

Relics

Amidst all the euphoria that surrounded the recent visit to the UK of the relics of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, some may have found themselves struggling to understand what it was all about. Indeed the Archbishop of Westminster, Vincent Nichols, said in his homily: “This outpouring of faith has baffled many people. Some secular commentators have not been able to make sense of it all. I have found their incomprehension quite intriguing.” It occurs to me that those who have indeed been baffled by what they have seen, may be feeling a little guilty about the negative feelings they have had, and so I thought it might be helpful to explore the Church’s traditional approach to relics. (I should say at the outset that while I will try to be objective, I personally am not into relics as such - devotion to the saints yes, but relics no.)

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes some important opening points:

The religious sense of the Christian people has always found expression in various forms of piety surrounding the Church’s sacramental life, such as the veneration of relics, visits to sanctuaries, pilgrimages, processions, the stations of the cross, the rosary, medals, etc. [para 1674]

These expressions of piety extend the liturgical life of the Church, but do not replace it. They should accord with the sacred liturgy, be in some way derived from it and lead people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them. [para 1675]

Pastoral discernment is needed to sustain and support popular piety and, if necessary, to purify and correct the religious sense which underlies these devotions so that the faithful may advance in knowledge of the mystery of Christ. [para 1676]

Such devotions, and especially the veneration of relics, are in many respects fairly Catholic and so there is perhaps a danger that they may be misunderstood by others when they receive the sort of publicity and high profile that the relics of Saint Thérèse did. It is quite clear from comments made at the time that those for whom devotion to relics is not a part of their tradition, may well have struggled to understand what it was all about and, unfortunately, historical misunderstandings may have been rekindled. What has to be made clear is that we do not worship the saints or their relics. *The Concise Dictionary of the Catholic Church* says:

The theological foundation for the cult of relics was developed in the Middle Ages. Stress was laid on the special dignity of the bodies of saints as temples of the Holy Spirit destined to a glorious resurrection, and on the sanction given by God in making them the occasion of miracles.

We are reminded that we share that same dignity, from our baptism our bodies too are temples of the Holy Spirit; we are all called to the sainthood of the redeemed; and the lives of the saints stand as examples to us that anything and everything is possible with the help of God's grace. They were ordinary people just like us, but who lived extraordinary lives. That's where the whole aspect of patron saints comes in and of having a personal patron to whom we can turn in prayer for assistance and encouragement as we strive, in whatever way we can, to follow their example.

The *A-Z of the Catholic Church* points out that "veneration of relics is not obligatory". I don't have a problem with relics *per se*, but I do have a problem with taking them on trips around the world as we saw with Saint Thérèse. My conviction is that if we have the degree of honour and respect that we should have for the saints, then we show that by leaving their bodies buried. I realise that it's a little different when we are talking about a saint, but how would we feel if someone dug up some bones of one of our family (and even took them on a trip)? I'm being a little facetious I know, because, as I say, we are talking here about saints and so the situation is a little different, but I think we would do better if we simply taught and promoted the lives of the saints and the spiritual qualities that have proved worthy of canonisation, holding up their lives (rather than their relics) to be emulated.

When I was parish priest at St Andrew's and the parish acquired its fourth church, St Anne's, I discovered a locked door in the back of the wooden altar. Eventually I came across a key that opened it. Inside there was a rather ornate box, about the size of a shoe box, tied with a red ribbon. It was filled with bones and there was some paperwork identifying them as the relics of Saint Eugenia about whom I knew nothing and about whom there seemed to be very little reliable information even on the internet. It really bothered me that they were there at all, but also, unlike the normal situation of a few small relics sealed inside an altar stone in the altar, these bones (and so many of them) were in a shoe box stored in the back of a movable altar in a church which was far from secure and which were therefore at risk if someone were to break in and do any damage. In consultation with the diocese, the plan was to take the bones back to Rome on my next visit there, but whoever the diocese contacted in the Vatican said they already had Eugenia(!). Whether this was a different Eugenia, or some other bones of the same Eugenia, there was no way of knowing. In the event, one of our local funeral directors agreed to manufacture a small casket into which the bones were placed and they are now in the burial plot at the Cathedral – buried as they should always have been ("earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust") rather than being stuck in a shoe box in the back of an altar.

Looking at what I have referred to as the euphoria surrounding the visit of Saint Thérèse's relics to this country, I couldn't help wondering how much of it was

yet another example of our current fascination with “celebrity” - wanting to see famous people, even to touch them, or to be where they have been? Hopefully it was much more a case of people choosing to reverence the relics as a more tangible expression of their devotion to Saint Thérèse. The *A-Z* referenced above makes the same point:

In accordance with the general human desire to treasure and honour relics of the great or famous (the bloodstained shirt of Lord Nelson, hair snipped from the head of a pop star), the Church has always encouraged the reverence to the bodies of the Saints which is represented by the keeping and honouring of relics. The practice is certainly as old as the 2nd century. One of its earliest manifestations being the custom of offering Mass on or near the tomb of a martyr, a custom later incorporated into the Law requiring relics of a martyr to be sealed into an altar before its consecration.

This raises another question in my mind. If the requirement that there be relics sealed in an altar is purely to make a connection with the martyred saints of the Roman catacombs, that’s one thing (as tenuous a link as it may be). Surely, however, the consecration of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ that takes place on the altar makes it infinitely more sacred than the presence of relics? And this connects with a further thought in light of the euphoria generated by Saint Thérèse’s relics: why aren’t there as many people packed inside the Cathedral and queuing up to get in every day (or at least on Sundays) given that Our Lord himself is really present in the Blessed Sacrament all the time? Is it a case of familiarity breeding not perhaps contempt (as the saying has it) but a degree of indifference? To put it simply: why don’t as many people regularly pack the Cathedral for Mass as they did to see the relics of Thérèse?

What I would be afraid of is that, unless people’s understanding is sound, there could be a danger of a degree of superstition creeping in. *The Concise Dictionary* (referenced earlier) points out that:

In the West the cult of relics increased, especially during the Crusades, when quantities of relics, often spurious, were brought back from the Holy Land. They were kept in reliquaries, carried in procession, and often gave rise to superstitious practices.

Miracles were often attributed to the relics of the saints (though more correctly they would have been at the intercession of the saint him/herself – one of the items of evidence required by the Church in the process of canonization) and consequently the importance that people gave to the relics themselves (and to touching them and so on) could, without care, verge on the superstitious. And the danger was even greater when there was money to be made from the visit of pilgrims to shrines and oratories containing relics (a common practice in

medieval times). Our devotion should be to the saint whose relics they are and not to the relics *per se*. If we don't make that distinction, then the danger is that we might treat the relics as objects that could bring us good fortune, good health, etc. and that would be superstition. The relics are holy objects and that's why we honour and reverence them, but, ultimately, our devotion and our prayers should be to the saint whose help and intercession we seek.

I wouldn't want to deny for one moment the tremendous graces that were undoubtedly at work through the visits that were made to the relics of Saint Thérèse. As Archbishop Nichols said in his homily: "So many people find encouragement, perseverance and hope through the example and prayers of this most remarkable of young women". Perhaps the presence of her relics brought Thérèse just that bit closer to their lives. But she would surely be the first to make the point that people should ultimately be seeking not her, but Our Lord through their devotion to her.

And this takes us back to what we heard from the catechism earlier:

These expressions of piety extend the liturgical life of the Church, but do not replace it. They should accord with the sacred liturgy, be in some way derived from it and lead people to it, since in fact the liturgy by its very nature is far superior to any of them. [para 1675]

All of the Church's sacramental celebrations and devotions find their source in the Eucharist. Nothing should become in any respect more important than the Eucharist, but sometimes devotional piety can come uncomfortably close to it. This point comes home to me on those occasions when people come into church and, without any reference to the Blessed Sacrament, go straight to Our Lady's altar, light a candle and pray to her, walk straight across in front of the tabernacle again without any acknowledgement of the Real Presence of Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, and light a candle at the Sacred Heart altar and pray there.

Pastoral discernment is needed to sustain and support popular piety and, if necessary, to purify and correct the religious sense which underlies these devotions so that the faithful may advance in knowledge of the mystery of Christ. [para 1676]

It is to Our Lord alone that every saint (and Our Lady too therefore) guides us through their intercession and the example of their lives. Our growth in Christ is the ultimate fruit of the honour and devotion that we show to them.

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