

Relics?



Opponents of the Catholic faith sometimes point to the veneration of sacred relics as a good example of Catholic superstition. "It makes no sense," they say, "to treasure bits of wood or cloth or dead Saints bones.

Now, it's true that Catholics do show great reverence towards the remains and mementos of the Saints. However, we do this for very good reasons. Firstly, it's simply because....

....the body of a Christian is God's temple. As such it is holy and to be treated with great respect. It's not simply a disposable container. It is awaiting a glorious resurrection.

The second reason is that God himself uses the body and other material things, to convey to us his blessings.

SACRED RELICS

Both Catholic and Orthodox Christians have always *venerated* the sacred relics of the Saints. Veneration simply means that we treat them with the respect due to things that are holy.

We do not worship them, or think of them as having magical powers. (Magic means trying to get spiritual forces to do your bidding.) But we know that God occasionally uses such relics in miraculous ways.

WHAT THEY ARE

But, just what are relics? Catholics sometimes divide them into three classes.

1. First class relics are the bodily remains of the Saints. This could be the whole body, or some fragment of it.

2. Things which were used by the Saint such as books, clothing, and so on, are often cherished as second class relics.

3. A third class relic is simply a piece of cloth that has been touched to the remains of a Saint.

A STUMBLING BLOCK

Some Christians have a hard time accepting that the remains of a Saint should receive any special attention, or that any material thing can actually have a spiritual effect.

They like to think of the material and spiritual worlds as separate realities that just don't mix. Catholics however, have always believed otherwise. There is a reason why.

grace are reported through the holy relics of the Saints even today.

Christian beliefs about the human body and physical death are very different from those of most unbelievers. This was especially true at the time of the apostles.

A SHARP CONTRAST

The land of the dead held no attraction for the pagans of old. Death was a dark unknown, and they grieved without hope. They feared both burial grounds and the spirits of the departed. They believed that bodies, including those of friends and loved ones, were a pollution, to be gotten rid of as soon as possible.

The first Christians, on the other hand, faced their deaths singing, their faces glowing with joy. They had no fear of departed spirits or burial places. Indeed it was among the tombs of the martyrs that they met for worship, safe from their persecutors who feared to go there.

A SIGN OF FUTURE GLORY

Christians regard the body as holy because in baptism it became part of Christ. It is a true temple of God, waiting to be restored and raised up in immortality at the resurrection. A body is not just garbage to be disposed of, it too holds the hope and promise of future glory.

It is as a sign of the glory and splendor awaiting the bodies of the Saints, that God works wonders through them. In this way He gives honor to those who have given honor to him by their great love and faithful service.

AN HONOR GIVEN

Veneration toward such relics is the only truly Christian attitude. A mother who loses a child may treasure a lock of hair as a keepsake. In a similar way, the Saints whom we honor are family. They are our beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.

Another strange practice is recorded there, a practice that sounds amazingly Catholic. We read:

“So remarkable were the miracles at Paul’s hands that cloths or aprons which had been touched to him were taken to the sick, and they were cured of their sickness, and the evil spirits came out of them. Acts 19:11-12

Thus God makes use of physical things to bring healing. Now he is the same today as yesterday. What he did then, he can do now. Our present Catholic practices are in agreement with those of the first centuries.

THE EARLY CHURCH

After the apostles and early martyrs had died, believers continued to venerate their remains and treasured cloths that had been touched to them. Many early accounts have been preserved which tell of such Christian practices.

St. Polycarp, a bishop of Smyrna, had been a disciple of the apostle John. When he was arrested, he refused to give up his faith in Jesus. He was sentenced and burnt to death in the arena. After his martyrdom, believers who had witnessed his sufferings wrote:

“We took up his bones which were more costly than precious stones, and more refined than gold, and deposited them in a fitting place. And there as we meet together, when we can, the Lord will grant us to celebrate with joy and gladness the birthday of his martyrdom.”

A CHRISTIAN CUSTOM

The custom soon developed among Christians of praying at the resting places of such sacred relics. Often God granted wonderful cures and blessings by means of them, and thus honoring his saints and martyrs.

From these early times, this custom has continued among Catholics. Miracles of God’s

WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS

God can work miracles through holy people, not only while they live, but also through their bodily remains. We see this in scripture.

The book of Kings records the following story which occurred in old Testament times. It tells of Elisha, a great and holy prophet.

“Elisha died, and was buried. Now bands of Moabites were making raids into the country every year. Some people happened to be carrying a man out for burial; when they sighted one of these bands, they threw the man into the tomb of Elisha and ran off. As soon as the man touched the bones of Elisha, he came to life and stood on his feet.” 2 Kings 20-21

THE HEM OF HIS CLOAK

At times God works wonders even through ‘things’ that are connected with someone holy.

The Gospel of Matthew tells us of a woman who suffered from bleeding for twelve years. She sought out Jesus thinking to herself, “If only I can touch the hem of his cloak, I will be healed.” When she did she was instantly healed.

Word must have got around, for later in the same Gospel we read that many sick people came to him, *“begging him just to let them touch the hem of his garment. And all who touched it were completely healed.”* Mat 14: 36

But, you may say, that was Jesus and he was God. However the Bible shows that God can bless us even through inanimate objects.

THE APOSTLES

God worked many miracles at the hands of the apostles. The book of Acts tells us that crowds of sick waited in the street so that Peter’s shadow might fall on them and cure them. Acts 5:15

To put this in perspective, ask yourself this. If by some chance, you were given a lock of Christ's hair, or his tunic, what would you do? Would you discard it as of no value, or would you cherish such a relic as priceless.

If you would value it, you must ask yourself why. Understanding this, is the key to understanding this ancient practice.

BUT ARE THEY REAL?

Often the charge is made that many relics are really frauds. Let's look at this briefly.

The Church is very careful in this matter. To make sure that relics are genuine they must be well documented and verified by sworn testimony. Only those so approved are given official recognition as true relics.

Relics that have been honored for a long time, but cannot be documented, may be kept, but the Church does not guarantee that they are authentic.

The charge that relics are a way of making money is nonsense, since their sale is strictly forbidden.

Though relics are not central to our faith, they are important signs that point to the resurrection and to the great dignity of the human body in the plan of God.