

Are relics truly necessary for worship?

Relics refer to parts of the body or personal belongings of persons regarded as holy and therefore believed by some professed Christians to be of spiritual benefit to them. In keeping with the requirements of God as enshrined in the Holy Bible, there is need to examine this doctrine to see if relics are truly necessary for worship.

According to the Catholic Encyclopaedia downloaded from the Internet and the Catholic Dictionary (sixteenth edition) by William E. Addis and Thomas Arnold, among other publications, the origin of the relics doctrine is traceable to the Council of Trent, the 19th ecumenical Council of the Roman Catholic Church which defined the doctrine in 1563. From the literature on the subject, it is unmistakably clear that virtually all the items regarded as relics are based on “traditions”, a euphemism for fables. This is certainly true of what is regarded as the “holy robe of Christ” which was displayed in 1959 in the oldest Cathedral in Germany and which recorded 1.8 million visitors or pilgrims. In Spain there have been exhibited in different cathedrals two different heads of John the Baptist, and in one of the cathedrals there is a magnificent ostrich feather preserved in a gorgeous case, which, it is said, fell from a wing of the angel Gabriel when he came to make the announcement to Mary! According to Rev Bertrand I. Conway at page 231 of his book THE QUESTION BOX, “The Catholic Church ... says, following the Scriptures, that they (the relics) are often the occasion of God’s miracles.”

Dilating on this issue Loraine Boetner in his book Roman Catholicism states at page 369 that, “Many of the alleged relics have been proved false and have been dropped ... Some of the bones have been exposed as those of animals. In one instance the alleged bones of a famous Neapolitan saint, which it was claimed had worked countless miracles, were found to be those of a goat.” !

People of goodwill will no doubt be appalled that traditions of men are being accepted as doctrines. As a result many people today indulge in what the Bible calls “vain worship” – the kind of worship that is barren or empty as it will not lead anyone to salvation. It is pertinent to recall the encounter Jesus Christ had with the Pharisees in which he reprimanded them for violating the law of God because of their tradition. Quoting the prophet Isaiah he said “Ye hypocrites, well did Esaias prophesy of you, saying, This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.” – Matthew 15:3-9.

Moreover, Christians are strictly warned against building their faith on legends or fables. St. Paul admonished: “Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith...” “But refuse profane and old wives’ fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness.” “And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables”. (1 Timothy 1:4; 4:7; 2 Timothy 4:4) The word of God as contained in the Holy Bible, we repeat, is the only authentic guide to worshippers of God in all matters of faith and doctrine-. Isaiah 8:20; Colossians 2:8.

Misleading Arguments

The doctrine of relics has, right from the middle ages, been the means of raising money for the Church. The people used to be frightened with the teaching that “each time a man looked at one of the relics he was excused from a certain number of years of purgatory”. These pardons from purgatory called “indulgences,” were officially granted by the command of the pope who was believed to have the power to “borrow”

quantities of goodness from a heavenly treasury. “This treasury was filled with the infinite merits gained by Christ through his suffering and death. It also contained the merits left over from the saints and others who had done so much good that they got into heaven with goodness to

spare". (THE UNIVERSAL HISTORY OF THE WORLD, by Johanna Johnston and James L. Steffensen, Volume VIII, page 620-621) Purgatory, according to the advocates of the doctrine, is a place where those unfit for immediate entry into heaven are purged through suffering, until they attain the state that qualifies them for heaven. The approach adopted by the Church to raise funds amounts to extortion and profiteering which the Bible condemns.- Proverbs 28:20,22; 20:21; 1 Timothy 6:6-12.

The thinking that the store of goodness left over by a departed saint can help the living is not true. What that argument fails to take account of is that though works are important, it is not by reason of one's work only that he will get salvation. In other words, those to be saved will not attain the gift of life merely because of their good works not to talk of having "goodness to spare". Salvation is a matter of grace. St. Paul stated: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast." Ephesians 2:8,9.

Again, the dead when resurrected will be rewarded according to the works they did while alive. God will not transfer the righteousness of one person to the account of another neither will He on the basis of the blessings meant for A bless B or reduce the punishment meant for him. Please read Isaiah 3:10; 11; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Galatians 6:5,7,8; Matthew 16:27; Ezekiel 14:14,16,18,20.

Moreover, belief that the souls of the dead are suffering in purgatory and that such suffering could be positively affected by means of the prayers said by priests on monetary consideration is certainly not true. When man dies he does not go to heaven or purgatory or to a hell burning with eternal fire but to the grave. The dead, both good and bad, will be in the grave until the time of resurrection. Indeed, "All (the dead) go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again." – Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 3:19-21; Job 17:1,13-16; John 5:28,29.

Other arguments being cited to justify the relics doctrine include Exodus 13:19 which states that the Israelites carried the bones of Joseph with them from Egypt and 2 Kings 13:20,21 where it is written that a dead man was restored to life when his corpse fell on the sepulchre of Elisha. But these texts cannot justify the veneration of relics. What the Israelites did was merely to convey the body of Joseph to its final burial place in keeping with his wish. (Genesis 50: 24-26; Exodus 13:19) It is not uncommon for one to ask to be buried in the place of his choice. For instance, Jacob asked to be buried in the cave of Machpelah which Abraham his father had bought for a burial place. (Genesis 23:3-20; 25:9,10; 49:29,30; 50:13) The Jews would have been the first to preserve the body of Joseph for use as relic. But they only took the body for burial in Canaan. Joseph, giving instruction about where he is to be buried was a demonstration of faith in the promise of God to redeem the Jews from the bondage of Egypt some day. Hence St. Paul stated: "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.

It should be stressed also that the Jews did not venerate the body of Joseph. They did not start distributing parts of his body to increase the level of devotion among the faithful. They never expected the dead Joseph to help them in prayer or to solve one problem or the other. They only took the body down to Canaan for burial. This was because they had the understanding of the purpose of God. The law of God says: "Whosoever toucheth the dead body of any man that is dead, and purifieth not himself, defileth the tabernacle of the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off from Israel..." (Numbers 19:13) Verse 14 of the same chapter says that the house into which the dead person or his parts are carried are thereby rendered unclean. It could be seen therefore that those who go about with pieces of dead men bodies in the name of relics are unclean before God. If a house is defiled by a dead body how much more a place of worship? It is imperative therefore that the dead should not be carried into the place of worship as the place as well as everything done therein at once become unclean before God. The text adds in verse 16 that "whosoever toucheth ...a bone of a man, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days..." See also Haggai 2:11-14.

In the case of the man who revived on falling on the sepulchre of Elisha, it should be understood that the dead man was not deliberately thrown on the grave of the prophet. The bearers of the dead body saw enemies coming and fled for their lives, abandoning the corpse they were to bury which, on falling on the grave of Elisha, revived. This was a special miracle God did in those days to show that Elisha was His servant. There was no evidence that such a miracle occurred again. One may ask, if the bones of a dead saint could raise people from the dead, then why are other dead people not being raised by being placed on the grave or caskets of any of the thousands of "saints" in the world?

Idolatry

The churches who believe in relics insist that though relics are to be kept in places of worship and due honor and veneration given them "no divinity or virtue is believed to be in them on account of which they are to be worshipped". But there is no denying the fact that by venerating the bodies of saints, their images and personal effects and so on the church has created, in the words of Paul Blanshard, "a full blown system of fetishism and sorcery...": she is practicing idolatry. -American Freedom and Catholic Power, page 248.

The law of God in regard to the use of images is as follows: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, ..." (Exodus 20:4) In Deuteronomy 4:15-20, God Almighty warns through the prophet Moses that His worshippers should not corrupt themselves by making "

a graven image, the similitude of any figure, the likeness of male or female, The likeness of any beast that is on the earth, the likeness of any winged fowl that flieth in the air..." (See also Deuteronomy 5:6-9) For the fact that the second commandment forbids the worshipping of images in any shape or form, it is unmistakably clear that the use of anything as "aid to faith", be it image or anything is idolatry. See also Ezekiel 8:7-12

It is patently misleading therefore to say that the Almighty God sanctioned the use of images in worship when he directed the making of the Brazen Serpent in Numbers 21:8 and the two golden Cherubims on the Ark of the Covenant as stated in Exodus 25:18.

What should be made clear is that the healing power of the brazen serpent was not in the object itself. The healing was done by God for those who obeyed His command to look at the brazen serpent on the pole. (Jeremiah 7:22,23) The brazen serpent was a picture of greater things to come as it typified Jesus Christ whom all would look to for salvation. (John 3: 14,15) It needs be recalled that King Hezekiah later destroyed the brazen serpent when he saw that some of the Jews worshipped it by burning incense before it as some are doing to relics today. (2 Kings 18:1-4) It was on this score that Joseph Zacchello, writing in The Secrets of Romanism posited that "The brazen serpent is rather a proof against the worship of images".

The images of cherubims on the tabernacle were certainly not worshipped by the people of Israel in those days. The images were not even seen by the people since they were placed in the holy of holies into which the priest entered only once a year, a picture of greater things in the Christian era. – Hebrews 8:2; 9:11,24; 10:1,10-12.

It was in this context that Apostle Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome regretted that some people have "turned the truth of God into a lie and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator" -Romans 1: 25.

Some however contend that the relics are mementoes, or memorials of deceased persons, to remind one of their works, for one to draw inspiration from them. There is nothing wrong if personal belongings of loved ones are kept as mementoes. But to venerate them becomes an entirely different matter. It is a sin.

The question may also be raised as to whether the handkerchiefs and aprons St. Paul used to cast out demons and heal the sick, (Acts 19:11,12) are not examples of relics? The fact is that God allowed such miracles to be done by St. Paul and other apostles when the Church was just at its infancy in order to establish the Church, but now such miracles have ceased. Particular note should be taken also of the fact that St. Paul was alive when these miracles happened – unlike the “saints” of today whose purported miracles are done after death! – Mark 16:16-20; Hebrews 2:4.

Look to God

People see relics as aids to devotion, to inspire them to focus their faith on God. But the Bible says we should look to God and Jesus Christ who is the mediator between God and men for our sustenance and salvation. God Almighty says: “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else. (Isaiah 45:22) And in Hebrews 12:1,2 St. Paul wrote: “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” (see also John 17:3) Evidently, Christians ought to exercise implicit faith in God Almighty through Jesus Christ and not in images or relics. And Christ told Thomas Didymus: “Blessed are those that have not seen, and yet have believed,” (John 20:27,29; compare 1 Peter 1:9) When people trust God and run away from sin He will help them out of their troubles. Hence Apostle Paul said Christians “walk by faith, not by sight”.- 2 Corinthians 5:7. There is no need for any object to serve as helps to faith as some religious leaders are teaching. As a matter of fact, all the exertions and self-afflictions in the use of relics in worship are spiritually worthless and unprofitable. The dead saints or martyrs so-called cannot help anyone being dead and silent. In Job 5:1 it is written “Call now, if there be any that will answer thee; and to which of the saints wilt thou turn?” Certainly none. It is only Jesus Christ God has appointed as the only way to salvation.- John 14:6.

All true Christians must keep away from such beliefs and practices as the one on relics and hold to the truth that is in Christ for their own blessing and salvation in the end by God’s grace. – 1 Timothy 4:13,16.