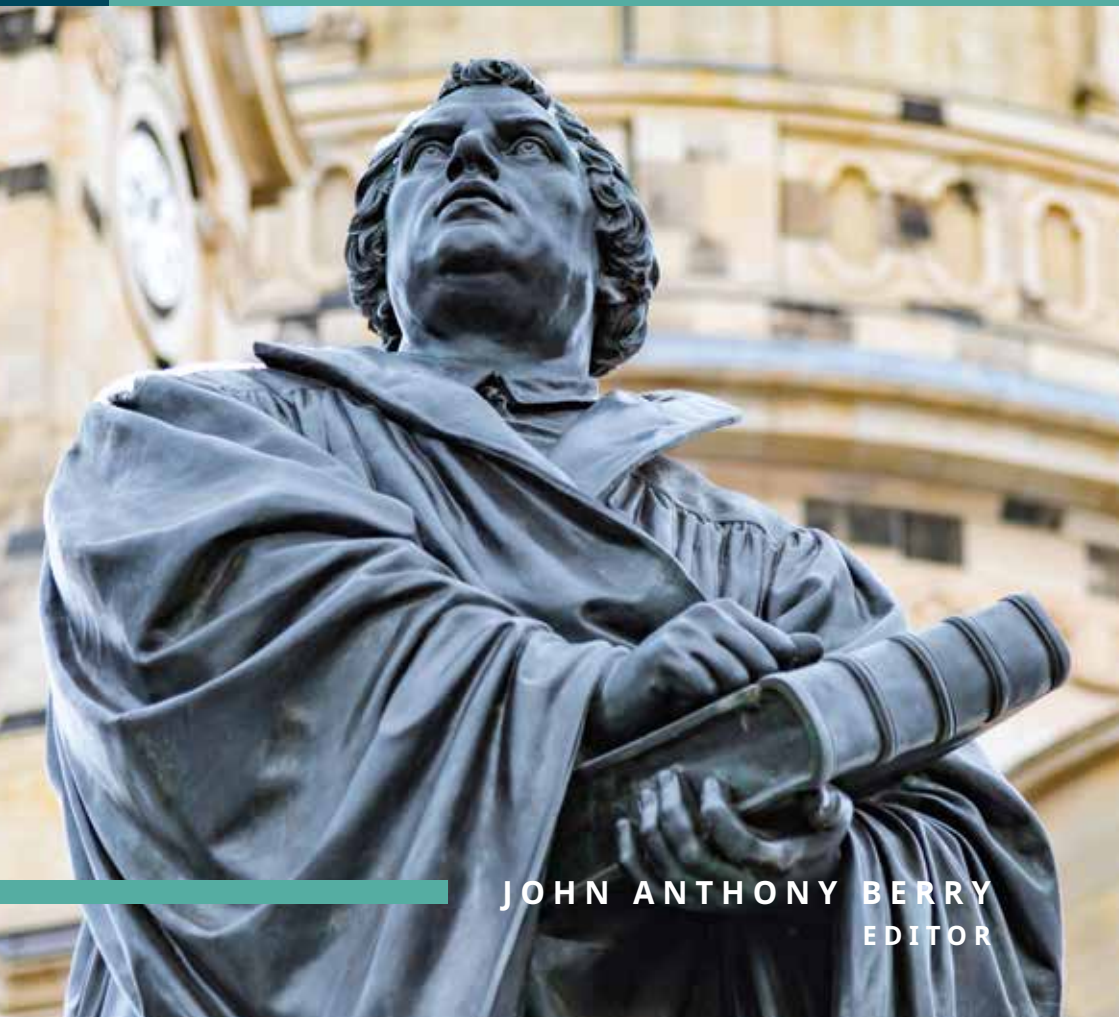


The Spirit of the Reformation

500 YEARS ON

Proceedings of the Malta International Theological Conference II



JOHN ANTHONY BERRY
EDITOR

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Proceedings of the
Malta International Theological Conference
II

John Anthony Berry

Editor



L-Università ta' Malta
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Communio Sanctorum Communio Bonorum

Von Balthasar and Luther

PAULINE DIMECH

I have chosen not to look at the issue of sainthood and the veneration of the saints, nor at Luther's arguments concerning indulgences and Purgatory, or the theological concepts of satisfaction, and of merit, or the question of personal sanctification, which are among the more controversial issues between Catholics and Protestants to this day. I have, instead, decided to examine the concept of the *Communio Sanctorum* itself, convinced that delving into the former topics often serves as an avoidance tactic by theologians, and that, before one delves into the many controversial issues associated with the theme, one ought to try and clarify the concept itself, since it will have to act as the grounding for all further discussion.

In carrying out this hermeneutical exercise, I wish to compare the writings of the two great theologians: Martin Luther and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Considering that this paper is being written on the anniversary of the Reformation, Martin Luther was a compulsory choice. However, Luther was not just a central figure in the Reformation, he is also one

of the more important theologians where the *communio sanctorum* is concerned. I chose von Balthasar not only because I am familiar with his writings on the *communio sanctorum* and on the saints, but also because the *communio sanctorum* was a very important theological concept for him too.

Already in 1988, von Balthasar had said that attempts to reunite the Churches “will continue to fail until the ecclesial aspects of faith and order [the central theme which was kindling the discussion during his time] have become united with the aspect of the *communio sanctorum*.” Von Balthasar stated that only when the ecclesial aspects of faith and order are united with the aspect of the *communio sanctorum*, will the concept of the *sanctorum* “come to fruition.”¹

Three important points need to be made before I even attempt at some explanation. Firstly, there is still a problem concerning whether the phrase *communio sanctorum* should be taken as an explanation of the Church, and a different way of describing the holy Catholic Church, or whether this is a different article of faith altogether. According to Balthasar, if one uses the Pauline image of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27), the “Holy Catholic Church” and “the communion of saints” inter-penetrate each other and are woven seamlessly together.² However, it is difficult to merge the former, “the visible, functional, and charismatically ordered Catholic Church,” with the latter, i.e. the “invisibly functioning laws of the communion of saints.”³

Secondly, there is the issue concerning the role which the concept of the *communio sanctorum* played in the Reformation. The Lutheran theologian Herman Amberg Preus wrote that “There were men before Luther who had seen the need of a Reformation. But it was Luther

1 Hans Urs Von Balthasar, “Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,” trans. Albert K. Wimmer. *Communio: International Catholic Review* 15, no. 2 (1988): 168.

2 Hans Urs Von Balthasar, “The Communion of Saints,” in *Elucidations*, ed. Idem, trans. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1975,) 97.

3 Von Balthasar, “The Communion of Saints,” 99.

who first saw clearly that at the root of the trouble lay a human and unscriptural conception of the very nature of the Church.”⁴ Preus also states that “[i]t took the Lutheran Reformation to give back to the Church the glorious doctrine of the Communion of Saints.”⁵ Even today, the subject remains very emotionally charged, and it can make rational theological argumentation difficult. Luther had told the Church, “we are the true ancient Church, and with the entire holy Christian Church we are one Body and a Communion of Saints... You are the new false church, apostate from the ancient true Church.”⁶ While the Reformers would claim that during the Reformation, Luther set out to restore the Church, for too long Catholics interpreted this as a brutal attack on the Church.

Thirdly, there is the issue of the interpretation of the Reformation. Balthasar’s judgment of the Reformation is based on that of Karl Barth. Von Balthasar writes about this in his essay on “Christian Universalism.” He argues that “[f]or Karl Barth the history of the Church of Christ begins not with the Reformation, but with Christ. The main point of his exposition of Luther is that his real function was to bring about a reform of certain essential doctrines within the one Corpus christianum, whereas his “founding a church” was a mistake with tragic consequences.”⁷ According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Catholic thought...presupposes that the division was not necessary, that if both sides think deeply and widely enough and in the spirit of

4 Preus, *The Communion of Saints* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1948), 10.

5 Ibid., 9.

6 *Wider Hans Worst*, written in 1541, was Luther’s satirical response to Duke Henry of Brunswick. The Duke was one of the most bitter antagonists of Luther and his followers, and was described as the “greatest Papist in all Germany.” Quoted in Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 92.

7 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Christian Universalism,” in *Explorations in Theology*. Volume 1: *The Word made Flesh*, trans. A.V. Littledale and Alexander Dru (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 244-245.

obedience, agreement can and must be reached, and that Protestantism, which the Catholic Church is obliged to describe as heretical, is yet, ultimately and seen in the light of its origins, only a schism.”⁸ Writing about the *communio sanctorum* in the light of such dire accusations is always difficult, especially because the historical context within which both theologians lived and wrote, as well as the personal issues which each one of the theologians had at the time of writing, impinges on their epistemological understanding and their hermeneutics of history.

This essay will be divided into three sections. The first of these sections will deal more directly with Luther’s reflections, in so far as the *communio sanctorum* is an ecclesiological theme. The second section of this essay will deal with Hans Urs von Balthasar’s theology of the *communio sanctorum*. The conclusion which follows will compare the two theologians together, as well as emphasise the importance for Systematic Theology to investigate the subject.

The *Sanctorum communio* in Luther

The two basic texts that will be used here are Luther’s 1519 “Treatise Concerning The Blessed Sacrament And Concerning The Brotherhoods,” dedicated to the Duchess Margaret of Braunschweig and Lüneburg, and the Large Catechism, which Luther published in January 1529. The former is one of three “essentially catechetical sermons for the instruction of all Christians.” They are, as Dean Zweck has pointed out, “written in clear, simple German, they avoid difficult theological issues, and they are deeply pastoral.”⁹ The Large Catechism, *Der Große Katechismus*, is also not a systematic work. There are no

8 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Christian Universalism,” 241.

9 Dean Zweck, “The Communion of Saints in Luther’s 1519 Sermon on the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 49, no. 3 (2015): 117.

technical terms and no argumentation in this work. It is free of polemic against Rome, and the theology presented in it is easy to comprehend,¹⁰ which makes it so helpful.

In the Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament, Luther emphasises the *communio bonorum*. “To receive the bread and wine of this sacrament, then, is nothing more than to receive a sure sign of this fellowship and incorporation with Christ and all saints.” He adds that the sacrament derives its common name “communion” from the fact that “the significance or effect of this sacrament is fellowship of all the saints” (*Die gemeinschaft aller Heiligen*).¹¹ And also that “This fellowship is of such a nature that all the spiritual possessions of Christ and His saints are imparted and communicated to him who receives this sacrament; again, all his sufferings and sins are communicated to them, and thus love engenders love and unites all.” Luther uses the metaphor of the city where “every citizen shares with all the others the name, honor, freedom, trade, customs, usages, help, support, protection and the like, of that city, and on the other hand shares all the danger of fire and flood, enemies and death, losses, imposts and the like.”¹²

Luther understood the word *communio* to refer primarily to eucharistic Communion. He was, however, willing to grant that it could refer to the assembly of believers in Christ.¹³ It seems, in fact, that this shift in emphasis from the Eucharist to the assembly of

10 Preserved Smith, *The Life and Letters of Martin Luther* (Boston – New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), 234.

11 Luther, “Treatise on the Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body of Christ,” trans. J.J. Schindel, par.4.

12 *Ibid.*, par. 5.

13 Lutheran World Federation and Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *From Conflict to Communion. Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2017), 94.

believers took place around and after the publication of the Papal Bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, which excommunicated him from the Catholic Church.¹⁴

Writing about the third article of the Creed, in the Large Catechism, Luther pointed out that the *communio sanctorum* is a later addition to the creed, and that it was meant to be nothing but an interpretation or explanation by which some one meant to explain what the Christian Church is. The problem is, according to Luther, that in German, the *communio sanctorum* means something else. He himself preferred to refer to the Christian Church as a group (*Haufe*), an assembly (*Versammlung*), or a congregation (*Gemeinde*), when the Catholic Church has always preferred *Gemeinschaft* (communion).¹⁵

Luther attempts to explain the words *Gemeinschaft der Heiligen* (communion of saints), knowing full well that the expression “has become so established in usage that it cannot be uprooted and it would be next to heresy to alter a word.” Luther argues that the *communio sanctorum*, which has been translated into German as *eine Gemeinschaft der Heiligen*, a communion of saints, is nothing but a poor and unintelligible translation. Luther says that it was rendered *Gemeinschaft der Heiligen* (communion of saints), simply because people understood neither Latin nor German. He claims that “no German would so speak or would understand the expression.” On the other hand, according to Luther, if it is to be rendered plainly, the *communio sanctorum* must be expressed quite differently in the German idiom; for the word *ecclesia* properly means in German *eine Versammlung*, an assembly.

14 Pope Leo X, Papal Bull *Decet Romanum Pontificem*, on the Excommunication of Martin Luther and his Followers, 3 January 1521.

15 Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, Christian Educational Series, trans. John Nicholas Lenker (Minneapolis, 1908), 123 (Second Part, Article 3).

According to Luther, in “genuine” German, “the word *communio*, which is attached to it, should not be translated *Gemeinschaft*, but *Gemeinde*. Secondly, the *communio sanctorum* ought to be called a Christian congregation or assembly (*eine christliche Gemeinde oder Sammlung*), or, and this would be the best and most clear translation, as holy Christendom (*eine heilige Christenheit*).¹⁶ And, thirdly, according to Luther, to speak correct German, it ought to be *eine Gemeinde der Heiligen* (a congregation of saints), that is, a congregation made up purely of saints, or, to speak yet more plainly, *eine heilige Gemeinde*, a holy congregation, “a small holy flock, a holy assembly of pure saints under one Head, Christ.”¹⁷

With regard to the first issue above (whether the phrase *communio sanctorum* should be taken as an explanation of the Church, or whether this is a different article of faith altogether), Luther would agree that the phrase *communio sanctorum* would have been added as an explanation of the Church. However, whereas the phrase may have been useful when it was originally added to the Creed, the phrase had become problematic over time. The *Communio Sanctorum* and the Church were not equivalent if we read “the Holy Catholic Church” to refer to the Roman Catholic Church. As Preus has said, before the Reformation, Luther already did not “identify the Communion of Saints with the Roman Church, nor exclude the possibility of other church bodies being within the spiritual Church of God.”¹⁸

Luther accused Catholic theologians of proceeding to shut up the *communio sanctorum* within the Roman Catholic Church. So, while Catholics considered the statements of Hugo of St Victor and of

16 Luther, *The Large Catechism*, 123, par.158.

17 Ibid., par. 159. In Psalm 111, Luther would argue that only the word “congregation,” serves to denote both the godly and the ungodly grouped together. See Brian Thomas German, “Martin Luther’s First Psalm Lectures and the Canonical Shape of the Hebrew Psalter,” 145.

18 Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 45.

Thomas Aquinas to be a confirmation that the *communio sanctorum* is equivalent to the Catholic Church, Luther was totally against equating the *sanctorum communio* with the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁹ He extricates the *communio sanctorum* from the Roman Catholic Church.²⁰ Luther still believed in the Church, and he still believed that the *communio sanctorum* was a good description of the Church, but he came to understand the Church as primarily a spiritual entity. His dismay at certain practices within the Roman Catholic Church had a lot to do with this disassociation of the *communio sanctorum* from the Roman Catholic Church. He felt that he could no longer identify the *communio sanctorum* with such a Church.

It is made clear in the Large Catechism that the Church is not a bodily assembly, but rather an assembly that is founded on faith and love. He writes of the *Christlichen Gemeine* (the unity of the Christian Church). Luther is thus making three arguments. Firstly, any ecclesial unity must be spiritual, and only for this reason is it possible to speak of a “communion of saints.” Secondly, since the unity of the Roman Catholic Church is based on external membership, the phrase *communio sanctorum* cannot be applied to it. And, thirdly, the “external assembly and unity” is insufficient, and ineffective in the case of sinfulness.²¹

Luther points to other problems which emerge with the translation of the word *Kirche*, as well as with how one is to understand “sanctorum.” Luther says that the word *Kirche* (church) means really nothing else than a common assembly. Therefore, in German, it ought to be called a Christian congregation or assembly (*eine christliche Gemeinde oder Sammlung*), or, best of all and most clearly, holy Christendom (*eine*

19 Ibid., 30.

20 Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 51.

21 See Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 80.

heilige Christenheit).²² *Christenheit* is the true Church, and should not be applied to an assembly except on account of the faith of its members.²³ Should one insist on using the term *Christenheit* for both the spiritual and the bodily Church, it would be best to qualify them as the “spiritual, inner” *Christenheit* (Christendom), and the “man-made, external” *Christenheit* (Christendom).²⁴

There is also the issue concerning who the “saint” in the phrase refers to. Does it refer to all Christians? Does it refer to those Christians who are around the altar? Does it refer to those who have faith? Does it refer to those who are exceptionally holy (only “the saints,” in the narrow sense)? There is also the issue as to whether the holiness of an individual can ever be established, and whether we may speak of some who are holier than others. Luther also called for a recollection that the communion of saints is a communion of sinners. In his work on Romans 7, Luther emphasised that the law of God in the spirit is at war with the law of sin in the person, and sin persists in the baptised and the holy.²⁵ Even saints cannot deny their sin, and believers must take the reality of their sinfulness seriously. Finally, there are also questions (which the whole of the Christian tradition struggles with), namely, whether the word *sancti* is to be restricted to Christians, or whether we may incorporate among the *sancti* those who are holy, irrespective of whether they are ‘Christian’ or not.

The constituents of the *sanctorum communio* also extends beyond the physical world. The assembly of the saints incorporates both the living, those on earth (*eorum qui in terris peregrinantur*), as well as the dead.²⁶ This is the *Communio cum sanctis*. Here, too, we have problems

22 Luther, *Large Catechism*, 123, par.158.

23 Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 82.

24 Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 83.

25 Luther, “Romans 7,” trans. Andrew Thornton. [Accessed online 18/11/2017]. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/luther/romans/7.html>.

26 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par.958.

to do with the perimeter of the *communio sanctorum*, particularly, because the scope of the *defunctis* remains unclear. Does the *defunctis* refer to all the faithfully departed? Does it refer solely to those in heaven (*qui caelesti beatitudine perfruuntur*)? Or does it also include those in purgatory, those undergoing purification (*qui vita functi purificantur*)?²⁷ Could it even include the unfaithfully departed?

The *Communio Sanctorum* in Hans Urs von Balthasar

Where Hans Urs von Balthasar is concerned, we shall be using the two short editorials which the Catholic theologian wrote about the *communio sanctorum* in the 1940's, an essay which was later published in *Elucidations*,²⁸ and his "Retrieving the Tradition. *Communio* – A Program."²⁹ His sources, as he himself claims, are J. Czeny and Émile Mersch, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Georges Bernanos.³⁰

The first point that must be made is that, like Luther, von Balthasar has what would seem to be a capricious reading of the *communio sanctorum*, where the meaning of the concept depends on the context. There is a sense in which, for von Balthasar, the *communio sanctorum* is equivalent to the Church. According to von Balthasar, the *communio sanctorum* is to be identified with the Roman Church, and it is what sets the Catholic Church apart from all other Christian churches.³¹ Von Balthasar follows Augustine and Gregory of Tours in this regard. Augustine never referred to the doctrine of the *communio sanctorum* by name, but "he presented one of its earliest and clearest elaborations, arguing that there was a logical necessity in the *Civitas Dei* for the idea

27 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par.962.

28 Von Balthasar, "The Communion of Saints," in *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches, 91-100.

29 Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Retrieving the Tradition," *Communio* 33 (2006): 153-169.

30 Von Balthasar, "Editorial: The Meaning of the Communion of Saints," *Communio* 15, no. 2 (1988): 160-62.

31 Von Balthasar, "Catholicism and the Communion of Saints," 163.

of a communion of saints, one in which a *unitas caritatis* embraces the saints in heaven, the angels, and the believers on earth.”³² On his part, Gregory of Tours wrote that one life nourishes all lives: *una tamen omnes vita corporis alit in mundo*.³³ In von Balthasar, *communio* takes the sense of an “exchangeability of merits,” of “togetherness” and mutual love, of an “active love for each other,” of an act of “representation.”³⁴ Balthasar says that “[t]he whole of St Paul’s teachings on the Church as the body of Christ, where each believer functions as a member of this body for the well-being of the whole as well as for that of each of the other members, ultimately seals the central meaning of the Christian idea of community (*Gemeinschaftsidee*).”³⁵

There are other instances where von Balthasar understands the *communio sanctorum* as wider than the Church. In such instances, von Balthasar distinguishes between the “Holy Catholic Church” and the *communio sanctorum*.³⁶ This makes analysing the subject less complicated. In his essay on “Catholicism and the Communion of saints,” he argues that although “the external church is capable of many good works, but these are no longer the direct result of justifying faith; they can also be performed by the others, that is, those who have been damned.”³⁷ This means that von Balthasar is very much aware that distinguishing between the Church and the *communio sanctorum* may be crucial, and that equating the Church with the *communio sanctorum* is not always helpful.

32 Augustine discussed the *Communio Sanctorum* in his *Enchiridion*. See Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 131.

33 Gregory of Tours, *Vita Patrum*. See Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography*, 136.

34 Von Balthasar, “Editorial: The Meaning of the Communion of Saints,” 162.

35 *Ibid.*, 160.

36 See von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, 441. Von Balthasar states that “The fact that grace is bestowed through the communion of saints does not mean that it must, for this reason be bestowed directly through the Church as an external institution.”

37 Von Balthasar, “Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,” 166.

A wider concept of the *communio sanctorum* enables von Balthasar to stretch much further than the limits of the Church. The *communio* is no longer restricted to those who are explicit believers of Christ, or the baptised. In terms of its identity, the *communio sanctorum* incorporates all those who are seeking to praise God's glory. Von Balthasar does not rule out the possibility of having someone from "outside" the ecclesial circle be included among the saints. According to Balthasar, Ishmael, Esau, the Pharaoh and Israel could be saved alongside Isaac, Jacob, Moses and the Church.³⁸

In terms of its effectiveness, von Balthasar simply refuses to describe the communion of saints as "a closed circle of those who exchange their merits and rewards among themselves," as it is generally understood in economics. On the contrary, he maintains that it "can only be an open circle of those who 'give without counting the cost.'" He adds that, "Consequently, "it is not possible to draw any dividing line around this open circle marking off its extent and the extent of its effectiveness."³⁹ In terms of its effectiveness, as early as the 1950s, von Balthasar had already extended the *communio sanctorum* to "unbelievers."⁴⁰

Von Balthasar also gives the concept of the *communio* a narrower sense, to refer to the saints. However, he qualifies this, arguing that the *communio sanctorum* does not consist solely of the saints in the narrow sense (those singled out). The saints (in the narrow sense) are to be acclaimed because they are the best "protectors and inspirers" of the *communio sanctorum*.⁴¹ The implication is that the *communio*

38 Von Balthasar, "The Church and Israel," 291.

39 Von Balthasar, "The Communion of Saints," in *Elucidations*, 96.

40 Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit. Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity*, trans. Donald Nichols, Anne Englund Nash, Dennis Martin (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 40. This is a concept which Balthasar owes to De Lubac. See *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard (London: Burns and Oates, 1962), 118. See also "The Communion of Saints," 96 and 99.

41 Von Balthasar, *Two Sisters in the Spirit*, 40.

sanctorum (the holy ones within the community) is the arbiter of doctrinal reasoning within the larger community. In this case, the *communio sanctorum* is a sector within the larger Church, which is supporting the Church, as well as slowly growing into the larger Church.

The whole of von Balthasar's theology seems to acquire a consonance when he reflects on the *communio sanctorum*, including his theology of the saints, his ecclesiology, his pneumatology, and his theology of grace. In his essay "The Communion of Saints," von Balthasar writes that if the phrase "communion of saints" is to be used to refer to the whole Church, it is only because of the saints, and thanks to them. The church has access to an abundance of treasures that have been procured for the Church through them. It is as a result of having been established as a community by the spirit.

Von Balthasar describes it thus: [i]f "communion of the saints" is a closer, more intimate and secret description of the Catholic Church, then this means that, in the first place, the communion of those who have been sanctified with the sanctity of Jesus by the Holy Spirit – they are the 'saints' – is a communion of those who have received a gift, who all communally share in something which of themselves they are not and could indeed never be."⁴² Using the Letters of Paul to the Corinthians, von Balthasar comments on the process whereby the saints become a communion of saints: "They do not become a communion of saints, if grace sanctifies them individually, on the basis of a universal human nature in which they already form a community; rather they became such a communion expressly through the community established by the Spirit (2 Cor 13:13), naturally on the basis of their call by the Father into the communion of his Son Jesus Christ (1 Cor 1:9), as it is realised particularly in the eucharistic community."⁴³

42 Von Balthasar, "The Communion of Saints," in *Elucidations*, 91.

43 *Ibid.*, 91-92.

Von Balthasar's translation of *communio* as communion goes beyond the context of the sacrament of the altar. He writes that

[i]t is of course true if one equates the communion of saints with the "Holy Catholic Church," then there will indeed be many profiteers whom one has to count among its number. And the transition from the "losers" to the "winners" is such a gradual one that it will not in practice be possible to draw any sharp dividing lines. Who, even among the true saints, does not profit from Mary's word of assent? She is the archetype of those who bear fruit, the Virgin Mother herself. We all take shelter under her cloak. But there are others within this cloak who themselves have smaller cloaks, and they do not know who it is that finds shelter under them, for, at least on earth, only God knows what the extent and effect of the fruitfulness of the saints may be.⁴⁴

In his essay on "Foundations of Christian Ethics," Marc Ouellet highlights that which distinguishes the theology of the *communio sanctorum* in von Balthasar: it is "at once divine and human," and it "resembles the Trinitarian communion" in that, what becomes common property – their very personhood – is more than just what belongs to each one.⁴⁵ Ouellet has argued that "by recovering the essential implication of community in the occurrence of grace," Balthasar "advances beyond the Protestant individualism of justification by faith and the Catholic individualism of merit."⁴⁶

44 Von Balthasar, "The Communion of Saints," in *Elucidations*, 96.

45 Ouellet, "Foundations of Christian Ethics," 238 and 241. Henri de Lubac had said that "the modern theology of the Church has reflected the Protestant individualism which it sought to correct in too extrinsic a fashion." *Catholicism*, 168.

46 Mark Ouellet, "Foundations of Christian Ethics," in *Hans Urs Balthasar. His Life and Work*, ed. David L. Schindler (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 241.

Von Balthasar understands the *communio sanctorum* as extending beyond time. De Lubac once wrote that: “If there is not admitted beyond all visible mortal societies a mystical and eternal community, beings are left in their solitary state or are crushed into annihilation; in any case they are destroyed, for suffocation too can cause death.”⁴⁷ For von Balthasar the communion of saints includes both the living and the dead.

According to Balthasar, the *communio* is what “makes the church Christ-like.”⁴⁸ Von Balthasar uses the concept of “pro-existence” in order to explain himself. According to him, the *sanctorum* is, first and foremost, the communion of “saints” on earth. In this context, communion is realised the more a Christian takes over the “pro-existence,” the form of Christ, the unselfishness of love. However, besides this earthly reality, the *sanctorum* also “constitutes...the communion with those who have become holy and Christ-like in heaven, in whose ‘pro-existence’ the still sinful Church may place her trust.”⁴⁹ Here, von Balthasar’s scheme is marked by a dialectic between the maximalist and the minimalist position: the saints in the narrow sense, and the saints in the wide sense. Within the whole schema of von Balthasar’s work, this is very significant, since it allows von Balthasar to understand different things by “Christifidelis,” as well as to single out individual saints.

Von Balthasar is critical of both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. According to him, “the reformed churches lack this element of an organic constitution.” In his view, within the Reformed Churches, “the Church can never seriously be held to be the ‘body of

47 Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 182.

48 Von Balthasar, “Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,” 168.

49 “Pro-existence” is a concept developed by 20th century Western Christian theologians to describe the service of the Church facing contemporary challenges. It generally means “a being there for others.” Von Balthasar uses it to refer to the “pro-existence” of the saints. Von Balthasar, “Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,” 168.

Christ, redeemed and instituted (as representative of all mankind) by him.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, the Catholic Church has “lost her sense of the ‘body’ and the truth of the Eucharist.”⁵¹ While criticizing the Reformed churches for their concept of the *communio*, von Balthasar also criticises the Catholic Church’s own pretenses. In his essay on “Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,” von Balthasar states quite unashamedly that neither “the invisible church of the true believers, the chosen ones,” nor “the external and visible church of the congregation that gathers for worship and, together, recites the creed,” corresponds to what St Paul describes as the “body of Christ?”⁵²

Conclusion

In this essay, I have attempted to provide some insights into a limited selection of the writings of Martin Luther and of Hans Urs von Balthasar regarding the *communio sanctorum*, emphasizing the importance of the concept of the *communio sanctorum* to both theologians. I focused on the logical aspect of *communio*, i.e., the conceptualisation and designation of the phrase *communio sanctorum*. I argued that both Luther and Balthasar tend to use the term to indicate different things: The Church, the Eucharist, the saints, and more. Both of them were well-disposed towards the *communio sanctorum* as an ecclesiological model. Both of them wished to use the concept to revive Christian faith and life. In both theologians, God’s precedence is not neglected. Von Balthasar writes that, “the goal of the communion of saints” is “to hold oneself ready.

The aim is the abandonment of all aims of one’s own, in order that God’s aims may be fulfilled through his own people.”⁵³ Luther describes the community of believers as mutually interdependent and mutually

50 Von Balthasar, “Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,” 167.

51 Von Balthasar, ‘Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,’ 167.

52 Ibid., 166.

53 Von Balthasar, “The Communion of Saints,” 97.

dependent upon God. As Preus has pointed out, the fellowship of the Church, according to Luther, “expresses itself in an outward corporate life and community.” But the essence of the fellowship is spiritual.” The Church is the Body of Christ to which belong not those who give what they have to others but those who believe in Jesus Christ. As Preus puts it, “A communistic society at its best is not the Church.”⁵⁴ Von Balthasar also points out that the *communio sanctorum* is not a *communio* in the sense of a communistic society.⁵⁵ He writes that “a church sustained by ethics, good works, social consciousness, and the liberation of those who are politically and socially downtrodden – essentially a caricature of the communion of saints.”⁵⁶

My preoccupation in writing this article went beyond my interest in Martin Luther and Hans Urs von Balthasar. I intended to emphasise firstly, that a re-appropriation of the theological concept of the *communio sanctorum* is essential, secondly, that such a re-appropriation requires a clarification of what the *communio sanctorum* stands for, and, thirdly, that an ecumenical venture is required for a proper hermeneutic of the term. My view is that, reading the concept from a historical, liturgical, spiritual, ethical or even pastoral, perspective, though exceptionally interesting, makes it very difficult to shed the emotional baggage which the subject carries with it, making a Lutheran-Catholic dialogue on the subject even more difficult than it already is.

The risk is that those involved will end up discussing all sorts of things: the blemishes of the church of late medieval times, the abuses concerning relics, the issue of indulgences, the structure of the liturgical year, the feast of All Saints, the process of canonisation, the cult of the saints, the pastoral initiatives which have been taken surrounding

54 Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 26-7.

55 Von Balthasar is in agreement with Preus, who claims that ‘A communistic society at its best is not the Church. See Von Balthasar, “Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,” *Communio* 15, no. 2 (1988): 163-68., and Preus, *The Communion of Saints*, 26.

56 Von Balthasar, “Catholicism and the Communion of Saints,” 163-68.

death, the practice of remembering celebrated ancestors in the faith, and so on and so forth. These are important, but there are other more fundamental issues which must be tackled before these ones, if these are then to be evaluated effectively.

Surely, if we are to speak of the *communio sanctorum*, we must agree, at least in principle, on what we mean by it. What it refers to. Who is to be included within it. Who its constituents are. Who makes it up? Where the limits should be drawn. Whether the *sanctorum communio* incorporates “all” the saints. The Catholic Catechism states that the *sanctorum communio*, i.e., the assembly of all the saints, incorporates *Omnes qui filii Dei sumus et unam familiam in Christo constituimus* (all of us who are sons of God and form one family in Christ).⁵⁷ This would be what Paul VI described as the *communio omnium christifidelium*.⁵⁸ This reference to the *Christifideles*, to the *unam familiam in Christo* and to the *communio omnium christifidelium* may seem very straightforward. However, this is far from being the case. For, the *communio sanctorum* understood as the *Christifideles*, could be taken to refer as much to those who explicitly confess their faith, and who manifest evidence of their discipleship, as to the community of implicit believers in Christ.

Clearly, the subject requires further analysis from an exegetical and a systematic perspective. Such an analysis may require the exploration into various well-traversed, but closely related, theological issues such as that of the *sola fide*, the visibility or invisibility of the Church, the priesthood of all believers, the notion of holiness attributed to an institution, and the concept of eternal life. The *communio sanctorum* has in the past decades emerged as a subject that can act as a bridge between the Catholic and the Lutheran side, and this is significant,

57 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par.959. *Lumen gentium*, 51.

58 Paul VI, *Solemni Hac Liturgia* (Credo of The People of God), 30. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 962.

but one must be careful not to get carried away by that which is less substantial. I wish to emphasise that further work is required if the concept of the *communio sanctorum* is to remain relevant, and whether it is to act as a bridge, rather than to serve as a sign of contradiction between Lutherans and Catholics, and among Catholics themselves.

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