



TESTIMONY

by Fr. Carlos Martins

Treasures of the Church

On 5 September 1979, the late Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, gave the first of his weekly General Audiences on the Theology of the Body. By the time of the last Audience on the topic on 28 November 1984, the Pope had spelled out an amazing catechesis on the beautiful and sacred way God has reflected himself on our physical bodies.

The basic core of the Pope's teaching is that the body speaks its own language, a language that leads us to God. "The body, and it alone is capable of making visible what is invisible, the spiritual and divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world, the invisible mystery hidden in God from time immemorial, and thus to be a sign of it" (February 20, 1980). To state it briefly, **the body reveals God.**

This description of the Theology of the Body is a very apt description of what occurs in a ministry in which I have been active for the past several years. Since 2005 I have travelled North America holding expositions of sacred relics. I bring with me approximately 150 relics and give a teaching on the scriptural, catechetical, and spiritual dimension of relics. Afterwards, those present have the opportunity to venerate them. The purpose of this ministry can very much be described within the context of the Theology of the Body. To borrow a phrase from Pope John Paul, its purpose is to use these special physical items to make "visible what is invisible."

Relics?

Relics are physical objects that have a direct association with the saints or with Our Lord. They are usually broken down



into three classes. First class relics are the body or fragments of the body of a saint, such as pieces of bone or flesh. Second class relics are something that a saint personally owned, such as a shirt or book (or fragments of those items). Third class relics are those items that a saint touched or that have been touched to a first or second class relic of a saint.

The vast majority of the relics I travel with in my ministry are first class relics, parts of the sacred bodies of saints. The first question I am often asked by people who are encountering relics for the first time is, "Why on earth would the Church want to break up the bodies of the saints and enshrine them?" This is a very good question ... for which there is a very good answer. **Relics are connected with the Holy Spirit.** In the case of first class relics, they were temples of the Holy Spirit. In a mystical way, the Holy Spirit **dwelt** within them. "*Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God*" (1 Cor 6:19). The early Christian Church

clearly understood this. It treated the remains of the martyrs with profound devotion and often celebrated Mass over their graves as a sign of their respect and honour for them.

Nowhere is this devotion more evident than in the account of the martyrdom of St. Polycarp written by his followers shortly after his death: "We adore Christ, because he is the Son of God, but the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord. So we buried in a becoming place Polycarp's remains, which are more precious to us than the costliest diamonds, and which we esteem more highly than gold."

This testimony is significant because Polycarp was a **first generation Apostolic convert**. He was converted by the Apostle John himself. John had baptized him, had ordained him a bishop, and had placed him as the bishop of Smyrna (modern day Izmir, Turkey). Thus, not only does this account reveal the reverence that Polycarp's disciples had for



him, but it also reveals to us how relics were regarded in the Apostolic age, in the earliest days of Christianity. Today, the Church continues to venerate the remains of the saints as it always has. It is customary, for example, to place a saint's relic inside every Church altar. It is placed within a stone in the centre of the altar. The stone is what the priest reverences at the start and at the end of Mass when he kisses the altar. It is the relic stone he is kissing.

Relics, Sacred Scripture, and healing

Scripture teaches that God acts through relics, especially in terms of healing. In fact, when surveying what Scripture has to say about sacred relics, one is left with the idea that healing is what relics “do.”

- When the corpse of a man was touched to the bones of the prophet

Elisha the man came back to life and rose to his feet (2 Kg 13:20-21).

- A woman was healed of her hemorrhage simply by touching the hem of Jesus' cloak (Mt 9:20-22).
- The signs and wonders worked by the Apostles were so great that people would line the streets with the sick so that when Peter walked by at least his shadow might “touch” them (Ac 5:12-15).
- When handkerchiefs or aprons that had been touched to Paul were applied to the sick, the people were healed and evil spirits were driven out of them (Ac 19:11-12).

In each of these instances God has brought about a healing using a material object. The vehicle for the healing was the touching of that object. It is very important to note, however, that the cause of the healing is God; the relics are a means through which he acts. In other words, relics are not magic. They do not contain a power that is their own; a power separ-

rate from God. Any good that comes about through a relic is God's doing. But the fact that God chooses to use the relics of saints to work healing and miracles tells us that he wants to draw our attention to the saints as “models and intercessors” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 828).

Veneration of Relics: Theology of the Body at work

The Church has always venerated the saints. Their “yes” to God allowed him to transform them into his witnesses. I have always found learning how each one made God present in the individual circumstances of his life fascinating. The life of each saint is, in some sense, another “incarnation” of God in the world, an incarnation that reveals the transcendent Creator. To put it in another way, the lives of the saints are another Gospel, one written with flesh and bones, which reveals to us how to love God and live out the teachings of Jesus within the circumstances of human life.

I would say that a good number of those who come to a relic exposition do so out of simple curiosity. Many are coming with the expectation that they are going to see a sort of museum exhibit of odd curiosities and items of “historical interest”. But by the time the teaching is finished—by the time I have gone through the scriptural basis for the veneration of relics, when I have spoken about the lives

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of the saints and the heroic witness that they have left us, and when I have related concrete stories of healing and miracles in the history of the Church brought about through relics - most attendees are in a far different place. They are ready for a **religious experience**, for an experience of the **theology of the body**. They are ready for an encounter with the living God through the bodies of his holy ones.

Veneration of the relics follows the teaching. I allow the attendees to touch the reliquaries (the containers which hold the relics). In fact, I **encourage** them to do so. I do this for two reasons: 1) in all the scriptural instances of relics effecting healing outlined above, contact with the relic was the vehicle by which the healing was brought about; 2) it is a tremendous faith experience for someone to hold something that has such an intimate connection with a saint; it helps to remove distance and abstractness, making the faith alive and animated. It makes the **visible what is invisible**.

Almost everyone has a favourite saint. It is especially endearing to me to see people encountering the remains of a saint to whom they have had devotion for many years. What I see so often in those instances is people having a living encounter with a friend whom they now get to experience more intimately. I also hear about many new friends that people have made when they find they have been "called" by a saint with whom they have never had any particular devotion.

Healing

I have seen the relics facilitate for those in attendance an encounter with the transcendent and unseen God in a unique way. Their faith has been healed, their bodies have been healed, and they have experienced the touch of God.

One of the more beautiful testimonies shared with me was that of a woman who had been sexually abused as a youth. She had been unable to forgive her abuser



until her encounter with the saints at the exposition she attended. She approached me afterwards and said how she felt free of the unforgiveness she had always felt towards him. "Gladly now, I forgive him." I could see in her face and in her eyes a beautiful freedom, lightness, and joy she was experiencing. Inside her Christ's Body was being raised from the dead.

I once held an exposition in a prison in conjunction with a Life in the Spirit retreat. This particular prison has a program called the *Brothers of St. Dismas*. Dismas was the thief who was crucified with Christ and converted in his dying moments (i.e., he is the "Good Thief"). Using Dismas as a model and intercessor, a prison chaplain created a program to bring prisoners to spiritual conversion and reform of their lives. The program was founded in 2001 and has spread to prisons throughout the USA. A similar program was started at female prisons called the *Sisters of St. Mary Magdalene*. I was very pleased to be able to bring to the inmates relics of both St. Dismas and St. Mary Magdalene. The prisoners could hardly believe it. Dismas and Magdalene, the model converts who had been provided as friends and benefactors to them, virtually walking in through the door to visit them.

The atmosphere of the place changed in that moment. The usual tension and aggression gave way to one of peace and devotion. One prisoner remarked the following to me: "There is something really special happening here... more special than I have ever experienced."

The Lord did not disappoint. By the time we left, the inmates were singing and praising God, many with tears streaming down their faces. I can't tell you the kind of experience that was to see a room full of murderers, rapists, and men of violence praising God and kneeling in front of the relics in acts of devotion and prayer.

One by one throughout the day the inmates would try to catch me alone in a corner of the facility to thank me and share with me their personal experience with the relics. One shared with me his encounter with the wood of Our Lord's Cross. In a moment of inner prompting he touched the reliquary and said he knew in that moment that he was healed of his alcoholism. His alcoholism was the root of what had landed him in prison. Approximately a year and a half later his parents introduced themselves to me at an exposition I was holding in a different part of the state. They said they were attending on recommendation of their

inmate son who was still glorifying God for what he had encountered that day.

A few weeks ago I received notice of a man who was in the hospital after being bitten by a venomous spider. The poison had caused a significant portion of the muscle and tissue in his arm to develop necrosis and die. The result was that a portion of his arm had to be amputated, and the procedure was scheduled for the next day. I had been asked to go and pray with him. I took along a relic of St. Maria Goretti which I wanted to touch to the area of infection. I knew the infection didn't stand a chance: St. Maria's father had himself died from an insect bite, and I knew she would be more than sympathetic to my request. When I arrived at the hospital I told the man St. Maria's story. How at 11-years-old she is the youngest canonized saint in the Church, how she suffered a gruesome attack from a would-

be rapist, and how she heroically forgave him for it. I also told him some of the many miracles she has been known to have done. When I was finished I prayed for him, touching his arm with the relic while asking for St. Maria's intercession. I had a deep sense of the presence of St. Maria as I was praying so I told him before I left never to forget what God had done for him that day. The next day when the doctors made their pre-surgery examination, they found nothing wrong with his arm.

A theology of the body is very much present in the Church's devotion to the relics of the saints. When we encounter the remains of a mortal creature - flesh, blood, and bone - we encounter the reality that an earthen vessel can become a vessel of God. The saints are not dead. They are very much alive, and they are responding to the devotion they receive in

the veneration of their relics. Through their relics they accomplish the same work they did while alive on earth: they communicate the living Body of Christ to which they themselves belong.

True and proper devotion to the relics and to the saints takes nothing away from the worship of God. On the contrary, it reveals him. And it shows us that the process of sanctification is a process that involves our entire being: body and soul. The saints are God's beloved members of his Body, members that never stop revealing him.

More information on Fr. Carlos' ministry can be found at:
www.treasuresofthechurch.com 

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