

## Did You Know?

- **Relics**      The relics of saints are 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. 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".

When Jesus healed the blind man in John 9:1-7, He 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.

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.

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!

Will there always be room for doubt for those who seek it? Sure. 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. 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. Some relics 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).

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.

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."

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.