held sway.²¹

It was during the Lutheran confessional and liturgical revival of the nineteenth century that Wilhelm Löhe of Neuendettelsau, Germany, one of the founding fathers of the Missouri Synod, contributed significantly to a renewed awareness and commemoration of the saints. He produced a conservative revision of the traditional sanctoral calendar for use in the home, at school, and in the life of the church.²² Featuring saints from throughout the church's history, one for each day of the year, Löhe's calendar was intended for the teaching and formation of Christians in faith and life. Where he found it necessary to replace some of the more questionable names from the old Roman calendars, he preferred biblical saints, as well as women for the sake of the deaconesses.

Commemoration of the Saints in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Clearly drawing from the same traditional sources as Löhe, or perhaps directly from his calendar, the *Lutheran Annual* of the early Missouri Synod—for decades, first in German, then in English, fully into the 1940s—reflected an evangelical catholic sensibility. After that point, from the 1940s into the 1960s, the *Lutheran Annual* became increasingly narrow

¹⁹ Cf. Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1914), 18, 224–240.

²⁰ Cf. *Martin Luther's Christmas Book*, edited by Roland H. Bainton (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1997).

²¹ Roger D. Pittelko, *The Saints' Days of The Lutheran Liturgy* (Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, June 1958).

²² Cf. Wilhelm Löhe, *Haus-, Schul- und Kirchenbuch für Christen des lutherischen Bekenntnisses*, Zweiter Theil. (Stuttgart: Verlag von S. G. Liesching, 1859), and *Martyrologium: Zur Erklärung der herkömmlichen Kalendernamen* (Nürnberg: Verlag von Gottfr. Löhe, 1868).

and parochial in its daily commemorations. It still included something for every day of the year, but instead of a history of the church catholic it read more like a family scrapbook of the Reformation and of the Missouri Synod, featuring multiple events in Luther's life and presidents of LCMS schools.

The 1960s and 70s brought further adjustments to LCMS consideration of the saints. To begin with, the annuals began turning back to a broader catholicity, with fewer references to Missouri Synod events and personalities and more historic saints from the early and medieval church. However, negative reactions to the calendar of commemorations proposed for *Lutheran Book of Worship* in the 1970s resulted in a greatly reduced calendar in subsequent annuals and in *Lutheran Worship* (1982).²³ It is a shame that the LCMS responded to legitimate concerns by resorting to an opposite extreme.²⁴

Lutheran Service Book has remedied the impoverishment and has provided the LCMS with a newly revised and greatly expanded calendar of feasts, festivals, and commemorations.²⁵ Along with an increased number of New Testament figures, *LSB* features the notable inclusion of Old Testament saints in its calendar of commemorations. To do so is not without precedent in the history of the church, though it has been more common in the East than the West. Of course, the Holy Scriptures commemorate the saints of the Old Testament, as previously noted, and both Löhe and the early LCMS *Lutheran Annuals* included them as well in their sanctoral calendars. Yet, it is significant to find them in *LSB*, broadening our perspective on the scope of the church.

Careful consideration was given to past precedents, both Lutheran and "ecumenical" or catholic, in developing the *LSB* calendar. The goal was not innovation but a deliberate identification with the history of the church on earth, to which we also belong as members of one body in Christ. At the

²³ *Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978); *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982).

²⁴ The author recalls from his reading and research of the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship archives in the course of his dissertation research that the inclusion of commemorations in *LBW* was due in part to the influence of Roger Pittelko, whose S.T.M. thesis was on the Lutheran commemoration and celebration of the saints from the Reformation onward. See Roger Pittelko, *The Saints' Days of The Lutheran Liturgy*. Pittelko, however, is certainly not to blame for all of the particular choices in the *LBW* calendar, a number of which were questionable at best.

²⁵ Cf. *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), x-xiii.

same time, as compared to the biblical, patristic, and medieval saints commemorated in *LSB*, the Lutherans included from the Reformation period and beyond may be understood as another kind of “local” saint that has also been important throughout the history of the church. There is indeed a place and a purpose for both the universal and the parochial in our sanctoral cycle. *Lutheran Service Book* endeavors to balance the two, to reintroduce a broader awareness of the church catholic and to facilitate the actual commemoration of the saints among us.

III. Fix Your Eyes on Jesus, the Author and Perfecter of Faith

With all of the saints who have gone before us in the faith and confession of Christ and with all who believe and are baptized into him, we are, in fact, one body in Christ, in heaven and on earth. We should be careful, then, not to make too sharp a distinction between the saints who have died and those who are still on their pilgrimage either alongside of us or elsewhere in the world. In this case, too, there is a need for balance, lest we emphasize the one at the expense of the other. Those who have departed in the faith are not dead and gone but are with the Lord and are of one Holy Communion with us in him. They rest from their labors while they also eagerly await with us the resurrection of all flesh and the consummation of all things (Rev 6:9–11; 14:13).

We live and die in the hope of the resurrection because Christ is “the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25–26). He is the firstborn from the dead and the firstfruits of the new creation that he should be the first of many brothers (1 Cor 15:20–23; Rom 8:29; Col 1:18; Rev 1:5). It is for this reason that we await with confidence and actively confess the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, since it is already begun in the body of Christ. As we share his cross and resurrection by our Holy Baptism (Rom 6:3–9), so do we confess his cross and resurrection in the face of the grave as we bury our loved ones and as we remember the saints.

The festivals of the saints are celebrations of the resurrection, rooted in the bodily reality of the incarnation of the Son of God (1 Corinthians 15). We remember and learn from their life in the body because their bodies are redeemed for the life everlasting in the body of Christ Jesus. So do their works follow after them as the fruits of their faith and the faithfulness of their Lord.

The example of the saints is not bland or generic but concrete, tangible, personal, and specific. They are living stained-glass windows through whom Christ shines on us in a panoply of colors, living icons of his grace,

mercy, and peace. We do believe, as the apostles testify, that Christ has manifested himself and his glory in them and that his Holy Spirit has been at work in them, bearing the fruits of his cross in faith and life (2 Thess 1:10; Eph 2:10; Gal 2:20).

In the perseverance of the martyrs and in the steadfast faith of all the saints and confessors, we perceive the gracious presence of Christ Jesus. That point is acknowledged and emphasized in *The Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* and in other early martyr accounts.²⁶ We recognize the same principle in those who were not put to death for their Christian faith and confession but who bore the cross in whatever place and in whatever ways the Lord called them to glorify his name. To remember the faithful departed with evangelical thanksgiving is comparable to a Lutheran funeral. It focuses on Christ Jesus but without ignoring or denying the particularities of the individual Christian. This commemoration of the saints is an extension of the honor that we rightly give to pastors, parents, and other persons, each within his own office and station in life. In each case, we believe and confess that what these faithful people do according to God's calling and command really is the work of God himself. Thus, we also recognize that Christ and his Spirit have accomplished the purposes of God in the lives of the saints who have gone before us in his word and faith.

Moreover, the sanctoral cycle provides an excellent means and opportunity for the teaching and learning of church history, geography, and doctrine. It is also a pedagogically powerful way to emphasize Christian vocation, both in general and in particular. There is a need, in this latter respect, for more female saints from a variety of appropriate vocations, occupations, and stations in life, as well as more saints of either sex who have served as exemplary laymen, both married and unmarried.

To remember and give thanks for the saints of old is also a reminder and encouragement to love, appreciate, and care for the body of Christ here and now. It would be hypocritical to venerate the saints who have gone before us while neglecting and forgetting the saints the Lord has placed beside us in this life. But it need not be a choice between one or the other. As we recognize and rejoice in our connection to all saints in the one body of Christ, all the more so should we follow the good example of past saints by loving and serving and caring for our brothers and sisters in Christ in our own place and time. The faith and faithfulness of the faithful departed within their vocations and stations in life teaches us to be

²⁶ For example, cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 2.2-3; 3.1.

likewise faithful in our duties and responsibilities on behalf of our neighbors, especially our fellow members of the household and family of God.

IV. Then Let Us Keep the Festivals to Which the Lord Invites Us

It is our goal and desire to remember the saints and to learn from them, not in competition with Christ but in confession of him, without detracting from the Sundays and seasons of the Church Year but complementing its liturgical contours and rhythms, enriching its practice of daily prayer. Of special importance is the celebration of the feasts and festivals of Christ and of those saints who are part of the gospel itself. The Blessed Virgin Mary, St. John the Baptist, and the holy apostles are as integral to the story of Christ as his nativity, Baptism, cross, and resurrection. Each of these people and events are but the brilliant facets of a single diamond in which we behold the light of the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Christ Jesus.

To avoid a distortion of this central focus on Christ, it is helpful to discern the relative priority of festivals. All of them have something worthwhile to offer, but not all of them are situated as close to the heart of the matter. Even the venerable Feast of the Annunciation gives way to Holy Week and the Octave of the Resurrection.²⁷ The Visitation of our Lord defers to Pentecost Day or the Feast of the Holy Trinity in those years when they coincide. In such cases, the lesser festival may be postponed to the day following the feast of Christ, depending on the life of the congregation.

We should bear in mind that Sunday, the Lord's Day, is a festival of the resurrection in its own right. Especially during the festival seasons of the Church Year—from Advent until the Day of Pentecost—the Sundays should generally be preserved in their integrity and not replaced by sanctoral festivals. These seasons, which are so pointedly governed by the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, are defined by the Sunday Propers and depend on them for their character and movement. Thus, during the Time of Christmas and the Time of Easter, the festivals of the

²⁷ The following rubric is provided for the Feast of the Annunciation in *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book*: "It is appropriate to observe this feast day in all its fullness during Lent. However, according to historical precedent, when the Annunciation falls during Holy Week or on Easter Day (or also on the Fifth Sunday in Lent in the One-year Series), it should not be observed at those times but may be transferred to a weekday following the Second Sunday of Easter" (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 960.

apostles and evangelists would best be celebrated during the week where possible. Perhaps a particular weekday, such as Wednesday, might be designated for the observance of any festivals that occur in a given week. Or the “eve” of a festival might be kept in order to work within the usual rhythms of parish life.

During the Time of the Church, sometimes known as “ordinary” time, that is, from Holy Trinity until the beginning of Advent, one might consider celebrating the festivals that occur on Sunday. It really depends on the circumstances of the congregation. To celebrate each of the festivals on its own appointed day is the ideal, and where that can normally be done, it seems less compelling to set aside the regular Sunday Propers in order to make room for the festivals on the Lord’s Day. But where it is simply not possible to keep the festivals during the week, then an occasional observance every five or six years when they fall on a Sunday might be best. Celebrating the congregation’s “name day” (or patron feast) where pertinent is usually recommended. How can St. Matthew Lutheran Church, for example, not celebrate the Festival of St. Matthew?

Also, thinking about the Time of the Church, the post-Pentecost “tides” provide some contour, nuance, and movement through the long green stretch of “ordinary” Sundays. These “tides,” which hinge upon several key festivals and commemorations, were integral to the earliest developments of the Western lectionary for the latter half of the liturgical year. In the Gregorian lectionaries, series of readings were assembled for blocks of Sundays following the Feast of St. Peter and St. Paul at the end of June, St. Lawrence in mid-August, and St. Cyprian in mid-September,²⁸ although Lutherans have generally given more attention to St. Michael and All Angels in late September than to St. Cyprian.²⁹ In some places, the Feast of St. Martin in early November marked the beginning of a six- or seven-week fast, which contributed to the liturgical development of Advent.³⁰ These divisions can still be of some use and benefit to us: from Holy Trinity to St. Peter and St. Paul the Apostles; to St. Lawrence the Martyr; to St. Michael and All Angels; to the Feast of All Saints; and then

²⁸ Cf. Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, 6 vols. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 3:169–175.

²⁹ For example, cf. Luther D. Reed, *The Lutheran Liturgy: A Study of the Common Liturgy of the Lutheran Church in America*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1947), 540.

³⁰ Cf. Martin Connell, *Eternity Today: On the Liturgical Year*, 2 vols. (New York: Continuum, 2006), 1:68–71.

several weeks counting down one year into the next, in anticipation of the Lord's Advent.

The progression of these post-Pentecost "tides" corresponds in its scope and sequence to the host of those who join us in praising the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the *Te Deum Laudamus*: Trinity Tide is followed by the tides of the Holy Apostles, the Holy Martyrs, and the Holy Angels. The liturgical year crescendos with the Feast of All Saints and then segues back into Advent as we await the coming of the Lord in glory for the judgment of the living and the dead.

Without pressing any sort of artificial "thematic" upon the Sunday Propers, the "tides" extend the emphases and sensibilities of the sanctoral cycle into the seasons of the Church Year in much the same way as the Proper Prefaces and the seasonal Graduals (in the Three-Year Lectionary) do. In fact, if you take note of the Graduals in Series C, you will be able to see how they move through the post-Pentecost tides.³¹ One can likewise use the Proper Prefaces to identify the tides.³²

In a more general way throughout the year, the Ordinary of the Divine Service, the Eucharistic rites, and the canticles of the Daily Office, along with many of the church's historic hymns, all confess an active awareness and appreciation of the great cloud of witnesses with which we are surrounded. The Proper Prefaces for Eastertide, apostles and evangelists, and All Saints' certainly do this, as do the Pre-Sanctus and the Sanctus ("with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven . . ."). Accentuating these aspects of the liturgy and pointing them out in preaching and catechesis can help Lutherans who have been uncomfortable with remembering the saints to appreciate them.

As far as preaching itself is concerned, it will always focus on Christ as the true and only God and Savior. But, in doing so, it will also include a proclamation of the saints as servants of the same Lord Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:5). On festival days, in particular, the preacher will grapple with the

³¹ Series C is specifically noted here, because the Graduals for Series A and B were inadvertently retained from *Lutheran Worship* instead of being revised and adjusted in connection with the new *LSB* three-year lectionary.

³² So, for example, the use of the Proper Preface for Holy Trinity throughout Trinity Tide; the Proper Preface for apostles and evangelists throughout "Apostles' Tide" (from late June to early August); one of the Common Prefaces for "Martyrs' Tide" (early August to late September); the Proper Preface for St. Michael and All Angels throughout "Angels' Tide" (late September to late October); and the Proper Preface for All Saints' through the final Sundays of the Church Year.

appointed Propers, the Psalms and readings of Holy Scripture, the prayers and hymns of the day, all in relation to the narrative history, life, and legend of the celebrated saint.

Obviously, some saints are better known than others, but there are a variety of ways to approach this. With respect to those apostles about whom we know very little from the Scriptures, such as St. Philip and St. James, St. Simon and St. Jude, their festival days are an opportunity to emphasize the apostolic office and ministry. Even their legends can point to the significance of these men, who did in fact go and preach in particular places and times. Considering their traditions while distinguishing such things from the word of the Lord can help us to think of the holy apostles as real men of flesh and blood. With Peter and Paul, Mary Magdalene and the Blessed Virgin Mary, John the Baptist and John the apostle and evangelist, the details of these saints are the very portrait of Christ to be considered and savored on their respective festivals.

Certain other feasts and festivals are especially well suited to the emphasis of particular doctrines that may not be dealt with so directly elsewhere in the lectionary or Church Year. For example, the Feast of the Annunciation is an ideal time to emphasize the incarnation of the Son of God. The Feast of the Epiphany teaches the manifestation of God in the ministry and mission of the gospel and in the external means of grace. The Ascension of our Lord is the flip side of his Incarnation and Epiphany, in which we find the sanctification and salvation of our human flesh and blood in the crucified and risen body of our merciful and great high priest: he became like us that we might be like him and live with God in him. The Feast of the Holy Innocents is an opportunity to address the sanctity of human life as well as the way that God accomplishes his purposes by way of the cross and suffering in the midst of tragedy. For Luther, the Holy Innocents also testify to the faith and confession of infants and young children.³³ St. Joseph of Nazareth is surely one of the best examples anywhere of what it means to be a faithful husband and father. St. Timothy and St. Titus, likewise, are fine examples of what it means to be a faithful bishop or pastor.

From week to week throughout the liturgical year, it is a salutary practice to commemorate the saints in the Prayer of the Church on the Lord's Day within the normal and normative context of the Divine Service. Aside from a general reference to all saints, the saints to be remembered in the coming week can be named in the prayers on the preceding Sunday, along

³³ Cf. Martin Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism" (1528), AE 40:254-256.

with any of the faithful who have departed this vale of tears in the preceding week. This practice emulates the historic naming of the saints at the Eucharist without intruding upon the consecration of the Sacrament. The saints can likewise be readily included by name in the Litany at Evening Prayer.

The commemoration of the saints finds an especially appropriate and salutary place in the daily prayer of parish life: at gatherings of the congregation, whether for Matins or Vespers, for meetings or other activities; in the daily or weekly chapel of the Lutheran day school; in the opening or closing of catechesis classes; and in the prayer and catechesis of the Christian home and family. The *Treasury of Daily Prayer* was specially designed to encourage and facilitate the remembrance of the saints on the part of parents with their children.³⁴

There are numerous other ways and means of exercising a healthy remembrance of the saints in the patterns and practices of the Christian life. Gathering works of art, iconography, and symbolism for the saints, for example, is a salutary practice. These various depictions and representations are quite interesting and instructive, often insightful and thought-provoking. For those who are visual learners, such images are a powerful medium. Commending particular saints as exemplars for confirmands (along the same lines but in addition to a “confirmation verse”) can also be particularly beneficial. The strength of a real human example with a life and a story to consider and think about should not be overlooked.³⁵ In a similar way, parents can mark and observe the “name days” of their children, and their own name days, too, for that matter, even if the namesake was previously unknown or coincidental. Making these connections to the saints who have gone before us is edifying, as it gives flesh and blood to Christian faith and love.

Aside from the links of namesake, the commemoration of laity from a variety of vocations and stations in life offers profound examples for “ordinary” Christians within their own places and occupations. Think of the remarkable benefit to be found in remembering child martyrs such as

³⁴ *Treasury of Daily Prayer*, ed. Scot A. Kinnaman et al. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008).

³⁵ This has been my own pastoral practice for many years now, and many of the young people have so embraced the connection that they have subsequently added the name of “their saint” to their own name.

St. Lucy and St. Agnes, as our children are growing up in a hostile world.³⁶ Considering those who have gone ahead of us on the same path provides compelling incentive and encouragement to vocational faithfulness in our own season, for they demonstrate that the confidence and peace of faith in the gospel produces patience, perseverance, and the Christian fruits of love and mercy.

V. Conclusion: That Christ Be Manifest in His Saints

By whatever ways and means we go about it, we remember the saints, give thanks to God for them, and learn from them because we recognize the life and Spirit of Christ Jesus in their lives of faith and love. It is the head of the church who is manifested in the members of his body, and he is glorious in all his saints. As he has redeemed them with his holy and precious blood and his innocent suffering and death from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, so do they praise and magnify him in life and death in the sure and certain hope of his resurrection from the dead. Across this great multitude of saints, which no one can number, Christ is all and in all.

As the Scriptures instruct us, we are encouraged by the example of the saints who have gone before us in the faith and who are with the Lord and now rest from their labors. We are strengthened by their fellowship in the body of Christ so that we do not grow weary or lose heart but run the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. With those who have suffered for his name's sake in the past, we also are conformed to the image of his cross, so that we might know him and the power of his resurrection, for by the evidence and testimony of so great a cloud of witnesses we do know the hope of his calling, the riches of the glory of his inheritance in all the saints, and the surpassing greatness of his power to all who believe.

To him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever. To which the holy evangelists say, "Amen," and the holy apostles fall down and worship (Rev. 5:14).

³⁶ The recent martyrdom of children (among others) in Iraq has been a sobering reminder of the violence facing Christians in this hostile world, but it has also been a strong encouragement for the church to remain steadfast in the face of death.