



SAINTS FOR SINNERS

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In many and various ways, Christians have tried to prove the existence of God. Many of these proofs are known to Lutherans and have been employed by us on occasion: the cosmological argument about a first cause or prime mover; the teleological argument pointing to the order and complexity of the universe; the ontological argument that God is greater than the greatest thing conceivable. Each has its virtue as well as its weaknesses, but one thing they all have in common: they are remarkably lonely. Whether they mean to or not, they signify a God detached, objectified, a thing to be proven or disproven rather than a person to be known, loved, or quarreled with. Likely this is why, even if they *prove*, these proofs never *persuade*.

A truly persuasive proof of God for us would have to point to the God of the gospel, not merely to a metaphysical necessity. Such a proof would have to be as personal, communal, and involved as the Trinity itself. Such a proof would have to indicate a God Who worked not only in the past as creator or redeemer but also in the present, as the living Holy Spirit. There *is* such a proof of God. It is the hagiographical proof.

The Saints We Already Have

We Lutherans have a hard time overcoming our knee-jerk fear of saints. Our institutional memory associates saints with very bad things; “childish and needless works,” as article xx of the Augsburg Confession puts it.¹ The dangers seem to us always to outweigh the benefits. Melancthon concedes that saint veneration started out all right but inevitably degenerated²; Luther points out that we don’t go around erecting shrines to the living saints who pray for us, so why do that for the dead?³ We connect the saints to the human habit of idolatry: reintroduce veneration and we’ll end up with a preference for their spuriously assumed

intercessions over the promised mercy of God in Christ. When Lutherans talk of saints at all, it is to make the perfectly valid point that the Scriptures use the word “saints” (really, “the holy ones,” referring to the Holy Spirit, Who makes them holy) as synonymous with “believers.”⁴

This is true, but it misses the point. Yes, there is a primary definition and theology of “the saints” as simply all believers in Christ Jesus as Lord.⁵ But throughout Christian history there has always been also a secondary definition and theology of “the saints” as the *exceptional* witnesses to Christ Jesus as Lord. It does little good simply to refuse to talk about the secondary kind by reference to the primary kind. And the fact is—Lutherans *do* venerate certain saints already.

To start with the most obvious point, any number of Lutheran churches have been named “St. Paul” or “St. Matthew” or even “St. Peter.” Many a Lutheran lets slip the moniker for post-biblical saints as well: “St. Athanasius,” “St. Augustine,” and “St. Bernard,” to name a few favorites of Luther’s. What about Luther himself? I have yet to hear anyone work up the gumption to call him “St. Martin” (“Blessed Martin Luther” at best, as if we had got as far as beatifying but not canonizing him⁶), but aside from the title he shows every sign of being a saint to us. His life story is regarded as a biographical baseline for spirituality. His works are read, meditated upon, and marketed in the form of daily devotions. We visit the Wartburg to see where he translated the New Testament, eagerly catching glimpse of the fireplace where he tossed his inkpot at the devil. The doors of the castle church in Wittenberg are long gone on account of enthusiastic Lutherans tearing it up into holy relics of the Reformation. St. Martin together with his wife St. Katie are the saintly models for the holy married life, warts and all, the school for sinners. Fast-forward four hundred years and you find the other favorite Lutheran saint,

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a martyr to the most evil regime of recent memory. As with Luther, there are Bonhoeffer icons, Bonhoeffer devotionals, and Bonhoeffer pilgrimages.⁷

Our Confessions allow for this.⁸ Melancthon gives a clear account of why Lutherans should not invoke the saints in prayer,⁹ but we are taught this one-sidedly almost to the point of parody. What we usually forget is that he and Luther both allowed for the possibility that the saints pray for us. It is hard to imagine just what we would mean by “the communion of saints” and “the resurrection of the body” if this were totally out of the question. Perhaps it would be better to say the saints pray *with* us: in fact, we testify as much in our proper prefaces in the liturgy—think especially of Mary Magdalene and Peter in the Easter preface.¹⁰ Further, neither Luther nor Melancthon denied the designation of some believers as saints in the secondary sense. If the term meant “utterly sinless,” then they (on good grounds) had their doubts. But “saints” as “utterly sinless” is a fairly truncated view of saints across history anyway.¹¹ And in some cases it is so obviously untrue that even the most extreme partisan of saint veneration would be hard pressed to deny it. St. Jerome and St. Cyril of Alexandria are two particularly odious saints¹²—Cyril will even appear as a villain in the movie *Agora* later this year, not without reason—and a good number of the biblical saints hardly qualify as role models. Lutherans should find little cause for alarm in this; in fact, it is a positive reason for us to reconsider saints, of which I will say more below.

The Evangelical Necessity of the Saints

Even beyond a minimalistic allowance of the veneration of the saints, the Confessions offer us a *positive* program for how to go about doing it rightly. In the Apology, Melancthon writes:

Our confession approves giving

honor to the saints. This honor is threefold. The first is thanksgiving: we ought to give thanks to God because he has given examples of his mercy, because he has shown that he wants to save humankind, and because he has given teachers and other gifts to the church. Since these are the greatest gifts, they ought to be extolled very highly, and we ought to praise the saints themselves for faithfully using these gifts just as Christ praises faithful managers [Matthew 25:21, 23]. The second kind of veneration is the strengthening of our faith. When we see Peter forgiven after his denial, we, too, are encouraged to believe that grace truly superabounds much more over sin [Romans 5:20]. The third honor is imitation: first of their faith, then of their other virtues, which people should imitate according to their callings.¹³

Note how extraordinarily *evangelical* the saints are in the church. In the first place, they are living evidence of God’s mercy and desire to save people. In their lives and teaching they make the gospel known. In short, they are proofs of the God *of the gospel!* Second, they specifically testify to the fact that this God of the gospel is one Who forgives. Peter denied Christ; even after the resurrection, in his career as an apostle, he made the enormous mistake of refusing table fellowship with Gentiles; and yet he is still called a saint, still forgiven, because grace triumphs over sin. Imitation of the saints only comes in third place in the Apology, and even this is keyed in a distinctly evangelical tune. Melancthon, ever sensitive to the religious psychology of Reformation theology, intuited that the holiness of the saints might become oppressive, seeming so far beyond the powers of ordinary believers. Thus imitation of the saints of the past must be counterbalanced by one’s own personal vocation in the present. The combination allows for

both a fellowship of learning from the holy ones before us and a confidence in the Holy Spirit’s guidance in our own time and place. Vocation directs veneration in a fruitful way.

This is a good starting point, and to it we can add a few more distinctively, reassuringly evangelical uses of the saints.

For one, saints are guides to repentance, and Lutherans are certainly interested in anything that moves sinners to repent. Saints inspire it both from the example of their own magnificent repentance—think of Augustine’s turn from Manichaeism, unchastity, and superstition—and by the splendor of their obedience to the law of God. In their light, our own sins are that much more evident.

Further, the saints live out *sola scriptura* in a vivid way. They are often seized by a portion of the Scripture and take it with utmost seriousness, challenging us to take Scripture with equal seriousness. The results can be profound, as in the recent revelation of Mother Theresa’s vocation to fulfill the words of Jesus, “I thirst,” not only in her missionary work among the poorest of the poor but also in her own intense spiritual suffering of thirst for God’s presence¹⁴; or in the way Martin Luther King Jr. lived the book of Exodus and the prophetic exhortation to let “justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream” (Amos 5:24) to such an extent that he exposed and transformed the injustice in American society; or in St. Anthony the Great’s devoting his whole life to Jesus’ invitation, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21).¹⁵ The results of living *sola scriptura* can also be weird: Alexander the Sleepless heard the words “Keep awake” as uttered by Jesus and strove his whole life to do exactly that. Profound or weird, the impact is something that biblically-centered Lutherans can only rejoice in: an abject commitment to the Scriptures as words of life from

God. Instead of writing exegesis, or preaching exegesis, the saints *become* exegesis. Even if some of them zero in on a small part of Scripture in an unbalanced way, as a whole group taken together, they become the living interpretation of Scripture. And the saints *must* be taken together; that is the whole point of the “*communion of saints*”!

Yet another evangelical use for the saints is to see how their lives map out the great variety within the *ordo salutis*. Stories are much better at playing out all the idiosyncratic possibilities of human encounter with the divine than ascetical theology or spiritual handbooks. And again, stories of saints are pointers and proofs of the God of the *gospel*, Who is a consummate storyteller, Whose revelation is a narrative set down in Scripture, and Who in His Spirit continues to work through history. This storytelling aspect of hagiography is not foreign to Protestantism. For instance, Gerald L. Sittser compares the function of Protestant missionary biographies to Orthodox icons of saints. The principal difference, he argues, is that the former shows the process of sanctification while the latter shows the result of sanctification, but the two are analogous in their spiritual intention. Of necessity, the starting point of hagiographical biographies is “ambitious, unusual, and flawed people” who through the sanctifying power of the Spirit “became living examples of faith.”¹⁶ The great number of the saints, in icons and missionary biographies and other hagiographic forms, shows that there is not just one way to grow in God’s grace, there is not even an ideal way, and there is certainly no expectation that it happens to ideal persons. Sanctification is something that happens to sinners in all their manifold variety.

Yet another gift of the saints is that they are an antidote to the tyranny of the present. The church extends not only over space but also time. It matters greatly that our confession of faith is held in common with the apostles and

all the baptized between us and them. But church history remains largely absent from everyday Christian worship and practice. Such neglect gives us a false impression of the importance of our own time, besides leaving us spiritually lonely and intellectually impoverished. Communion with the saints of the past two millennia fills in that gap and reminds us that God did not stop His ministry among us when Jesus ascended into heaven.

Hagiography for and against the Gospel

Given this impressive number of evangelical uses of the saints, what reason can Lutherans still have for avoiding them? It should be clear by now that the problem is *not* with the saints themselves. The problem is what we do with the saints. Hagiography is the problem. Hagiography can and should create stronger faith, a greater love of God, wonder at His mysterious ways, and a desire to emulate the saints’ good works in ways that fit our own time and place. But hagiography can also cause resentment and envy, a burden of inadequacy that leads to despair instead of repentance, competitively playing the saints off against each other,¹⁷ hamhanded attempts to reproduce the saints’ ways unfittingly, and of course the big Lutheran fear of trusting in the saints more than in God Himself. But there is no one better than the saints themselves to correct our hagiographical abuses.

To explain: I once saw a medieval sculpture of St. Martin of Tours, famous for giving half of his cloak to a beggar and turning to a life of faith and charity thereafter. In this sculpture, Martin on his horse is large, noble, beautiful, transformed. But the beggar he helped is small, deformed, even subhuman. The artist’s mistake is revealing: he (presumably a he) took the saint to be the true human but the object of the saint’s charity to be something less. Yet it was exactly the opposite intuition that motivated Martin himself: the recognition of humanity,

of Christ himself, in another person, however destitute.¹⁸

Who matters more to God, the saint or the person whom the saint serves? Tales of saintly charity—when they manage to echo the passion of the saint more than the passion of the hagiographer—magnify the little ones, the weak ones, those who will never become saints themselves. The saints do not magnify themselves. If anything, they tend to become ever more cognizant of their own sinfulness. Their saintly activity is about elevating the helpless and the hopeless. And this is how Jesus defined his own ministry.

And as Jesus reclined at table in the house, behold, many tax collectors and sinners came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” But when he heard it, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.’ For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.” (Matthew 9:10–13)

God is ultimately for and about the sick sinners of this world, the ones who will never get their acts together enough to become saints. The gospel is that while we were still sinners—even enemies of God—Christ died for the unrighteous. Hagiography runs the risk of making the gospel primarily about the potential, even the obligation, of sinners to turn into saints rather than the gracious rescue and forgiveness that God extends to His enemies while they are still sinners.

As Lutherans we need not, and furthermore should not, deny the first part—our destiny as saints, in the sense of sinners who are and will be personally transformed. But as Lutherans we also always insist that the rescue and forgiveness are the fundamental gospel, the baseline, the gracious fact that

we will never grow beyond. In technical terms, justification precedes sanctification, and sanctification is never such that justification is no longer necessary. It's not a ladder to be kicked away. Saintliness is the enactment of the gospel, not the condition of the gospel. And the saints know that.¹⁹ They are also for the sinners of the world. Which is probably why no one becomes a saint by trying to become a saint, which is necessarily a self-centered process at odds with sanctity itself. When a saint is doing her job, she will decrease, while Christ—and the least of these in whom Christ dwells, however hidden (Matthew 25:40, 45)—will increase.

This brings to mind John the Baptist, who is the true template of the saint and the account of whom in the gospels is the template of proper hagiography. John the Baptist prepares the way for the Lord to come. He does not point to himself, but away from himself, to Jesus. “Behold!”—not John's own baptisms or works in the wilderness or ascetic diet but—“the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” John is the holiest man in Israel and yet insists that he is unworthy to untie the thong of Jesus' sandals.

Jesus does not deny John's exceptional holiness or calling. And yet his ultimate judgment on his forerunner is startling.

As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, ‘Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has

arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Matthew 11:7–11)

This extraordinary word of Jesus' must orient our perception of the saints. A saint may be the greatest man ever born of woman: and yet—in God's kingdom—the very least is still greater. God's priorities, God's judgments, God's evaluation of the human heart find the greatest in what is the least. The greatest is the one who will receive the most from God.²⁰

Jesus finishes his comments on John with the observation:

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. (Matthew 11:12–15)

The law is violent—even the law of holiness—and it kills. Jesus comes to make alive.²¹ This potential for conflict between the gospel and hagiography continues beneath the surface of the book of Acts, where the disciples of the Baptizer have to make the difficult move from venerating John to worshipping Jesus.

We will recognize the saints, then, by their habit of pointing away from the violence of their own holiness to the mercy of Christ, as John did. A saint constantly gives the gift of Christ. Historically, saints have done this in three ways: as martyrs, as miracle-workers, and as models. The martyrs were the very first kind of saint to arise, believers who gave Christ to the point that they also gave their lives. As the centuries passed, the saints were known to give other kinds of miraculous gifts from heaven, such as healings, though often the gift of the miracle got separated from the gift of Christ. Current-day interest in saints focuses heavily

on their potential as models, though again often separated from the gift of Christ. Melancthon notes in the Apology that, “[w]hen people try to imitate [the saints], for the most part they imitate the outward practices, but not their faith.”²² One sees the same kind of error happening in contemporary liberal Christianity oriented chiefly toward social justice: it tries to pry good works out of people by guilt and magnification of heroically active Christians but is unable to create and sustain the faith that moved such heroes to action.

Civic Wonderworkers and Sinful Saints

In an evangelical understanding, we will want to place the greatest emphasis on the saint as martyr (broadly understood as witness) to and for Jesus Christ. This raises two serious questions.

What about the great lights of this world who were not Christians or, even if they were Christians, were not primarily witnesses to Christ in their life and work? One finds, for instance, in contemporary proposals for saints, a rather astonishing tendency to mention Gandhi.²³ It hardly need be said that Gandhi was not himself a Christian. His name recurs because “saint” is understood primarily as an imitable model. No Christian need deny the greatness of Gandhi or the fact that he was a divine gift to the world. But the concept of saint is utterly voided of its christological center, in both its primary and secondary senses, if Gandhi qualifies as one. It is essential to restrict the meaning of “saint” to “martyr” for Jesus Christ. Still, there is something vital in this intuition about the greatness of Gandhi. It shows that we need room in our theology for a concept of the “secular saint.”

This should pose no difficulty for Lutherans, on account of our doctrine of the two kingdoms. God does not only supply the needs of the right-hand kingdom but of the left as well. God is concerned for our public and

social wellbeing, the righteousness of our governments, and the fairness of our economies. We should expect that God will give us “secular saints”—or better, civic wonderworkers—whose first calling may not be to witness to Christ, and who may not be baptized (think of Luther’s “wise Turk”), and yet still do the work of God in this temporal world. The nonviolent practice of Gandhi certainly qualifies him as a civic wonderworker; we might also suggest people like Abraham Lincoln, Florence Nightingale, and Nelson Mandela. God is generous to us in the arts and sciences as well, and we ought not disdain the great lights He has given us in the persons of Albert Einstein, Marie Curie, Emily Dickinson, Beethoven, or Klimt. But honoring such persons—even the Christians among them—does not require us to call them saints.²⁴

If great humanitarians of exceptional character are denied the status of saints because they are not primarily witnesses to Christ, what about exceptional witnesses to Christ of doubtful character? The example of Peter that Melancthon offers is instructive. Sin and error do not disqualify one as a saint or witness to Christ, not at all. In fact, from an evangelical perspective, the sins of the saints are themselves important witnesses. Saints are not saved by their good works anymore than ordinary sinners are. Saints who sin are evidence of God’s desire to forgive as well as testimony to His power, for He can and does work through earthen vessels and unclean lips. Saints who sin are a commentary on theodicy, for God permits evil and yet works greater good through it (hence another proof of the God *of the gospel*). Saints who sin are a constant corrective to the moralistic impulse that lurks in the practice of veneration.²⁵ A terrible disservice is done to believers when hagiographers clean up the lives of the saints to a falsely pristine state or restrict the saints to the obviously righteous.

In this regard, Lutherans have ecumenical company. The Bolland-

ists, a group of Jesuits dedicated to hagiographical studies, began in the nineteenth century to apply historical-critical method to the legends of the

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saints, in part out of pastoral concern that the embellished and absurd tales read in the liturgy provoked more snickering than sanctifying among the laity. The best-known Bollandist Hippolyte Delehaye’s best-known work, *The Legends of the Saints*, presents a careful and occasionally hilarious account of the problems of hagiography. Hagiography is not simply history, Delehaye insists, though history is generally concealed somewhere beneath it. Since hagiography aims at the edification of contemporary readers, it often ignores the actual details of the saint’s own time and place; it tends to conflate saints and reduce their sanctity to a humdrum monotony; it favors the bold and concrete over the inward and mystical; and it almost always wants to erase the sins of the saints.

[T]he eulogy of a saint admits of no blameworthiness; and as saints are subject to human infirmities, the hagiographer who wishes to respect the truth is faced with a task of considerable delicacy. His faithfulness in this matter depends largely on his state of mind. His concern is to edify: and if, for example, he can persuade himself that the saint’s failings, before *or even after* his conversion, so far from tarnishing his glory *actually enhance the triumph of God’s grace*, why, then, the hagiographer will not leave his subject’s human side in the shade, and will avoid putting him on so high a peak that others are discouraged from emulating him. But there is a school of

hagiographers who would gladly expunge St. Peter’s denial from the gospels, in order not to tarnish the halo of the leader of the apostles.²⁶

Delehaye’s sympathies, as both Christian and historian, are evident: tell the truth, and the failings that appear will only give greater glory to God. It is thus important to distinguish the tales about the saint from the saint proper: “We are therefore quite justified in being wary of a legend, while maintaining full trust in the saint.”²⁷ This sentence could nicely summarize a Lutheran approach to hagiography.

A more recent Catholic writer, Lawrence Cunningham, in his book *The Meaning of Saints*, expresses some disappointment in the Roman legal system for canonizing saints. His primary concern is that the focus on the miracle-working powers of the saints forces their role as models into much lower esteem. The world needs people inspired to live holy lives of engaged service, he argues, more than it needs people content to ask help from the miracle-working dead.²⁸ Cunningham also finds that the system has tended to favor members of orders, which have the time and finances to apply for the sainthood of one of their own. (It should be noted that since Cunningham’s book was written, John Paul II changed the process to make it easier and cheaper, in part to redress this imbalance.) But a more recent writer like Robert Ellsberg, who offered his own suggested calendar of the canonized and non-canonized in the collection *All Saints*, has found that strikingly few laypeople ever end up as saints: sainthood itself has become clericalized. Cunningham and Ellsberg both call for a gradual shift in the meaning of sainthood for today, no longer focusing so much on miracles as on their solidarity, service, and hidden faithfulness.

The same desire for a revised perception of sainthood can be found in Eastern Orthodoxy. Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, the “grandmother of western

Orthodoxy,” wrote a number of saint studies over the course of her life, the longest and most detailed of which was a biography of Lev Gillet, known also by his pen name “A Monk of the Eastern Church.” She believed that he was a saint, yet hardly anyone knew his flaws and failings better than she did, and she did not pass over these unpleasant facts in her account of his life. Following in this tradition is Michael Plekon’s work on “hidden holiness,” arguing that saints for our time and place will not look like those of the past. New models must be developed, new kinds of saints recognized.²⁹ A French Orthodox theologian by the name of Antoine Arjakovsky has called this approach “the new hagiography,”³⁰ and there is every reason to think that, if Lutherans are willing to talk of saints among their own, this hagiographical approach will be of particular interest.³¹

In fact, given these movements in the churches most concerned with saints, it is an ecumenical imperative for Lutherans to join the conversation. The reformers objected to the “religious life” being considered greater than the lay life; this Lutheran critique could be extended to the canonization of saints as well. The relatively small number of canonized saints who were married—or raised children—implies, if anything, that the traditional perception of what qualifies as holy is still skewed. A conception of sainthood that inadvertently bars anyone forced to discipline a willful two-year-old, or connect to a moody teenager, or spend a lifetime exploring the tricky terrain of personal intimacy, needs serious revision.³² A great deal of theological work remains to be done here, certainly beyond the scope of this essay. We have much to learn and much to teach.³³

Lutheran Hagiography in Action

We come now to the final issue, which is really the first, because the veneration of the saints has always been primarily a liturgical matter. We must

consider what the reintroduction of the saints might look like in Lutheran worship.

What would be the impact on preaching? It is entirely possible that pastors, bored with the gospel of God’s unmerited grace for sinners or frustrated with the slow sanctification of their recalcitrant flock, would use saint days as an excuse to give a biographical lecture instead of a sermon or a wallop over the head instead of a pronouncement of pardon. This danger will apply equally to frustrated Christians on the left and the right. I’ve already heard these sermons, often on our gradually observed biblical saint days or in reference to the various persons commemorated in church bulletins. Melancthon’s guideline is as good as any: the proper use of the saints in a sermon will evoke both gratitude and trust in the gospel. Only thirdly should the saint be presented as a possible model for imitation, according to each person’s own calling. In short: if saints don’t produce either genuine repentance or genuine joy, then something in the hagiographical and homiletical process has gone awry.

Prayers ought not be directed toward the saints but can allude to them, as already happens in certain of the proper prefaces. (Actually, the invocation of saints in public worship is relatively rare even in Catholic practice; it occurs most often as private devotion.³⁴) A worship service could be tailored to honor the life and witness of a particular saint—presumably on the saint’s death day—but it would have to meet the requirement of glorifying the holy God more than the holy person. A special occasion service, rather than Sunday morning or high holidays, is likely the right place to experiment with this, or perhaps first at Christian education events.

Another point to consider is that saint commemorations are a way of bringing church history into worship, against the aforementioned tyranny of the present. Saint commemorations will bring the church’s historical suc-

cesses to mind. It may prove wise to balance this joy in success with repentance in failure. The reintroduction of hagiography as a corporate church discipline is thus also the occasion to begin hamartigraphy as a corporate church discipline. As with saint commemorations, this would present dangers of its own: it would be pretty easy for us to apologize for, say, the sins of the Inquisition, which in no way touches our lives—or for sins we perceive another part of the body of Christ committing right now though we ourselves do not—or for sins that are ideologically popular to repent of and as such don’t actually cut through our self-righteous bubble. But potential abuse doesn’t absolve us of seeking out the right use.

Some modest efforts have already been made among Lutherans to establish a calendar of saints—not of Lutherans only but including Lutherans who, obviously enough, have never been formally acknowledged since our churches have no official canonization process. The movement is strongest in Scandinavian countries.³⁵ Here and there are other exploratory efforts by Lutherans and various other Protestants to articulate an understanding of the saints within their churches.³⁶ A recent conference sponsored by the Faith and Order Commission gathered Christians from Catholic, Orthodox, and especially Protestant churches to consider the role that commemoration of the saints might play in their worship; Lutherans numbered among the speakers there.³⁷

This essay here is intended to introduce readers to *Lutheran Forum*’s entry into this process: we are not proposing a calendar per se, but starting in this issue we will present to you our own candidates for sainthood from within our church across the past five hundred years and around the globe as a deliberate revival of the *vox populi* approach to canonization that was the norm for the first millennium of the church. These fellow believers were the Spirit’s chosen proofs of the God of the gospel. Insofar as they pointed

to Christ, we find it fitting to call them saints.

But we undertake this effort in hagiography always remembering that, in the kingdom of God, the very least is greater than these saints. Saints are for the same people God is for: the lowest, the least significant, the most sinful. For the saints are ultimately living exegesis of the humility commanded by the gospel: “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Luke 17:10).³⁸ ✠

Notes

1. Quotations from confessional documents here are taken from *The Book of Concord*, eds. Timothy J. Wengert and Robert Kolb (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) [hereafter cited as BC].

2. “It seems that when the saints were first mentioned, as in the ancient prayers, this was done in a tolerable way. Soon afterward, invocation followed and then after that enormous abuses far worse than pagan practices.” Apology XXI, BC 242.

3. “Concerning the Invocation of the Saints” in the Smalcald Articles, BC 305.

4. The Latin version of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession reads, “The church is the assembly of saints,” while the German version reads that it is “the assembly of all believers,” also implying the basic equivalence between saints and believers, BC 43, 42. The point is also made in the statements and studies of the Lutheran-Catholic dialogue on the subject, collected in *The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII*, eds. H. George Anderson, J. Francis Stafford, and Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992).

5. The best account I have read of this “primary” theology of the saints, and why it must remain primary, is in Robert Bertram, “A Constructive Lutheran Theology of the Saints,” *dialog* 31/4 (1992): 265–71. His chief point is that while prayer is praised as the very highest thing by the reformers—as the life of faith itself—it is *not* a means of grace. What believers need even more than to speak to God is to hear *from* God, and this office is performed by other living believers. One living believer can say to another: “I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” or “Sarah, your sins are forgiven,” in a way no dead believer can. The one thing I would add to Bertram’s argument is that, although it cannot be so specifically personal, one of the reasons Christians have always been attracted by the saints *is* their capacity

to speak across time in surprisingly personal ways. Think of how many generations have been formed by Augustine’s *Confessions*, or how John Wesley’s heart was strangely warmed by Luther’s Preface to Romans, or how countless souls have been moved by the wild and wondrous grace exhibited in the life of St. Francis. In this important sense, the dead saints *do* speak to us. This is the key for moving from the primary theology of the saints (the biblical sense of the community of living believers who proclaim the word of God to one another day by day) to the secondary theology of the saints (those exceptional believers who proclaim the word of God to our hearts and imaginations across the boundary of earthly time and space).

6. Not long after his death, though, Luther was already for all intents and purposes considered a saint by his evangelical followers. See Robert Kolb, *For All the Saints: Changing Perceptions of Martyrdom and Sainthood in the Lutheran Reformation* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1987).

7. Even some Catholics have found reason to consider him a saint. See for instance Harry James Cargas, “Protestant Martyr’s Canonization Fitting,” *National Catholic Reporter* 19 (October 22, 1982), 21, cited in Stephen R. Haynes, *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon: Portraits of a Protestant Saint* (London: SCM, 2004), 228. Haynes documents at length the various features of the Bonhoeffer “cult,” as well as arguing that the best way to understand Bonhoeffer’s function in the church is as a saint. Of particular interest is his comparison of the features of Bonhoeffer’s life to those in classic hagiography, 133–43. See also the two pieces by Frits de Lange, “Saint Bonhoeffer? Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Paradox of Sainthood” and “On Classics and Saints: The Relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” both available online at fritsde.lange2.wordpress.com/articles/, accessed February 1, 2009.

8. The Augsburg Confession made a point of saying so (though, ironically, no article drew greater ire in the Roman Confutation). Article XXI reads: “Concerning the cult of the saints our people teach that the saints are to be remembered so that we may strengthen our faith when we see how they experienced grace and how they were helped by faith,” BC 58.

9. I find his arguments still compelling and assume that a renewed and reformed practice of saint veneration among Lutherans would not include the invocation of the saints. See Apology XXI.

10. The preposition “with” also has the virtue of downplaying the mediatorial aspect of saint veneration that makes Lutherans so uncomfortable, while still asserting the reality of the resurrection and our communion with those on the other side of death. See the essays on mediation in *The One Mediator*.

11. A surprising contribution to this conversation comes from Paul Tillich, who writes:

“The term ‘saint’ has been misunderstood and distorted; saintliness has been identified with religious or moral perfection. Protestantism, for these reasons, has finally removed the concept of sainthood from theology and the reality of the saint from religion. But sainthood is not personal perfection. Saints are persons who are transparent for the ground of being which is revealed through them... Protestantism does not allow a difference between the saint and the ordinary believer. Every believer is a saint in so far as he belongs to the communion of saints, the new reality which is holy in its foundation; and every saint is an ordinary believer, in so far as he belongs to those who need forgiveness of sins. On this basis, however, the believer can become a medium of revelation for others and in *this* sense a saint. His faith and love can become sign-events for those who are grasped by their power and creativity. A rethinking of the problem by Protestant theology is certainly needed.” *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951): 121–22.

12. On Jerome and Cyril, see Robert Louis Wilken, “Communio cum Sanctis,” *A Report from the Center*, Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology (Autumn 2008): 4, 6.

13. Apology, BC 238.

14. Mother Theresa, *Come Be My Light: The Revealing Private Writings of the Nobel Peace Prize Winner*, ed. Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C. (London: Rider, 2008).

15. All biblical quotations hereafter are taken from the English Standard Version.

16. Gerald L. Sittser, “Protestant Missionary Biography as Written Icon,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 36/3 (2007): 303–21. Just like in classic medieval hagiographies, “[t]he purpose [of the missionary biographies] is not merely to tell the facts and thus preserve the memory of these missionaries but to awaken, illumine, inspire, and challenge readers to perceive and embrace the same spiritual vision and calling,” 315.

17. This is why, as we develop our calendar of saints (as is already happening to some extent), it will be important to have not only Lutheran saints in our constellation, and not only pre-Reformation saints. As part of our growing ecumenism we must recognize and grant the work of God in churches that think rather differently from our own. But ecumenical rapprochement between us and Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and Anglicans will not only entail *our* acknowledgement of *their* saints but also *their* acknowledgement of *ours*: all the more reason to be ready to show how God has been at work in our community, how His light has shined through some of our own. This will be most difficult when it comes to blood martyrs at the hands of fellow Christians, as for instance St. Patrick Hamilton, the Lutheran martyr introduced in this issue.

18. This intuition is, I believe, also the lasting legacy of Mother Theresa and why she has

captivated so many people across confessional lines.

19. See David C. Steinmetz, “Growing in Grace,” *Christian Century* (October 30, 2007): 10–11, where the author compares the spiritual thirst of Mother Theresa to the *Anfechtungen* of Martin Luther: “[T]here is no way to grow in grace by trying to grow out of it... there is no way to grow beyond Christ. In the end, sanctity is God’s gift to Christians and not any Christian’s gift to God,” 10.

20. Luke takes the same approach in his own distinctive way: consider the three “lost” parables of ch. 15.

21. The wider context of Matthew 11 sustains this interpretation. It begins with John in prison sending his disciples to ask Jesus if he is the one or should they wait for another. What an extraordinary question! Did John forget Jesus’ baptism and the rending of the heavens? Instead of answering directly, Jesus sends back news that is not news at all: Jesus has been healing and raising the dead and preaching good news to the poor, as everyone knows. Does John need more evidence than that? “And blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (v. 6). John’s “violent” holiness runs the risk of being offended by Jesus’ mercy to the undeserving, his “eating and drinking” with “tax collectors and sinners”; by comparison to John’s rough sanctity, Jesus comes off as “a glutton and a drunkard” (v. 19). The chapter concludes with Jesus’ prayer of gratitude that “these things” have been revealed not to the “wise and understanding” but to “little children,” who find that Jesus is “gentle and lowly in heart,” offering “rest for your souls,” for “my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (vv. 25–30). It is not necessarily those who imitate Jesus, but those who receive from Jesus, that truly understand.

22. Apology xv, BC 227.

23. Among others, Phyllis McKinley, *Saint-Watching* (New York: Viking, 1961); Lawrence Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980); Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time* (Chestnut Ridge: Crossroad, 1997)—all Roman Catholics, too!

24. Sometimes the two will overlap. A civic wonderworker and saint in the same person was surely Dag Hammarskjöld, whose civic wonderworking required a reticence about his faith and whose witness to Christ could really only begin after his death. A great artist and great saint in the same person was Johann Sebastian Bach. In these cases, God was exceptionally generous to both kingdoms!

25. For Lutherans especially, the hagiography of sinful saints is the way to cope with our frequently inappropriate veneration of Luther. Luther is of *no value* to believers as a cultural hero, as the first great anti-Catholic, as the founder of our little in-group, or as a philosophical or political revisionist. What matters about him is his faith pointing to Christ. When

Luther gets lost and turns away from Christ—as he did in his vitriole against the Jews, the Anabaptists, and the papists—he is worthless to us. When Luther testifies to Christ and him crucified, then and there alone he is a saint for us and a model for Christian living and theologizing. Let us once and for all dispense with Luther the hero and welcome in his place Luther the sinful saint.

26. Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, trans. Donald Attwater (Portland: Four Courts, 1998), 54. My italics.

27. *Ibid.*, 171.

28. It is commonly known that in the present-day canonization process of the Roman Catholic Church there must be several verified miracles through the intercession of the dead candidate for sainthood. What is less known is the reason for it: miracles are proof that the person went directly to heaven rather than to purgatory, and therefore that said person was indeed sufficiently sinless to qualify as a saint. Needless to say, Lutherans will not want to adopt this requirement for sainthood.

29. Michael Plekon, *Living Icons: Persons of Faith in the Eastern Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2004) and *Hidden Holiness* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2009).

30. Antoine Arjakovsky, *Essai sur le père Serge Boulgakov* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2006) and *Church, Culture and Identity: Reflections on Orthodoxy in the Modern World* (Lviv: Ukrainian Catholic University Press, 2007).

31. A more urgent reason for Lutherans to consider saints afresh is that it was on this very topic that an otherwise progressive dialogue between Lutherans and Orthodox nearly broke down! See Risto Saarinen, *Faith and Holiness: Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue 1959–1994* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), on the dialogue between the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland and the Moscow Patriarchate: “...Felmy [a Lutheran participant] finds that honouring saints is rather unproblematical for Lutherans, whereas a direct invocation to the saints causes theological problems. Following this, the invocation to the saints was critically debated. According to the discussion notes by Klaus Schwarz [another Lutheran], this debate almost ended the dialogue completely. The common theses only state that no common understanding on this point was achieved... Both churches agree, however, that the ‘cloud of witnesses’ mentioned in Hebrews 12:1 refers to the holy people who are gathered to an eternal worship in the sanctifying nearness of God. It is further mentioned that martyrs and other strong witnesses of the church are remembered in both churches,” 126.

32. An interesting ecumenical corroboration on this point comes from the nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox theologian Alexander Bukharev, who after many years as a monk renounced his vows, believing that

a Christian’s calling was to live outside the walls, in the troubled city of the world; he subsequently married as well and was vilified by most of his generation (among other things for being “a Lutheran,” though except for these probably coincidental biographical details, his theology showed no sign of Lutheran influence). Elisabeth Behr-Sigel wrote her dissertation on him, and his work was also known to Paul Evdokimov: Behr-Sigel and Evdokimov were both married lay theologians and insistent on the call to holiness in the everyday life of the workaday world.

33. A more positive Lutheran contribution to this issue is the reformers’ understanding of the family as the true monastery. See, for instance, Scott Hendrix, “Luther on Marriage,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 14/3 (2000): 335–50.

34. “Common Statement: The One Mediator, the Saints, and Mary,” §94–95, in *The One Mediator*, 56–57.

35. See Yngvill Martola, “On the Question of a Lutheran Sanctoreale,” *Studia Liturgica* 34/1 (2004): 92–108.

36. Besides the essay by Robert Bertram mentioned in note 5, see: Howard V. Harper, *Profiles of Protestant Saints* (New York: Fleet Press Corporation, 1968); *Heilige(s) für Protestanten: Zugänge zu einem “anstößigen” Begriff* (Karlsruhe: Evangelischer Presseverband für Baden, 1993), especially the article by Hans-Martin Barth, “Der Heilige Gott und Seine Heiligen,” to which this present essay is quite sympathetic; the rather strange and not entirely successful attempt of James William McClendon Jr. in his *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today’s Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), best described as a liberal Southern Baptist approach to hagiography; assorted essays in *The One Mediator*, especially Eric W. Gritsch’s “The Views of Luther and Lutheranism on the Veneration of Mary,” Robert W. Bertram’s “Luther on the Unique Mediatorship of Christ,” John Frederick Johnson’s “Mary and the Saints in Contemporary Lutheran Worship,” and Gerhard O. Forde’s “Is Invocation of Saints an Adiaphoron?”; Karl Christian Felmy, “Die Heiligen als Leitbilder für die Kirche and ihr Zeugnis in der Welt,” in *Bilaterale Theologische Dialoge mit der Russischen Orthodoxen Kirche*, ed. Klaus Schwarz (Hermannsburg: Missionshandlung Hermannsburg, 1996), 363–72, in which he makes the nice summary statement: “Heilige sind Menschen, aus denen Gott herausleuchtet” (“Saints are people out of whom God shines”). Notable also is the four-volume Lutheran prayerbook significantly titled *For All the Saints* (Delhi: ALPB, 1994–1996).

37. Basic information about and a selection of papers from the conference can be found on the website: www.monasterodibose.it/index.php/content/category/17/223/582/lang/en/

38. As noted also in AC 6.