

International Crusade for Holy Relics

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An Apologetics on Relics

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Sacramentals and their use by Catholics have always been one of contention with members of other Christian denominations. Fundamentalists particularly are ready at a moment's notice to proclaim "blasphemy" and "idol worship" to the sacramentals of Catholicism. Their position is one of combining spirit and the material world, that an element of the Divine realm (especially the gift of grace) cannot be transmuted in the material world. However, this is what the sacramentals of the Church are.

Everyday items such as water, bread, wine, oil, the imposition of hands, and the human body, can result in a transfer of God's grace. The same is applied to many of the sacramentals: holy water, chrism, the Rosary, candles, ashes, and the objects of daily life of those who are recognized as having been blessed with extraordinary intervention of God's grace. The use of sacramentals accumulates for the believer, that all-encompassing grace. When the conversation turns to relics of the saints and beati, the issue of the Fundamentalist's becomes heated.

Recently, an ex-priest and leader of Mission to Catholics International (a Fundamental Protestant organization luring Catholics away from the Church) Bart Brewer, phrases the position of most Protestants in his autobiography, *Pilgrimage From Rome*: "Another "dogma" that has bothered Catholics for centuries is the veneration of relics and the claims of 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). To the average Catholic, every sentence in this single paragraph contained in this supposed priest's manuscript is in error. With further examination, let's review Mr. Brewer's statements.

The first claim that the veneration of relics has "bothered Catholics for centuries." Considering the esteem Catholics have possessed for Holy Relics from the earliest times of the Church, this is ludicrous. As a matter of fact, it isn't fellow Catholics who have been "bothered"; it is non-Catholics, former practicing Catholics, and primarily fundamentalist Protestants. In addition, no Catholic will ever claim that Holy Relics possess some "magical power" or other such nonsense. Mr. Brewer also fails to provide **any** Catholic work that makes such an asseveration - due to the fact that there isn't one. Catholic sacramentals are the opposite of magic. In magic, a material object is regarded as the causation of an aspect of the spiritual realm; in other words, a lower cause is expected to produce a higher effect.

There is **no** magic in sacramentals. The sacraments of the Church, sacramentals, or relics cannot compel God to perform **our** will. Their use is united with God, whom through **His** will

established their potency. It is God alone, who endows the use of relics. Never has man ever been able to perform an “overpowerment” of God, which is what belief in magic is.

In the following sentence, Mr. Brewer scoffs and ridicules relics by his reference to Martin Luther, however the replication should be obvious to him. When we refer to relics, we are usually speaking of parts of their physical remains or an element of their personal possessions. For the purposes of our debate, let us refer to anatomical remains.

There are no conclusions to support the concept of maintaining a saint’s physical remains must be kept in a singular reliquary. During the days of early Christianity, believers preserved the remains of those who were martyred during the persecutions. In fact, it was common to divide the saint’s bones amongst the communities of Christians; therefore the claims of numerous locations that claimed to possess relics would be proper.

Now for a classic debate: Mr. Brewer states that if all the alleged pieces of the True Cross were gathered together, “it would take a ten-ton truck to carry them.” His charge is ridiculous. A Frenchman by the name of Rohault de Fleury, in 1870, compiled a catalogue of all the known relics of the True Cross, as well as, those presumed lost. In his measurements of the relics in existence and the volume of those pieces presumed missing, he concluded that if combined, they total would only be that of approximately one-third of the True Cross.

Mr. Brewer’s next charge, “It is clear that most ‘relics’ are frauds.” Where is this clarity? Certainly there have been fraudulent relics, yet in the majority of cases they have been claimed to be genuine. A perfect example is the continuing arguments over the Shroud of Turin, which has been under scientific examination for decades. At present, there is no definitive experimentation to the establishment of the authenticity (the scientists themselves admit this fact) of the Shroud. However there are the skeptics who comment that it is one of the most bewildering forgeries ever produced, or is perhaps the burial cloth of a person who died in the same way as the Biblical account of Jesus’ crucifixion. Aside from the doubts concerning the age of the Shroud, it has recently been concluded that pollen samples lifted from the Shroud are those from plants only found near Jerusalem. For the believer, there is no doubt.

Finally, Mr. Brewer’s illation that, “there is nothing in the Bible that supports the veneration of relics. In the Old Testament, the bone of Elisha returned the life of a dead man, “Elisha died and was buried. Bands of Moabites were making incursions into the country every year. Some people happened to be carrying a man out for burial; at the sight of one of these bands, they flung the man into the tomb of Elisha and made off. The man had no sooner touched the bones of Elisha than he came to life and stood up on his feet” (2Kgs. 13:20-21). Referring to the New Testament we find a woman being cured of hemorrhaging by touching the hem of Christ’s cloak (Mt.9: 20-22). The sick were healed when Peter’s shadow passed over them (Acts 5:15-16). “So remarkable were the miracles worked by God at Paul’s hands that handkerchiefs or aprons which had touched him were taken to the sick, and they were cured of their illnesses, and the evil spirits came out of them” (Acts 19:11-12).

There is a perfect congruity between modern Catholic devotional practice and that of the ancients. If one rejects all Catholic relics of today as frauds, they also reject the Biblical accounts as fraudulent also. Let us be ever vigilant in our faith, as well as, the practices of our Church. In such faith, may we grow in holiness and be receptive of the grace of God.