

The Augsburg Confession

Article 21

The topic discussed in this article is that of the role of departed Christians in the lives of Christians still in this earthly life. In our editions this article is entitled “The Cult of Saints” - pointing out that it is abused by the Roman Catholic Church.

In this study we will consider the following: The role of the departed saints as an example to those who are living; the evidence for praying to the saints given by the Roman Confutation; the words of Scripture on the subject; and finally the dangerous result of the Roman teaching concerning the saints. *[Note: In Scripture the word “saint” is used to refer to all those who have faith in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:2), but in the context of this study, the term “saint” will be used only to refer to those who have been called from this earthly life.]*

The Example of the Saints

In Article 21 our Lutheran forefathers began by pointing out the positive example the saints have for us: *“It is also taught among us that saints should be kept in remembrance so that our faith may be strengthened when we see what grace they received and how they were sustained by faith. Moreover, their good works are to be an example for us, each of us in his own calling. So His Imperial Majesty may in salutary and godly fashion imitate the example of David in making war on the Turk, for both are incumbents of a royal office which demands the defense and protection of their subjects.”*

Scripture clearly sets before our eyes the faithful example of the saints as a blessing for us. The book of Hebrews states: ***“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. For by it the elders obtained a good testimony” (Hebrews 11:1-2).*** The rest of that chapter sets before us the example of specific saints and their lives of faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab and many more. Then we read: ***“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).***

As we look in Scripture, in ancient church history, and even our own history, we find and remember many wonderful examples of faith in the lives of those who have lived and died before us. They can and do serve as an encouragement as we live our own lives of faith now. We also find many bad examples and many failures in their lives. The apostle Paul, citing the poor examples of the children of Israel, reminds us: ***“Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted” (1 Corinthians 10:6).*** We can learn from the bad examples of others as well as the good.

If we know the failings of the saints it can help us to remember that they were not perfect. They were sinners, just the same as us. They were sinners who obtained the crown of life, not through their own works, but through faith in the work of Christ. For this reason the Lutherans continued this article by pointing out the errors taught concerning the role of the saints in the Roman Church: *“However, it cannot be proved from the Scriptures that we are to invoke saints or seek help from them. ‘For there is one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus’ (1 Timothy 2:5), who is the only savior, the only highpriest, advocate, and intercessor before God (Romans 8:34). He alone has promised to hear our prayers. Moreover, according to the Scriptures, the highest form of divine services is sincerely to seek and call upon this same Jesus Christ in every time of need. ‘If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous’ (1 John 2:1).”*

The Roman Confutation

In response to the above paragraph the Roman Confutation replied: *“This article of the Confession... must be utterly rejected and in harmony with the entire universal Church be condemned.”* This condemnation was based on three things: *“For in favor of the invocation of saints we have not only the authority of the Church universal but also the agreement of the holy fathers, Augustine, Bernard, Jerome, Cyprian, Chrysostom, Basil, and this class of other Church teachers. Neither is the authority of Holy Scripture absent from this Catholic assertion...”*

Notice the order in which they offer support for their teaching on the invocation of the saints:

- The authority of the Church universal;
- the agreement of the holy fathers;
- the authority of Holy Scripture.

In their minds, the Word of God in the Bible was last and the least important of their support. Most important was the authority of the Church (the tradition of the Church). The writings of the church fathers and Scripture were only offered in support of the Church's authority.

Scripture and the Saints

When we consider the evidence which the Roman theologians presented, we will see that they fail to make a distinction between the invocation of those who are alive and those who have been taken from this earthly life - a very important distinction indeed!

Scripture says that we should make intercession for one another, even for our enemies. James writes: ***“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16)***, and Jesus told His disciples: ***“pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44)***. But these words were spoken to those who were alive, not to those who had been called from this earthly life. The Roman theologians refer to such passages in the Confutation. They refer to the invocation of Job for his friends (Job 42:8); the invocation of Moses for the Children of Israel (Exodus 32:11); of those in Jerusalem for Peter who was in prison (Acts 12:5); as well as many others. They use these passages in support of their teaching that the saints, now called home, continue to pray for us, and that we should ask for their prayers.

In the Apology the Lutherans responded to the Roman assertion that the invocation of saints was supported by Scripture saying: *“There is no passage in Scripture about the dead praying, except for the dream recorded in the Second Book of the Maccabees (15:14).... Scripture does not teach us to invoke the saints or to ask their help. Neither a command nor a promise nor an example can be shown from Scripture for the invocation of the saints.”*

This is a very helpful point, but Scripture goes even beyond this. Concerning those who have departed this life Scripture tells us that they have no knowledge or control over what takes place on earth:

“For the living know that they will die; But the dead know nothing, And they have no more reward, For the memory of them is forgotten. Also their love, their hatred, and their envy have now perished; Nevermore will they have a share In anything done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:5-6).

“For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us And Israel does not recognize us. You, O LORD, are our Father, Our Redeemer from of old is Your name” (Isaiah 63:16).

Again the Apology states: *“Even if the saints do pray fervently for the church, it does not follow that they should be invoked.”*

The Dangerous Result

The biggest problem with the Roman teaching on the invocation of the saints was not in connection with prayer, but intercession. The Church taught that certain saints were in charge of certain parts of life. This may have been derived from the heathen religions which thought that the gods had certain areas of power or influence (cf. Apology, Article XXI, ¶ 32).

Even worse, the Church not only encouraged parishioners to pray to the saints, but also taught that the merits of the saints could be passed on to others, in effect taking the place of Jesus and minimizing His work of redemption. Like Luther, many people considered Jesus a harsh and angry judge, and were taught to trust in the mercy of the saints rather than the mercy of Christ. But Paul writes: ***“Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us” (Romans 8:34).*** Here we can already begin to see the work of the Anti-christ, leading people away from Christ.