

*With this essay the Institute continues a series of posts it initiated in the fall of 2016, with contributions from members of the Company of Teachers designed to relate the Reformed tradition to current events. Feel free to reproduce these pieces and cite them as you see fit.*

## **Communion of Saints**

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Familiar foreignness is crucial. As much to faith as any paradox may be. Childhood presents one way to see it. Jesus said to welcome children in his name, and he blessed them (Mark 10:13-16). Most of us cherish memories of our own youth; even so, those episodes are strange. I could enumerate a few involving fireworks or magnifying lenses. You may say to yourself in retrospect, “how did that crazy idea ever make any sense to me?” Or perhaps, “How could I have done such a bizarre thing then?” I say it with reverence, but I do wonder if the adult Jesus himself might have smiled wryly to recall his youthful lagging at the Temple (Luke 2:42-52). People are different and see the world quite differently at different times of their life. It may be well to consider the fact that the strangeness of your very own childhood refuses to be “resolved” into a monolithic present.

Your remembrances will always have an air of peculiarity, however much you may try to make sense of them. And that is more than merely something to endure. Perhaps my point in all this could show up further if you were to consider a dream. Any dream can perplex the wakeful you. For example, you could dream that color, motion, and shape occupy separate portions of an infinite plane and that they nevertheless each remain intelligible. This makes no waking sense, but in the dream, the division may appear as elegant as Euclidean geometry. Your own recollected self (of dreams or of childhood) is equally foreign and necessary to *you* who read these words just now. That fact may cause distress. It can feel like an insistent question that you never square away. Still, the mysterious, sometimes discomfiting, otherness serves the greater good. To ponder prayerfully—to *welcome*—the unanswerable is to extend a special sort of hospitality. It changes you. It engages you in fellowship with a stranger en route to the triune God whose very holiness embraces surprise (Cf. Luke 24:13-32 and Genesis 18:1-15). Or do you suppose that the mother of our Lord ever tidily resolved the Incarnation? Was it any less salutary that she continually pondered it in her heart (Luke 2:19)?

Presuming to see God in your complacency—in who you may be (or wish to appear to be) apart from who you will become or were, or, worse, in what you are apart from anyone else who bears God’s image—leads only to a god whose properties are all too well established in this present world (cf. 1 John 4:20-5:2). Holiness is *sacred* and therefore radically distinct. In the same vein, the *church* is the fellowship of those “called out” into a sort of separateness. Nevertheless, such separateness serves the surprising sake of togetherness. This kind of foreignness is ironically *familiar*. The “communion of saints” does not cross out but crosses into every otherness.

Any story of humanity will indicate how prone we are to dead-ends of self-centeredness. The problem persists in every age. Demography today indicates a flux of populations toward pockets of greater and greater homogeneity, according to various criteria of politics, race,

cultural outlook, and economics. An overall proliferation of diversity exacerbates this troubling coalescence. One sees it also in the forums of our virtual communities. But does one really live abundantly when bent to pare like Robespierre all disconfirming others? Or does that rather validate some pre-conceived appetite(s)? *O, indeed, you shall surely not die* (Genesis 3:4-6). Only, let the church return to courageous companionship, or, literally, sharing bread together—within the mystery of our very selves and our relations; our friends and also enemies; the widow, the orphan, and the stranger.

To hearken to a great old prayer...

Lord, you came to set us free and did not shun the virgin's womb. Bring us together with your saints of every age to glory everlasting. Amen.