

Praying to Mary?

Praying to Mary and the Saints. Bishop Harold Usgaard (Southeastern MN) recently conducted an ordination service in which he and the congregation prayed to Mary and the saints. It happened at St. John's Lutheran Church in Northfield, MN, on March 24, 2000. Two ELCA pastors from St. John's also participated: Gerhard Knutson (interim pastor) and Joseph Crippen.

What to Expect from Mary? "...[W]e ask all the saints to pray for us, beginning with the Mother of our Lord, continuing on through the ages, up to our present time," thus prayed Bishop Usgaard and others. The problems are twofold: First, death is a barrier we cannot penetrate. As Luther said:

Let the dear saints rest where they are.... Let them be, and let God take care of them. We can neither know nor understand how they live in the world beyond. That world is quite different from this one (WA 17, 2:255).

The life of those Christians who have died before us is hidden from us. They are with Christ where there is no more death, mourning, crying, or pain (Rev. 21:4). At the same time there is no indication or promise that they can or will hear us.

Second, Luther taught that the invocation of the saints detracted from the honor due to Christ, the sole Mediator. Through the Word of the cross and sacraments, Christ takes our sin and gives us the righteousness which comes from his struggle with our sin and death. He is our go-between; he is God for us. What could we gain from praying to someone other than Christ himself?

When physical and spiritual benefit and help are no longer expected, then the saints will be left in peace, both in the grave and in heaven (*Smalcald Articles* 2,3:28; BC 306).

Where no gain is expected from Mary and the saints, the practice will die out, and that's exactly what happened in the Reformation.

Lutheran Identity Crisis. Keith Homstad, who designed his ordination service to include the prayers to Mary and the saints, was educated both at a Catholic seminary, St. John's in Collegeville, MN, and Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN. He was approved by the Southeastern MN Synod for ordained ministry in the ELCA and now serves as pastor of Gol Lutheran Church

in Kenyon, MN.

It appears as if the Lutheran part of his education didn't take, or maybe he chose what suited him from the cafeteria of theologies he found at Luther Seminary. In any case, neither Bishop Usgaard nor the Southeastern MN Candidacy Committee raised red flags about Homstad's suitability for Lutheran ministry.

No One Was Blind-sided. It cannot be said that Bishop Usgaard or any of the ELCA pastors who participated in the service were caught off guard by the prayers to Mary and the saints. They all knew what was included in the ordination service days in advance, and still they went along. That's how the church breaks down.

Where "Unity" is Supreme. Perhaps in this generation in which "Unity" is drummed into Lutheran skulls as the supreme value, going along is the path of least resistance, much like the story of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Everyone knew the emperor had no clothes on, but it was politically correct to pretend that he did. It took a child to stand up and say, "But he isn't wearing anything at all!"

After the Homstad ordination, rank-and-file members of St. John's called and wrote letters saying it wasn't right to pray to someone other than Christ our Lord. Only **after** people complained did the bishop and pastors admit that praying to Mary and the saints had been a big mistake.

By then, of course, it was also too late. A pastor had been ordained and was on the ELCA roster! He preaches and teaches weekly in Kenyon, MN. But what theology informs him? At best he is confused. In a March 29, 2002, letter, Pastor Homstad apologizes for "creating any wrong impressions" by the use of the words "pray for us" directed to Mary and the saints. Either he doesn't get it, or he's unrepentant, yet obliged by the controversy to offer some form of semi-apology.

The Real Kicker. Finally, this sorry tale has yet another twist. Bishop Harold Usgaard is not just any-old bishop on any-old committee. He serves on the Bishops' Committee on Theological and Ethical Concerns!