



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York**

**The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector***  
**John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music***  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, May 15, 2011**  
*The Fourth Sunday of Easter*

*Festal Evensong  
at 4pm*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock  
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*THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS; THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS*  
*(Apostles' Creed Series, Sermon 14)*

*The Communion of Saints*

I recall once reading a children's story about a tick who sat on a dog, and the dog lived with a family in a house, on a street, in a town, that was in the center of a county, of a certain state in our nation that is seated on the continent of North America a part of the earth which spins round the sun, the center of our solar system, just one of many in this swirl of milky way; a galaxy, one of billions that bespeckle our universe, and all that, from tick to infinity, brought into being and sustained by God our Father.

The kind of interconnectedness in that story is akin to this mystery we profess as the communion of saints. *Communio sanctorum* is our sharing and fellowship in the holy. When the church talks about the communion of saints she is talking about two relationships: a fellowship among holy people and a fellowship in holy things.

It is easy to mistake the communion of saints as being only those faithful people who have died, and that in some vague way, through our profession of a common creed, we share a bond of affection. We might also mistake the visible church solid and firmly planted in places such as say 53rd Street and 5th Avenue as the only legitimate manifestations of the church. That would be our error in an age where the eye is the locus of faith; if we can't see it and handle it, it is of no account. We might err further by thinking that those who have died are to be pitied, it's their loss to have departed such glories as these, and that we who occupy the pews and kneel at the rail are the living embodiment of the church. John Henry Newman suggested that such a view of the departed saints confuses who is really alive and who is dead. He goes further to say that attitude suggests that the departed saints are "attached to us as a church [grave] yard is to a church, which it is decent to respect, unsuitable to linger in."<sup>1</sup> The reality of our relationship; the reality of our communion is far deeper than that and it is far more real and more mystical and wonderful.

The church is an assembly of all the saints. It is Christ's body, that greater mystery, with Jesus Christ at her head. Her members are made up of both the living and the dead from this age and from ages past. We are all indwelled and, hopefully, governed by the Holy Spirit. That perfect spirit is poured out into this body and that goodness becomes a common fund in which we all, past and present, share. Jesus, being the head of this body, communicates his supreme goodness to us through the sacraments.

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<sup>1</sup> Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* #11

On the day of Pentecost, Saint Peter preached a sermon that included a call to “repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>2</sup> At the conclusion of his sermon those who “gladly received his word were baptized and on that day was added unto them about 3000 souls. And they continued steadfastly in the apostle’s doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.”<sup>3</sup>

This is one of the first descriptions we have of our fellowship with holy people and holy things. In it we find the proclamation of the gospel that draws people towards a new life in Christ. We hear about baptism in Christ’s name for the forgiveness of sins and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This is the sacramental gate through which people enter into the body of Christ and begin sharing with fellow believers in the communion of saints. That fellowship is strengthened by Christ’s self-giving of his body and blood in the Eucharist: Luke calls it the breaking of bread. And all of it is awash in the prayers.

Trying to articulate this mystery called to my mind a poem by George Herbert in which the poet paces his floor searching for suitable words to express his love for God.

“Whereas if the heart be moved,A

Although the verse be somewhat scant,

God doth supply the want”<sup>4</sup>

God does continue to supply new lines to this old yet living story. The communion of Saints grows ever larger every day as the newly baptized are welcomed into the body, here at Saint Thomas, and in all the churches throughout the world. But, I would be lying to you if I insisted that the church is one big *communio sanctorum* love-in, and if you have spent any amount of time in church, you wouldn’t believe me even if I did tell you that.

### *The Forgiveness of Sins*

Sin has been a fixture of the church and indeed the entire created order since the first transgression of Adam and Eve in the garden and it remained so until Moses received the law on Sinai. Then things got worse. When the law comes the power of sin is aggravated rather than diminished, and a heightened sense of moral responsibility results. Does that mean there is some fault with the law? God forbid. This from Romans: “Nay, I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet.”<sup>5</sup> The law has this double edged quality to it; it at once convicts us of sins we have committed, but sometimes points out sins we have not committed and all of sudden begin to seem pretty appealing. “Hm, I never thought of that one before!”

After Moses, the prophets preached vehemently against sin, exhorting the faithful to repentance and resistance against further transgression; often with tragic results prompting Jesus to say, “Woe to you! for you build the tombs of the prophets whom your fathers

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 2.38

<sup>3</sup> Acts.41-42

<sup>4</sup> Herbert, *A True Hymn*

<sup>5</sup> Romans 7.7

killed.”<sup>6</sup> We don’t like to have our sins pointed out to us, and are often content to shoot the messenger.

And so it goes right through the ages from Adam to you and me. Sin is our purposeful disobedience to the known will of God and every sin does harm to the communion of saints. “If we say that we have fellowship with him [Jesus], and walk in darkness, we lie, and *do* not the truth: If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”<sup>7</sup> “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”<sup>8</sup>

Taking all this into account, what can be said? What can be said is, “every man is separated from God, except those who are reconciled to God through Christ the Mediator.”<sup>9</sup> Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners not to condemn them. He commended to us the sacrament of baptism for the forgiveness of sins; instituted for us the sacrament of his body and blood, our sins being washed clean through that sacrifice; and bestowed upon us his Holy Spirit as an advocate and guide lest we suffer for want of his consoling presence.

Saint Augustine once wrote that in the commission of sin you get no help from God; but to those who cry out for release from sin, “the sun of righteousness will arise with healing in his wings.”<sup>10</sup> “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”<sup>11</sup>

Make no mistake, your sins and my sins do grave harm to the body of Christ. They impair our communion with one another; they impair our communion with Christ; they impair our communion with the sacraments.

The forgiveness of sin is an *ἄφεσις*, the Greek word that means letting go. We are liberated from sin by Christ in baptism and through a much more laborious baptism of repentance in which we drench our couch with tears.<sup>12</sup>

The result of the free and unmerited gift of forgiveness is a restoration of communion both in sacrament and in that mystical body that is all the saints: holy things, holy people.

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 11.47

<sup>7</sup> 1 John 1.6,8

<sup>8</sup> Romans 3.23

<sup>9</sup> St. Augustine, *On Merit and the Forgiveness of Sins*, I.56

<sup>10</sup> Malachi 4.2

<sup>11</sup> 1 John 1.9

<sup>12</sup> St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 39.xvii