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“CAN THESE BONES LIVE?”

Selections from Church Fathers on the Veneration of Relics

*And He said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live?
And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest. (Ez. 37:3)*

The Old Testament

And Elisha died, and they buried him. And the bands of the Moabites invaded the land at the coming in of the year. And it came to pass, as they were burying a man, that, behold, they spied a band of men; and they cast the man into the sepulchre of Elisha: and when the man was let down, and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived, and stood up on his feet. (2 Kings 13:20-21)

The New Testament

And God wrought special miracles by the hands of Paul: so that from his body were brought unto the sick handkerchiefs or aprons, and the diseases departed from them, and the evil spirits went out of them. (Acts 19:11-12)

Letter From the Christians of Smyrna Describing the Death of St. Polycarp, c. 156 A.D.

After he had been burnt at the stake, the local Christians wished to carry off his remains, but the Jews urged the Roman officer to refuse because the Christians “would only abandon the Crucified One and begin to worship this man.” Eventually, however, permission was granted and “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.”

Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea (+340 A.D.)

In his *The History of the Church* (c. 325 A.D.), Eusebius relates that such objects as the throne of St. James or the oil multiplied by Bishop Narcissus (c. 190 A.D.) were already clearly venerated as relics.

"The throne of James – who was the first to receive from the Saviour and His apostles the episcopacy of the Jerusalem church, and was called Christ's brother, as the sacred books show – has been reserved to this day. The Christians there, who in their turn look after it with such loving care, make clear to all the veneration in which saintly men high in the favour of God were regarded in time past and are regarded to this day."

"Many stories of miracles wrought by Narcissus, handed down by generations of Christians, are told by members of the community. Among these they narrate the following tale of wonder. Once during the great all-night-long vigil of Easter, the deacons ran out of oil. The whole congregation was deeply distressed, so Narcissus told those responsible for the lights to draw water and bring it to him, and they obeyed him instantly. Then he said a prayer over the water, and instructed them to pour it into the lamps with absolute faith in the Lord. They again obeyed him, and, in defiance of natural law, by the miraculous power of God the substance of the liquid was physically changed from water into oil. All the years from that day to our own a large body of Christians there have preserved a little of it, as proof of that wonderful event."

Christian Altar Stone Inscription, 359 A.D.

Dated inscriptions upon blocks of stone, which often served as altar slabs, were widespread in the early 4th century. One such from Northern Africa, now found in the Louvre in Paris, bears a list of relics once affixed into a shallow circular cavity carved in its surface. The inscription reads: "A holy memorial of the wood of the Cross, of the land of Promise where Christ was born, the Apostles Peter and Paul, the names of the martyrs Datian, Donatian, Cyprian, Nemesianus, Citinus, and Victoria. In the year of the Province 320 [A. D. 359] Benenatus and Pequaria set this up."

St. Ephraim the Syrian (+ c. 379 A.D.)

On the holy martyrs: "Even after death they act as if alive, healing the sick, expelling demons, and by the power of the Lord rejecting every evil influence of the demons. This is because the miraculous grace of the Holy Spirit is always present in the holy relics."

Egeria, A Pilgrim to Jerusalem in Holy Week (380 A.D.)

Egeria, a fourth-century Spanish pilgrim who authored one of the earliest surviving pilgrimage accounts of Christian holy places, describes in detail the Good Friday service of 380, and the veneration of the Holy Cross:

"And when they arrive before the Cross the daylight is already growing bright. There the passage from the Gospel is read where the Lord is brought before Pilate, with everything that is written concerning that which Pilate spake to the Lord or to the Jews, the whole is read..."

Then a chair is placed for the bishop in Golgotha behind the Cross, which is now standing, the bishop duly takes his seat in the chair, and a table covered with a linen cloth is placed before him: the deacons stand round the table, and a silver-gilt casket is brought in which is the holy wood of the Cross. The casket is opened and (the wood) is taken out, and both the wood of the Cross, and the title are placed upon the table. Now, when it has been put upon the table, the bishop, as he sits, holds the extremities of the sacred wood firmly in his hands, while the deacons who stand around guard it. It is guarded thus because the custom is that the people, both faithful and catechumens, come one by one and, bowing down at the table, kiss the sacred wood and pass through."

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (+386 A.D.)

Before the year 350, St. Cyril of Jerusalem informs us three times that the fragments of the wood of the Cross found by his contemporary, St. Helen, in 326 A.D. had been distributed in many places:

"...He was truly crucified for our sins. For if thou wouldest deny it, the place refutes thee visibly, this blessed Golgotha, in which we are now assembled for the sake of Him who was here crucified, and the whole world has since been filled with pieces of the wood of the Cross."

After referring to the miracle wrought by the restoration to life of a dead man after being touched to the relics of Elisha, St. Cyril says this occurred:

"...To show that even though the soul is not present a virtue resides in the body of the saints, because of the righteous soul which has for so many years tenanted it and used it as its minister...Let us not be foolishly incredulous as though the thing had not happened, for if handkerchiefs and aprons which are from without, touching the body of the diseased, have raised up the sick [Acts 19], how much more should the body itself of the prophet raise the dead?"

St. Gregory of Nyssa (+395 A.D.)

In a eulogy celebrating the Holy Martyr Theodore, St. Gregory contrasts the horror produced by an ordinary corpse with the veneration paid to the body of a saint. The pilgrim approaches the tomb, "believing that to touch it is itself a sanctification and a blessing and if it be permitted to carry off any of the dust which has settled upon the martyr's resting place, the dust is accounted as a great gift and the mould as a precious treasure. And as for touching the relics themselves, if that should ever be our happiness, only those who have experienced it and who have had their wish gratified can know how much this is desirable and how worthy a recompense it is of aspiring prayer."

In a sermon on the Holy Forty Martyrs of Sebaste, after describing how their frozen bodies were afterwards burned by the persecutors, St. Gregory says, "their ashes and all that the fire had spared have been so distributed throughout the world that almost every province has had its share of the blessing. I also myself have a portion of this holy gift and I have laid the bodies of my parents beside the ashes of these warriors, that in the hour of the resurrection they may be awakened together with these highly privileged comrades."

St. Ambrose of Milan (+397 A.D.)

At the finding of the relics of Sts. Gervasius and Protasius: "You know — indeed, you have yourselves seen — that many are cleansed from evil spirits, that very many also, having touched with their hands the robe of the Saints, are freed from those ailments which oppressed them. You see that

the miracles of old times are renewed, when through the coming of the Lord Jesus grace was more abundantly shed forth upon the earth, and that many bodies are healed as it were by the shadow of the holy bodies. How many napkins are passed about! How many garments, laid upon the holy relics and endowed with the power of healing, are claimed! All are glad to touch even the outside thread, and whosoever touches it will be made whole."

St. John Chrysostom (+407 A.D.)

"God left us the relics of the saints wishing to guide us in the same zeal they had."

In a eulogy on St. Ignatius of Antioch: "You, inhabitants of Antioch, have sent forth a bishop and received a martyr; you sent him forth with prayers, and received him back with crowns; and not only you, but all the cities which lay between. For how do you think that they behaved when they saw his remains being brought back? What pleasure was produced! How they rejoiced! With what laudations on all sides did they beset the crowned one! For as with a noble athlete, who has wrestled down all his antagonists, and who comes forth with radiant glory from the arena, the spectators receive him, and do not suffer him to tread the earth, bringing him home on their shoulders and according him countless praises. So also every city in turn received this Saint from Rome, and bearing him upon their shoulders as far as this city, escorted the crowned one with praises, hymning the champion.... At this time the holy Martyr bestows grace to the very same cities, establishing them in piety, and from that time to this day he enriches this city."

St. Jerome (+420 A.D.)

"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 to better adore Him whose martyrs they are."

Blessed Augustine of Hippo (+430 A.D.)

Regarding miracles at the relics of the martyrs: "To what do these miracles witness, but to this faith which preaches Christ risen in the flesh and ascended with the same flesh into heaven? For the martyrs themselves were

martyrs, that is to say, were witnesses of this faith.... For this faith they gave their lives, and can now ask these benefits from the Lord in whose name they were slain. For this faith their extraordinary constancy was exercised, so that in these miracles great power was manifested as the result. For if the resurrection of the flesh to eternal life had not taken place in Christ, and were not to be accomplished in His people, as predicted by Christ... why do the martyrs who were slain for this faith which proclaims the resurrection possess such power? ...These miracles attest this faith which preaches the resurrection of the flesh unto eternal life."

In *The City of God*, Blessed Augustine gives numerous instances of miracles wrought by soil from the Holy Land flowers which had touched a reliquary or had been laid upon a particular altar, oil from the lamps of the church of a martyr, or by other objects connected with the saints themselves.

St. Paulinus of Nola (+431 A.D.)

Regarding the Crown of Thorns, which had been found in the Holy Sepulchre and was still in Jerusalem, St. Paulinus of Nola (354-431) writes, "The thorns with which Our Savior was crowned is held in honor together with the Holy Cross and the pillar of the scourging."

[A later writer, Cassiodorus, speaks of the Crown of Thorns as still being venerated at Jerusalem in 570 A.D. It was later taken to Constantinople where it was enshrined until Baldwin II, of the Latin Kingdom of Constantinople offered it to King Louis of France. It is now enshrined in the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris, *ed.*]

St. Cyril of Alexandria (+444 A.D.)

"We by no means consider the holy martyrs to be gods, nor are we wont to bow down before them adoringly, but only relatively and reverentially."

St. Gregory the Great (the Dialogist), Pope of Rome (+604 A.D.)

St. Gregory himself filled a small neck cross with filings from St. Peter's chains and from the gridiron of St. Laurence.

St. John Damascene (+780 A.D.)

"The Saints have become according to grace that which the Lord Christ is according to nature. That is, they have become gods according to grace: pure and living habitations of God. For God says: 'I will dwell in them, walk in them, and I will be their God' (II Cor. 6:16; Lev. 16:12). The Holy Scriptures likewise say: 'the souls of the righteous are in God's hand, and death cannot lay hold of them' (Wis. Sol. 3:1). For death is rather the sleep of Saints than their death."

"Further: 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His Saints' (Ps. 119:6). What, then, is more precious than to be in the hand of God? For God is life and light, and those who are in God's hand are in life and light. Further, that God dwells even in their bodies in a spiritual manner the all-divine Apostle attests: 'Know ye not that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit dwelling in you?' (I Cor. 3:16). And, 'the Lord is Spirit' (II Cor. 3:17). Thus, the evangelical truth: 'If anyone destroy the temple of God, him will God destroy — for the temple of God is holy, and ye are that temple' (I Cor. 3:17). Surely, then, we must ascribe honor to the living temples of God, the living dwelling-places of God."

"These, while they lived, stood with boldness before God. The Lord Christ granted us the relics of the Saints to be fountains of salvation unto us, pouring forth manifold blessings and abounding in sweetly fragrant oil. Let no one disbelieve this! For if water burst in the desert from the steep and solid rock according to God's will (Ex. 17:6), and from the jawbone of an ass to quench Samson's thirst (Judges 15:14-19), is it then unbelievable that fragrant oil should spring forth from relics of the holy Martyrs? By no means, at least to those who know the omnipotence of God and the honor which He accords to His Saints."

"According to the Old Testament law, everyone who touched a dead body was considered impure (Num. 19:11). However, the Saints are not dead. For from the time when He Who is Himself Life and the Author of life was counted among the dead, we do not call those dead who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection and with faith in Him. For how could a dead body work miracles? And how, through the holy relics, are demons driven off, diseases dispelled, the sick made well, the blind restored to sight, lepers cleansed, temptations and tribulations overcome; and how does every good gift come down from the Father of lights (James 1:17) to those who pray with sure faith?"

From the *Lives of Sts. Barlaam and Joseph*: "We carry about these clean and holy bones, O king, because we attest in due form our love of those marvelous men to whom they belong; and because we would bring ourselves to remember their wrestlings and lovely conversation, to rouse up ourselves to the like zeal; and because we would catch some vision of the rest and felicity wherein they now live, and thus, as we call them blessed, and provoke one another to emulate them, strive to follow their footsteps: because, moreover, we find thereby that the thought of death, which is right profitable, lends wings of zeal to our religious exercises; and lastly, because we derive sanctification from their touch."

Holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council (787 A.D.)

"Our Lord Jesus Christ granted to us the relics of Saints as a salvation-bearing source which pours forth varied benefits on the infirm. Consequently, those who presume to abandon the relics of the Martyrs: if they be hierarchs, let them be deposed; if however monastics or laymen, let them merely be excommunicated."

St. Justin Popovitch (+1979 A.D.)

"...That a pious veneration of the holy relics is a constituent part of the salvation rendered by the God-Man is also evidenced by the following facts: from the depths of sacred antiquity, churches were built on the graves and relics of saints, and the holy liturgy is performed only on antimensia, in which are placed parts of the holy relics. Moreover, the divine service books, especially the Menaion, are replete with prayers and hymns which refer to the pious veneration of holy relics....

"All in all, the mystery of holy relics is at the heart of the universal mystery of the New Testament: the incarnation of God. The full mystery of the human body is explained by the incarnation, the embodiment of God in the God-Man, the Lord Jesus Christ. For this reason, then, the Gospel message concerning the body: "The body for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (I Cor. 6:13). And through a human body also, the entire creation, all of matter, received its divine significance, the universal meaning of the God-Man. By man, who is sanctified in the Church by the holy mysteries and the holy virtues, the creation and even matter are sanctified, united to

Christ. There accrues to this also a joy—the myrrh-streaming property of many relics. This wonder of myrrh has been given to the holy relics in order to indicate that Christians are truly "a sweet-savour of Christ unto God" (II Cor. 2:15), sweet-smelling to God and to heaven. The truth of the Gospel is that the sin of man is a foul odor before God and every sin pleases the devil. Through the holy mysteries and holy virtues, Christians become "a sweet-savour of Christ unto God." For this reason, then, the holy relics of the saints pour forth myrrh." ✦