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INVOCATION OF THE SAINTS, ARTICLE 22 AND ARCIC

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In the recent ARCIC report on Mary the authors attempts to justify the practice of invoking the prayers of the saints by arguing:

asking our brothers and sisters, on earth and in heaven, to pray for us, does not contest the unique mediatory work of Christ, but is rather a means by which, in and through the Spirit, its power may be displayed. (Mary Grace and Truth para 68)

However, the report has to acknowledge that Article 22 of the Thirty-nine articles repudiates the practice. ARCIC asserts:

The English Reformers criticized this invocation and similar forms of prayer, because they believed that it threatened the unique mediation of Jesus Christ. Confronted with exaggerated devotion, stemming from excessive exaltation of Mary's role and powers alongside Christ's, they rejected the "Romish doctrine of ... the Invocation of Saints" as "grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God" (Article XXII).

ARCIC Spin

Notice that ARCIC portrays the Article as an historic text rather than one that is part of the present day doctrine of the Church of England. They say that the reformers criticized the practice, though as the Article shows they in fact condemned it. Then they say that the reason for this rejection had to do with exaggerated devotion and a perceived threat to the unique mediation of Christ. However, the Article actually attacks the doctrine, not just the practice and asserts that it is repugnant to the Word of God.

The reason why ARCIC presents Article 22 in this way is so that they can then assert that modern Roman Catholicism has 'moderated' the excesses of the past and that today Roman Catholics assert that the invocation does not undermine the unique mediation of Christ. Therefore, they can argue that the Reformers objections are no longer valid. In fact, both these claims about the Roman position are dubious and ARCIC does not deal with the main accusations of Article 22.

Article 22 in context

In full Article 22 reads:

The Romish doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Reliques, and also invocation of Saints, is a fond thing vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.

Four reasons are given for rejecting invocation of the saints – it is a fond thing (futile), vainly invented, with no warranty in Scripture and, in fact, repugnant to the Word of God.

The first versions of the Article began with the words 'The doctrine of the school-men...'. When the Council of Trent met the Article had already been published and it is possible to see in the Decrees of Trent direct reference to the Article. The Roman position is declared as:

"...the saints, who reign together with Christ, offer up their own prayers to God for men; that it is good and useful suppliantly to invoke them, and to have recourse to their prayers, aid, (and) help for obtaining benefits from God, through His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who is our alone Redeemer and Saviour; but that they think impiously, who deny that the saints, who enjoy eternal happiness in heaven, are to be invocated; or who assert either that they do not pray for men; or,

that the invocation of them to pray for each of us even in particular, is idolatry; or, that it is repugnant to the word of God; and is opposed to the honour of the one mediator of God and men, Christ Jesus; or, that it is foolish to supplicate, vocally, or mentally, those who reign in heaven.”
(26th Session - Decree concerning purgatory)

Notice here that Trent specifically repudiates what our Article declares that the invocation of the saints is repugnant to the Word of God. Notice also that Trent says that their practice and teaching do not affect the honour of Christ as our sole mediator.

In January 1563, not long after the final session of Trent, the Article was revised under Elizabeth I. Its opening was changed from ‘The doctrine of the school-men’ to ‘Romish Doctrine’. Trent makes the invocation of the Saints official Catholic doctrine, and our Article repudiates what Trent affirms.

Has later Roman Catholic teaching softened what Trent declares? Certainly their affirmation of the unique mediatorial role of Christ was there in Trent. It may be true that Roman Catholic practice has been moderated, though this is questionable, but our Article condemns the ‘Romish Doctrine’ not exaggerated practice.

Has Rome changed?

The Roman Catholic Catechism, quoting extensively from the Papacy’s 1964 Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium* sets out the Roman view:

being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness... they do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth through the one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus... (Para. 956) ... “because it is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins” she (the Church) offers her suffrages for them. Our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective. (Para. 958)

The Catechism offers no Scripture to support these claims. It can be seen also how praying for the dead (to be loosed from their sins), offering suffrages (to buy them time off purgatory) and invoking their prayers for us are all linked. Moreover it is apparently only because of the Church’s intercession for the dead that their prayers for the living can be effective. What a perverse system they have invented, all without warrant of Scripture and all turning people away, despite their assertions, from trust in Christ alone.

What’s wrong?

Article 22 states that this practice is a fond thing vainly invented with no warrant of Scripture. This is self-evident; there is no indication whatsoever in Scripture that Christians were expected to invoke the prayers of the saints. Moreover, there is no evidence for such practice in the first 3-4 centuries of the Christian Church. The first clear evidence appears to be from 480AD. The practice thus appears to have truly been ‘invented’ and it can be seen to be one of the ways in which pagan practices were assimilated into Christian belief only to corrupt it.

Anglicans believe that the invocation of the saints is repugnant to the Word of God. However, once someone has accepted that the practice is true they will tenaciously defend the practice from Scripture. What we must keep saying is that this practice has no warrant in Scripture, how it was a late innovation, and how the only way to defend the practice is to invoke tortuous logic and reading into Scripture.

Consider the steps required to justify this belief:

1) It is claimed that in the ‘communion of the saints’ we should ask the dead for their prayers just as we ask other living believers for prayer. This relies on there being either an identical or a

sufficiently similar relationship between the dead and the living, as between the living and the living. But Scripture suggests that the change in relationships is not simple – there will be no marriage in heaven, the saints are at rest and so on. Therefore, to assume a similar relationship, sufficient to justify mutual prayer when Scripture makes no mention of such practice, is unwarranted. What we see, in fact, is that the Roman Catholic view of purgatory makes the state of the saints at rest far more akin to this life than Scripture allows.

2) That praying with the dead is essentially the same as praying with the living. Yet, when we pray for one another we do so because we are pilgrims on a journey and our prayers are part of our expression of fellowship on the journey. Those who accept the Biblical gospel believe that once we enter into rest the journey is complete, the race finished. Our fellowship with those who are at rest is not the same, they certainly do not need our prayers and although we may fantasise about them looking down on us and cheering us on our way, God has not said it is so. The phrase ‘cloud of witnesses’ is sometimes abused to support this view understanding ‘witness’ as ‘spectator’ rather than as ‘testimony’ being the example of those who have gone before.

3) That the dead can hear requests made to them for prayer. This is justified by the saying of Jesus ‘that there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents’. However, to read this verse in this way we must assume that it is speaking about the saints and that they have direct knowledge of what happens on earth, rather than, for example, being informed of the fact. Both these are very heavy assumptions and cannot be said to justify the belief.

4) That calling on the dead in this way is different from the practices of calling on the dead which are clearly condemned in Scripture (Lev 20.27, 1 Sam 28 etc). Given the severity of what Scripture says this point requires strong evidence. Instead all that can be offered is the fact that Moses and Elijah appeared on the mount of transfiguration. Given the singularly unique nature of this event and that there is no recorded intercourse between these two figures and the disciples the use of this text is absurd.

5) That it is part of the role of those who have died in Christ to pray for the living. Again this is nowhere stated in Scripture, and the only verse Roman Catholics offer to support the contention is Rev 6.10. Even if this verse could be used to justify the idea that the saints in glory cry out to God it does not claim that they pray for the living. Moreover, when we look at the verse in context we see that the souls mentioned as having been slain are given white robes and told to rest and wait until the number was completed. This, indeed is the picture Scripture gives us, to be in Christ is to be at rest. In this life we make fervent prayer to God as Scripture amply bears witness, but once we have gone to be with Christ we are at rest, the work done, and there is not the slightest hint otherwise.

Two further things can be said about the claim that invoking the prayers of the saints is like asking others to pray for us.

1) In practice, despite the claims, invocation of the saints is not the same as asking others to pray. For one thing, our fellowship with the living is clear and transparent and expressed in various ways, not just prayer, but our fellowship with those at rest is different. For another, though some may ask dead family members for prayer, mostly they are invoking some supposed super-saints. They justify this by saying that the prayers of a righteous man avails much (Jas 5.16) but there is no idea in Scripture that we should therefore ask certain supposed super prayers to pray for us. In fact, in the Scripture we see far more of prayer springing from active fellowship and concern and relatively little by way of requests for prayer.

2) In corporate liturgy the error becomes all the more apparent. Whatever the protests, the way invocation is used in liturgy does not make it the same as asking others for prayer, but does put it on a par with intercession to the Father through the Son. It is small wonder that those who have come out of Roman Catholicism have recognised that despite the official claims in practice the invocation of the saints detracts from the mediatorial role of Christ.

This doctrine and practice have no warrant in Scripture nor in the early church but was a late invention. Those who are ensnared in the belief seek to justify it using supposedly logical arguments and scriptural quotation. However, when the arguments are analysed the logical steps involve unjustifiable assumptions and the Scriptures quoted are abused either by reading meaning into them or by assuming that they mean something other than their plain sense. There is no single clear scriptural text to support any part of the argument. Small wonder then that authentic Anglicans continue to declare that this doctrine and practice are repugnant to the Word of God.