

The Early Church Fathers on Relics

It is said that the veneration of relics is evidence of idolatry or superstition. But this ignores the clear evidence in Scripture that demonstrates not only their use, but their power. For instance, in 2 Kings 13:20-21 we see a dead man come to life after touching the bones of the prophet Elisha. In the New Testament we see a woman cured after touching the hem of Jesus clothing (Matthew 9:20-22). And in Acts 19:11-12 we see people healed by aprons or handkerchiefs that had touched the Apostle Paul. Of course, relics have no power of their own. But just as God chooses to work through men he also chooses to work through their relics as a testament to their holiness. The Early Church was aware of this as evidenced by their practice of collecting and treasuring the relics of the martyrs.

The Martyrdom of Saint Ignatius

... he was thus cast to the wild beasts close beside the temple, that so by them the desire of the holy martyr Ignatius should be fulfilled, according to that which is written, The desire of the righteous is acceptable Proverbs 10:24 [to God], to the effect that he might not be troublesome to any of the brethren by the gathering of his remains, even as he had in his Epistle expressed a wish beforehand that so his end might be. For only the harder portions of his holy remains were left, which were conveyed to Antioch and wrapped in linen, as an inestimable treasure left to the holy Church by the grace which was in the martyr (*The Martyrdom of St. Ignatius* 6 [A.D. 107]).

The Martyrdom of Polycarp

[T]he Son of God, we adore; but the martyrs, as disciples and followers of the Lord, we worthily love on account of their extraordinary affection towards their own King and Master... [When Polycarp died] we afterwards took up his bones, as being more precious than the most exquisite jewels, and more purified than gold, and deposited them in a fitting place... [As] opportunity is allowed us, with joy and rejoicing, the Lord shall grant us to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom, both in memory of those who have already finished their course, and for the exercising and preparation of those yet to walk in their steps (*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 17-18 [A.D. 155]).

Acts of the Martyrdom of St. Epipodius and St. Alexander

Into [a] cavern their venerable bodies were, with religious forethought, cast, because the fury of the Gentiles, denying the last rites of burial, raged even against the bodies of the dead. [Later] the reverence of religious men preserved that place, and a reverence transmitted [it] through their posterity... [One] woman...preserved [a] sandal of the martyr... [and]did not deny that, by the mercy of God, she had cured very many by means of the relic... . (*Acts of the Martyrdom of SS. Epipodius and Alexander* [A.D. 178], in Ruinart, *Acta Primorum Martyrum Sincera et Selecta* Chapter 13, as translated in *The Faith of Catholics*, Volume 3, Page 250-251).

The Martyrdom of Perpetua and Felicity

Meanwhile in another gate, Saturus was encouraging the soldier Pudens saying: "In summary," he says, "certainly, just as I expected and predicted, I have not been affected by any beast up till now. And now you should believe with your whole heart: behold I go forth to there, and I will be finished by one bite of a leopard." And immediately at the end of the spectacle, as a leopard was let loose, he shed so much blood from one bite, that as he returned, the crowd acclaimed the testimony of his second baptism: "Well washed, well washed!" And plainly he had been saved who had been washed in this way. Then he says to the soldier Pudens: "Goodbye," he says, "and remember the faith and me; and let these things not trouble you, but strengthen you." And at the same time he asked for a small ring from the other's finger, and he returned it to him as an inheritance having been dipped in his wound (21:1-5 [A.D. 202]).

Deacon Pontius of Antioch

As [St. Cyprian] sat moistened after his long journey with excessive perspiration (the seat was by chance covered with linen, so that even in the very moment of his passion he might enjoy the honor of the episcopate), one of the officers...who had formerly been a Christian, offered him his clothes, as if he might wish to change his moistened

garments for drier ones; and he doubtless coveted nothing further in respect of his proffered kindness than to possess the now blood-stained sweat of the martyr going to God." (*Life and Passion of St. Cyprian* 16 [A.D. 258]).

Peter of Alexandria

In the meanwhile a spirited body of senators of those who are engaged in the public transport service, seeing what had happened, for they were near the sea, prepared a boat, and suddenly seizing upon the sacred relics, they placed them in it (*The Acts of Peter of Alexandria* [A.D. 300-311]).

Eusebius

I can show the trophies of the apostles. For if you will go to the Vatican or to the Ostian way, you will find the trophies of those who laid the foundations of this church. (Quoting Gaius in his dialogue with Proclus A.D. 198, recorded in *Church History* 2:25 [A.D. 325]).

With respect to those places which are honored in being the depositories of the remains of martyrs, and continue to be memorials of their glorious departure; how can we doubt that they rightly belong to the churches [?] (*Life of Constantine* 2:40 [A.D. 339]).

Basil

If I am able to find any relics of martyrs, I pray that I may take part in your earnest endeavor (Letter 49 [A.D. 329-379]).

Ambrose of Milan

We have found this one thing, in which we seem to excel those who have gone before us. That knowledge of the martyrs, which they lost, we have regained. The glorious relics are taken out of an ignoble burying-place, the trophies are displayed under heaven. The tomb is wet with blood. The marks of the bloody triumph are present, the relics are found undisturbed in their order, the head separated from the body. ... Let these triumphant victims be brought to the place where Christ is the victim. But He upon the altar, Who suffered for all; they beneath the altar, who were redeemed by His Passion. I had destined this place for myself, for it is fitting that the priest should rest there where he has been wont to offer, but I yield the right hand portion to the sacred victims; that place was due to the martyrs. Let us, then, deposit the sacred relics, and lay them up in a worthy resting-place, and let us celebrate the whole day with faithful devotion (Letter 22 11-13 [A.D. 386]).

The Apostolic Constitutions

[God] is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live to Him. Wherefore, of those that live with God, even their very relics are not without honor. For even Elisha the prophet, after he was fallen asleep, raised up a dead man who was slain by the pirates of Syria. For his body touched the bones of Elisha, and he arose and revived. Now this would not have happened unless the body of Elisha were holy (6:6 [A.D. 400]).

Jerome

We, it is true, refuse to worship or adore...the relics of the martyrs...the angels and archangels...and every name that is named, not only in this world but also in that which is to come. ... Still, we honor the relics of the martyrs that we may adore Him whose martyrs they are. We honor the servants that their honor may be reflected upon their Lord who Himself says: "he that receives you receives me." ... If the relics of the martyrs are not worthy of honor, how comes it that we read "precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints?" (Letter 109 1-2 [A.D. 404]).

Theodoret of Cyr

The noble souls of the triumphant are sauntering around heaven, dancing in the choruses of the bodiless; and not one tomb for each conceals their bodies, but cities and villages divide them up and call them healers and preservers of souls and bodies and venerate them as guardians and protectors of cities (*The Cure of Pagan Maladies* 8 [A.D. 449]).