

A REINTERPRETATION OF INVOCATION AND INTERCESSION OF THE SAINTS

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[The intercessory role of the saints often is ignored today in favor of the saints' role as models of holiness. This can obscure the theological truth communicated profoundly in invocation and intercession, namely that Christ's work is victorious in all times and places and unites all in one eschatological communion of response to his offer of salvation. The philosophical concept of intentionality appropriated theologically can direct attention to the dynamic of nature and grace involved in invocation and intercession, for a reinterpretation of this tradition that upholds properly both a past attentiveness to the symbolic capacity of the saints and a present attentiveness to the creative function of religious acts.]

MANY CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGIANS focus on the saints as models of faith and holiness for individuals within the Catholic Church to emulate. Just as many would seem to leave to the corporate life of the Church, particularly the liturgy, veneration of the saints as intercessors. Given past "abuses, excesses or defects,"¹ this is understandable. And it incites few cries from the faithful, half of whom know little if anything about the saints or the meaning of their unique place in the "communion of the saints." The saints have virtually disappeared from churches, religious education classes, and popular Catholic discourse. For Catholics born in the past 40 years, then, neglect of veneration of the saints on the individual level, in any of its forms, must be attributed in part to a lack of knowledge about the saints and the tradition surrounding them. For older Catholics, acknowledging the saints as intercessors may seem superfluous at best, given the Church's proper attention since Vatican II to Christ *the*

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¹ *Lumen gentium* no. 51. Translation is from *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, rev. inclusive language ed., Austin Flannery, ed. (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1996).

intercessor. But the "problem" with the tradition of invocation and intercession is not the practice itself but its theological residence in a worldview from which the Church moved at the late pivotal council. What is needed is a reinterpretation that pulls the practice from the shape molded in the Middle Ages.

Why should one bother to reflect upon this practice at all, if most seem satisfied to let the saints recede from individual consciousnesses? First, a theological truth resided in the practice that compelled Catholics for two millennia, and it is a question as to whether or not, at the popular level, this truth is adequately represented elsewhere in the life of the Church: Christ's work is victorious in all times and places and unites all in one eschatological communion of response to his offer of salvation. Second, it would seem that, despite contemporary theology's wise reluctance to pronounce on matters of the afterlife that have not been revealed to us, there is a natural human need to connect with the dead. In the absence of the presence of the saints, there is no shortage of popular books and television programs featuring self-professed mediums who purport to communicate with the dead—a type of spiritualism that is anathema in the Catholic Church but to which today's Catholics, along with detractors of the Catholic tradition of invocation for intercession of the saints, can fall prey. Third, the Catholic Church today is not simply European, and to ignore the inclinations of members of the Church outside of Europe and North America is to perpetuate a long tradition of allowing one social-religious sensibility to dictate to all. Among believers of the Christian East, for example, private veneration of the saints in all of its varieties is more common than in the West. In Latin America, the practice retains its popularity, and, in the growing Church in Africa, many have noted that cultural traditions involving the cult of the ancestors may have some affinity with the cult of the saints. Fourth, any notion that marginalization of the tradition may promote ecumenism ignores the fact that while invocation and intercession of the saints is anathema to some Protestant minds, the Orthodox remain invested in such practices of veneration on both corporate and individual levels. For all of these reasons, whether or not one feels compelled to invoke the saints privately, it is important to have a satisfactory "theory" to explain the practice. Any truly helpful explanation must not only validate the practice of invocation, but show why it is religiously effective.

My article suggests that the philosophical concept of intentionality appropriated within a theological framework can illuminate the tradition in a way that preserves it in its fullness but that also is consonant with contemporary philosophical, sociological, psychological, and cultural sensibilities. Indeed, the concept can show that the tradition of invocation of the saints can promote values of today's Church where often it is seen to thwart them, and it can suggest a way of speaking about this tradition that not only

avoids pitfalls of the past but bars them from resurfacing. And, it will properly emphasize that, because both divine and human activity are involved in invocation of the saints, precisely because invocation will be shown to be a means of response to God, it marries a past sensibility that emphasized the symbolic capacity of the saints and their instrumentality in the dispensation of grace (focusing upon divine activity, admittedly sometimes without drawing the proper distinction between God's activity and that of the saints, with the effect of making the saints themselves seem almost divine) to a present sensibility that emphasizes the creative function of religious acts (focusing upon human activity that must include cognizance of God's antecedent offer to us of self-communication which makes possible the heightened divine-human encounter that we help bring about in our specifically religious response). In the past, it would seem that the focus in invocation of the saints was mostly upon what the saints were "doing" for us now that they exist in the "divine" realm. More recently, those who have reflected upon intercession of the saints have focused primarily upon the activity of those who invoke the saints, validating this as a thoroughly Christian impulse. But just as important in making the practice comprehensible is grasping how the act issuing from the impulse effects the reality that the Church claims, without falling into the medieval tendencies of imagining the saints in heaven distributing favors to whom they will and without falling into common theological errors. The question is: What divine and human realities can make the practice efficacious, and precisely how is it efficacious?

KARL RAHNER ON INVOCATION OF THE SAINTS

Karl Rahner gave us a good start at reinterpreting the practice of invoking the saints and his thought will lay the groundwork for my study. According to Rahner, invocation is expressive of a profound sense of the love of God which Christians believe enlivens us with a power, even after death, that is meaningful for others and that assists all in attaining the fullness of personal spiritual existence. It is "the courage of that love" that acknowledges the fact that "every life lived in faith and love is of permanent value and significance for all, and that the redeemed man in the state of blessedness receives and lives this significance of his life."² Invocation of a particular saint is in fact invocation of all the saints, "an act by which we take refuge in faith in the all-enfolding community of all the redeemed." In Christ, all are united in love and, since "each is responsible for all," the

² Karl Rahner, "Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?" *Theological Investigations* 8, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury, 1977) 3-23, at 23.

saints intercede not as "intermediaries"³ but as neighbors transformed by God's grace, "creative models of holiness"⁴ in the Church's "unrepeatable history of the appropriation of God's grace and of the partaking of God's holiness."⁵

The unity of the saints with Christ is possible because, as Rahner's theology of nature and grace holds, all human beings, living and dead, exist in a supernatural modality. Indeed, the reality that makes both invocation and intercession comprehensible must be understood to have its grounding in the reality that embraces all human beings from the moment of existence, if we are to avoid spiritualistic notions of communication with the dead across a gulf between the natural and the supernatural. All human beings live under the influence of the offer of divine self-communication to which we have been given the capacity to respond. This "supernatural existential" exists by virtue of the self-bestowal of God through the Christ event, which occurs through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit present to creation from its beginning. It is a kind of "grace," objectively speaking, "present in every person as the condition which makes its personal acceptance possible"⁶ even though, by "moral guilt," we can refuse the offer.⁷ It exists, therefore, in each and every human being either in the mode of sanctification or of negative judgment.⁸ Two fundamental moments characterize the divine-human relationship, then: first, the existential situation given to us by God which is that we live under the offer of his self-communication and have been gifted with the capacity to accept this offer, and second, our concrete response to this situation with an "existentiell decision."⁹ It is important to note that the existentiell decision entails

³ Ibid.

⁴ Karl Rahner, "The Church of the Saints," *Theological Investigations* 3, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (New York: Seabury, 1974) 91–104, at 100.

⁵ Ibid. 99.

⁶ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1995) 128.

⁷ Karl Rahner, "Existence: 'The Existential,' Theological, Supernatural Existential," *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology* 2, ed. Karl Rahner et al. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968) 306–7, at 306.

⁸ Rahner, "Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?" 8.18.

⁹ "'Existential,' as in Rahner's phrase 'supernatural existential,' refers to an element in man's ontological constitution precisely as human being, an element which is constitutive of his existence as man prior to his exercise of freedom. It is an aspect of concrete human nature precisely as human. 'Existentiell,' as in Rahner's phrase 'existentiell Christology,' refers to the free, personal and subjective appropriation and actualization of something which can also be spoken of in abstract theory or objective concepts without such a subjective and personal realization" (Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 16, trans. note).

a progressive movement of conversion.¹⁰ It is only at death that a person's "fundamental option" is fully rendered and finally effective in the complete transformation of the human person. Rahner wrote: "The radical acceptance of divinizing self-communication on the part of the creature occurs, however, by death. For death, as action, is the definitive acceptance of self by the free being, and, as undergone, it is the acceptance and endurance of the situation of guilt which is that of the free being."¹¹ The radicality in death of a human being's acceptance of God's offer of self-communication is the possibility of the saints' role as intercessors. In death, saints can "intercede" in a way not possible for even the holiest of people during life.

As a result of the fact that a kind of self-bestowal of God upon human beings occurs whether or not God's intended recipients accept it, living human beings experience God as the transcendental horizon of their existence, sometimes in a state of "elevation" in which the immediacy of God's presence is not associated with any object in the world and other times reflexively and deliberately in association with a particular object—"the concept of a given reality." Rahner described the former case as "the original act of knowledge and freedom" which "bears upon the actual reality itself."¹² While the "original transcendental experience of God in grace" is unthematic, it is necessarily mediated through worldly categories,¹³ since God's self-communication to human beings occurs in the tem-

¹⁰ Rahner took recourse in Scholastic theology's notion of a "gradated grace" to explain both the distinction and the relationship between the graciousness of God and the grace for which it exists ("Questions of Controversial Theology on Justification," *Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smyth [New York: Seabury, 1974] 189–218, at 217). He explained that "[a] subject whose being or nature was grace in such a way as grace is just grace, would be, even as a subject, the pure affirmation of God, and could do nothing else but ratify the affirmation of God in Christ: it would have to believe. And since the subject is real and therefore very 'objective', without this objective inclination in human nature, there would be no difference at all between objective and subjective redemption, there could be no possible contrast between the two dimensions which would be more than apparent. Not only are there grades of 'being in Christ', there are also essential gradations in the gratuitousness of grace itself. . . . The grace of the strictly supernatural procures for itself the grace of creation as its own presupposition on a lower level, maintains and animates it by virtue of the stronger will of God with regard to the higher grace: but it still leaves it as the lower grace. . . . Everything exists in Christ; there are degrees in this 'everything'; . . . [T]he existence which the degrees have in Christ is of different kinds. The lower 'degree' only has its existence in Christ, the higher 'degree' consists essentially of the self-communication of God in Christ . . ." (ibid. 215–16).

¹¹ Karl Rahner, "Salvation: Theology, Redemption," *Sacramentum Mundi* 5.425–33, at 431.

¹² Rahner, "Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?" 8.19.

¹³ Ibid. 8.20.

poral order which finite spirit transcends but does not escape.¹⁴ Rahner claimed that it is mediated through love of neighbor, our "original relationship with God" which is enabled and elicited by God's grace. In other words, God can be said to be met in the neighbor, in the sense that when we respond to God's grace positively and love the neighbor, we experience God directly though mediately, and "intentionally" but implicitly. In this act, we realize our "full creaturely reality."¹⁵ Love of Jesus Christ, who is the preeminent categorial mediator of God's personal communication, is "the unique and the highest act of love of neighbor," but we know the risen Christ in the neighbor.

Theology firmly maintains that there is a love of neighbor which is itself a 'divine virtue', such that its 'formal object' is God himself, i.e. a virtue which is exercised and achieved in a relationship of immediate contact with God in himself. . . . [T]he exercise of love of neighbor (as charity) is *ipso facto* and in itself the love of God. But as true love it is a love that is supported by grace. In other words it is a love that is made open by God to attain to God.¹⁶

When love of neighbor is consciously objectified and deliberately recognized in thematic, or conceptual, form, it becomes a religious act—one also supported by grace. This is the latter experience described by Rahner—the concept of the given reality.¹⁷ It may take the form of veneration of the saints. Thus, *dulia* (veneration of the saints) and *latria* (worship of God) are distinct yet united.¹⁸ Since the saints are part of the permanent body of Christ, love of them as neighbors surpasses love of other neighbors in this qualified sense: the saints' unity with Christ renders our love of them "explicit and definitively complete."¹⁹ This is the case even though the love of the neighbors we encounter in the earthly realm is the condition of the possibility for our love of the neighbor-saints; both loves put us in "an immediate relationship with God in Jesus."²⁰ Invocation of the saints offers stability, therefore. Prayers will be heard, since the saints are united with Christ. And invocation of the saints joins us to all of those in permanent

¹⁴ Ibid. 8.13.

¹⁵ Ibid. 8.20. Rahner also wrote: "Man experiences himself . . . as a subject who actualizes the subjectivity of his gratuitously elevated transcendence in his a posteriori and historical encounter with his world of persons and of things, an encounter which is never completely at his disposal. And he actualizes it in his encounter with a human thou in whom history and transcendence find their one actualization together and in unity, and there he finds his encounter with God as the absolute Thou" (Rahner, in *Foundations of Christian Faith* 133).

¹⁶ Rahner, "Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?" 8.18.

¹⁷ Ibid. 8.19–21.

¹⁸ Ibid. 8.10.

¹⁹ Ibid. 8.21.

²⁰ Ibid. 8.22.

communion with Christ. It is conscious participation in the communion of the saints, a search for the community of others in Christ.

THE INTENTIONALITY OF INVOCATION AND INTERCESSION

Rahner does not use the term "intentionality" specifically in his reflection upon veneration of saints, but he does use it elsewhere to denote the human disposition and existential situation which is the result of divine gift. His theological anthropology would suggest that it may be equally instructive in explaining our response to God's "self-offer." Indeed, intentionality can be viewed as the very locus of the dynamic of nature and grace because concrete human nature exists in a supernatural mode and the unique mark of the human being is the ability to understand this and to respond to God's love.²¹ A brief look at Rahner's comments regarding intentionality will show that his theology of nature and grace can be delineated in terms of intentionality. It will lead to a theological definition of intentionality as the cognitive, affective, and volitional orientation of the human being to God such that all of our activity, implicitly or explicitly, positively or negatively, responds to Being itself. This is, of course, a very particular appropriation of the concept of intentionality that underwent an evolution from Thomas Aquinas, to Franz Brentano, to Edmund Husserl, and to Martin Heidegger who was, of course, influential upon Rahner.

A most important reference of Rahner to intentionality occurs in his *Theological Dictionary*. Here, under the entry on "Formal Object, Supernatural," readers are told that

[i]nsofar as grace is in germ, that is, really and efficaciously, a participation in the life of God and the whole spiritual activity of man is thus already (here and now) directed towards the essentially supernatural beatific vision (possession of God), we can speak of man's cognitive intentionality being elevated by grace ("illuminated", Scripture says) and directed to a supernatural formal object—the infinite reality of God himself; and this intentionality, so directed, forms the non-objective and non-specific 'horizon', in a kind of fundamental existential situation, within which everything of moral and religious (that is, existential) significance is contained and ordered to its last end.²²

²¹ Theresa Sanders illustrated the confusion that can reign in theological matters of the "intentional"—where the realms of nature and grace must always be carefully delineated—when the proper distinctions are not made between our intentional capabilities and their use. She correctly claimed that desire for God "is not an intentional act, if by intentional one means that its origin is the human will. Just the opposite: we are constituted by it, not it by us" (Theresa Sanders, "Seeking a Minor Sun: Saints after the Death of God," *Horizons* 22 [Fall 1995] 183–97, at 197).

²² Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, "Formal Object, Supernatural," *Theological Dictionary*, ed. Cornelius Ernst, trans. Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965) 177–78, at 178. Rahner asserted elsewhere that the fact of this

Elsewhere Rahner wrote that "every human being is elevated by grace in his transcendental intellectuality in a non-explicit manner."²³ This is an ontological rather than an ontic "event":

The formal definition and the material description of the end of man (or of the morally relevant finality of a particular element of his being) must always take man's 'intentionality' into account. . . . The 'end' of an essentially purposeful ('intentional') being can only be determined by the 'Whither' or goal of this intention. But if this intentionality is unlimited in knowledge and freedom, the intentional possession of reality as such (a possession which is very 'real') is the end of this being, an end which is *quodammodo omnia*.

The end is therefore the limitless fullness of reality, i.e., 'God' . . .²⁴

While it is not his focus in references to intentionality, Rahner did not ignore the necessity of willful human advertence to our end. It is assumed and stated implicitly that the elevated cognitive intentionality must have our assent to be fully operative. In a passage remarkably Heideggerian, he wrote in apparent echo of that philosopher's description of our authentic comportment toward *Dasein*:

The end realized or to be realized in freedom and the predetermined end . . . as the self-realizing end (*finis quo*) has to be set by the free act, creatively, in continual hope. Hence it cannot be simply regarded as the actuation of a potentiality, such as takes place outside the field of freedom. . . . The goal of freedom, even where God himself is the end and absolute future (at least as the *finis quo*), is in the concrete the new goal freely chosen among many possibilities and creatively mapped-out. The past, even as potentiality, is left behind by this incalculable future, in the light of which man understands himself creatively.²⁵

elevated transcendentality "does not mean, and need not mean, that man must always have a conscious awareness of this 'supernatural existential' in his life, or that he must be able to create this awareness within him simply by a process of psychological introspection" (Karl Rahner, "Church, Churches and Religions," *Theological Investigations* 10, trans. David Bourke [New York: Seabury, 1977] 30–49, at 35). He explained that a human being "develops to the full the supernaturally elevated transcendentality bestowed upon him, the 'supernatural existential'. . . in and through his existence as engaged in human living in the concrete." All things in creation are potentially revelatory of God; some things—such as the Incarnation—have an objective meaning (and are a cause of the concrete constitution of human beings as those with an elevated cognitive intentionality), whether or not their full value and meaning is explicitly recognized by all human beings (ibid. 36).

²³ Karl Rahner, "Revelation: Concept of Revelation, Theological Interpretation," *Sacramentum Mundi* 5.348–53, at 350.

²⁴ Karl Rahner, "Order: End of Man," *Sacramentum Mundi* 4.300–305, at 301.

²⁵ Ibid. 302. Rahner's reference to the *finis qui* is to our "predetermined end"; his reference to our *finis quo* is to "the actual possession of God." As he explained, "The unlimited transcendence of man and God's self-communication in grace to man mean that God is the (intended) end of man, which therefore precedes his free

Since the concrete reality of human beings which includes "the transcendental character of the ordination to the end" functions as a moral "ought" in our lives²⁶ and we thereby live the supernatural existential either in the mode of acceptance or rejection, we exercise our intentionality for greater union with God, or not. Our "intentional" response to God is itself influenced by "grace" in the very form of the offer of his self-communication²⁷ manifested in our elevated intentionality.

Despite Rahner's reference to a "cognitive intentionality," it must be emphasized that all modes of human consciousness—knowledge, love, and freedom—are affected in the elevation of our "intentionality," and therefore all human action—cognition, volition, and affection—is response to being itself.²⁸ This is clear through Rahner's references, such as that given above, to the hope and freedom employed by human beings in their pursuit of their final goal. To think otherwise is to undermine human free will. It is true, as those in the tradition of dialogical philosophy hold, that love or affection, netting religious conversion, is the most basic and highest consciousness precisely because the divine-human relationship is driven by the love of God to which we are bidden to respond. Love guides and brings to their peak state the conversions of the intellect and of the will, but any virtue, including love, is a gift that cannot be demanded of God in any way, even while it is never given without human cooperation. This means that habit precedes virtue, and habit requires the exercise of the intellect and will. No one is born a saint, loving God perfectly from the start. God's love begins the process of our conversion and our return of the love of God (through the influence of the power of his own love) ends the process, but in between our intellect and will condition our love. That is why the saints are instructive and efficacious in our journey; their struggle to allow themselves to be converted through love presents both example and assistance to us, as will be explained.

realization of his goal. It is predetermined and not that which man sets himself and produces." God "takes this *finis quo* to himself as his own determination [in the Incarnation]."

²⁶ Ibid. 301.

²⁷ Rahner wrote: "[T]he acceptance of God's self-communication must be based upon and is based upon God's offer itself, and hence that the acceptance of grace is once again an event of grace itself, this follows from the ultimate relationship between human transcendence as knowledge and freedom and the term and source by which this transcendence is opened and upon which it is based" (*Foundations of Christian Faith* 118).

²⁸ Lonergan claimed that the intentional operations are directed by three types of conversion—intellectual, moral, and religious (Bernard J. F. Lonergan, in *Method in Theology* [London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1972; reprint, Toronto: University of Toronto, 1996] 237–44; page numbers are to the reprint edition).

SAINTS, SYMBOL, AND RELIGIOUS ACTS

How is intentionality related to invocation and intercession of the saints, then? Properly observing the nature and grace dynamism, there are two aspects of invocation and intercession deserving attention. The first emphasizes an objective reality; the second emphasizes our subjective response. Our intentionality "elevated by grace," "in germ," by virtue of its direction toward "a supernatural formal object," nets the original transcendental experience that is "non-objective" and "non-specific."²⁹ Within this is the other experience of deliberate, objectified human response; it is explicit, thematic, a religious act³⁰ as one consciously reflects upon and commits to "the infinite reality of God himself"³¹ through an object, as Rahner explained. Since this occurs *within* the fundamental existential reality of life in God, such religious acts are properly anamnestic, which is to say sacramental or symbolic in a way that recalls Christ and anticipates our future with him because they participate in the Church's sacramental action toward God's "real symbol," Christ.³² To do justice to both the

²⁹ Rahner and Vorgrimler, "Formal Object, Supernatural" 178.

³⁰ Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, "Anamnesis," *Theological Dictionary* 19–20.

³¹ Rahner and Vorgrimler, "Formal Object, Supernatural" 178.

³² Anamnesis is the recollection of past events. For Christians, the primary event of recollection is Christ's life, death, and Resurrection. Since the saints are a permanent part of the body of Christ, they play an important role in this. The principle of anamnesis functions in Rahner's theology on a couple of levels, correlative to Rahner's descriptions already presented of (1) human beings' original act of knowledge and freedom bearing upon the actual reality itself—God and (2) human beings' deliberate objectification of this act in a concept. On the first level, the original doctrine itself as Plato's referred to the soul's ability to recollect things known from another existence; Rahner compared it to Augustine's doctrine of *memoria* to explain the necessity and reality of the "*a priori* principle of expectation" in human beings which allows them in their transcendence to grasp that which is met in history (Rahner, "Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions," *Theological Investigations* 17, trans. Margaret Kohl [New York: Crossroad, 1981] 39–50, at 47; see also C. Huber, "Anamnesis bei Plato," *Pullacher Philosophische Forschungen* VI [Munich, 1964]). Since we are constituted such that God is our fulfillment, *memoria* responds to that which discloses him. On a most basic level, that which is met in history is the neighbor; the categorial object of the neighbor can mediate God's personal communication, which is revelatory. "It is the environment of *personal relationships* . . . that provides the word in and through which man discovers himself and realizes himself, and . . . comes forth from himself," wrote Rahner ("Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?" 17). Personal relationships can be said to be the pinnacle of historical experience which reveals to human beings their transcendental nature ever reaching for something in but beyond this world, which theologians have named "grace" and Rahner called the "self-communication of God." *Memoria* ultimately anticipates and hopes for "the absolute bringer of sal-

divine and human aspects of invocation and intercession, we must focus first on the meaning of symbol and then on the meaning of religious acts.

While Rahner's theology of symbol is controversial in its claim that "all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own nature,"³³ certainly beyond dispute is the symbolic status of human beings who have the ability to express themselves intentionally. This means that human beings not only can function as symbols but that we were created to respond to symbols. The saints exercised their elevated transcendentality or intentionality for union with God through their own engagement with his creation and its redemption

vation" (Rahner, "Jesus Christ in the Non-Christian Religions" 48), God, the absolute mystery in whom human beings come to recognize that in their finite contingency they are utterly dependent. It seeks Christ, who brings our salvation by manifesting his gift of self and making this manifestation an "irreversible event" (ibid. 47). On the second level, one which more particularly focuses upon human beings' deliberate cooperation in the realization of God's manifestation in history and their resultant growth in spirit and freedom, human beings find "immediate contact" with the Incarnation in the sacraments where this "past" salvific event is recollected in a way which makes it present even while it simultaneously anticipates the future (Rahner, "Theological Observations on the Concept of Time," *Theological Investigations* 11, trans. David Bourke [New York: Seabury, 1974] 288–308, at 291). Here, past, present, and future could be said to dissolve into the eternity of God. Anamnesis is accomplished in the sacraments—most particularly in the Eucharist—because these contain the necessary characteristics of such an event: "it must be accomplished in a personal act and anticipate its ceremonial representation in anamnesis; it must affect the celebrants and be of significance for salvation, or more specifically, it must commemorate in advance their future salvation" (Rahner and Vorgrimler, "Anamnesis" 19–20). Because the Church "represents humanity," authority for anamnestic events is given fundamentally to it rather than to individuals (ibid. 20). The two facets of Rahner's appropriation of the concept of anamnesis also can be delineated in terms of intentionality—the original transcendental experience resulting from our "elevated" intentionality which is "non-objective" and "non-specific" (Rahner and Vorgrimler, "Formal Object, Supernatural" 178) and the deliberate, objectified human response. As already noted, the latter experience, the explicit, thematic, religious act (Rahner and Vorgrimler, "Anamnesis" 19–20), is a conscious reflection upon and commitment to "the infinite reality of God himself" (Rahner and Vorgrimler, "Formal Object, Supernatural" 178) through an object. Since this occurs *within* the fundamental existential reality of life in God, such religious acts are properly anamnestic, which is to say sacramental or symbolic, in a manner given only to human beings since "man is a being permanently established within the universe and the unity of history means that those deeds which he has accomplished in time retain their validity and remain likewise historically established" (Rahner and Vorgrimler, "Anamnesis" 20). The possibility of any event of anamnesis is given by God's "real symbol," Christ. God's real symbol and the purposeful anamnesis of its culminating event—Christ's sacrifice—intersect in the Eucharist.

³³ Karl Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," *Theological Investigations* 4, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Seabury, 1974) 221–52, at 224.

through the presence of the risen Christ, and this is potentially revelatory and even salvific for us since, in responding to these neighbors as symbols, we worship God. In venerating the saints, we follow not only the second but also the first of the two great commandments. Rahner claimed that the two are functionally one.³⁴ Intercession of the saints is the grace of Christ communicated through his saintly symbols of his victory and our hope. This particular symbolic reality can elicit religious acts in a manner given only to human beings since "man is a being permanently established within the universe and the unity of history means that those deeds which he has accomplished in time retain their validity and remain likewise historically established,"³⁵ Rahner wrote. As dictated by his notion of symbol, the concrete model "renders what is represented present for the first time to the others as something genuinely possible."³⁶ This sacramental significance of the saints for the living is reflected in the lovely words which conclude Rahner's "Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?": "They are our brothers [and sisters] who have already attained their perfection, and they entreat the God of the living to let that light shine upon us too which is the manifestation of his own love and the blessed eternity of his own life."³⁷

So a theology of symbol provides a key to understanding how veneration of those whose lives reflect near-perfection in love can "mediate" grace to us. Our love of the saints is love of Christ because they have reached the fullness of their being in him. The Catholic doctrine of anamnesis includes this aspect of unity of the mystical body with its head, and it thereby shows how veneration of the saints (i.e., *dulia*) is always simultaneously a response to the offer of the grace of Christ (i.e., *latría*).³⁸ But what do we mean when we say that the saints mediate grace to us?

³⁴ Karl Rahner, "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbour and the Love of God," *Theological Investigations* 6, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 231–49, at 249.

³⁵ Rahner and Vorgrimler, "Anamnesis" 20.

³⁶ Rahner, "The Church of the Saints" 100 n. 5. He further asserted here that "[t]he fact that the model itself is present is the undeniable miracle of the Spirit in the Church." In the succeeding n. 6, he explained that "intercession and the communication of grace to us by the Blessed in heaven: . . . does not signify any new (historical) initiative on the part of the Blessed, an initiative—that is—which would be independent of and externally added to their real, historical life, but objectively simply the permanent validity of their life for the one world in the eyes of God, a validity which God has conceived as an element of the one world of the spirit, of the ethical and of faith, at the same time as he willed this one world, in which each thing depends on the whole, precisely as it is."

³⁷ Rahner, "Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?" 8.23.

³⁸ Included within the category of *dulia* but surpassing it is the "hyperdulia" due to Mary.

In the past, the symbolic reality of the saints has been emphasized one-sidedly such that the objective reality of the saints as “mediators” of grace because of their unity with *the* Mediator has resulted in a concentration on their “instrumental” power. They were those who could, through this power, dispense aid to us (or, more correctly, they could have this power dispensed to aid us). Plenty has been written about the origination of this view in a patriarchal societal structure that no longer holds sway. But, if there is the truth that the Church upholds for invocation and intercession, the tradition was never truly only about the objective fact of the “instrumentality” of the saints; it was also about our subjective response to God through the saints—whether or not this was recognized by individuals invoking the saints in the past. It could not be simply about the “saintly symbols,” for every religious matter involves both grace and those upon whom grace “works.” In invocation and intercession, both the invoker and the intercessor are “graced” subjects summoned by God to respond positively to his self-offer. So the objective status of the saints as symbols because of their proximity to Christ is subjectively appropriated and therefore fully actualized in the reaction of the living to them. The subjective orientation of the invoker to the things of God offered to human beings is the very point of the religious act; indeed, it is the point of any religious act that properly recognizes that all such activity is a response, not an initiative. In the Middle Ages, the “things” offered often were conceived narrowly as material favors—cures, success at tasks at hand, recoveries of lost items, etc. And it may be that God truly will grant such favors through the agency of a saint. But, as medieval Christians did not stress enough, God will do what he will, and he may answer our prayers in a way that we do not expect but need. The value of any prayer is simply that we consciously turn ourselves to God, responding to him by adopting a disposition that allows him to work with us.

Religious acts such as invocation—conscious responses to God’s offer of self-communication—put us in a place of alignment with and exceptional receptivity to God’s will. Creative possibilities are realized in the divine-human encounter of petitionary prayer where God invites human beings to be “co-creators,” in the most qualified sense of this term. Petitionary prayer, including that of the intercessory variety, favorably influences the relationship between God and those who pray as well as those for whom they pray by drawing both parties more deeply into the Christian life and the very life of God which embraces all, whether or not God answers any particular petitionary prayer the way that we think we wish.³⁹ The saints already have entered as deeply as possible into the life of Christ, and this

³⁹ For detailed discussion about the value of petitionary prayer, see Eleonore Stump, “Petitionary Prayer,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (April 1979)

is why they are the most “effective” at intercessory prayer. When we mirror their intentionality, joining ourselves with them, we open up new possibilities for receiving God’s loving guidance (i.e., grace). We have a foretaste of that which the saints now enjoy. Is it not the function of the communion of saints that we may help each other to come more fully into the presence and power of God? Invocation of the saints is an inherently communal activity. Rahner wrote:

If the one Holy Spirit is to move us all, and there is one body because we have been baptized by this Spirit into one body (I Co 12:13) and if we must therefore—because we are members of the one body of Christ—with one mind bear each other’s anxieties, then everyone ought to pray for everyone else. Apostolic prayer is a Christian duty.⁴⁰

Intercessory prayer, then, is efficacious for both the intercessor and the one for whom he or she intercedes—except in the case of canonized saints who already are one with Christ and therefore do not gain from our prayers.

Christ’s presence in the Church and his perpetual intercession with the Father are the possibility of any saintly life within the communion of saints, of course. They are the possibility of the religious acts that can align our intentionality with that of the saints and build up the communion of saints, orienting us more fully toward Christ. Invocation of the saints is deliberate cooperation with the saints and all others who positively respond to God. Merely by praying for another or asking for another’s prayers, one becomes transparent to God’s grace, making it more manifest in the world; the saints simply are unique symbols brought to “grace-ful” fruition in Christ. A renewed focus upon this aspect of invocation of the saints that has been neglected in past ages—that invocation is a response that attends to God’s presence among us most evident in the saintly instances of the perfection of nature through grace—can rightly place the emphasis in our piety on the “power” of the response as well as the “power” of the saints. It is because now after so many centuries it is difficult for us to think of the activities of the cult of the saints in other than its problematic medieval form that emphasized only or mostly saintly power that the practice of invocation often is set aside rather than reexamined in light of “prayer power.” Symbols and the religious acts that register our committed response to them work hand in hand. Barring this understanding, we are always in danger of thinking either of symbols as invested with magic or of religious acts as activity through which *we* create (rather than respond to or “co-create”) a reality.

81–91, and Kevin Timpe, “Toward a Process Philosophy of Petitionary Prayer,” *Philosophy and Theology* 12 (2000) 397–418.

⁴⁰ Karl Rahner, “The Apostolate of Prayer,” *Theological Investigations* 3, trans. Karl-H. and Boniface Kruger (New York: Crossroad, 1982) 209–19, at 218–19.

To summarize, the value of the saints to the living is derived from the saints' symbolic status and our intentional response to them in that regard; the saints are symbolic of and for our relationship with Christ, the "real symbol." Made in the image of God, human beings are "naturally" symbolic in a way surpassing that of other created existents, precisely because we possess intentionality that has been "elevated" by and in reference to its giver. Intentional investment in our relationship to God realizes increase in the symbolic reality, a reality which thereby becomes intensely revelatory, and "grace-ful," and compelling to others in its communication of human meaning and possibility. The tradition has roundly affirmed the symbolic reality of the saints and the religious meaning behind our response to them. A few words must be said about this, the tradition's affirmation of both aspects of invocation and intercession.

Regarding the saints as symbols, in the second century's *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the final actions of those who were martyred with the bishop Polycarp, who was given "universal veneration" because of "the saintliness of his life earned for him, even before his martyrdom,"⁴¹ were seen as transparent to Christ: "Others displayed such heroism that not a cry or a groan escaped from any of them; which seemed a clear proof to us all that in that hour of anguish those martyr-heroes of Christ were not present in the body at all—or better still, that the Lord was standing at their side and holding them in talk."⁴² In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa cogently treated the iconic power of sainthood, stating in *On Virginity* that "many of the Saints cast the refulgence of their own lives, like lamps, upon the path for those who are 'walking with God' [Gen 5:24, 6:9]."⁴³ According to Gregory, the God-man is known to us in the saints, through the "power of the Holy Spirit."

⁴¹ "The Martyrdom of Polycarp," in *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth, rev. trans., ed. Andrew Louth (New York: Penguin, 1987) 13. Citations are to paragraph rather than page numbers.

⁴² Ibid. 2. It is made clear that a notion of or akin to anamnesis functioned in the document's presentation of Polycarp in his resemblance to Christ via his religious act of martyrdom which involved, centrally, love of neighbor: "It was almost as though all the preceding events had been leading up to another Divine manifestation of the Martyrdom which we read of in the Gospel; for Polycarp, just like the Lord, had patiently awaited the hour of his betrayal—in token that we too, taking our pattern from him, might think of others before ourselves. This is surely the sign of a true and steadfast love, when a man is not bent on saving himself alone, but his brethren as well" (ibid. 1).

⁴³ Gregory of Nyssa, *On Virginity*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. V: Gregory of Nyssa, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 343–71, at 357. For Gregory, the saints were instances of successful recoveries, via grace, of the tarnished image in human beings such that they become guides for others in this "soul-cleansing" process whereby God may be

The saints, by their progress in virtue reaching toward perfection, possible due to "the communion of the real Light" that makes them "as beautiful as the Beauty which he has touched and entered,"⁴⁴ inspire others to look within and seek perfection of the image in themselves. In the eighth century, John of Damascus recalled the words of Basil of Caesarea that "the honor paid to the image redounds to the original"⁴⁵ since, as John offered, "the original is the thing imaged from which the copy is made." The honor given them "gives proof of one's love for the common Master."⁴⁶ And while the now frequent claim that notions of the "saints" as symbols was not present in the early Church but developed after the New Testament period may be true if the litmus test is comparison with the developed medieval understanding of symbol, surely there is at least the root of the notion of fully converted persons as symbols in Paul's comments on the presence of the life and death of Jesus in the flesh of Christians. Paul explicitly tells the Corinthians that Christians are "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (2 Cor. 4:10-11). And no less than seven times Paul entreats the early Christian communities to imitate him as he imitates Christ or approves of them for having done so: "[T]hough you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me" (1 Cor. 4:15-16). "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1). There is the obvious implication here that in reflecting Christ one manifests him as a guide for

"seen" (ibid. 357-58.) Gregory explained that the saintly "lights" are so purified, so polished through avoidance of "all bitterness and all the noisome effluvia of the flesh" that they reflect the light of God's own nature; "when they receive the sunbeam they beam themselves" (ibid. 356). Verna Harrison noted that, for Gregory, the luminosity of the divine nature, "which the pure soul sees in itself as in a mirror," is an "effulgence" and not only a "reflection" (Verna Harrison, "Receptacle Imagery in St. Gregory of Nyssa's Anthropology," *Studia Patristica* 22 [Leuven: Peeters, 1989] 23-27, at 26). John Milbank asserted that, in Gregory's theology, "reflection involves no such inevitable establishment of a separate and lower reflecting surface apart from those self-rebounding rays of light themselves" (John Milbank, in "Gregory of Nyssa: The Force of Identity," *Christian Origins* [London: Routledge, 1998] 94-116, at 108).

⁴⁴ Ibid. 357-58.

⁴⁵ John of Damascus, *On the Worship of Images*, in *Readings in Christian Thought*, 2nd ed., Hugh T. Kerr, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990) 72-73, at 72; see "The Orthodox Faith," in *Saint John of Damascus: Writings*, The Fathers of the Church (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1958) XXXVII, 370-72, IV.16; Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Ghost*, 18.45.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 73.

others.⁴⁷ Elsewhere in the New Testament we may also find a hint of the emergence of the notion of symbol that will become more and more pronounced in accounts of martyrdom and will be fully developed in the later tradition's view of the saints: Luke deliberately presents the trial of Stephen, "a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6:5), "full of grace and power" (Acts 6:8), as a mirror to that of Jesus.

Regarding the value of response to the symbolic capacity of the saints in religious acts of veneration, including invocation, Christians from the earliest centuries were asking their dead brethren to pray for them, as ancient graffiti at gravesites attest.⁴⁸ In our response to the symbolic reality of the saints, that to which they attested and to which we attest in invocation of them is the victory of Christ that makes possible their virtue. We do not venerate the saints because of their "natural" goodness, but because of the triumph of grace in them. By their positive response to God they have cooperated with him in making grace more visibly manifested in the world. *Yet there is posited here no activity on the part of the saints other than conformance to Christ.* The highly speculative medieval notions of the afterlife have little if any place in contemporary theological reflection. The change in invocation is on the part of the invoker, not the saint, for the transformation of the saint already is in a stage of completion. The saints always are in the presence of God in Christ (i.e., the very definition of prayer) and, therefore, they want all that God wants—which is that which is best for us whether we pray for it or not. In invocation, we intentionally join ourselves with the communion of saints, a communion consciously acting within the grace of Christ of which the saints are preeminent because they are permanently united to Christ our goal. This is an important shift in understanding that results from a proper emphasis on both the objective status of the saints and our subjective response to them. Far from individualistic, invocation of the saints is indicative of one's conscious, willing engagement in the eschatological community of faith. Again, this is not to entertain any of the faulty medieval notions of symbol that conceived of the saints as entitatively powerful, with the ability to dispense favors at

⁴⁷ Jerome Murphy-O'Connor explained that "Christ is the ideal of humanity toward which all believers strive, but since they cannot see him, Paul's comportment must mirror 'the life of Jesus' (2 Cor 4:10). This is the only authentic hermeneutic. The theme appears with reference to every community that knew Paul personally (1 Cor. 4:16; Gal. 4:12, Phil. 3:17; 4:9; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2:14)" (Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1990] 808).

⁴⁸ Orazio Marucchi, *Christian Epigraphy: An Elementary Treatise with a Collection of Ancient Christian Inscriptions Mainly of Roman Origin*, trans. J. Armine Willis (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1912).

their will in response to our entreaties. The “power” of the saintly symbols as well as the “power” of our response to them is derived from the reality that embraces all human beings from the beginning of our existence. The only advantage that the saints have in intercession is their permanent proximity to Christ; it is not that any living person at any stage of transformation through grace cannot intercede for others. And this suggests altered language for the act of invocation of the saints, which the tradition has called “praying to” the saints.

THE LANGUAGE OF INVOCATION

Given the contention of my article that invocation is conscious cooperation with God via response to the triumph of Christ’s grace in the saints, while the language of invocation—that we pray “to” the saints—is fully validated by the tradition, there also is theological accuracy in slightly different language for invocation—that we pray “with” the saints (even when it is they who are explicitly addressed). This simple change in the preposition, while seemingly minor, expresses the true relationship among Christ, the saints, and petitioners conscious of the inherent unity of all human persons in the body of Christ. And this language might be more in tune with today’s religious sensibilities. Again, correctly understood, veneration of the saints is inherently communal, so to say that one is praying “with” St. Jude for a lost cause, for example, accurately expresses the reality that saints are in a perpetual attitude of prayer to which we consciously join ourselves when we invoke them, in this religious act responding to God’s summons. Because the neighbor who is a saint has not “simply an implicit unity” with Christ but one “explicit and definitively complete” and “the object of faith,”⁴⁹ the risen Christ meets us in a certain readiness for conversion in our responsorial posture of veneration and deeply so in its humble form of invocation. He meets us in an attitude of worship of him which always has a communal dimension in Christianity. The point of invocation of the saints, then, is recognition of our place in the communion of saints that transcends time and space. It properly recognizes that Christ is present and triumphant in the communion of the Church and the community of humanity. Religious acts stand alone in their expression of a fully reflective and deliberate intentionality directed to God as the end of humanity. Veneration of the saints is a profound religious, indeed intentional, act in reference to the promise of our “share” in the eschatological victory that Christ has won. Invocation is perhaps its boldest statement.

⁴⁹ Rahner, “Why and How Can We Venerate the Saints?” 8.21.

THEOLOGICAL CHECKS AND BALANCES

Understanding invocation and intercession through the lens of the concept of intentionality, emphasizing that all human action is response to God's invitation and religious acts are particularly so, helps balance common tendencies toward theological error.

First, veneration of saints and especially its form of invocation shows, correctly, that all in the community of grace are not necessarily at the same stage of sanctification, checking two erroneous notions of nature and grace. The first errs in the direction of extrinsicism in that it envisions grace as being offered to some and not to others or of grace as being offered only via occasional divine intervention. This error does not recognize the reality of God's offer to each and all as a given element of our concrete human existence. The second errs in the direction of intrinsicism in that it envisions grace strictly speaking as *de jure* or manifestly *de facto* bestowed equally. This error assumes as a given that all are equally sanctified, since all are created in the same existential situation and/or because the Holy Spirit animates the entirety of the community of those professing Christ. It conceptually muzzles the possibility of genuine, free disclosures of God to us and undermines human free will. There are degrees of intentional investment in our status as objects of God's creative and salvific love and hence in our existential situation as "spirit[s] in the world."⁵⁰ The lives of the saints convince of this; the saints' exceptional appropriation of their elevated intentionality has united them with Christ fully and permanently. If and when our conscious investment mirrors that of the saints and is expressed in invocation of them—a religious act of love of neighbor which follows the two great commandments, it does so because the saints are iconic of Christ and therefore appeals to them are made to God in whom they rest. Such a conscious investment is elicited by God himself through the mediation of Christ made manifest in the saints and made efficacious in our graced "intentional" response.

Second, there is a theological inconsistency in recognizing the saints as models but not as intercessors. The saints are valuable as models precisely because Christ's grace has triumphed in them. We do not honor the saints for that which they have achieved by nature alone, in other words, but for that which has been achieved in them through the grace of Christ perfecting nature. Grace is manifest in them. If this is not the case and they are not worthy intercessors, then they are not worthy of our emulation as models, either. The roles of the saints—companions, models, and intercessors⁵¹—are intrinsically related.

⁵⁰ Taken from Karl Rahner, the title *Spirit in the World*, trans. William Dych (New York: Continuum, 1994).

⁵¹ *Lumen gentium* no. 51.

Third, in the Church today the human element of divine-human interaction often is emphasized, whereas in the Church of the Middle Ages the divine element of divine-human interaction was the greater focus. Both elements must be held together in reflection upon every religious reality, including that manifested in invocation and intercession of the saints. Fixating either upon the symbolic reality of the saints or upon the legitimacy of our invocation of them alone is deficient and can lead to the faulty notion of either the saints or their invokers as entitatively powerful. Both contribute to the efficacy of veneration through invocation, and both divine activity and human activity are involved in the making of the "saintly symbols" and our response to them (even though, in the history of the Church, there has been a tendency to emphasize one or the other in reflection upon the saints as symbols or upon religious acts). The symbolic reality of the saints is a status given by God but ratified by the saints, and our invocation of the saints is a profound form of our acceptance of God's offer of self-communication, even through the saints.

Fourth, veneration of the saints, particularly in the form of invocation, fosters deeply the requisite consciousness of the eschatological nature of the communion of the saints that is endangered when our brothers and sisters who have finished their journey are not in our line of vision along with those with whom we are making the journey.

In conclusion, private veneration of the saints, particularly invocation, will not compel all and perhaps not even many contemporary Catholics. But this should not be because it is identified with its interpretation in an earlier age. Certainly that interpretation was at least in part responsible for the development of the cult of the saints that includes invocation for intercession. But the Church has validated the doctrine of intercession of the saints for all ages, so it is legitimate and even necessary to reinterpret the practice for a particular time. Understanding invocation and intercession of the saints under the rubric of the concept of intentionality illuminates the divine-human interaction at work in both "activities" in a way that is not given to abuses of the past, that is sensitive to concerns of the present, and that keeps powerfully before us the theological truth about our eschatological reality through Christ's abiding presence in the world.