

Historical Theology

Veneration of Saints and Relics

Don White

October 10, 2021

“Along with the growth of ritual and ceremony in the 4th century worship went the expansion of the “cult” [*a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object.*] of saints and relics. Christians attached an ever greater importance to the dead bodies of those who had been considered outstandingly holy in their lifetimes, especially martyrs. Chapels and shrines and sometimes churches, were built over the tombs of the saints. Believers increasingly prized “relics” of saints – things that belonged to the saint when he was alive, e.g. a piece of his clothing, or even one of his bones. The idea developed that the dead saint, now in heaven, could help struggling believers on earth by his prayers. After all, ‘The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much’ (James 5:16); surely a saint’s prayers would be even more effective now that he was in heaven? So Christians practiced – not praying *to* the saints – but asking the saints in heaven to pray *for* them. This was called ‘invocation’, or ‘invoking’ the saints (from the Latin *invocare*, ‘to call upon’). In popular piety, it often drifted into a custom of actually praying to the saints which was little different from the way that Pagans had prayed to their various gods. People considered particular saints to be especially good at meeting particular needs: one could bring about a cure for childlessness, another could protect travelers, another could reveal the future, etc. (Needham, 200)

Veneration of Saints is defined as the “celebration of the virtuous life or death of

persons whose souls reside in heaven with Christ” (EDT, 1137).

“Such honor includes the respectful memory and imitation of the virtues of departed believers as well as verbal communion with them. It includes both private and public devotion.” (Ibid.)

“Veneration of saints began as recognition of earthly martyrs, at whose graves Christians conducted memorial services of worship of God. By the fourth century Christians inaugurated similar honor of other deceased, called “confessors,” whose piety they esteemed as a sacrifice equivalent to that of martyrs. Subsequently use of images and relics as conveyors of personal presence multiplied the places where this form of the communion of saints was practiced by Orthodox and Catholic faithful.” (Ibid.)

The great Church leaders of the time, like Basil of Caesarea, Chrysostom, Ambrose, Augustine and Jerome, positively encouraged this cult of the saints, relics, and invocations. Others, however, did not like what was going on. A French presbyter called Vigilantius protested what he saw as Christian lapsing into Pagan customs and practices: ‘Disguised as piety, we virtually see the worship of the Pagans being introduced into the churches. People light rows of candles in broad daylight, and everywhere they kiss and adore a dead body’s dust, deposited in a little pot and

wrapped up in a precious piece of cloth.” (Needham, 200-01)

“To differentiate between the worship of God and veneration of saints Augustine proposed the distinction, elaborated by later writers, between *latria* and *dulia*. *Latria* (“worship”) belongs to deity alone (Matt. 4:10); *dulia* (“honor”) may be merited by human beings by virtue of their office or deeds (Romans 13:7). (EDT, 1137)

hyperdulia (*usually uncountable; pl. hyperdulias*)

1. (*Roman Catholicism*) A level of veneration higher than dulia but less than latria , properly given to the Virgin Mary only.
 - **2009**, Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, Penguin 2010, p. 451: By the thirteenth century, the growth of devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, in both East and West led John of Damascus's admirer Thomas Aquinas to formalize a further refinement: the concept of an exceptional sort of veneration, **hyperdulia**, offered only to the greatest of God's creations, Mary, the mother of Jesus.

<https://www.wordsense.eu/hyperdulia/>

“Three historical stages in defining who are the venerable may be identified. Initially ordinary believers honored the dead on general repute. After the third century bishops supervised the public cult (*a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object.*) of saints. From the latter Middle Ages centralized authority (papacy in Catholicism; synod in Orthodoxy) assumed sole power to designate saints. Currently an elaborate judicial procedure is required to determine sainthood, entailing two degrees:

“beatification” confirms that the deceased reigns with Christ and merits local devotion; subsequent “canonization” prescribes veneration by all faithful. In such determination, miracles in response to prayers to the individual constitute primary evidence. (EDT, 1137)

“As early as the middle of the second century, it was customary to gather at their [martyrs'] tombs on the anniversary of their deaths, and there to celebrate communion. Once again, the idea was that they too were part of the church, and that communion joined the living and the dead in a single body. It was this practice that gave rise to saints' days—which usually celebrated, not their birthday, but the day of their martyrdom. (The custom of gathering relics of martyrs seems to have begun fairly early. In the mid-second century, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* tells us that Polycarp's bones ‘would have been more precious to us than pearls.’”) (Gonzalez, 110-11)

Relics

“Objects preserved as memorials of the earthly lives of saints, Mary, or Jesus, including their bodies and items which contacted them.” (EDT, 930)

“In Catholic and Orthodox traditions relics function as both reminders of those who lived for the faith and media for communion with venerable persons, because some of the grace that filled their lives is perceived to remain in surviving objects, evidenced by miracles associated with relics. Biblical imitations of the power of relics may be detected in stories about Elisha's bones (II Kings 13:21) and cloths Paul had touched (Acts 19:12). (Ibid.)

Belief in relics spread widely among Christians by the fourth century, receiving approval from such illustrious fathers as Ambrose, Augustine, and Chrysostom. Initially this practice focused on graves of martyrs, which became choice sites for building churches. Later it led to the transporting of objects from graves, including bones and cloths (*brandea*), for enshrinement elsewhere. The seventh ecumenical council decreed that no new church be consecrated without relics in its altar. Relics were also placed in portable reliquaries [*a container for holy relics*] for use in processions and miracles of healing and protection. (Ibid.)

Scriptural Evaluation of the Veneration of Saints and Relics.

There is One Mediator: Not Mary or the Saints in Heaven

1 Timothy 2:5

Our True Intercessors

Jesus

Hebrews 7:25

Romans 8:31-34

The Holy Spirit

Romans 8:26-27

A Christian's prayers are to be addressed to our Father in Heaven not to Mary, Saints or Angels

Matthew 6:6-13

Prayers to the Dead are forbidden in Scripture.

"Whenever the Bible mentions praying to or speaking with the dead, it is in the context of sorcery, witchcraft, **necromancy**^[1], and divination—activities the Bible strongly condemns (Leviticus 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:10-13)."

<https://www.gotquestions.org/prayer-saints-Mary.html>

necromancy^[1]the supposed practice of communicating with the dead, especially in order to predict the future.

⁹"When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable things of those nations. ¹⁰"There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, ¹¹or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, **or one who calls up the dead.** ¹²"For whoever does these things is detestable to the LORD; and because of these detestable things the LORD your God will drive them out before you. ¹³"You shall be blameless before the LORD your God. ¹⁴"For those nations, which you shall dispossess, listen to those who practice witchcraft and to diviners, but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you *to do so.*" (**Deut. 18:9-14**)

"In one instance when a dead "saint" is addressed by a living person, the saint, Samuel, is not happy to be disturbed (1 Samuel 28:7-19)."

<https://www.gotquestions.org/prayer-saints-Mary.html>

Who are the Saints?

The word "saints," lit. "holy ones," is found in the New Testament in reference to those who have trusted in Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:1-2; 2 Corinthians 1:1;
Ephesians 1:1, 18; 3:8 14-19; Colossians
1:24-27

**Believers have direct access to the
Father through Jesus Christ**

John 14:6

Romans 5:1-2

Ephesians 2:17-18

Hebrews 4:14-16

**The Practice of the Apostle Paul was to
ask believers, not saints in heaven, to
pray for him.**

Ephesians 6:18-19; Colossians 4:2-4

**Our confidence in prayer: Pray
according to the will of God.**

1 John 5:13-15

Veneration of Relics = Superstition

1 Samuel 4:1-11

2 Kings 18:1-4

Resources:

Elwell, Walter A., Editor. Evangelical Dictionary
of Theology (EDT). Baker Book House, 1984.
Veneration of Saints, P.D. Steeves, p. 1137.
Relics, P.D. Steeves, p. 930.

Gonzalez, Justo L. The Story of Christianity, Vol.
1, The Early Church to the Dawn of the
Reformation. HarperCollins Publishers, 2010.

<https://www.gotquestions.org>

Needham, Nick. 2000 Years of Christ's Power,
Volume 1, The Age of the Early Church Fathers.
Christian Focus Publications, 2016.