THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Teaching Outline Composed by James F. Gontis
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I. WHAT IS THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

A. Members of the Church through all time
   a. In the Apostles’ Creed, we profess belief in the communion of saints immediately after professing belief in the Church…not without reason
   b. The term “communion of saints” explains what the Church is.
   c. It refers to the bond of unity among all believers, both living and dead, who are committed followers of Christ
   d. God’s holy family, united through faith in Christ and the sacraments
   e. The Mystical Body of Christ (Rom. 12 and 1 Cor. 12)
      i. Jesus associates Himself with His followers: Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me? (Acts 9:1-5)
      ii. Vine and branches (Jn. 15:1-5): Because all believers are joined to Christ, we are also joined to one another

B. Communion in spiritual goods among the saints
   a. Communion in the faith
   b. Communion of the sacraments
   c. Communion of charisms (gifts) – no one person has it all. Only God has it all.
   e. Communion in charity (Rom 14:7—None of us lives for oneself; and no one dies for oneself; 1 Cor. 12:26-27—If one part suffers, all the parts suffer…)

C. Communion among holy people
   a. 3 groups: Church Militant, Church Suffering, Church Triumphant
      i. Saint and saint
         1. In a sense, a saint on earth is anyone living in a state of sanctifying grace (but it’s not a “done deal” unless and until one dies in a state of sanctifying grace).
         2. A saint in heaven is one who has attained the perfection of holiness by responding to God’s grace and who has died in sanctifying grace and has been fully purified from sin and its attachments.
         3. Some of the Saints in heaven are canonized. Held up for us as model disciples and as intercessors for us.
         4. We are all meant by God to be saints.
      ii. We are involved in spiritual battle for our salvation. Jesus says “Do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good.”
   b. Intercession of the saints
      i. United in one body and as one family, we can call on the saints for their assistance and intercession and we look to them as models.
      ii. St. Paul often asked others to pray for him (Rom. 15:30, Col. 4:3, 1 Thes. 5:25, Eph. 6:18-19, 2 Thes. 3:1)
iii. St. Dominic: “I shall be more useful to you after my death and I shall help you then more effectively than during my life.”

iv. St. Therese: “I want to spend my heaven in doing good on earth.”

c. Communion with the saints
   i. Just as our communion among fellow Christians on earth joins us more closely to Christ, so our communion with the saints in heaven joins us more closely to Him.

d. Communion with the dead
   i. Death does not break our communion with other members of the Body of Christ.
   ii. All who are united in Christ are alive (Mk. 12:26-27: *He is not God of the dead but of the living.*)
   iii. The Church since the beginning has honored the memory of the dead
       1. 2 Macc. 12:45
       2. Our prayer for those who have died can help those who are in Purgatory. Those in Purgatory (and of course those in Heaven) help us with their prayers.

II. HOW DOES ONE BECOME A SAINT?

A. The Church does not “make” saints—God does!
   a. In canonizing someone, the Church simply recognizes a Saint God has made through His grace. Of course the person has to have cooperated with His grace through a life of heroic virtue.
   b. Canonization is the process by which the Church determines and declares that a deceased member of the faithful may be proposed as a model and intercessor to the Christian faithful and venerated as a saint, based on the fact that the person lived a life of heroic virtue or remained faithful to God through martyrdom.
      i. Does not mean that those who were canonized were flawless.
      ii. Not all Saints are canonized—thus, All Saints’ Day (November 1) celebrates all those in heaven who are unknown to us (i.e. the “uncanonized”) as well as those who are canonized.

B. Why the Church canonizes saints (CCC 828)
   a. Recognizes the Holy Spirit’s power to sanctify us.
   b. Sustains hope of believers by proposing saints as models and intercessors
      i. Blessed John Paul II beatified 1338 and canonized 482 saints, more than all his predecessors since 1588 combined. These saints came from all states of life, races, many and varied ethnicities, and had greatly varied personalities.
      ii. Holiness is all around us AND we are all called to be saints.

C. The canonization process
   a. In the early Church, Saints were typically declared by popular acclaim.
   b. Process was formalized in 16th century and in some ways the process at that time resembled an adversarial legal process in which the candidate for sainthood was put on trial posthumously (even included a “Devil’s Advocate” to challenge whether the person in question had attained heroic sanctity.)
c. Blessed John Paul II significantly streamlined the process and made it a more local and collegial affair
   i. Much of the process is now handled in the local diocese.
   ii. Much more of an academic and historical process, not legal
   iii. Wanted to emphasize that God is generous in making saints because God is generous with His grace, which makes us saints.
   iv. Often had beatifications and canonizations outside of Rome during his many trips, to show that holiness is all around us
d. Congregation for the Causes of Saints
e. Stages: Servant of God, Venerable, Blessed, Saint
f. Pope Benedict has also canonized a very significant number of Saints. Unlike his predecessor, Pope Benedict, in most circumstances only celebrates Masses of canonization, not beatification.

III. WHAT AND HOW TO TEACH ABOUT THE SAINTS

A. Veneration vs. adoration
   a. We give honor and respect to the saints, i.e. we venerate them. We refer to this as dulia.
      i. In honoring them, as God’s creations, we are giving God praise, not taking away from His glory
   b. We reserve adoration (worship) due to God for God alone. We refer to this as latria.

B. We do not pray to saints in the same way that we pray to God
   a. Two different meanings for the same English word “pray”
   b. We pray to God (worship Him)
   c. We pray to saints (ask them to pray to God for us)

C. Saints are models: examples of holiness for us to imitate
   a. Life of heroic virtue and fidelity to God’s grace
      i. Mother Teresa: “Be a saint wherever you are.”
      ii. Vatican II’s Universal Call to Holiness (Lumen Gentium, 39)
         1. Goal of every Christian life, no matter one’s state in life
         2. God gives each and all of us sufficient grace to be saved.
         3. Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us. (Heb 12:1)

D. Saints are powerful intercessors (Jas 5:16-20)
   a. As we pray to God for one another, saints pray to God for us (Rev. 5:8 and 8:3-4) and so we should ask them for their prayers
   b. Patron saints
   c. Relics
      i. We honor the remains of those who are in heaven
      ii. God works His power using physical as well as spiritual things (cf. Jesus’ garment in Mt. 9:20-22, Peter’s shadow in Acts 5:15, Paul’s apron in Acts 19:11)
E. Mary
   a. Mother of Christ, Mother of His Body, the Church
   b. Constantly intercedes on our behalf
      i. Wedding at Cana
      ii. Like Queen Mother in O.T.
   c. The four principal teachings regarding the Blessed Virgin Mary we refer to as the four Marian dogmas. They are:
      1. Mary as Mother of God (Jesus is God and Mary is His mother).
      2. Immaculate Conception (By the power of God, kept free from original sin from the first moment of her conception).
      3. Perpetually Virgin (Before, during, and after the birth of Jesus).
      4. The Assumption – At the end of her life on earth, Mary was assumed, by God’s power, body and soul into heaven.
   d. For more on the Blessed Virgin Mary, please see the Vatican II document Lumen Gentium, Chapter 8. Mary is an icon of the Church
   e. Mary is the greatest of all God’s creatures / first in the order of grace.
   f. In Mary, we see what we are meant to become.