

In earlier writings, I take "the communion of saints" referred to in the third article of the Apostles' Creed to be equivalent in meaning to what the Reformers called "the invisible church." In the light, however, of subsequent reflections written up in the attached entries, a different interpretation is evidently called for.

The important terms in this alternative interpretation are not only "the holy catholic [visible] church," "the invisible church," and "the communion of saints," but also "the people of God." By "the people of God," I understand (in terms analogous to Maurice's) humanity in right relation to God (or, more generally, strictly ultimate reality), even as I understand "the world" to mean humanity out of such right relation. Thus the people of God is invisible in the same sense in which the invisible church is—and for the same reason: because it includes all human beings who understand themselves authentically and are therefore visible as doing so to God alone i.e., all true Christians as well as all other persons who actualize substantially the same self-understanding, albeit through means other than the specifically Christian means of salvation. By "the communion of saints," then, I understand the encompassing community of holy persons and holy things in which the invisible people of God so understood is visibly realized.

By "the holy catholic [visible] church," I understand the *primary* Christian means of salvation: the sacrament or sign not only of the grace of God through Jesus Christ but also of Christian faith in God—Jesus Christ himself being the *primal* Christian sacrament or sign, even as the so-called sacraments of the church are all *secondary* Christian means. But just as the grace of God through Jesus Christ is but a specific (exhibitive) mediation of the meaning of strictly ultimate reality for us, so Christian faith in God is but a specific (apprehensive) mediation of authentic self-understanding in relation to that meaning. Precisely in being the primary Christian sacrament or sign, however, the visible church is the sublation of the communion of saints, in that one cannot participate in it without thereby participating in the indefinitely larger community comprising all holy persons and holy things, non-Christian as well as Christian.

By "the invisible church," then, I do not mean simply "the people of God," but only those members thereof who have become such by accepting the call to membership in the holy catholic [visible] church and whose response to that call is visible solely to God as a response of faith.

Thus the communion of saints is the community of all whom I have sometimes distinguished as the *explicitly* called, together with all the various means—including things as well as persons—through which their call has explicitly come to them. Included within this encompassing community of the explicitly religious as well as of all who have a real option of becoming such is that much smaller community properly called "the holy catholic [visible] church," understood as the community of all whom I distinguish from my Christian standpoint as the *decisively* called. By the same token, the people of God is the community of all the chosen, or elect, whatever the means through which they have been called and by the right use of which through faith they have been chosen through their own choosing. Included, then, within this encompassing community of the chosen or elect is the much smaller community of the invisible church, understood as the community of all who have been chosen through the specifically Christian^s means of Christ and the holy catholic (visible) church with its word and sacraments—and faith.

In sum: what is properly meant by "the communion of saints" may be clarified by the following *analogia proportionalitatis*: as the holy catholic (visible) church is to the invisible church, so the communion of saints is to the people of God.

December 1995; rev. 3 September 2003

"The Communion of Saints"

This phrase from the Apostles' Creed refers to the indefinitely larger community of holy persons and holy things (analogous to the visible church) in which I necessarily share precisely in being a member of the visible church. If decisive revelation sublates all other specific revelations, then one cannot share in the community that bears it without *eo ipso* sharing in all the other communities whose revelations are sublated by it, and thus in the indefinitely larger community embracing all such communities.

Thus, while "the communion of saints" emphatically includes Israel, as the community represented by the Hebrew scriptures, it neither is nor can be limited exclusively to this community. It includes everyone and everything else insofar as they, for their part, re-present the same self-understanding, or understanding of existence, of which Jesus Christ as attested by the church is the decisive re-presentation.

My confession of faith in this indefinitely larger community of holy persons and holy things commits me both to make more effective use of the means of salvation that they provide and to join in validly and efficaciously administering these means to others.

9 May 1993

Whether or not there is a valid distinction to be made between "the holy catholic church" and "the communion of saints," as Theodore Jennings argues, one can and should distinguish between "**the church**" and "**the people of God.**"

Given such a distinction, however, I obviously need to revise the view I have previously defended in some such way as this:

1. The rule of God is the necessary condition of the possibility both of **the people of God** and of **the world** as the two communities established respectively by authentic and inauthentic response to God's rule.

2. Thus one could say, in a formulation paralleling but materially differing from Maurice's, that the people of God is simply humanity in right relation to God, while the world is that same human community out of right relation to God.

3. **The church**, however, is to be distinguished from **the people of God** as a sacrament or sign is to be distinguished not only from the grace of God through Jesus Christ, but also from the Christian faith in God of which it is also the sacrament or sign. True, the church is *invisible* as well as visible, and it is only the visible church that can be said to be analogous to a sacrament or sign. But even the invisible church, properly so-called, is to be distinguished from the people of God, as the community of those who, having accepted the call to membership in the visible church, are also known by God, although only by God, to have a true and saving Christian faith, in distinction from all those who have otherwise, and through other means, also responded authentically to God's rule.

The visible church, then, is the *primary* sacrament or sign not only of God's grace through Jesus Christ and of Christian faith in God, but also of God's rule and of the authentic response to it that constitutes the people of God. Presupposed by this formulation is that Jesus Christ himself is the *primal* sacrament or sign both of God's grace and of Christian faith, on the one hand, and of the rule of God and of authentic response to God's rule, on the other.

1. The rule of God is the necessary condition of the possibility both of the church and of the world as the two communities established respectively by authentic and inauthentic response to God's rule.

2. Thus Maurice is right that the church is simply humanity in its right relation to God, while the world is that same humanity out of its right relation to God.

3. The church in this sense, however, is the invisible church, which is to be distinguished although never separated from the visible church-- analogously to the way in which the unincarnate Christ as the ^{implicit} primal source of our authentic existence is to be distinguished although never separated from the incarnate Christ through whom this source is explicitly and decisively re-presented.

4. The visible church, then, is the primary sign or sacrament of God's rule and of the invisible community of authentic response to this rule, Jesus Christ being their primal sign or sacrament.