

Many non-Catholics particularly shy away from the sacramental aspects of Catholicism—and not from the seven sacraments only. What they dislike is the mixing of spirit and matter, the gift of something spiritual—grace—by means of physical things. That, after all, is what the sacraments are. This tendency to drive a wedge between spirit and matter stems from age-old heresies known as Dualism, Marcionism, and Manichaeism. Marcion in particular taught that the God of the Old Testament was evil in creating matter, but the God of the New Testament is a different and good God, who raises us to the level of spirit. The less one is entrapped by matter, the closer one is to God. Needless to say, this does not fit well with the sacraments—or with the incarnation!

In the sacraments, common material things, such as water, wine, bread, oil, and the imposition of hands, result in the giving of grace. Related to the sacraments are the sacramentals, objects such as medals, blessed palms, holy water, and ashes. Their use can lead people to receive or respond to grace. Many non-Catholics wrongly believe that the Church teaches that these sacramentals actually provide grace. But one of the biggest problems for non-Catholics are the relics of saints—the bones, ashes, clothing, or personal possessions of the apostles and other holy people which are held in reverence by the Church and sometimes associated with miraculous healings and other acts of God.

This is how Bart Brewer, ex-priest and head of Mission to Catholics International, phrases the complaint in his autobiography, *Pilgrimage From Rome*:

“Another dogma that has bothered Catholics for centuries is the veneration of relics and the claims that they have magical powers. Even Martin Luther wondered how there could be twenty-six apostles buried in Germany, when there were only twelve in the entire Bible! It is said that if all the pieces of the cross displayed in Catholic churches were assembled together, it would take a ten-ton truck to carry them. It is clear that most ‘relics’ are frauds. Furthermore, there is nothing in the Bible that supports the veneration of relics, even if they are genuine” (page 132).

This is a unique paragraph in that each sentence in it contains one or two blunders. Let’s go through them.

The first is the claim that the veneration of relics has “bothered Catholics for centuries.” Considering the high regard Catholics have had for relics throughout the years, this is absurd. It hasn’t been Catholics who have been bothered—it has been non-Catholics (and ex-Catholics).

What’s more, the Church does not claim that relics have “magical powers.” Note that Brewer cites no Catholic work which makes such a claim—because there isn’t any. The sacramental system is the opposite of magic. In magic, something material is regarded as the cause of something spiritual; in other words, a lower cause is expected to produce a higher effect.

NO MAGIC IN SACRAMENTS

The sacraments (and, derivatively, sacramentals and relics) don’t compel God to work in a certain way. Their use depends on God, who established their efficacy, so their effects are divine, not natural, in their origin. It is God who sanctions the use of relics; it is not a matter of men “overpowering” God through their own powers or the powers of nature, which is what magic amounts to.

When Jesus healed the blind man in John 9:1-7, did the Lord use magic mud and spittle? Was it actually a magic potion he mixed in the clay, or was it simply that Jesus saw fit to use matter in association with the conferral of his grace? The Lord is no dualist. He made matter, he loves matter, and he had no qualms about becoming matter himself to accomplish our redemption.

In the next sentence Brewer casts ridicule on relics by referring to Luther’s comment, but the rejoinder should have been obvious to him. Apart from the fact that there are more than twelve apostles mentioned in the Bible (there are at least sixteen, counting Paul, Barnabas, James the Just, and Matthias), there is no reason to think that the whole of a saint’s skeleton must be kept in one reliquary. In fact, from

what we know about the way early Christians preserved the bones of those killed during the persecutions, that would be unusual. More commonly, the saint’s bones were divided up, so various communities could have a portion of his relics: the skull here, a hand there, other bones elsewhere. So it would be proper for several cities to claim to have the relics of a single saint.

TEN-TON TRUCK OR WARSHIP?

Now for the classic argument. As Brewer phrases it, if all the alleged pieces of the True Cross were gathered together, “it would take a ten-ton truck to carry them.” That’s a modern way to put the charge. It used to be said the pieces would be enough to build a warship, but warships aren’t made out of wood any longer.

Either way, the charge is nonsense. In 1870 a Frenchman, Rohault de Fleury, catalogued all the relics of the True Cross, including relics that were said to have existed but were lost. He measured the existing relics and estimated the volume of the missing ones. Then he added up the figures and discovered that the fragments, if glued together, would not have made up more than one-third of a cross. The scandal wasn’t that there was too much wood. The scandal was that most of the True Cross, after being unearthed in Jerusalem in the fourth century, was lost again!

Brewer’s next charge is this: “It is clear that most ‘relics’ are frauds.” It isn’t clear at all. Certainly nothing he said indicates that. Have there been any frauds? Sure. But in most cases, relics are either known to be genuine or there is some reason to think they may be genuine, even if complete proof is impossible.

Take the famous Shroud of Turin, which scientists have been examining for some years. The scientists admit their experiments cannot establish that the Shroud is the actual burial cloth of Christ—they admit that is impossible—but they also say they might be able to eliminate the possibility of forgery. That is, they apparently are demonstrating that the

Shroud was a burial cloth that was wrapped around someone who was crucified in the same manner as Christ, perhaps at about the same time he was crucified (there is considerable dispute about the age of the Shroud, and the carbon-14 tests that have been performed on the Shroud have been defective), and in the same area he was crucified.

Most relics cannot be fakes because most relics are the bones of ordinary saints of history who were well known and whose remains were never lost in the first place.

The Church has never pronounced that any particular relic—even that of the cross—is genuine. But, the Church does approve of honor being given to the relics that can with reasonable probability be considered authentic.

IS THERE ROOM FOR DOUBT?

Will there always be room for doubt for those who seek it? Sure. And if that is the case with the Shroud of Turin, it is more the case with most other relics.

The skeptic will always be able to say, “This might not have been so-and-so’s,” or “You might be mistaken,” and we’d have to admit that’s true. There might have been a mistake, or fakes might have been substituted for the real relics.

We evaluate relics the same way we evaluate the bona fides of anything else. Did George Washington really sleep in a particular bed? We have to do some detective work to find out. We may never know for sure. We may have to rely on probabilities. On the other hand, we might have incontrovertible proof, that could be disbelieved only by the skeptic who insists George Washington never existed at all.

It’s the same with relics. Some are beyond doubt. Others are so highly probable that it would be rash to doubt. Others are merely probable. And some, yes, are improbable (though we wouldn’t want to toss out even most of those, in case we err and toss out something that really is a relic).

NO VENERATION?

Finally, Brewer claims that “there is nothing in the Bible that supports the veneration of relics, even if they are genuine.” Again, not so.

One of the most moving accounts of the veneration of relics is that of the very body of Christ itself. Rather than leaving his body on the cross, to be taken down and disposed of by the Romans (as was the customary practice), Joseph of Arimathea courageously interceded with Pilate for Christ’s body (Mark 15:43, John 19:38). He donated his own, newly hewn tomb as Christ’s resting place (Matt. 27:60). Nicodemus came and donated over a hundred pounds of spices to wrap inside Jesus’ grave clothes (John 19:39), that amount of spices being used only for the most honored dead. And after he was buried, the women went to reverently visit the tomb (Matt. 28:1) and to further anoint Christ’s body with spices even though it had already been sealed inside the tomb (Mark 16:1, Luke 24:1). These acts of reverence were more than just the usual courtesy shown to the remains of the dead; they were special respect shown to the body of a most holy man—in this case, the holiest man who has ever lived, for he was God Incarnate.

RELICS IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

The veneration of relics is seen explicitly as early as the account of Polycarp’s martyrdom written by the Smyrnaeans in A.D. 156. In it, the Christians describe the events following his burning at the stake: “We took up his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place, where the Lord will permit us to gather ourselves together, as we are able, in gladness and joy and to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom.”

In speaking of the veneration of relics in the early Church, the anti-Catholic historian Adolph Harnack writes, “. . . [N]o Church doctor of repute restricted it. All of them rather, even the Cappadocians, countenanced it. The numerous miracles which were wrought by bones and relics seemed to confirm their

worship. The Church therefore would not give up the practice, although a violent attack was made upon it by a few cultured heathens and besides by the Manichaeans” (Harnack, *History of Dogma*, tr., IV, 313).

In the fourth century the great biblical scholar, Jerome, declared, “We do not worship, we do not adore, for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore him whose martyrs they are” (*Ad Riparium*, i, P.L., XXII, 907).

RELICS IN SCRIPTURE

Keep in mind what the Church says about relics. It doesn’t say there is some magical power in them. There is nothing in the relic itself, whether a bone of the apostle Peter or water from Lourdes, that has any curative ability. The Church just says that relics may be the occasion of God’s miracles, and in this the Church follows Scripture.

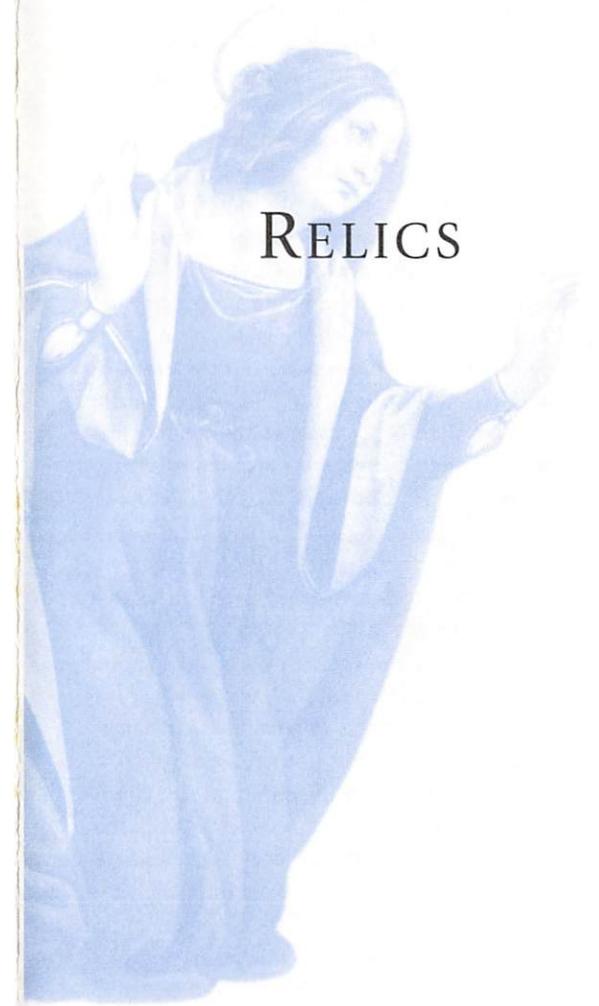
The use of the bones of Elisha brought a dead man to life: “So Elisha died, and they buried him. Now bands of Moabites used to invade the land in the spring of the year. And as a man was being buried, lo, a marauding band was seen and the man was cast into the grave of Elisha; and as soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood on his feet” (2 Kgs. 13:20-21). This is an unequivocal biblical example of a miracle being performed by God through contact with the relics of a saint!

Similar are the cases of the woman cured of a hemorrhage by touching the hem of Christ’s cloak (Matt. 9:20-22) and the sick who were healed when Peter’s shadow passed over them (Acts 5:14-16). “And God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them” (Acts 19:11-12).

If these aren’t examples of the use of relics, what are? In the case of Elisha, a Lazarus-like return from the dead was brought about through the prophet’s bones. In the New Testament cases, physical things

(the cloak, the shadow, handkerchiefs and aprons) were used to effect cures. There is a perfect congruity between present-day Catholic practice and ancient practice. If you reject all Catholic relics today as frauds, you should also reject these biblical accounts as frauds.

Mary & the Saints



NIHIL OBSTAT: I have concluded that the materials presented in this work are free of doctrinal or moral errors.

Bernadeane Carr, STL, 10 August 2004

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+Robert H. Brom, Bishop of San Diego, 10 August 2004

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