Christian Unity Working Group – National Conference 2010

Eucharist: Eph. 4: 1-6, Jn 17: 2-26.

REFORMING SAINTS

The pliability or flexibility of liturgical calendars allows us to anticipate Sunday’s feast for those who honour the Reformation tradition, for it is the 493rd anniversary of that evening when a young professor of scripture pinned some theses for public debate to the church door in the new University of Wittenberg. It could, I suppose, have happened on any day, but was the eve of one of the most important days for the Church: the feast of All Saints, important because it was invented to embrace any saints forgotten elsewhere in a well-populated calendar (to which Australia has added one in the last fortnight). It was John Wesley’s favourite day. This juxtaposition of significant memorials is a pity in a church like ours which makes too little of the past and its witness. I hope most ministers have spread them over two weeks!

The immense coverage of Mary of the Cross MacKillop’s canonisation in the Australian press is interesting in itself (and especially when the headlines read ‘Australia’s first saint’), but to ecumenists, it has raised some uncomfortable issues. My own first reaction was to write a chapter for a book edited by Anita Munro and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship in Australia*, a significant set of essays on the inculturation of worship in our land, in which I analysed the Uniting Church’s calendar of ‘special commemorations’[[1]](#footnote-2), showed its strengths and weaknesses, but chiefly claimed that there were a lot of saints in Australian Christianity who will not make Rome’s list because they weren’t Roman Catholic. They include martyrs, the highest and least argued of such claims. I pointed out that Mary MacKillop arrived on our list in *Uniting in Worship* 2005, Blessed or not. And I reminded the reader that ‘saints’ in the biblical and Reformed perspective means every Christian. I have a rather bouncy Lutheran friend who begins her emails ‘Greetings, saints!’, and she’s right.

The uncomfortable part is not, of course, ‘the glorious company of the apostles, the noble fellowship of prophets, the white-robed army of martyrs’ who ever sing God’s praise, but the method of discerning those worthy of the title as defined by our great Mother, Rome. One of our own put it sharply, John Bodycomb in *Crosslight*:

‘I have no quarrel with the Catholic Church’s recognition of her [sc. Mary MacKillop] as a saint. What I find questionable is that the record of this good and godly woman must be adorned with miracle stories. Even Jesus’ alleged miracles are not what qualify him for exalted status.’ He expands on this: ‘I am uneasy with a divinity who/that can be manipulated by Mary MacKillop or any other singularly good person. What if a thousand good persons interceded? I do not believe in a “poll-driven” divinity either’.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Bodycomb is not alone in making this criticism; a number of distinguished Catholics have made it. To be fair, one of the problems the 16th century Reformers, both those later called Catholics and Protestants, was the number of bogus or non-existent names on the calendar, George and Christopher among them, and both groups purged their lists. A church which claims to be universal does well to make sure the people they so honour did live holy lives, did show forth the spirit of Christ, did demonstrate the power of God to overcome human sinfulness with costly grace. Some people are best commemorated in the *local* Christian memory, which the Uniting Church encourages. In the Uniting Church we need to name more of those who should bring courage and joy to our whole nation and the region of the world in which we live, South East Asia and the Pacific.

When it is used, our calendar of ‘other commemorations’ (how much more minimalist could you get? – I prefer the Church of South India’s ‘Commemoration of Notable Christians’) we use it for ‘educational purposes’, a ‘children’s story’, for instance. This is insulting to both children and adults: the saints deserve better. For children, we reduce a life to a matter of piety or drama or example, and no wonder they are bored; for adults, we consign them to historical curiosities. In this neglect, we have lost one of the legacies of the Reformation.

Every time we recite the Apostles’ Creed, we say we believe ‘in the communion of saints’. But if we seldom name them, have no real recollection of them, and never take time to know them, we have no communion – or fellowship – with them. The Reformers’ problem was superstition, and the cash cult which depended on the merits of the saints to assuage the fear which was constant in a world where life was nasty, brutish and short and everyone really believed in hell. Calvin fully believed that the saints in heaven pray to God – but so may we, so they have no special role in intercession to save the dead or ease their pain in purgatorial fires (or ice: Dante). The prayers of the Church militant and triumphant are all heard at God’s right hand through Jesus Christ our Lord, who knows our human condition. So what is the relationship between these two churches, one on earth and the other in heaven? Modern Roman Catholic teaching emphasises the eucharist as the place where we meet in worship, where we who live by time join our prayers to those in eternity; but it was a recent Methodist worship book[[3]](#footnote-4) which ended its intercessions with ‘In you, Father, we are one family in earth and heaven. We remember in your presence those who have died… giving thanks especially for those who have revealed to us your grace in Christ’.

At that moment, we who walk this ecumenical journey with all its challenges, indeed stand with those who went before us, (to name only those in *Uniting in Worship*): St John and St Paul, whose words about unity in Christ we have heard again today, and among the saints, Lesslie Newbigin of India and Birmingham, Luther of Wittenberg, Martin Bucer, the peacemaker of the Reformation, Paul Couturier of the Week of Prayer, Dorothy Soelle, bible teacher, Pope John XXIII, Willem Visser t’Hooft, D. T. Niles, ecumenical pioneers, Mary MacKillop, Dag Hammarsjold, Thomas Merton, all the holy martyrs and missionaries of our time, and we ask them: ‘Pray with us; stand with us, we need you; we walk in your footsteps, in the same grace of our one Lord Jesus Christ’.

To whom be glory in the Church forever and ever.

The Rev. Professor Emeritus Robert W. Gribben

Chair, Standing Committee on Ecumenics and Dialogues,

World Methodist Council

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(Anglican-Methodist International Commission for Unity in Mission)

The Global Christian Forum Committee

1. See *Uniting in Worship 2* (2005), pp 566ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. *Crosslight*, the journal of the Uniting Church Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, (Melbourne: March 2010) No. 197, p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Methodist Service Book, UK, 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)