

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

In the Light of Scripture

by

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

RELICS

ROME VENERATES (but we have seen this is really worship) a vast number of relics. Most of these are supposed to be the bones of saints. But besides these there are very many others, as for instance, parts of the tables of Law given to Moses, the rods of Moses and Aaron, the table at which Jesus and His disciples sat for the Last Supper, many pieces of the true cross, thorns from the crown He wore, the nails from which He hung, the board upon which the superscription was written, the sponge which the Roman soldier dipped in the vinegar, the head of the spear which was thrust into His side, the outer and inner garments, His shroud, and the heads of John the Baptist, Peter, and Paul!

Although many of these have been worshiped for hundreds of years, obviously many if not all of them are spurious. The parts of the “true cross” so venerated if put together would far exceed the possible bulk, of the original cross. Of the three or four nails which might have been used at the crucifixion, fourteen are preserved!

Only one spear was thrust into our Lord's side: today there are four. Jesus had only one seamless robe: the Church of Rome preserves three. It also has two heads of John the Baptist, one at Rome and the other at Amien. The Catholic Encyclopedia and other books admit that many of the relics are spurious, but nevertheless they are still kept for worship. Various excuses for this are made.

1. The great difficulty of deciding which are true and which are spurious.
2. In gathering out the false, some that are true might be rejected and dishonored. So let them alone, as the Lord said of the tares which grew up with the wheat.
3. If the Church formally acknowledges that certain relics are spurious, a measure of disgrace and reproach is unavoidable.
4. “It matters little if the relic be not authentic, for the' reverence we pay is to the Saint.”—*Question Box*, p. 373.
5. The layman says, “Since it appertains to the popes and bishops to decide matters of faith and practice, we can only leave the matter in their hands.”

So Rome continues to countenance what she herself acknowledges is partly false, and in doing so sponsors a worship which is forbidden by the very Scriptures whose divine authority she acknowledges.

She does, however, seek to find support from the Bible for the veneration of relics, but with less than poor success.

1. The bones of Joseph, for instance:

And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him: for he had straitly sworn the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you (Exodus 13:19).

Sold as a slave into Egypt, Joseph had spent all but the first seventeen of the one hundred ten years of his life in that land. Through those years, first of suffering and oppression, and then of greatness and glory as Viceroy, he had never let go his faith in God nor lost the desire to return to the land promised to his forefathers. As the day of death approached, he said to his brethren,

I die; and God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he sware to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob . . . God will surely visit you, and ye shall carry up my bones from hence (Genesis 50:24, 25).

By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones (Hebrews 11:22).

All through the following years of Egyptian bondage, Joseph's embalmed body remained among the Israelites as a reminder of God's promise of deliverance and of Joseph's faith. When the day of deliverance came, Moses brought it out according to the oath. But we never read that it was worshiped or "venerated" after the Romish fashion. It was only mentioned three times, first at the taking of the oath, next when the wilderness journey began, and lastly when it was duly interred at Shechem (Joshua 24:32). Never again through the whole history of the Israelite nation is any reference made to the bones of Joseph. Had it been God's intention to preserve them for relics of the church, they would not have passed so silently off the scene.

2. The Church of Rome cites the case of Elisha, whose bones were actually connected with a miracle, as attested by Scripture:

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 (II Kings 13:20, 21).

The first thing we observe in this brief account is that the power was not attributed to Elisha's bones. The power to raise the dead belongs to God alone:

The Lord killeth, and maketh alive: he bringeth down to the grave, and bringeth up (I Samuel 2:6).

The second is that the case is unique. In the whole compass of Scripture there is no other occasion where God used the bones of a dead man to work a miracle.

In the third place, the people of Israel did not remove Elisha's bones from the tomb and put them in a casket to be worshiped, nor did they build a shrine at the tomb and make it a place of pilgrimage. No other dead bodies touched those bones and came to life. Nor did people come there to pray for the sick. As with Joseph's bones, we never hear of them again.

It may reasonably be asked why God used Elisha's bones in this way. To that question no certain answer can be given, for the reason is not positively revealed. God is sovereign and can work miracles as He wills, with or without visible means.

But the context of the passage supplies a possible reason. It is in close juxtaposition with two things. Immediately before this account we have Elisha's prophecy uttered just prior to his death, that the invading Syrians should be repulsed three times and no more. Immediately after comes the record of the fulfillment of that prophecy. The miracle might well have been wrought to remind backsliding Israel, that though Elisha had passed on, God was still there watching over His word (through Elisha) to perform it.

3. Rome quotes two cases of healing in the New Testament by unusual means as an argument for the use of relics.

a. **Insomuch that they brought forth the sick into the streets, and laid them on beds and couches, that at the least the shadow of Peter passing by might overshadow some of them. There came also a multitude out of the cities round about unto Jerusalem, bringing sick folks, and them which were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed every one** (Acts 5:15, 16).

This account need not astonish us, for the Lord in commissioning the twelve and the seventy had given them powers of healing, and He Himself healed sometimes with means, though more often without.

b. **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).

Peter's shadow could hardly be kept as a relic, but the handkerchiefs and aprons might have been. They were not, however, so far as the record goes, nor were any further miracles wrought by them. When Peter and John healed the lame man at the Beautiful gate of the temple, and all the people ran together wondering, Peter said unto them,

Ye men of Israel, why marvel ye at this? or why look ye so earnestly on us, as though by our own power or holiness we had made this man to walk? . . . His name [Jesus], through faith in his name, hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all (Acts 3:12-16).

Peter then went on to preach Christ as the One who could forgive sins.

Genuine relics have had a place, not only in national history, but also in religious life, as reminders of what God has done, that our faith may be strengthened thereby.

God commanded Moses to put a pot of manna in the ark of the covenant to remind the Israelites of His provision through their forty years of wilderness travel (Exodus 16:33, 34). He also commanded him to place Aaron's rod which budded before the ark as a memorial of His choice of Aaron for the high-priestly office (Numbers 17:10; Hebrews 9:4).

But the Israelites did not worship these things. For them to have done so would have been on a par with the worship of the brazen serpent, which Hezekiah broke in pieces and called "**a thing of brass**" because of their idolatry.

~ end of chapter 28 ~

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