Message de l'archevêque de Canterbury

Imprimer
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Bose, 30 octobre 2008

Symposium œcuménique

par ROWAN WILLIAMS

Ceux qui, par la grâce de Dieu, modèlent notre vie de disciples sont une grande multitude dont les visages nous sont souvent cachés

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TEXTE ORIGINAL ANGLAIS DE LA COMMUNICATION
DE L'ARCHEVÊQUE ROWAN DE CANTERBURY
AU COLLOQUE "UNE NUÉE DE TÉMOINS"
(Bose, 29 octobre-2 novembre 2008)

to the Prior and Community of the Monastery of Bose
and all attending the Conference held in collaboration with
the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches:

A Cloud of Witnesses:
opportunities for Ecumenical Commemoration

In one of the hymns for Vespers on the Sunday of All the Saints in the Orthodox Church the saints are addressed as 'Orators of the Spirit'. I hope that in this meeting, all participants will feel that the Holy Spirit is truly speaking to them through the company of the saints, and also through the human fellowship of this encounter. For since we are all called to sanctity, then we are all called to speak in and for the Holy Spirit.

Holiness is never an individual matter. For a human person to become holy, so Christians believe, is for them to be taken into the Body of Christ, so that their life is informed, shaped, determined by the eternal life of God the Son as it was and is embodied in Jesus of Nazareth; it is for them to be 'immersed' by the gift of the Holy Spirit in the flow of the Son's life towards the Father, the everlasting movement of total adoration and self-giving love. To be holy is to stand with Christ, and to stand with Christ is to be a member of his Body, living in and through the communion of renewed human persons that the Spirit creates.

Hence the naturalness for St Paul of referring to all the baptized as holy – as 'saints': in principle, all those who through their baptism are brought into the place where Jesus is, are caught up in this flow of his life towards the Father. But we quite reasonably use the word 'saint' more commonly to refer to those in whom we can see that flow evidently at work. The person whom the churches recognize as a saint in the usual sense is going to be one who shows what is true for *all* Christians, one who offers a unique definition of what the baptized life might mean. The holy person will have learned from all those around them how to live in Christ; and they will have learned even from those whose lives may not show the strongest or clearest marks of baptismal faithfulness. And the rest of us, as we receive and reflect on that definition, are called to scrutinize our own lives in its light, asking how our own baptized identities might be deepened and given more integrity. When a saint is recognized and commemorated, the Church proposes to its own people and to the wider world a model of life in community with Jesus, and in community with all others who have been called; a saint is someone who is himself or herself *shaped in discipleship* by living in the body of Christ, and also someone whose own life feeds that Body and draws it back to its heart and its calling.

But what about saints in a divided Church? Sometimes we may be inclined to think that there is something special about the saints of the 'undivided Church' – before the schism of East and West, or before the Reformation; or, worse, we may be tempted to use the saints of our particular tradition as proofs that our own confession has been more successful at nourishing holiness than others. This is understandable: if a Roman Catholic looks at a saint of the Eastern Christian world, they may feel that such a saint's witness is somehow weakened or compromised by their separation from or even hostility to the Roman Communion. Anglicans and Protestants cannot fail to be aware that the post-Reformation saints of the Roman Catholic Church belonged to a body that regarded their own Reformed Christian witness as defective and misguided in many ways. Even more problematically, in West and East, there are those who have suffered torment and

death at the hands of fellow-Christians and who are regarded as martyrs. Catholics, Orthodox, Anglicans and Protestants have all been involved in one way or another in inflicting as well as enduring suffering for what they believed Christ had called them to: but how can we celebrate the memory of someone who died at our own hands?

In Britain, the calendar of the Church of England commemorates those who died as 'Protestant heretics' under the persecution of Queen Mary Tudor; it also commemorates those, like John Bunyan and Richard Baxter, who were persecuted by Anglican authority, and, in providing a celebration of all the saints and martyrs of the Reformation era, indirectly acknowledges those who died for their loyalty to the Pope at the hands of the British state. Admirable as this is, it needs something of a theology to make it more than just the willingness to acknowledge courage or integrity wherever they occur; it needs exposition in terms of the understanding of the Body of Christ. And it may be that such a theological exposition also gives us better insight into the theology of sanctity overall.

So in relation to this, I want to suggest three perspectives that may help us.

First and most importantly, the Christ whose life we recognize in each other is the Christ who has suffered rejection and humiliation at the hands of human agents like ourselves. To borrow the terminology of the contemporary British theologian who has most eloquently developed this theme, James Alison, Jesus has 'the intelligence of the victim'. He stands where every victim of every act of human aggression and violent exclusion stands. That is to say, he is not simply a figure with whom we can identify ourselves instantly and straightforwardly, as if he just mirrors back to us who we already are: our identification with him is only fully real if it involves identification also with those whom we as particular agents or our culture or interest group may have made to suffer. To stand where Christ stands is to be exposed to his judgement: it is a place where we must change and grow if we are to live, because to claim the name of Christ is to be committed to a willingness to see ourselves as victimisers as well as victims – as sinners as well as holy people united with the Son of God.

Thus, when we are confronted with the martyr who has suffered at the hands of our own ecclesial body, there is a very particular kind of judgement and gift involved. To the extent that our victim has met his or her death in the conviction that they are being obedient to the law of Christ, they address to us a word from Christ, an invitation to acknowledge our own complicity in violence and the skewed perspectives that both generate and feed violence. They invite us to cross over to where Christ is: to the place where violence is endured not inflicted. And in this way they draw us deeper into the life of the Body of the crucified.

Secondly: all this is only the most dramatic and clear-cut example of how the holy person manifests to us the reality of a Body constantly broken by betrayal and falsehood, rather than a finished or timeless holiness. Every saint's life, as noted already, arises out of a corporate Christian life in which imperfect (sometimes dramatically imperfect) Christians have played a formative part. Thus if and when we acknowledge signs of Christlikeness—of what I called earlier the 'flow' of life and prayer towards God the Father—in someone from another Christian confession, then even when we still feel bound to attend to theological and ecclesiological disagreements at the level of ideas, we are bound to see that this one holy life must entail a presence and activity of the Body of Christ in and through their Christian fellowship. An Orthodox Christian recognizing something of holiness in a Calvinist, a Pentecostal recognizing holiness in a Catholic, would be acknowledging that the actual historical and specific fellowship of this apparently foreign Christian body of believers is a conduit of the life of the Body of Christ, whatever its supposed 'deficiencies' in [catholic] order or in biblical fidelity.

Thirdly: when we celebrate the saints in an ecumenical context, we are celebrating the Church that *will be* but is not yet. We celebrate the eschatological Body of Christ in which all those who have truly served Christ and embodied his way and his gospel are equally at home, however they may have been separated from each other in history. And we also acknowledge with gratitude that our own life in Christ's Body is nourished by many invisible sources – indeed, that it is nourished by this eschatological unity. The Spirit of the age to come, the Spirit who is a pledge, an *arrabon* of God's future, works in us through relationships we cannot see or grasp at the moment, acting through the stranger, the victim, the one we cannot now recognize as brother or sister. To celebrate a holy person from the history of another Christian family is at the same time to say, 'I do not know today whose life may be used by the Spirit today and tomorrow to bring me to the maturity of faith and witness that God has in mind for me.'

The imagery of a 'cloud' of witnesses is curiously apt here. Those who by God's grace shape our discipleship are a great multitude whose faces are often hidden from us. It is good that we are able to identify some of those faces – the familiar and obvious ones in our own lives and in the life of our own community, and also the unexpected faces, the strangers who, we begin to see, have been brought into our individual and corporate lives by God for our health and salvation; and in identifying some of these faces, we are reminded of those others whose faces we cannot see, both past and present. And we turn to our Christian brother and sister in another Christian confession with new eyes and new expectations – new penitence as well, since we are faced with the reality of how we consciously and unconsciously ignore, avoid and even violently reject God's gift when it comes in unfamiliar form.

The ecumenical celebration of holiness teaches us two essential things. It alerts us to the various ways in which we may be complicit in Christ's suffering at least as much as sharing it; it teaches us to be very cautious about triumphalistic identification with the cross when, as flawed and fallible disciples, we are always also the crucifiers. It is the same insight that comes at every Eucharist, when we acknowledge that we sit at table among those who will betray and abandon their

Lord, knowing that we have failed and will fail as they did. And it recalls us to gratitude for the pathless ways of God's grace, given to us constantly in the unexpected person, place or community. In other words, the business of this Conference is not simply one aspect of liturgical life or historical study, but the whole character of the Church as a penitent and maturing body, watered by hidden streams and living out of the timeless resource of the Holy Spirit in whom the end, when Christ is all in all, is already real.

May this Conference be blessed by God the Holy Trinity for the enriching of our shared witness and the deepening of our unity.

From Lambeth Palace, London
SS Simon and Jude, apostles
28 October 2008