

The Lutheran Confession Concerning the Saints

On this, the occasion of All Saints' Day, the question "How ought Lutherans to view the saints?" must be answered. In the first place, it is helpful to be clear about what a saint is. Simply put, a saint is one who is holy, for the Greek word (ἅγιος) simply means "holy ones." All Christians are called holy because of the work of the Holy Spirit calling them out of unbelief and into faith which believes in and grabs hold of the forgiveness of sins earned by the perfect obedience, suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This includes those saints who yet remain in this life and those who have died in the Lord Jesus and for this reason are alive with him (I Thess. 5:9—10).

In the context of the Reformation, this question was addressed for this reason: the Roman Catholic Church taught (and teaches) that the saints in heaven are to be invoked (prayed to) so that they would, in turn, intercede on our behalf and for our needs. Thus, they attempt to set up another mediator besides Christ Jesus, our Lord. It is as Luther observes in the Large Catechism, under the First Commandment: **Look at what we used to do in our blindness under the papacy. Anyone who had a toothache fasted and called on St. Apollonia; those who worried about their house burning down appealed to St. Laurence as their patron; if they were afraid of the plague, they made a vow to St. Sebastian or Roch. There were countless other such abominations, and everyone selected his own saint and worshiped him and invoked his help in time of need, (Large Catechism, First Commandment).**

In view of this abuse, Lutherans desired to answer the above question. If a Christian is not to pray to saints, is there an honorable or salutary (good) way to view and honor them? The answer, in short, is yes. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession affirms that **our confession approves giving honor to the saints [and] this honor is threefold (Apology, Article XXI, paragraph 4).** The Apology goes on to explain further what this threefold honor includes:

(1) 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 [Matt. 25:21, 23]. (2) 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. (3) The third honor is imitation: first of their faith, then of their other virtues, which people should imitate according to their callings. The opponents do not require these true honors. They only argue about invocation, which, even if it were not dangerous, is certainly not necessary. To be sure, concerning the saints we grant that in heaven they pray for the church in general, just as they prayed for the entire church while living. [However], even supposing that the saints do pray for the church, it still does not follow that they are to be invoked, (Apology XXI, paragraph 4—7).

We can see from the above quotation how much value Lutherans put on the saints. It might be argued that Lutherans put more value on them than the Roman Catholic Church because we do not put the saints in a place they do not belong. Rather, we direct all our thanks and prayers to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit and in this way allow Jesus to be the only mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2:5). Additionally, we do not cast the saints aside, but see in them those who have received much grace and mercy from our Lord. From this example we comfort ourselves in the fact that, even as they received forgiveness of all their sins, we too can and do receive forgiveness for our sins. Additionally, we imitate their faith, that is, the same faith confessed in the Apostle's Creed, and their life as they lived in accord with the Ten Commandments. This is the way Lutherans honor the saints of Christ.

