

Relics

The veneration of relics is practiced by Christians and non-Christians alike. It is in no way restricted to the Catholic religion, but is, to some extent, a primitive instinct with origins that predate Christianity.

It is known, for instance, that relics of Buddha, who died in 483 B.C., were distributed soon after his death. Although there remain only a limited number of authentic relics, parts of his body, including teeth and hairs, have been carefully preserved and enshrined in various domed, towerlike shrines that are found in cities and in the countryside throughout the Buddhist world. Known as stupas, or pagodas, these shrines are visited by both monks and laymen who walk around them in a practice known as circumambulation, making offerings of food and flowers while meditating on the doctrines taught by Buddha. Since there are only a few authentic relics, some of the millions of stupas in Asia contain only images, prayers or sacred writings as reminders of the prophet.

The relics of Confucius have been venerated every year by Chinese and Asian peoples since the year 195 B.C. Relics of Mohammed, who died in A.D. 632, are likewise revered, these being two hairs of the prophet which are kept in a reliquary resembling a domed temple that stands several feet high beside the huge rock in a building in Jerusalem called the Dome of the Rock. This limestone rock, measuring 58 feet by 44 feet, figures in Islamic, Jewish, and Christian traditions and is something of a relic itself, being regarded by Moslems as the rock visited by an angel before the creation of Adam and Eve and the place where Mohammed ascended to heaven. Here Abraham is said to have nearly sacrificed his son, and it is claimed that all the great prophets from Elijah onward prayed beside it. Many Christian churches profess the belief that Christ will descend on the spot at the Second Coming.

Since the early days of the Church the remains of a saint or holy person were called relics, from the Latin *Reliquiae* meaning remains. Relics are divided into three categories. First-class relics are parts of the bodies of saints and the instruments of Our Lord's Passion. Second-class relics are objects sanctified by close contact with saints, such as articles of clothing, objects used in life, or, in the case of a martyr, the instruments of his torture. Third-class relics are objects or cloths touched to either first- or second-class relics.

Material benefits obtained through relics of saints have often included miracles, as is witnessed not only by the history of the Church and the lives of the saints, but also by Sacred Scripture. In the Old Testament the relics of the prophet Elisha are mentioned. It is related that,

“Elisha died and was buried. At the time bands of Moabites used to raid the land each year. Once some people were burying a man when suddenly they spied such a raiding band. They cast the dead man into the grave of the prophet Elisha, and everyone hurried off. But when the man came in contact with the bones of Elisha, he came back to life and rose to his feet” (2 Kings 13: 20-21).

The New Testament mentions second-class relics of the Apostle Paul and the wonders the Lord has worked through them. The Acts of the Apostles relate that,

“...God worked extraordinary miracles at the hands of Paul. When handkerchiefs or cloths which had touched his skin were applied to the sick, their diseases were cured and evil spirits departed from them” (Acts 19: 11-12).

It is impossible to determine the time when the practice of venerating minute fragments of the bodies of saints first came into vogue, but it is known to have been widespread during the fourth century. These small pieces of bone or blood were, for those who possessed them, imbued with a spiritual force that could produce miracles through the intercession of the saint to whom they belonged. They were so greatly esteemed by their owners that every kind of priceless jewel, every manner of artistry and craftsmanship were expended upon the cases in which they were preserved, and excessive amounts of money were invested in the shrines that housed them. To these shrines, many of which are still the glory of the land, pilgrims traveled great distances to pray and make vows. When the cult of relics came to its full height during the Middle Ages, many great churches owed their sanctity and renown simply to the presence of important relics.

The veneration of relics is permitted and encouraged by the Church out of honor for the bodies of saints – which were temples of the Holy Spirit, and which will be raised to eternal glory – and to satisfy the universal instinct of mankind to treat with affection and reverence the material souvenirs of those we love. To this the Council of Trent concurred and added long ago that relics could be honored, since through them many benefits are granted to men by God.

The Church has repeatedly warned, however, against the temptation to confuse sound spirituality with magic, blasphemous idolatry and superstitions.

Vatican II addressed the matter of relic veneration by noting that,

“The saints have been traditionally honored in the church and their authentic relics and images held in veneration. For the feasts of the saints proclaim the wonderful works of Christ in His servants, and display to the faithful fitting examples for their imitation.”

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