

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS
SIXTH IN SERIES ON THE APOSTLES' CREED
NOVEMBER 2, 1986

Page 1

The Roman Empire, concerned about the growth of the church and convinced that the church was a challenge to its authority, conducted an extensive persecution. Christians were thrown to wild beasts or burned alive in front of shouting, sadistic crowds. In the city of Smyrna, about 155 A.D., the persecution was intense. Some Christians had been martyred. Some had renounced their faith rather than be executed. The proconsul decided the time was right to confront the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp. Polycarp, 86 years old at the time, was a respected, loved leader. In his youth he had met people who had actually known Jesus, so his teachings and his example had far-reaching consequences.

The High Sheriff led Polycarp to the stadium and stood him before the proconsul. The shouting was so loud they could hardly hear each other. The proconsul had pity on Polycarp and pleaded with him, "Have respect for your age. Spare yourself this torture. Confess Ceasar as Lord and denounce the atheists." Christians were called atheists because they refused to acknowledge the emperor as god. The proconsul persisted, "Swear by Caesar, curse Christ, and I will set you free."

Polycarp answered, "86 years have I served Christ, and He did me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my king who saved me? Hear a plain answer: I am a Christian." The proconsul threatened, "I will have you burned alive unless you repent." Polycarp answered with serenity, confidence and joy. His face radiated peace, "You threaten me with the fire that burns for an hour and is speedily quenched; but you know nothing of the fire of the judgment to come and of eternal punishment which is reserved for the wicked. Why delay? Bring what you will." The proconsul announced to the crowd, "Polycarp has confessed himself to be a Christian." The crowd shouted, "Burn him alive."

Polycarp was not the first martyr, but his martyrdom so captured the admiration and imagination of the people, they began worshipping at his tomb. The martyrs who held steadfast to the faith, in contrast to those Christians who had weakened and confessed Caesar, were held in high esteem in the church's memory. The church believed that the martyrs gained immediate entrance into heaven and were seated in special places of honor. Not only were the burial places of special significance, but the bones of the martyrs and their possessions were venerated. In time, only special persons were named saints. These "official" saints were assigned special days on the church calendar when they were to be remembered and honored. Children were baptized with the name of a special saint. Prayers were prayed to saints to intercede with God on behalf of people. As it was believed that only martyrs gained immediate entrance into heaven, "ordinary" Christians had a waiting period in purgatory. In 994 A.D., November 1 was decreed as All Saints Day to honor the saints in heaven, and November 2 as All Souls Day to pray for the dead who are still in purgatory.

It is interesting to see how practices developed through the centuries, but the 16th century reformers believed the essence of the faith had been lost. The effect of the Protestant Reformation was to take the church back to its origins, back to the Bible and the early creeds. There we find that all Christians were called saints. Paul wrote to the saints in each of the cities to whom he wrote letters. The saints were the members of the church--the Christians--of that city. On All Saints Day we remember and honor the

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Page 2

martyrs. We rejoice in the example of Polycarp and hold him before us as a hero and an example. But, we also include all those who have died in the Lord. All Saints Day is also an opportunity to remember our loved ones who have died. The banner for All Saints Day has a dark side which stands for this earth, and a silver side which stands for heaven. The cross is the bridge between the two worlds. The saints, having lived this life in faith, now live eternally with God, through the cross of Christ.

Now, what about communion with the saints? In the Apostles' Creed, we affirm a belief in the communion of saints. We can have communion or fellowship with the saints who are yet alive; but, can we have fellowship with those who have died? There is something out there, and around us. Ancestor worship is one of the primitive forms of religion, indicating that people have always sensed the presence of spirits. Sensing the presence of the dead, however, has often been perceived as frightening. Early people believed the dead return to haunt us, so there are many customs of leaving food or flowers on the graves to appease the spirits. Less friendly spirits were chased away by making noise, reflected yet in some of our Halloween customs.

But, can we have communion, fellowship with the dead? Some psychics claim to be mediums or channels through which the dead communicate. Psychics tell us that each of us has spiritual guides. Tradition calls them guardian angels. The Greek philosopher, Plato, four centuries before Christ, said, "God has placed by every person a guardian angel, to whom he has committed the care of the person; a guardian who never sleeps and who is never deceived." Do you experience a guardian angel? Is there a spirit world with whom we humans can commune? What does the Bible say?

There are many references in the Bible to a spirit world, most of which refer to angels. In fact, angels are mentioned some 300 times in the Bible. Angels are spiritual beings who have two functions: first, angels are messengers of God. An angel told Mary she was going to have a baby. An angel told Joseph. Angels announced the event to the shepherds. Secondly, angels are presented in the Bible as guardians or protectors. Psalm 91:11, "God will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways." Psalm 34:7, "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear God, and delivers them." Martin Luther described angels as "spiritual creatures, created by God to serve all of Christendom and the Church." John Calvin called angels "administrators of divine beneficence who regard our safety, undertake our defense and direct our ways."

Helen Keller attributed her victory over her handicaps to the angels of the Lord, those who helped her, watched over her, and patiently guided her progress. Carol Gleason, a member of our church, was driving on a desolate stretch of the freeway when she heard a voice inside her head distinctly say, "Carol, look at your temperature gauge." Carol looked, saw the temperature gauge enter the red zone, quickly exited and stopped at a service station which happened to be the only open for miles. Isn't it comforting to know you are guided and protected? Evidently, there are angels, spiritual beings, and our loved ones all around us.

I have discovered that when people are given permission to talk about such things, and not considered weird or strange, many are anxious to share. Anna McRae, also one of our members, had a persistent cough that would not respond

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SIXTH IN SERIES ON THE APOSTLES' CREED
NOVEMBER 2, 1986

Page 3

to medicine. One early morning her deceased husband came into her room and shouted, "Turpentine" which is an old-fashioned remedy. The next day she went to the pharmacy, obtained Spirits of Turpentine and immediately found relief. Jean Siemers, also one of our members, awoke one night to see her deceased husband standing at the foot of the bed, beckoning her to follow him. He said, "Jean, come with me now." She responded with a loud, "No way! I'm not ready to go yet! I've got too much to do!"

A little girl, playing with friends on an apartment house roof, was about to scramble over a dividing wall when she was suddenly confronted with a strange man wearing a blue uniform with brass buttons. He said sharply, "I am Johnson. Don't do that!" The little girl stopped just in time to save her life. When she told her parents of the incident, they, for the first time, told her that she was an adopted child, and her deceased father's name was Johnson. Furthermore, he had been a railroad conductor and wore a blue uniform with brass buttons.

When we lived in Manteca, a friend told us about her nephew. When he was four years old, his mother was in an automobile accident and was rushed to the hospital. The family gathered at the hospital and took turns sitting with the boy outside in a small garden. At one point, they learned that the mother was dying and all of them rushed into the hospital, leaving the little boy alone. After she died, they discussed how they would tell the little boy. But, when they reached the garden, he smiled at them and said, "Mama was just here. She told me she was going away, but that she would always love me."

Some of you may find it difficult to accept the idea of the communion of saints. The previous generation particularly found it difficult to accept because they separated the body from the spirit, physical from spiritual, matter from energy. Our generation, however, knows there is no such thing as solid or physical, but everything is composed of energy or spirit. Physical and spiritual are the same. We are basically energy. We are spirit. Physical death is by no means the end of our lives.

The doctrine of the communion of saints means that you are not alone. Don't be frightened. When some folks have experiences with spirits, they are afraid they will be called weird, so they ignore or stifle the experience. Don't be intimidated. Be open to the presence and sometimes manifestation of the spirits. Give credibility to those nudges of conscience, those moments of insight, a burst of creativity, or a new idea. Give credence to the inspiration as you test it according to your best knowledge. Be open; you might be guided. You are not alone. Christ is with you. The Holy Spirit is with you. Your loved ones are with you. The saints are with you.

The book of Revelation gives us a picture of the saints surrounding the throne of God in heaven, praising, singing, giving thanks, glorifying God. As we worship God here in this place, we are not alone. The saints are with us, encouraging us, guiding, protecting and worshipping God with us. We are not alone. We have each other and we are bound together through Christ in fellowship, in communion with the saints.

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