

Part I: The Church Remembers

The Communion of Saints: The Church's Crisis of Memory

Every Sunday Christians around the world stand and confess words older than themselves. They recite a creed they did not write, celebrate a Eucharist they did not devise, read Scriptures preserved by generations they never knew, and gather among the living and the dead in what the Creed calls "the communion of saints." Yet many Christians have forgotten what that phrase actually means. You see, we have reduced it to a comforting sentiment about heaven when, in reality, it is a profound declaration about memory and the Church. The communion of saints is the Church's refusal to believe that Christianity began with us. It is the conviction that faith is received before it is proclaimed.

That claim may seem surprising. We have become accustomed to describing Christianity in terms of belief, morality, mission, or personal experience. Each, of course, is essential. Yet beneath them all lies something which I think more fundamental. Christianity is, before anything else, a religion of memory.

The Scriptures repeatedly remind us that the greatest danger facing the people of God is not persecution, intellectual doubt, or even moral failure. It is forgetfulness.

Israel's history is punctuated by the recurring command, "Remember." Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Remember the covenant at Sinai. Remember the mighty acts of the Lord. The biblical imperative is not nostalgia for a vanished past but covenantal fidelity in the present. To forget is to sever oneself from the acts by which God has constituted His people. Memory is therefore neither sentimental nor optional; it is an act of obedience.

This pattern reaches its fulfillment in the Upper Room. Our Lord did not instruct His disciples merely to think about Him after His departure. He commanded them, "Do this in remembrance of me." The Greek term, *anamnesis*, cannot be reduced to mere psychological recollection. Within the liturgical and covenantal vocabulary of Scripture, it signifies a remembrance that participates in the reality of what is remembered. The Eucharist is therefore not simply an exercise in historical reflection but the Church's perpetual participation in the once-for-all saving work of Christ. All this is to say, Christian memory is sacramental before it is intellectual.

The same principle governs the life of the Church in every age. Baptism is memory enacted. The Creed is memory confessed. The liturgical year is memory ordered in time. Even the canonical Scriptures are themselves the written memory of God's dealings with His people, received, preserved, and proclaimed within the worshipping community long before they became objects of scholarly investigation. The Church does not merely possess memories; the Church exists because it remembers.

This understanding stands in marked contrast to the assumptions of contemporary Western culture. Ours is an age captivated by innovation. We instinctively equate what is new with what is better, what is recent with what is relevant. We celebrate originality while quietly assuming that dependence upon the past is a weakness to be overcome. Historical consciousness has given way to chronological snobbery. All too often, tradition is frequently caricatured as intellectual inertia, while novelty is mistaken for vitality.

The Church has not escaped these assumptions. Indeed, the Church has all too often baptized them. Every generation is tempted to imagine that, somehow, it stands at the beginning of Christian history, uniquely capable of recovering an authentic Gospel that is somehow obscured

by two millennia of theological reflection, liturgical development, and ecclesial life. Such confidence is neither reformational nor evangelical. It is simply ahistorical in that it mistakes amnesia for renewal.

This temptation is hardly new. The Fathers confronted it repeatedly. Whether opposing Gnosticism in the second century or Arianism in the fourth, they did not appeal first to originality but to continuity. Their concern was the *regula fidei*—the rule of faith received from the apostles and confessed throughout the churches. Orthodoxy was never understood as the invention of new doctrine. Rather, it was the faithful reception, preservation, and articulation of the apostolic inheritance. As St. Vincent of Lérins would later argue, authentic catholicity is discerned in that which has been believed 'everywhere, always, and by all'—not as a mathematical formula but as a recognition that the Holy Spirit has not abandoned the Church to perpetual theological reinvention.

This is precisely what the Creed means by the communion of saints.

Modern Christians often hear the phrase and imagine only those believers who have died and now rest in Christ. That is certainly included, but it is hardly exhausted by it. The communion of saints is the Church's confession that Christ has created one Body that extends across all generations, languages, cultures, and centuries. Those who have gone before us are not simply historical curiosities to be viewed from a distance. They remain members of the same Body into which we ourselves have been baptized. Their witness continues to instruct us, their prayers accompany the worship of heaven, and their theological labors continue to nourish the Church they served in their own generation.

This understanding has profound implications for how we read Scripture, how we worship, and even how we think. Christians do not

approach the Gospel as isolated individuals armed only with private judgment. We read within a communion, just as we worship within a communion. It is a communion of the ages. Now, the Fathers are not infallible, nor are the great medieval theologians, nor the Reformers, nor, indeed, scholars of our own age. Yet neither are they disposable. They are our elder brothers and sisters in Christ, fellow pilgrims, no matter the age in which they lived, whose lives bear witness to the inexhaustible riches of divine revelation.

Years ago, during my own theological formation, I began to realize that scholarship was not primarily the acquisition of information but entrance into a conversation... a conversation that was already in progress. Surrounded by the accumulated wisdom of centuries, I slowly discovered that the finest theologians did not seek originality for its own sake. They sought fidelity. They listened before they spoke. They received before they critiqued. Their confidence arose not from intellectual independence but from their willingness to inhabit the Great Tradition with humility. It was then that I began to understand that the communion of saints is not merely an article of the Creed. It is the very environment in which Christian theology lives and breathes.

Every Christian, whether consciously or not, inherits a history. The question is not whether we possess a tradition. We all do. The question is whether we have the humility to recognize the one that has already formed us, and is forming us still.

That recognition is desperately needed today. Before we can address the Church's divisions, recover theological seriousness, or speak credibly to an increasingly fragmented culture, we must first recover our memory. For the Church cannot proclaim faithfully what it no longer remembers. You see, the communion of saints is not merely an ornament of Christian doctrine. It is the Church remembering itself.

To be continued...

The Communion of Saints: The Church's Crisis of Memory

Part II: When the Church Forgets

In the first part of this essay, I have argued that Christianity is, at its heart, a religion of memory. The Church exists because it remembers. It remembers Israel's story, Christ's saving work, the apostolic witness, and the faith once delivered to the saints. That memory is not preserved merely in books, but in liturgy, sacrament, doctrine, and in the life of the Church itself. Yet if memory is essential to Christian identity, then forgetfulness is among the gravest dangers the Church faces.

Memory is rarely lost in a single generation. It erodes quietly until an entire people mistakes forgetfulness for freedom. Civilizations disappear this way. Families disappear this way. Churches disappear this way.

Our own age has not abolished history. Indeed, it often appears fascinated by it. We produce documentaries, commemorate anniversaries, digitize archives, and debate the past with remarkable intensity. Yet fascination with history is not the same thing as historical consciousness. The latter requires humility. It recognizes that we ourselves are products of a past we neither created nor fully understand. Historical consciousness teaches us to ask not simply what happened, but how what happened continues to shape us.

Modern Christianity has too often exchanged historical consciousness for the cult of the contemporary. We instinctively evaluate the past according to the assumptions of the present, forgetting that we ourselves will one day be judged by generations yet unborn. The result is a Church increasingly tempted to imagine that authentic Christianity is whatever our generation discovers for itself. The past becomes a

warehouse from which we selectively retrieve quotations rather than the living inheritance within which we have been formed.

Moreover, this temptation is not confined to one theological tradition. Conservatives often imagine that fidelity consists in preserving a particular moment in history. Progressives frequently assume that faithfulness requires liberation from history. Both instincts misunderstand tradition. The Church has never existed by preserving a museum, nor by beginning anew every generation. It lives by receiving, discerning, and faithfully transmitting the apostolic inheritance under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

This, however, raises a deeper question. Who has the authority to narrate the Christian story?

Every community lives by a narrative. Families tell stories about themselves. Nations tell stories about themselves. Churches do the same. Those narratives shape identity far more deeply than constitutions or mission statements. But, if the story is distorted, the identity becomes distorted as well.

Much of the contemporary Church suffers from precisely this disorder. We have become adept at creating mythologies. We imagine golden ages (whether in the 1950s or the Middle Ages) that never existed or primitive Christianities conveniently resembling our own theological preferences. We speak confidently of 'returning to the New Testament Church,' as though two thousand years of theological reflection, liturgical development, missionary expansion, and spiritual experience were unfortunate detours rather than the providential history of Christ's Body.

The irony is striking. Architecture, medicine, law and so much more in the arts and sciences rest on centuries of accumulated knowledge and practice. Yet many Christians who accept this as a truth in other fields, often feel entirely comfortable dismissing centuries of theological

reflection as irrelevant. We have accepted the authority of accumulated wisdom in nearly every discipline except the one that concerns the knowledge of God.

The Fathers understood this differently. They never imagined themselves as religious entrepreneurs. Athanasius did not defend the divinity of Christ because he wished to construct a novel theological synthesis. Augustine did not write to establish a personal school of thought. Their concern was the *depositum fidei*, interpreted within the *regula fidei* and received in the worshipping life of the Christian community. Development occurred, certainly, but development was understood as faithful reception rather than creative reinvention.

I did not always appreciate this.

Like many students, I initially approached theology as the acquisition of information. I wanted answers. The bookcases began to fill. I wanted mastery of texts, historical periods, and doctrinal controversies. Theology seemed to consist primarily in learning enough to defend one's conclusions.

That illusion gradually dissolved.

My years in higher education in the United States and in England fundamentally altered the way I understood both theology and history. Attending the Oxford Patristic Conferences introduced me to an intellectual world whose roots extended far deeper than I had imagined. Studying in Durham for three years confirmed that discovery in ways I could never have anticipated. There I came to understand that scholarship is less about possessing knowledge than entering a conversation that was already underway.

Libraries became more than repositories of books. They became witnesses. Every shelf testified that generations of Christians had wrestled with the same Scriptures, prayed the same Psalms, celebrated

the same Eucharist, and confronted many of the same questions that confront us today.

What changed me most was not simply reading the Fathers. It was discovering that they were neither relics nor monuments. They became teachers, guides and friends.

Athanasius ceased to be merely the subject of academic investigation. Augustine became more than a towering intellectual figure. Their writings revealed minds disciplined by prayer, formed by the liturgy, and devoted to the life of the Church.

The same was true of the scholars from whom I was privileged to learn. Gerald Bonner possessed an extraordinary command of Augustine, yet what impressed me most was not the breadth of his learning but the generosity with which he shared it. Henry Chadwick demonstrated that immense scholarship need not produce arrogance. Conversations with colleagues often continued long after lectures had ended. Disagreement was expected. Intellectual rigor was assumed. Charity was indispensable.

Those years taught me something that has remained with me ever since. Theology is not a debate to be won but a conversation into which one is invited. There is a seat at the table for those who want it and who are willing to engage.

That realization transformed my understanding of authority. I no longer imagined the task of theology to be originality. Originality is rarely a Christian virtue. Fidelity is. I learned that the best theologians listen before they speak because they know they are not the first to read the Scriptures or to ponder the mystery of the Incarnation. Their confidence rests not in novelty but in communion.

Looking back, I recognize that those years also reshaped my understanding of the Church itself. The communion of saints ceased to

be merely an article recited in the Creed. It became an intellectual and spiritual reality. I found myself increasingly aware that every serious theological conversation included voices that transcended centuries. Athanasius was present. Augustine was there. The Cappadocians had their voices heard. Anselm, Hooker, Taylor, Temple, Ramsey, Packer, Stephen Sykes, Rowan Williams, Bob Webber—all were present and belonged to the same conversation, each of them illuminating the Gospel from within his own place and historical moment while remaining accountable to those who had come before.

This was not antiquarianism. Nor was it nostalgia. It was participation.

Much has been written in recent years about "deconstruction." The term is often used to describe the painful dismantling of inherited beliefs. Some forms of that process are necessary. Every generation must distinguish authentic tradition from mere custom, apostolic faith from cultural accommodation. Yet deconstruction without reconstruction produces only fragmentation. The Church does not flourish by severing herself from her memory. She flourishes by returning to the sources—*ressourcement* in its richest sense—not to escape history but to inhabit it more faithfully.

Perhaps that is what I have missed most in recent years. It is not simply theological discussion, but theological friendship. There was a time when conversations ranged naturally from Athanasius to Augustine, from Brunner to Barth, from liturgy to exegesis, from ecclesiology to prayer. The purpose was not victory but understanding. We assumed that truth was something to be sought together rather than possessed individually.

That assumption now feels increasingly rare.

The speed of contemporary discourse has left little room for patient reflection. Social media rewards certainty more than wisdom. Polemics travel faster than careful argument. Theological identity is too often reduced to slogans, while the patient work of historical theology is dismissed as irrelevant. Yet the Church has always depended upon precisely that patient work. Doctrine matures through prayer, controversy, worship, and generations of faithful reception. Theological amnesia is never overcome by louder voices. It is overcome by deeper roots.

I left England with degrees, books, and friendships that have enriched my life beyond measure. More importantly, after years of study, I left with a different understanding of what it means to be the Church. I had entered what I have often come to think of as the Christian version of the Great Conversation. It took me years to realize that it began long before I arrived and will continue long after I am gone. My task was not to dominate that conversation. It was to enter it with humility, to learn, to contribute what I could, and then to hand it on to those who would come after me, knowing full well that I'll still have a seat at the table.

That, I have come to believe, is what the communion of saints looks like in the life of the mind. It is not merely the remembrance of holy men and women who have gone before us. It is the joyful recognition that we never think, pray, preach, or worship alone.

If the Church is to recover its voice in the modern world, it must first recover its memory. It must once again learn to listen before it speaks. Only then will the Church discover that the conversation it feared had ended has, by the grace of God, been continuing all along.

To be continued...

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Part III: Remembering Forward

If the modern Church suffers from a crisis of memory, then its renewal will not begin with innovation but with remembrance. This is not a call to retreat into the past, nor an invitation to confuse tradition with traditionalism. Christianity has never survived or thrived by preserving relics. The Church has survived because every generation has learned anew how to receive what it did not create and to hand on what it never possessed exclusively as its own.

Tradition is one of the most misunderstood words in the Christian vocabulary. It is often imagined as little more than inherited custom, institutional habit, or resistance to change. Yet the classical understanding of *traditio* is far richer. The word itself means "that which has been handed over." It describes a living movement rather than a static possession. The Church receives the apostolic faith, embodies it in worship, articulates it in doctrine, and entrusts it to those who follow. Tradition is, therefore, neither antiquarianism nor nostalgia. It is the living memory of the Body of Christ.

The Fathers understood this instinctively. Athanasius did not preserve the Nicene faith because he wished to defend the cultural superiority of fourth century Alexandria. Augustine did not preach in Hippo because he hoped future generations would admire his brilliance. Their concern was always the same: that the Gospel entrusted to the Church might remain recognizably the Gospel.

Doctrine was never detached from worship, nor theology from holiness. One cannot read their works for long without discovering that the greatest theologians were first men of prayer.

That lesson has been confirmed repeatedly throughout my own life. Some of the finest scholars I have known possessed an intellectual humility that was as memorable as their learning. Pamela Bright demonstrated that rigorous historical scholarship could coexist with profound Christian charity. James Atkinson embodied a breadth of learning that never diminished his gentleness. Charles Kannengiesser reminded me that the Fathers remain inexhaustible precisely because they continue to point beyond themselves to Christ. Their scholarship was not an end in itself. It was an act of service to the Church.

The same could be said of Michael Ramsey. More than any Anglican theologian of the twentieth century, he understood that the Church exists only because she continually receives her life from Christ in the shadow of the Cross. Reading Ramsey, one is struck not by cleverness but by holiness. His theology emerged from prayer, from the liturgy, and from the patient contemplation of Scripture. He never separated doctrine from devotion because he understood that the deepest truths of Christianity cannot be mastered; they can only be inhabited.

Rowan Williams has continued that same conversation in our own time. He has shown, perhaps better than any contemporary theologian, that returning to the Fathers is not an exercise in historical curiosity but an encounter with living witnesses. His writings repeatedly remind us that theology begins in contemplation before it becomes analysis. We do not think our way into communion. We are drawn into communion, and only then do we begin to think faithfully about what we have received.

Robert Webber understood this in a different register. Long before many others recognized the growing spiritual exhaustion of modern evangelicalism, he perceived that the future of the Church would depend upon recovering her ancient memory. His call to rediscover the historic Church was never an appeal to romanticize the past. It was an invitation to recover the Church's center. Worship, sacrament, catechesis, and the rhythm of the Christian year were not relics of another age but gifts by which the Church remembers who it is.

Looking back over the years, I realize that my own theological journey has been less a search for novelty than a gradual entrance into what I have referred to as the Great Conversation. At first I imagined theology to be a succession of books. Eventually I discovered that it was a communion of persons. Athanasius conversed with Augustine. Augustine illuminated Anselm. Ramsey read the Fathers. Rowan Williams entered the same stream. Bonner and Chadwick taught their students not simply what to think but how to listen. Across the centuries, the conversation continued, and by God's grace I found myself occasionally invited to take a seat at the table.

This is why I have increasingly become convinced that the greatest threat facing the Church is not secularism, declining attendance, or even theological confusion. Those are real concerns, but they are secondary. Beneath them lies a more fundamental loss. We have forgotten that Christianity is something we receive before it is something we explain. We have mistaken independence for maturity, originality for faithfulness, and novelty for renewal.

The recovery of memory requires humility. It asks us to acknowledge that we are not the first generation to wrestle with Scripture, to celebrate the Eucharist, or to confess Jesus Christ as

Lord. It reminds us that every genuine reform in the Church has arisen not from forgetting the past but from returning more deeply to it. The great reformers were first great listeners.

This is why the communion of saints matters. It is not a decorative phrase buried within the Creed. It is a confession about the nature of the Church itself. Christ has gathered one people across centuries and cultures, one Body whose members continue to bear witness to Him even as generations come and go. We are formed by those who preceded us, just as those who follow will in some measure be formed by us. The communion of saints is therefore not simply an object of belief. It is the context in which Christian faith is lived.

Every Sunday the Church quietly bears witness to this reality. We gather around one altar. We hear ancient Scriptures. We confess an ancient Creed. We offer ancient prayers that have been shaped and refined by countless generations of believers. Then, in the Eucharistic Prayer, we join "with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven." Those words are so familiar that we often fail to hear them. Yet they express one of the most extraordinary convictions in all of Christian theology. The Church at worship is never alone. The visible congregation is joined to the invisible communion. Time is gathered into eternity. Memory becomes praise.

Perhaps that is why I have come to believe that the communion of saints is ultimately grounded in the Church's refusal to forget.

It refuses to forget the God who called Abraham.

It refuses to forget the prophets who proclaimed His word.

It refuses to forget the apostles who bore witness to the Resurrection.

The Church refuses to forget Athanasius standing almost alone for the faith of Nicaea, Augustine preaching to an anxious world, generations of unnamed monks preserving manuscripts through centuries of upheaval, scholars patiently recovering forgotten texts, missionaries carrying the Gospel across continents, parish priests faithfully celebrating the Eucharist in places history will never record, and ordinary Christians whose names are known only to God.

None of them belongs to the past alone.

They belong to the communion into which we ourselves have been baptized.

That confession is more than memory.

It is hope.

As I sit in my library writing these words, I am alone, yet surrounded by friends. Athanasius still defends the faith. Augustine still teaches me to think. Ramsey still reminds me that theology begins in holiness. Webber still calls the Church back to her ancient center. Bonner, Chadwick, Atkinson and so many others continue the Great Conversation. Though they have departed this life, they remain remarkably present. Through their books they still speak. Through their lives they still instruct. In remembering them, I discover that I have never studied alone.

Yet the communion of saints is greater even than the companionship of books. Every Sunday I leave my library and

come to an altar. There, once again, I confess a Creed I did not write, hear Scriptures I did not preserve, partake of a Eucharist I did not devise, and join my voice "with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven." At that moment the conversation becomes communion. Every Sunday, at every altar, the Church remembers. And in remembering, she discovers that she has never been alone. Perhaps that is what the Creed has been teaching us all along.

The communion of saints is not simply about those who have gone before us. It is God's gracious reminder that no Christian ever believes alone, prays alone, worships alone, or serves alone. We have received a faith that has been handed to us by countless faithful hands. Our calling is simply to receive it with gratitude, live it with integrity, and hand it on with joy.