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THE COMMUNITY GOD INTENDED FOR HIS CREATION¹

Andrew Remick

Abstract This essay reviews the design and context of Rachel Ellis's portrayal of the Communion of Saints created in 2003-2004 as part of Saint Patrick's Cathedral in Parramatta, Australia. Her contemporary rendition invites contemplation of the universal call to holiness through its depiction of a multicultural assembly journeying together toward Christ's light.

The Communion of Saints is an ancient belief of the Church describing the union between the faithful on earth with the faithful who are now in eternal life. Its significance in the Christian tradition is evidenced by its inclusion in early professions of faith, such as the Apostles' Creed. The concept of the Communion of Saints has been rendered artistically for centuries, especially in stained-glass windows found in churches around the world depicting the Saints in heaven and thereby demonstrating the link between the liturgy on earth and the heavenly liturgy. While the Saints are frequent subjects of liturgical and devotional art in every era of the Church, contemporary expressions invite today's pilgrims to reflect anew on this timeless community of the faithful. This paper focuses on one of these recent illustrations of the Communion of Saints, which was created in 2003-04 by Rachel Ellis of New South Wales for the rebuilt and expanded St. Patrick's Cathedral in Parramatta, Australia.

Located on a site where Catholics in this area west of Sydney have gathered to celebrate Mass since 1803, the current St. Patrick's Cathedral is the fifth church on the property. Its four predecessors were built between 1829 and 1936 and the present St. Patrick's incorporates the 1936 neo-Gothic building. The need to rebuild and expand the Cathedral arose after an arsonist set a fire that gutted the historic stone edifice in 1996. Over the ensuing seven years, architects, artists, craftspeople and diocesan officials collaborated to create a twenty-first-century Cathedral that is both responsive to the requirements of the Church's contemporary communal worship as well as supportive of the individual devotional needs of the faithful. The project thoroughly reorganized the Cathedral's campus to more effectively accommodate the needs of the Diocese, the community that regularly worships at St. Patrick's, as well as pilgrims who visit the church. Most significantly, the design yielded the addition of a modern 800-seat cathedral extending from the side of the 1936 structure. The historic building was in turn reconfigured to house the main entrance, baptistery, and Blessed Sacrament Chapel in its nave, plus new devotional and sacramental spaces in the aisles. The first Mass celebrated in the new St. Patrick's Cathedral occurred on November 29, 2003.²

In addition to the creation of new spaces, the rebuilding and expansion of the St. Patrick's presented the opportunity to design original art, furnishings, vessels, and objects for use throughout the Cathedral. The design team sought to develop the art program concurrently with the creation of the building plans to allow designers, artists, and consultants to work together to produce an integrated and harmonious architectural and artistic vision. Four senior artists, each working in a different medium, were commissioned to oversee the main elements in the church to provide aesthetic consistency across prominent building

components. In addition to the senior artists, the design team invited other artisans to contribute their talents through works focused on particular features of the Cathedral. These commissions generated many of the liturgical vessels, textiles, and devotional images and sculptures parishioners and visitors encounter at St. Patrick's. By fostering the intentional collaboration between architects and artists, the design team strove to create a meaningful religious atmosphere in the Cathedral "through the use of honest natural materials...suffused with light and interlaced with rich works of art in support the parishioners' journey in Christ."³

One of these smaller commissions was awarded to Rachel Ellis to furnish an image for the Communion of Saints Shrine situated in a niche at the end of an aisle in the historic neo-Gothic portion of the church. Her monumental 3.8-meter-high charcoal drawing fills the height of the alcove and offers pilgrims an invitation into what Ellis has described as "an inter-generational group of people from all parts of the globe moving together with each other in love, compassion, and grace."⁴ She endeavored to create an image that would inspire a desire in viewers to become part of "the communion of the holy" and convey a sense of welcome to what she beautifully called "the community God intended for his creation." Ellis characterized this community as being filled with hope, joy, peace, and unity in God and one another throughout her statement about the piece. Additionally, she wanted the image to capture the church's "continual process of 'becoming holy.'" Ellis achieved this in two ways. The first is her depiction of people journeying from left to right across the picture plane, and the second is through the interplay of light and shadow, with the lighter tones representing greater proximity to holiness. As the people move toward the right of the image, they are immersed in ever brighter light, symbolizing their nearness to Christ, in whom they are walking.

Ellis's desire to portray the communion of the holy as moving together toward Christ corresponds adeptly to the goal of St. Patrick's artistic program to support the parishioners on their journey of faith. Its placement near the ornamental gates of the main entrance reinforces the imagery of a journey that Ellis features in her drawing. Gates mark the movement from one context to another, in this case from the secular world into a sacred space where the earthly church unites with the heavenly Jerusalem and back out again as the faithful go to live out their vocations. Ellis directly ties the Cathedral into the local faithful's journey toward the communion of the holy by incorporating an image of its gates into her artwork. A second instance of the shrine's connection to the Christian's journey arises from the proximity of Ellis's drawing to the baptismal font, the prime point of initiation into the People of God. Locating her depiction of the Communion of Saints near the font brings together the start and finish of the journey of faith that begins at baptism and reaches its fulfillment in the presence of God in Heaven.

Ellis's interpretation of the Communion of Saints is an outstanding contribution to the artistic program at St. Patrick's Cathedral. Although primarily intended as a devotional image, by virtue of its content and location, it nevertheless invites the viewer into joyful contemplation of the encounter with Jesus in the assembly of the faithful and the invitation to walk with the People of God on the path toward holiness.

Notes

1. Forward by Bishop Kevin M. Manning, in *Ibid.*, 25.; Giurgola, *Luminous Simplicity: The Architecture and Art of the St. Patrick's Cathedral, Parramatta*, 39-44, 47.; "The Art Programme," ed. St. Patrick's Cathedral Parramatta (Canberra Australia: Goanna Print, 2006), 3.
2. "The Art Programme," 4-5.
3. Giurgola, *Luminous Simplicity: The Architecture and Art of the St. Patrick's Cathedral, Parramatta*, 157.
4. "The Art Programme," 34-35.