

*(Draft—not for publication or citation)*

## **Dialogue between Luther's thought on "*communio sanctorum*" and Japanese traditional spirituality**

*Motoo Ishii*

### **Introduction**

It could be said that the custom of ancestral rites is kind of an obstacle for Christian mission in Japan. It is so because even in this secularized age, these rites still have influence on ordinary people in Japan and also the practice is tightly bound up with Japanese Buddhism. On the other hand, it is not possible to share the gospel with Japanese people without sympathy for Japanese spirituality as found in Japanese ancestral rites. In fact, the Catholic Church has a way to evangelize Japanese using a home altar that is modeled after the altar for ancestral rites in the Buddhist way. This is a practical example, but here is a question how Christian faith can face and answer back to Japanese spirituality as found in ancestral rites. It is important to ask what kind of spirituality can be seen in the so-called Japanese ancestral rites practice and to face it in terms of Christian spirituality. Then it is possible to find a way by which Christianity can take root into Japanese soil.

In this essay, I will explain two traditional Japanese spiritualities, and how the concept of "*communio sanctorum*" in Luther's theology addresses them. At the same time, it will be a chance to examine what is the richness of the Christian gospel, as Japanese spirituality could challenge the western traditional thinking of Christianity.

### **Two traditional spiritualities in Japan**

Behind the practice of ancestral rites, there can be found two kinds of Japanese traditional spiritualities: community-oriented spirituality and nature-oriented culture. These spiritualities are nurtured in Japanese culture, which has been based on rice-cultivation.

#### Community-oriented spirituality

For example, Shuichi Kato, a social critic, writes about the five features of Japanese view of death and life, and relates:

First, a family, a blood-community, and a "mura" (local village) community have the living and the dead as its members. Death is just to move from the first status to the second as a member of the

same community. In this sense, it is better than ostracism.

Second, it is essential to die in a good manner in a community. The good manner is to die without disgracing benefits of the community and to die according to a way that the community established.<sup>1</sup>

These expressions are very description of Japanese spirituality. I call it “community-oriented spirituality” and examined it with historical research in my dissertation

In the community-oriented spirituality, death is not a point of division between the living and the dead. Rather, this community-oriented spirituality overcome the crisis of death.

In Japanese traditional thought, Ancestral rites make the soul of the dead kami (god) or hotoke (Buddha). This means that the soul of the dead is going to be pacified and given salvation through ancestral rites. And then the spirit of the dead gives blessing to the living, in turn. Here we can see the interdependent relationship between the living and the souls of the dead. In such a relationship the living and the dead consist of the Japanese community having ie (family) and mura (village) community as its core. They are living in the same community as other members. And it is also characteristic in this community-oriented spirituality that bringing harmony and benefits into the community might be more important than individual happiness.

The nature-oriented spirituality

In “nature-oriented spirituality,” Japanese people want to return to nature after their death gradually and to be united with the life of nature which circulates and repeats appearance of death and life in the flow of life in nature. By the ancestral rites, Japanese people let the souls of the dead return to nature making the soul of the dead unite with the collective ancestral spirit. Traditionally, Japanese people think of mountains as dwelling places of the soul becoming the ancestral spirit. In addition, the ancestral spirit could become the spirit of the mountain, or the god for the community. And nature also nurtures the whole community in which the ancestor belongs as a member even after his/her death. Such nature-oriented spirituality also has its own expression in the animistic worldview of

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<sup>1</sup> Shuichi Kato, M Risch, R.J. Lifton, *Japanese View of Death and Life*. II (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1977)

the Japanese tradition. Recently some of Japanese scholars like Takeshi Umemura insist that Japanese spirituality, in this ecological crisis must teach the westernized world, including the Japanese society itself such an animistic view, which sees the spirits and souls in everything of the world and takes care of nature as the mother of the whole of life.

In another expression, Hiroyuki Itsuki, who is a famous writer in Japan, writes in his *A Single Drop of Water in a Mighty River*,

I want to rethink that we are just small beings. It is true, however, that there is a life of heaven and earth even in a single dewdrop on a leaf though it is just small. If the expression “life” is exaggerated, I can paraphrase it into “a breath of the universe”. . . . .

“A human being is just a single drop of water in a mighty river.” He/she is just a small drop of water but it is a drop which makes a huge flow of water and a part of rhythm which moves towards the eternal time, I just feel so gazing the water.<sup>2</sup>

So in the nature-oriented spirituality Japanese people make themselves humble and seek a way to live in and with nature, and entrust themselves to it.

Returning to nature in this nature-oriented spirituality seems to contradict remaining in community in the community-oriented spirituality. However, it is not the case for the Japanese mind. Both are unified together in the cosmological worldview.

### **Implications of Luther’s *communio sanctorum* for the Japanese Spirituality**

In order to answer such Japanese spiritual needs, it seems very important to examine the Christian concept of *communio sanctorum*: the community of the saints. This concept is found in the third article of the Apostle Creed, and expresses how people are saved by the work of the Holy Spirit through faith. In the middle ages the concept was understood as the participation of the merit of saints. But after Luther’s Reformation, most protestants have understood it as the appositive concept of the catholic church which is put just before the concept in the Creed. It is sure that Luther sees the church as an assembly of believers. As the 7<sup>th</sup> article of the Augsburg Confession says, the concept of *communio sanctorum* is understood as the community of saints. The concept, however, provides an important way to interact with Japanese spirituality.

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<sup>2</sup> Hiroyuki Itsuki, *A Single Drop of Water in a Mighty River*, (Tokyo: Gentosha, 1998) 21, 25.

## Community of saints including the living and the dead

Who is a saint? As mentioned above, in the middle age, a saint was understood as a dead faithful one who had holiness and sanctity like a martyr and whose existence and/or work could be highly meritorious for salvation.

For Luther, however, a saint does not mean such a special person, because there is no righteousness before God. So Luther thinks that a saint just means a believer. All believers are sinful but are righteous because of Christ's work on the cross. Holiness became understood as that which comes from God and is given to all believers by faith alone, not because of the believer's own efforts. Because of God's work of love through Christ, all believers are saints now instead of the special one who is in Heaven.

Luther also thinks that there are only two kinds of saints: one is a living and the other is dead.<sup>3</sup> So before God the one who is on the earth and the one who is in Heaven are both living in the eternal life that Christ has won on the cross and given to us. So it is often pointed out that in Holy Communion, we have a foretaste of the banquet of heaven with all, including the ones who are in heaven already. Such Christian community including the living and the dead could be a tentative answer to the Japanese community-oriented spirituality.

In the practical situation, it is quite important for all Christians to believe that such a community of saints will make the gospel realized. For example, on their deathbed, all believers could be consoled concerning loneliness, by the *communio sanctorum*.

In the hour of his death no Christian should doubt that he is not alone. He can be certain, as the sacraments point out, that a great many eyes are upon him: first, the eyes of God and of Christ himself, for the Christian believes his words and clings to his sacraments; then also, the eyes of the dear angels, of the saints, and of all Christians. There is no doubt, as the Sacrament of the Altar indicates, that all of these in a body run to him as one of their own, help him overcome sin, death, and hell, and bear all things with him. In that hour the work of love and the communion of saints are seriously and mightily active.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lennart Pinomaa, *Faith Victorious: An Introduction to Luther's Theology*, trans. By Walter J Kukkonen (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press) 114.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *A Sermon for Prepare to die*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), LW 42, 112.

It is in *communio sanctorum* including the living and the dead, in which Christ himself exists in the middle that the eternal life that Christ has already promised and given to all believers is getting believed and realized so that the dying one could be peaceful and liberated from loneliness into the community of saints. It could be a concrete example answering to the community-oriented spirituality. In fact, many Japanese Christians enjoy Holy Communion as a symbol and an actual event God gives in Christian life in which they can meet through Christ's grace with a beloved one who has passed away.

The concept of *communio sanctorum* shows comprehensive salvation

Generally speaking, Japanese nature-oriented spirituality finds the close relationship and continuity between human beings and nature and seeks salvation in the union with mother nature. Such a spirituality is watched because there is an ecological crisis today bringing severe destruction to nature and life all around the world as the background. In such a situation, criticism against Christianity in the West often points out that this biblical spirituality has responsibility for the crisis because it speaks of human beings as rulers of all creation and Christianity is too anthropocentric.

Of course, this is not the case. In Christianity it is not the human being but God who is a center of all creation and the real ruler. Also it speaks of human beings as taken from dust of the earth and destined to return to dust. Here is seen the continuity between human beings and nature and the smallness of human beings. Moreover, biblical spirituality knows human sin as the cause of the destruction of God's creation and this curse is caused by human sin.

In order to solve the problem, human sin that has brought all destruction to the world, human beings must be saved first and made newly into right agents to work for God's world. It should be made clear that human responsibility can be pointed out appropriately only when the sin of human beings is known.

The concept of *communio sanctorum* points to the location where salvation is realized by the Holy Spirit. As seen above, the *communio sanctorum* is known as the assembly of believers in Protestantism, but Luther uses it in terms of participation or sharing<sup>5</sup> of holy things in a different sense from the Roman Catholic's. In the medieval

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<sup>5</sup> Lennart Pinomaa, *Faith Victorious: An Introduction to Luther's Theology*, trans. By Walter J Kukkonen (Lima, Ohio: Academic Renewal Press) 119.

tradition these holy things are sacraments and merits of saints, but for Luther the holy things could be all blessings that each believers is given.

I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, yet is united in love without sect or schism. Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses.<sup>6</sup>

Here in the *communio sanctorum*, all believers are sharing all their possessions.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the concept of *communio sanctorum* does not necessarily mean the assembly or community of believers, but also sharing all things that believers are given by God in this world. It is known in Luther's Large Catechism that all is given by God the Creator. Everything is named there, that we need to live including human body and nature and sun and stars in heaven.<sup>8</sup> If those who are saved by Christ share all things given by God with each other in *communio sanctorum*, then all the creatures share and partake the salvation in the community. So the concept of *communio sanctorum* gives the image of salvation not only for Human beings but also for all creatures in the world including nature in this world.

In the center of this image of salvation, the end of human sin won by Christ must be seen and proclaimed because it is in *communio sanctorum*. In this sense, the Christian message of salvation meets the Japanese nature-oriented spirituality. Christian spirituality knows the salvation of the whole world including nature and the relationship between human beings and nature in the concept of *communio sanctorum*. It is a comprehensive concept of salvation because it has God's comprehensive work for salvation as its center.

This image of salvation of the world including nature in *communio sanctorum* is not fully developed by Luther himself. It is, however, a possible way to show and remember the

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<sup>6</sup> Theodore G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 2000) 417.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. by Robert C. Schultz ( Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 294-297

<sup>8</sup> The Book of Concord. 412

concrete participation of Christians into ecological concerns in Lutheran theology. In fact, the use of the means of grace explains the understanding of bread and wine in the Holy Communion of Evangelical Lutheran Worship in ELCA, and is explained as follows:

The 'how' of Christ's presence remains as inexplicable in the sacrament as elsewhere. It is a presence that remains 'hidden' even though visible media are used in the sacrament. The earthly element is . . . a fit vehicle of the divine presence and it, too, the common stuff of our daily life, participates in the new creation which has already begun.<sup>9</sup>

What is important here is that the participation of earthly things in the new creation as described by the fact that bread and wine are Christ's body in Communion. In the grace of the Lord's Supper there is not just remission of human sin, but also an opening of the new creation in the work of Christ brought salvation in the cosmological and eschatological dimension.

### **Challenge from Japanese spirituality to Christian**

A Problem of non-believer's salvation

Are ancestors saved who did not have chance to hear the Gospel or to become a Christian before their death? In a more concrete sense, the question goes like, "Can my grandma be saved though before she died she did not have a chance to go to Church?" It is the biggest issue in Christian mission in Japan.

As I explained above, in the community-oriented spirituality, there is a mutual and interdependent relationship between the living and the dead. So the living can do something for the salvation of the dead by ancestral rites. Is there anything to be done for their salvation in Christianity?

In fact, we need to know if the conception of *communio sanctorum* is exclusive. If so, it could be said that the efficacy of *communio sanctorum* to the Japanese spirituality is quite limited. Berentsen, however, makes a clear distinction between *communio sanctorum* and *communio familiae*. According to Berentsen, Fasholé-Luke, an African protestant theologian who also compares African ancestor worship with the communion of the saints and concludes "that 'even non-Christians can be embraced within the Communion of

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<sup>9</sup> Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Renewing Worship 2: Principles for Worship*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002) 123.

Saints”, “in spite of his emphasis of the significance of the sacraments in the understanding of *communio sanctorum*.”<sup>10</sup> Against Fasholé-Luke’s ambiguous position, Berentsen says, “the New Testament does not allow a theology of mission to exploit the idea of the communion of saints in the direction of an obscuring integration with *communio familiae* in order to solve the problem of the pre-Christian dead.”<sup>11</sup>

Then what could be an appropriate answer to the Japanese community-oriented spirituality? It seems not enough to say, “entrust them into the will of God.” Of course, it is true, but the answer does not help for those who face the question.

The first person’s death and the second person’s death

It could be said that through ancestral rites the bereaved helps the dead to go to heaven. It means that the bereaved make the deceased really die by the series of rituals which usually last 33 years. The soul of the dead is going to unite with the collective ancestral spirit through the ancestral rites for 33 years. A person lives and dies such death in the Japanese spirituality in which the person is remembered repeatedly in the ancestral rites.

Kunio Yanagida, a famous journalist, wrote a kind of diary when he experienced his beloved son dying after an attempted suicide. Yanagida reports that in the process, Yanagida nursed the son who became brain-dead, and talked to him even though he knew well that brain-death means real death because he had learned a lot about brain-death as a journalist. Yanagida says, “there is a big difference between death in general (the third person’s death) and the beloved person’s death (‘the second person’s death’).” And then after a few days, Yanagida talked to his son, “it is enough that you have done well, now I allow you to go.”

It could be said that “the second person’s death” is a kind of process of acceptance of the death of the deceased as real and grief leaving by the bereaved. Here, however, in Japanese spirituality, this shows the undivided nature of “the first person’s death” and “the second person’s death” because until Yanagida accepted the death of his son, the son did not yet die besides in spite of the biological fact of death.

Life is not just lived by the one who biologically possessed it. Rather Life is shared among the people who have an interrelationship with each other. Japanese spirituality

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<sup>10</sup> Jan-Martin Berentsen, *Grave and Gospel*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1985) 213

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

knows that the meaning of an individual life is found in the relationship with others, especially in the relationship of love. The end of the individual life is not ended in the individual biological end, but rather in the other's receiving hearts of the death. This challenges westernized individualism.

Michiko Ishimure, a Japanese writer who has grappled with the problem of Minamata disease, a pollution disease for a long time explains why she writes about it. She says that she wants to be a kind of shaman against the modern in which the monopolistic capital exploits and does harm to nature and the root of all life. She is trying to listen to the voice of the spirits and the souls of the dead and the living which has never be pacified in Minamata city and to bring words to all in this ages what happened and what is done for the suffering people, especially to the dead by the pollution. Otherwise, they will never be saved, which means that they cannot die completely. If so, we cannot live in a reliable world.

It is solidarity between the living and the dead in Japanese spirituality that is trying to make peace, safety, and plenty of life in the coming age. Ishimure feels it is our responsibility to live in this solidarity. In such an understanding, it is not good only to entrust the souls of the dead into God's hands without saying anything about what the bereaved received from the deceased.

Now we know that all of us are easily involved and ruled by demonic power which uses violence within the whole creation, nature and society including life of ourselves. So a prayer must be prayed from the depth of our sinful situation to the Creator, the Savior, and the only Ruler of the world; God, listening to the voice of the victims who died an unnatural death.

### **The individual nature and communal nature of Life in Christ**

Community and an individual person united with Christ

Each Christian is united with Christ through Baptism. Then the assembly of believers which is cemented to Christ becomes the church as the body of Christ. This is logic of reason but it does not express the order of the occurrence of faith. If there is no church, there is no one proclaiming the gospel, no one can listen to it, and there is no Christian. In the community of believers, they share the witness of Christ, then a Christian is born. The important thing is that an individual believer can exist only in the community of saints, *communio sanctorum* in which Christ is present as the center and works for both

each Christians and the community as whole.

In Christian spirituality, an individual is never forsaken by the community of saints, while in the Japanese community-oriented spirituality, an individual is required to live and die for the community. In the nature-oriented spirituality, an individual is going to disappear into the flow of river.

It could be said that Japanese know that their own self is small. Japanese would be humble. On the other hand, Christians know through faith that their own self is sinful and must perish before God. In addition, however, Christians know God loves them in spite of their sin, and saves them. Christ works for salvation of one who should be damned. For this purpose, Christ is given for us.

But faith must be taught correctly, namely, that by it you are so cemented to Christ that He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated but remains attached to Him forever and declares: "I am as Christ." And Christ, in turn, says: "I am as that sinner who is attached to Me, and I to him. For by faith we are joined together into one flesh and one bone." Thus Eph. 5:30 says: "We are members of the body of Christ, of His flesh and of His bones," in such a way that this faith couples Christ and me more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife.<sup>12</sup>

An individual believer, in such faith, is united with Christ and saved by *communio sanctorum*. About such understanding of the new discovering of the individual, Christians must ask to Japanese spirituality.

Concerning the salvation of non-Christian ancestors, I want to propose that we think of the souls of non-Christian ancestors within the context of the church as the body of Christ. I am not saying that the souls of non-Christian ancestors are in the communion of saints. None of those souls are involved in the community as living non-Christians are. If we say it is so, however, it would assume the idea of evangelization of the dead, and our understanding could not support that idea. But we also could not say that they are outside of salvation. We can say that we commit them to the hands of God. Then we could think of the soul in the context of the church because the church is the body of Christ who was crucified, died, and was resurrected for our salvation. When we commit them to the hands

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<sup>12</sup> Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535, Chapters 1-4. (Saint Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 1999) LW 26 168

of God, we commit them to Christ who loves those who are not worthy to be loved. If so, we can think of dead ancestors in the context of the same communion in which we are living.

Practically, it is quite important to put non-Christian ancestors in the context of the church, *communio sanctorum*. This means that the church is going to care for them, but in a Christian way. Instead of Buddhist ancestral rites, we have services to give thanks and praise to God for our dead ancestors and share the love of God found in the life of the dead. In such Memorial services, we just entrust them into God.

The communal nature of *communio sanctorum*

Luther talks about communal nature of faith which realizes the unity with Christ, and others.

The immeasurable grace and mercy of God is given us in this sacrament to the end that we might put from us all misery and tribulation [anfechtung] and lay it upon the community [of saints], and especially on Christ. Then we may with joy find strength and comfort, and say, "Though I am a sinner and have fallen, though this or that misfortune has befallen me, nevertheless I will go to the sacrament to receive a sign from God that I have on my side Christ's righteousness, life, and sufferings, with all holy angels and the blessed in heaven and all pious men on earth. If I die, I am not alone in death; if I suffer, they suffer with me. [I know that] all my misfortune is shared with Christ and the saints, because I have a sure sign of their love toward me." See, this is the benefit to be derived from this sacrament; this is the use we should make of it. Then the heart cannot but rejoice and be strengthened.<sup>13</sup>

My life is no longer just only my own, but rather shared with all saints because everything is shared with saints in *communio sanctorum*.<sup>14</sup> This is not an undivided unity as we can see in Japanese spirituality. It is, however, a very important viewpoint to overcome the modern individualism. In the modern individualism, it seems that each of us has right

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<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and the Brotherhoods* (Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1999) L W 35, 54.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* trans. by Robert C. Schultz ( Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966) 297-303.

to decide everything including a famous question, “to be, or not to be?” Conversely, nobody can step into other’s private matter. But in *communio sanctorum*, Christians take care of others, each other.

You must feel with sorrow all the dishonor done to Christ in his holy Word, all the misery of Christendom, all the unjust suffering of the innocent, with which the world is everywhere filled to overflowing. You must fight, work, pray, and—if you cannot do more—have heartfelt sympathy. See, this is what it means to bear in your turn the misfortune and adversity of Christ and his saints. Here the saying of Paul is fulfilled, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ” [Gal. 6:2]. See, as you uphold all of them, so they all in turn uphold you; and all things are in common, both good and evil. Then all things become easy, and the evil spirit cannot stand up against this fellowship.<sup>15</sup>

Among the believers we share all so that it is also true between the saint in heaven and the saint on earth. The bereaved receives what the deceased thinks, feels, and minds at death, and lives with it. If someone died in a war, the person would leave a strong desire for peace. So the bereaved can take over the work for peace. Such a relationship between the dead and the living must be made sure in Christian faith.

However, human’s natural thought and mind are not affirmed as such because these come from sinful man. For example, Luther says, in speaking of his love, for his daughter, Magdalene in heaven, as her father:

This love of which I speak is natural love, which, although in itself good and human, must be crucified with us so that the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God may be done. For God’s Son, through whom and by whom all things were made, gave his very life although this was neither deserved nor required of him.<sup>16</sup>

Luther sees that even the love for his own daughter, which seems good in itself, must be sinful and subject itself to God’s will. For the purpose, it “must be crucified,” Christians in the *communio sanctorum* are not those who enjoy a kind of loving-each-other

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther, *The Blessed Sacrament of the Holy and True Body and the Brotherhoods* (Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1999) L W 35, 54.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, edited and translated by Theodore G. Tappert, (Westminster: John Knox, 1955) 81.

circle. Rather, they are emptying themselves and not seeking benefits for themselves, but wish salvation for others.

From this point of view, it could be said that through *communio sanctorum* we can pray for the salvation of the non-Christian ancestors in a more positive sense. The community-oriented spirituality feels a close relationship with the beloved one so Japanese people share their lives in this natural love. In such a relationship, the deceased is not just dead, but living in the bereaved. If the bereaved wants to be saved and united with Christ, the deceased living in this person, whose life here is just part of it, could be saved with that person. Of course, as seen above, both the bereaved and the dead must be crucified in faith and purified by Christ love. To show the way of salvation of the dead in such an intimate relationship is possible

This is a tentative answer to Japanese spirituality. It must not be a dogmatic statement, but rather a practical and pastoral statement. “Your non-Christian grandma who is in your mind partakes in the salvation of Christ’s love through your faith.”

### **Conclusion**

This is a dialogue between Luther’s understanding of *communio sanctorum* and the Japanese traditional spirituality; the community-oriented spirituality and the nature-oriented spirituality. I examined Japanese spiritual needs and questions to the Christian faith, especially concerning salvation of un-baptized ancestors and the relationship to nature. I tentatively answered the issues raised from Luther’s understanding of *communio sanctorum* and found deep insight about a communal perspective which questions individualism as found in westernized modern thought concerning the understanding of Christian life in *communio sanctorum* through this dialogue.