

Relics

Relics

What They Are and
Why They Matter

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—Joan Carroll Cruz

For my dear husband, Louis,
my children Tommy, Mike,
Jeannine, Carolyn, Louis,
and his wife June,
for their patience, understanding
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Introduction

The veneration of relics is practiced by Christians and non-Christians alike. It is in no way restricted to the Catholic religion, but is, to some extent, a primitive instinct with origins that predate Christianity.

It is known, for instance, that relics of Buddha, who died in 483 B.C., were distributed soon after his death. Although there remain only a limited number of authentic relics, parts of his body, including teeth and hairs, have been carefully preserved and enshrined in various domed, tower-like shrines that are found in cities and in the countryside throughout the Buddhist world. Known as stupas, or pagodas, these shrines are visited by both monks and laymen who walk around them in a practice known as circumambulation, making offerings of food and flowers while meditating on the doctrines taught by Buddha. Since there are only a few authentic relics, some of the millions of stupas in Asia contain only images, prayers or sacred writings as reminders of the prophet. The extreme development of relic worship among the Buddhists of every sect is a fact beyond dispute.

The relics of Confucius have been venerated every year by Chinese and Asian peoples since the year 195 B.C. when Emperor Kao Tsu of the Han Dynasty visited the

tomb and offered sacrifices. Although Confucius laid no claim to being more than a man, his system of ethics gradually assumed the aspects of a religious cult. His *analects* are wise sayings similar to the Proverbs in the Bible. In accordance with tradition there are no statues or images of the sage, only tablets inscribed with his name. The followers of his teachings number more than 300 million, with many paying homage at his tomb.

Relics of Mohammed, who died in A.D. 632, are likewise revered, these being two hairs of the prophet which are kept in a reliquary resembling a domed temple that stands several feet high beside the huge rock in a building in Jerusalem called the Dome of the Rock. This limestone rock, measuring 58 feet by 44 feet, figures in Islamic, Jewish, and Christian traditions and is something of a relic itself, being regarded by Moslems as the rock visited by an angel before the creation of Adam and Eve and the place where Mohammed ascended to heaven. Here Abraham is said to have nearly sacrificed his son, and it is claimed that all the great prophets from Elijah onward prayed beside it. Many Christian churches profess the belief that Christ will descend on the spot at the Second Coming.

Since the early days of the Church the remains of a saint or holy person were called relics, from the Latin *Reliquiae* meaning remains. Relics are divided into three categories. First-class relics are parts of the bodies of saints and the instruments of Our Lord's Passion. Second-class relics are objects sanctified by close contact with saints, such as articles of clothing, objects used in life or, in the case of a martyr, the

instruments of his torture. Third-class relics are objects or cloths touched to either first- or second-class relics.

Material benefits obtained through relics of saints have often included miracles, as is witnessed not only by the history of the Church and the lives of the saints, but also by Sacred Scripture. In the Old Testament the relics of the prophet Elisha are mentioned. It is related that:

Elisha died and was buried. At the time bands of Moabites used to raid the land each year. Once some people were burying a man when suddenly they spied such a raiding band. They cast the dead man into the grave of the prophet Elisha, and everyone hurried off. But when the man came in contact with the bones of Elisha, he came back to life and rose to his feet (2 Kings 13:20-21).

The New Testament mentions second-class relics of the Apostle Paul and the wonders the Lord worked through them. The Acts of the Apostles relate that:

... God worked extraordinary miracles at the hands of Paul. When handkerchiefs or cloths which had touched his skin were applied to the sick, their diseases were cured and evil spirits departed from them (Acts 19:11-12).

Other cloths known as *branded*, after lying for a time in contact with the remains of the holy apostles, were likewise treated as relics.

After the apostolic times, the earliest record of honor paid relics of holy persons was written by the inhabitants of Smyrna about A.D. 156 which described the death of

St. Polycarp. After the saint had been burned at the stake, we are told that his faithful disciple, after encountering delays by Roman officers:

... took up his bones which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place where the Lord will permit us to gather ourselves together in gladness and joy and to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom.

The authenticity of this *passio* is beyond question, since it has been proven that it was written soon after Polycarp's martyrdom in the year 156 or 157.

We learn three times from St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) that relics of the wood of the cross, discovered about the year 318, were already distributed throughout the world. St. Gregory of Nyssa (d. c. 400), in writing about the forty martyrs, described how their bodies were burned by persecutors and recorded that:

... their ashes and all that the fire had spared have been distributed throughout the world so that almost every province has had its share of the blessing. I also myself have a portion of this gift and I have laid the bodies of my parents beside the relics of these warriors.

From the early Catholic standpoint there was no extravagance or abuse in honoring relics and, indeed, the practice was taken for granted by writers such as St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Gregory of

Nyssa, St. Chrysostom, St. Gregory Nazianzen, and by other great doctors without exception.

St. Jerome instructed that:

We do not worship, we do not adore for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the Creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore Him whose martyrs they are.

St. Cyril of Alexandria writes:

We by no means consider the holy martyrs to be gods, nor are we wont to bow down before them adoringly, but only relatively and reverentially.

Gregory the Great for a time expressed displeasure with the interference, dismemberment or the removal of the remains of the honored dead from one place to another, although he offered to send the Empress Constantina some filings from St. Peter's chains, a type of gift often mentioned in his writings. The saint is known to have enriched a little cross, destined to hang around the neck as an *encolpion*, with some filings both from St. Peter's chains and from the gridiron of St. Lawrence.

During the fourth century, St. Augustine wrote in *De Civitate Dei* (The City of God) about miracles wrought by soil from the Holy Land, flowers which had touched a reliquary or had been laid upon a particular altar, oil from lamps of the church of a martyr, or by other things no less remotely connected with the saints themselves.

The writings of St. Gregory of Tours abound in stories of the marvels wrought by relics, as well as of the practices used in their honor, while St. Theodore, archbishop of Canterbury, declared that, "The relics of the saints are to be venerated." He further adds that, "... if possible a candle is to burn there every night."

We learn from Kleinclausz, the contemporary biographer of Charlemagne (d. A.D. 814), that the emperor visited all the famous sanctuaries, St. Peter's of Rome being particularly dear to him and where he had been at least four times to pray. He likewise assisted at the transfer of sacred remains from one place to another and assisted at the dedication of churches where his favorite relics were enshrined. We learn further from Kleinclausz that "Charlemagne caused relics to be searched for at Rome, Constantinople and Jerusalem and, when found, shared them with his friends." Primary among the relics Charlemagne hoped to acquire were relics of Our Lord's Passion that had gone undiscovered by St. Helena (d. A.D. 330), who looked for and found the True Cross and many instruments used at the Crucifixion.

It would not be hard to imagine that the followers of Jesus Christ, being convinced that He was the Son of God, kept and honored all material objects that He had used during His life and those of His mother, and that they revered those objects that were used during His Passion. It would not be unreasonable to believe that these were faithfully guarded and passed with care from one generation to another. Nor would it seem improbable that honor would

be given the remains of those who had upheld the Lord's honor, professed faith in Him in the face of persecution and torture, or those who willingly and heroically gave up their lives rather than denounce Him.

After the death of Jesus, the persecution of His followers brought about the death of countless martyrs. They were buried in the secrecy of the catacombs, which later became a veritable treasury of relics for worldwide distribution. Upon the tombs of these heroes of the Faith, religious services and Holy Mass were reverently offered. Soon the possession of these saintly remains became an obsession and a matter of jealous rivalry. In order that no one person or group should be privileged above any other, the remains were divided, the least part being as cherished and revered as the whole.

While many instinctively shrink from the very thought of disturbing the dead, these divisions of the remains were not acts of desecration, but acts of veneration. Since the number of Christians increased rapidly, and the apostles and disciples put into practice the Lord's injunction that they should go forth and share the Gospel with all nations, it seemed reasonable that they should take with them all they held dear, including the relics of their honored dead.

After the year 313 when Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, putting an end to persecution of the Christians, the monuments built over the graves of the martyrs were transformed into magnificent sanctuaries and basilicas. When churches were erected apart from the tombs of

martyrs, the remains of one or the other of the martyrs, or at least part of these, were transferred and enshrined often within the altars. This gave rise to the practice, down to modern times, of having relics of saints enclosed in a flat stone situated in the center of the altar directly beneath the spot where the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered.

It is impossible to determine the time when the practice of venerating minute fragments of the bodies of saints first came into vogue, but it is known to have been widespread during the fourth century. These small pieces of bone or blood were, for those who possessed them, imbued with a spiritual force that could produce miracles through the intercession of the saint to whom they belonged. They were so greatly esteemed by their owners that every kind of priceless jewel, every manner of artistry and craftsmanship were expended upon the cases in which they were preserved, and excessive amounts of money were invested in the shrines that housed them. To these shrines, many of which are still the glory of the land, pilgrims traveled great distances to pray and make vows. When the cult of relics came to its full height during the Middle Ages, many great churches owed their sanctity and renown simply to the presence of important relics.

With the increase in pilgrimages and processions to the churches that possessed outstanding relics, a rival town could improve its fortunes by acquiring a precious relic, sometimes by bold theft, thus transforming itself into a place of honor that deserved respect and attention. Eventually monasteries and parishes sought to increase

their prestige by possession of treasured relics. Since the supply was naturally limited this often led to unfortunate rivalries. Few saints were allowed to rest in peace. Tombs were ransacked, the remains quarreled over, translated from one church to another, and dismembered to be divided among numerous shrines. The securing and honoring of relics became so widespread that it was impossible to control avarice and competition or to prevent certain abuses, such as the distribution of fraudulent relics.

As early as the fourth century, St. Augustine denounced certain impostors wandering about in the clothing of monks who were profiting from the sale of spurious relics. The writings of St. Gregory the Great (d. A.D. 604) and St. Gregory of Tours (d. A.D. 593) prove that many un-principled persons found a means of enriching themselves by a trade in relics, the majority of which were fraudulent. Ecclesiastical authority did what it could to secure the faithful against deception, but the discovery and distribution of huge collections of relics made the task impossible to properly manage.

The Councils of Lyon (1245 and 1275) prohibited the veneration of recently found relics unless they were first approved by the Roman pontiff. This was echoed by Bishop Quivil of Exeter in 1287 when he wrote:

We command the prohibition to be carefully observed by all, and decree that no person shall expose relics for sale, and that neither stones, nor fountains, trees, wood, or garments shall in any way be venerated on account of dreams or on fictitious grounds.

The decrees of synods upon this subject are practical and sensible and prove that some check was exercised upon the excesses of the unscrupulous and the mercenary. The Council of Trent (1545–1563), which ranks with Vatican II as the greatest ecumenical council held in the West, ordered bishops to take special pains in this regard and established the norm that relics be subject to the control of the Vatican. It is unknown when it became customary for a relic to be accompanied by a special document of authentication.

At a later time it was maintained that those who made or knowingly sold, distributed, or displayed false relics for veneration incurred *ipso facto* excommunication reserved to the bishops.

Before the 1983 revisions in the Church's Code of Canon Law, the rules regarding relics were outlined in a special section (Canons 1276–1289). At the present time first-, second- and third-class relics may be authenticated and distributed by religious orders on the approval of the local bishop. But the most formidable task of authenticating and historically approving first-class relics rests with the Relic Office in the Vatican which receives, keeps and distributes relics of saints and those holy persons declared *blinded* who are candidates for canonization.

In this matter we are presently instructed by the vicar general of the Diocese of Rome:

Relics should be handled intelligently, without abuses. They are signs which can be useful to spread devotion to holy men and women all over the world. When relics are requested for private and

public veneration they must be accompanied by official papers warranting their validity and authenticity. In no way may they be sold. A contribution may be requested merely to cover expenses such as for the relic case and mailing charges.

No one is constrained to pay homage to a relic, and supposing it to be false, no dishonor is done to God by the continuance of an error which has been handed down in perfect good faith for many centuries. Nor can ecclesiastical authority be blamed for permitting the continuance of a cult which extends back into remote antiquity. The Council of Trent dealt with this matter and noted that while no Catholic is formally bound to the veneration of relics, he is, nevertheless, forbidden to say that such veneration ought not to be given authentic relics.

Devotion of ancient date, deeply rooted in the heart of people, cannot be swept away without some measure of popular disturbance. To create this disquiet by forbidding honor paid to articles of doubtful authenticity might be injurious to the faith of many unless proof of falsity is so overwhelming as to amount to a certainty. There is justification, then, for the practice of the Holy See in allowing the cult of certain doubtful ancient relics to continue.

It can be reasonably assumed that some famous relics are almost certainly false, but there is no need to assume deliberate fraud. Some have come about by facsimiles and imitations being touched to a shrine or the contents, and having some sanctity achieved as a result. In the case of the holy nails, facsimiles which had touched the authentic ones

were at first venerated as articles of a second-class nature that simply touched the original, but with the passage of time and the dimming of memories, or the misplacement of written histories, they were eventually regarded as the original itself.

In some ancient inventories the extravagance and utter improbability of many of the entries cannot escape the most uncritical, yet many of our cherished relics which the skeptic might label of doubtful origin or which have been looked upon by some with suspicion might well be authentic and worthy of our honor and attention.

It should be mentioned that the relics included in this work are presented with facts gathered from extensive research to which has been added data as supplied by the custodians of shrines under consideration. The genuineness of each is left to the judgment and discernment of the reader.

One historian has observed that the most suspicious circumstances about the crucifixion relics is the astounding fact that they were discovered by the Empress Helena about three hundred years after the event. When a queen is known to be a searcher of relics, it can be anticipated that relics in any amount would be forthcoming. It was also noted that an enthusiast of eighty years is not exactly the person to discriminate between truth and fraud, especially when all her sympathies are one way. We pray and assume that the saint worked under divine inspiration and selected the articles with care.

Several saints and holy persons have been given the grace to distinguish true from false relics. The Venerable Anne Catherine Emmerich could not only distinguish false

from true relics, but could identify their nature and origin. Several chapters are dedicated to this subject in her biography. During her ecstasies, the stigmatist Therese Neumann could likewise identify and describe true relics and distinguish these from false ones.

It should be noted that if a relic is false, the saint would still be honored since we pray not to a bit of bone, but to the saint to whom it is supposed to belong.

The veneration of relics is permitted and encouraged by the Church out of honor for the bodies of the saints—which were temples of the Holy Spirit, and which will be raised to eternal glory—and to satisfy the universal instinct of mankind to treat with affection and reverence the material souvenirs of those we love. To this the Council of Trent concurred and added long ago that relics could be honored, since through them many benefits are granted to men by God.

The Church has repeatedly warned, however, against the temptation to confuse sound spirituality with magic, blasphemous idolatry and superstitions.

Vatican II addressed the matter of relic veneration by noting that:

The saints have been traditionally honored in the church and their authentic relics and images held in veneration. For the feasts of the saints proclaim the wonderful works of Christ in His servants, and display to the faithful fitting examples for their imitation.

While the acquisition or honoring of relics is commendable, there are relics of a nonmaterialistic nature which are more deserving of our attention. St. Gertrude the Great learned the identity of these, and to this we should give careful consideration since Our Lord himself instructed her in the matter. It is recorded in her biography that the saint desired to have some relics of the wood of the cross. To this yearning Our Lord said to her,

If you desire to have some relics which will draw My Heart into yours, read My Passion, and meditate attentively on every word contained therein and it will be to you a true relic which will merit more graces for you than any other ... thence you may know and be assured that the words which I uttered when on earth are the most precious relics which you can possess.

Relics of Jesus Christ

Eucharistic Miracles

Eucharistic miracles have authenticated the real presence of Christ in the sacrament of the altar since the earliest ages of the Church. In such miracles the host is transformed into flesh, sometimes it has bled, or was preserved for long periods of time. As early as the third century, St. Cyprian mentioned a eucharistic miracle; Sozomen, a fifth-century historian, relates another. In the eighth century the most complete, the most carefully recorded, the best preserved, and certainly the most scientifically studied of such miracles occurred in Lanciano, Italy.

During the seven hundredth year of Our Lord, in a monastery then named for St. Longinus, the Roman centurion who pierced the side of Christ with a lance, a monk of the Order of St. Basil was celebrating Holy Mass according to the Latin Rite. Although his name is unknown, it is reported in an ancient document that he was "... versed in the sciences of the world, but ignorant in that of God." Having suffered from recurrent doubts regarding transubstantiation, the turning of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, he had spoken the solemn words of consecration

when the host was suddenly changed into a circle of flesh while the wine was transformed into blood. Bewildered at first by what he had witnessed he eventually regained his composure and though weeping joyously he announced to the congregation: "O fortunate witnesses to whom the Blessed God, to confound my unbelief has wished to reveal Himself visible to our eyes. Come brethren and marvel at our God so close to us. Behold the flesh and blood of our Most Beloved Christ."¹

The congregation rushed to the altar, wondered at the sight, and went forth to spread the news to townspeople, who in turn came to witness the miracle for themselves.

The flesh remained intact, but the blood in the chalice soon divided itself into five pellets of unequal sizes and irregular shapes. It has been conjectured that Divine Providence prompted the monks to undertake the weighing of the nuggets. On a scale obtained from the archbishop it was discovered that one nugget weighed the same as all five together, two as much as any three, and the smallest as much as the largest.²

The Host and the five pellets were placed in a reliquary of artistic ivory and were safeguarded in turn by three religious orders. At the time of the miracle the Church of St. Longinus was staffed by Basilian monks, but was abandoned by them at the close of the twelfth century, the property passing quickly to the Benedictines

1 *The Eucharistic Miracle of Lanciano, Italy*, Bruno Sammaciccia, Sanctuary of the Eucharistic Miracle, Lanciano, Italy, 1977, p. 18.

2 *Ibid.* p. 18.

and then to the Franciscans, who had to demolish the old church because of damage incurred by earthquakes. The new church that was built on the site was dedicated to their founding father.

History records that after the miracle was certified, a document was written on parchment in both Greek and Latin and was safeguarded by the monks between two tablets. We are told that in the first years of the sixteenth century, when the monastery was then in the possession of the Franciscans, the document was shown to two visiting monks of the Order of St. Basil. Wishing perhaps to save their order the disgrace of having the weakness of one of their members persist throughout history, they left during the night with the document, and despite many investigations, the Franciscans "... have never been able to find out whither the two fugitives had fled."

The ivory reliquary was replaced in 1713 by the one which now exhibits the relics. The ostensorium is of finely sculptured silver, the flesh of the Host being held between two round crystals, the nuggets of blood being enclosed in a chalice of artistically etched crystal which some believe might be the actual chalice in which the miraculous change occurred.

On a February day in 1514, Monsignor Rodrigues verified in the presence of reputable witnesses that the total weight of the five pellets of congealed blood was equal to the weight of either of them, a fact that was later chiseled on a marble tablet dated 1636 that is still located in the church. During subsequent authentications, however, the

prodigy was not repeated.³ A number of these authentications have been performed throughout the ages, but the last verification in 1970 is the most scientifically complete and it is the examination that we will now consider.

Performed under strict scientific criteria, the task was assigned to Professor Doctor Odoardo Linoli, university professor at large in anatomy, pathological histology, chemistry, and clinical microscopy, head physician of the united hospitals of Arezzo. Professor Linoli also availed himself of the services of Doctor Ruggero Bertelli, a professor emeritus of normal human anatomy at the University of Siena, who concurred with all of Professor Linoli's conclusions and who additionally presented an official document to that effect.⁴

Assembled in the sacristy of the Church of St. Francis on November 18, 1970, were the archbishop of Lanciano, the bishop of Ortona, the provincial to the Friars Minor Conventual, the chancellor of the archdiocese, the reverend secretary of the archbishop and the entire community of the monastery together with Professor Linoli.

On examining the ostensorium, it was observed that the lunette containing the flesh was not hermetically sealed and that the particles of the unleavened bread that had remained for many years had by then entirely disappeared. The flesh was described as being yellow-brown in color, irregular and roundish in shape, thicker and wrinkled along the periphery, becoming gradually thinner as it reached the

³ *Ibid.* pp. 38–39.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 72.

central area where the tissue was frayed with small extensions protruding toward the empty space in the middle. A small sample was taken from a thicker part for examination in the laboratory of the hospital in Arezzo.⁵

On examining the five pellets of blood it was noted that the prodigy of identical weight of one pellet as against the other four was not effected as it was for the last time in 1574. The five pellets were found to be quite irregular in form, finely wrinkled, compact, homogeneous and hard in consistency, being a yellow-chestnut color and having the appearance of chalk. A small sample was taken from the central part of one pellet for microscopic examination and scientific study.⁶ Later, after all the studies were completed, the fragments of both relics were returned to the church for safekeeping.

The conclusions reached by Professor Linoli were presented on March 4, 1971, in detailed medical and scientific terminology to a prestigious assembly including ecclesiastical officials, the provincials and superiors of the Friars Minor Conventual, representatives of religious houses in the city, as well as civil, judicial, political, and military authorities, representatives of the medical staffs of the city hospitals, various religious of the city, and a number of the city's residents.

The conclusions that were presented were later discussed by the Very Rev. Father Bruno Luciani and Professor Urbano, the chief analyst of the city hospital of Lanciano and a professor at the University of Florence. A copy of

5 *Ibid.* pp. 44–48.

6 *Ibid.* pp. 44–50.

the scientific report and the minutes of the meeting and discussions are kept in the archives of the monastery. True copies were sent to various Church officials and superiors of the order, while another was delivered in a private audience to His Holiness Pope Paul VI.

As a result of the histological studies the following facts were compiled: The flesh was identified as striated muscular tissue of the myocardium (heart wall) having no trace whatsoever of any materials or agents used for the preservation of flesh.⁷ Both the flesh and the sample of blood were found to be of human origin, emphatically excluding the possibility that it was from an animal species.⁸ The blood as well as the flesh were found to belong to the same blood type, AB.⁹ The blood of the Eucharistic Miracle was found to contain the following minerals: chloride, phosphorus, magnesium, potassium, sodium in a lesser degree, but calcium in a greater quantity.¹⁰ Proteins in the clotted blood were found to be normally fractionated with the same percentage ratio as those found in fresh and normal blood.¹¹

Professor Linoli further stated that the blood, had it been taken from a cadaver, would have been rapidly altered through spoilage and decay and that his studies conclusively reject the possibility of a fraud perpetrated centuries ago. In fact, he maintained that only a hand experienced

7 *Ibid.* p. 54.

8 *Ibid.* pp. 60–62.

9 *Ibid.* pp. 63–65.

10 *Ibid.* p. 70.

11 *Ibid.* p. 70.

in anatomic dissection could have obtained from a hollow internal organ, the heart, such an expert cut made tangentially. That is, a round cut, thick on the outer edges and lessening uniformly in a gradual degree into nothingness in the central area.¹² The doctor ended his report by stating that while the natural condition of the flesh and blood were conserved in receptacles not hermetically sealed, they were not damaged, although they were exposed to the influences of physical, atmospheric, and biological agents.¹³

The ostensorium containing the relics was previously kept to the side of the altar in the Church of St. Francis, but it is now situated in an open tabernacle atop the main tabernacle of the high altar. A stairway at the back of the altar enables the visitor to climb closer, where he can view the reliquary containing the flesh and blood through an opening that has been conveniently provided.

The visitor will notice that the Host appears rosy in color when it is backlighted, and as he gazes he must undoubtedly reflect upon the countless numbers of others who have looked upon this Eucharistic Miracle during its 1200 years of existence.¹⁴

The Eucharistic Miracle that occurred at Bolsena, Italy, is noteworthy because an investigation was immediately initiated by Pope Urban IV who, on being satisfied with

12 *Ibid.* pp. 70–71.

13 *Ibid.* p. 71.

14 The foregoing has been summarized from the book published by the Church of the Eucharistic Miracle in which all the tests made on the samples are more thoroughly detailed, together with photographs of the microscopic studies.

the results, commissioned St. Thomas Aquinas to write the Mass and Office of the Body of Christ, a feast initiated one year following the miracle and now celebrated throughout the world as the Feast of Corpus Christi.

The year was 1263 when Peter of Prague, a Bohemian priest, paused at Bolsena on his journey to Rome. Bolsena was then famous for the shrine of St. Christiana and it was over this saint's tomb that the priest celebrated Holy Mass that eventful morning. Although a devout priest, he nevertheless doubted the real presence of Christ and was astonished, on breaking the Host after the Consecration, to see blood flowing from it onto the corporal, the square piece of linen placed under the chalice and host during Mass. An effort was made to conceal the bloody miracle, but realizing that such an occurrence could not be kept secret the priest interrupted the Mass and asked to be taken to neighboring Orvieto where the pope had sought refuge. After listening to the account, Pope Urban IV absolved the emotional priest of his doubts and ordered an immediate investigation. The facts were speedily compiled. The pope ordered the bishop of the diocese to bring the miraculous Host, together with the linen that bore the splashes of blood, to Orvieto in solemn procession. The corporal was enshrined in the cathedral of the city where it is still venerated.

In 1964, on the seven hundredth anniversary of the institution of the Feast of Corpus Christi, Pope Paul VI attended ceremonies in the cathedral after flying from the Vatican to Orvieto by helicopter, the first pope ever to use such a means of transportation.

The Eucharistic Miracle of Santarem is unique in that it did not occur in a church, but nearby, and was not occasioned by a doubting priest as mentioned previously, but by a woman who was fully aware of the sacrilege involved.

The miracle originated in the parish of St. Stephen, located in Santarem, Portugal, thirty-five miles south of Fatima. A woman of the parish, unhappy with the activities of an unfaithful husband, had consulted a sorceress who promised a deliverance from her trials for the price of a consecrated host. After many hesitations the woman consented, received Holy Communion, but removed the Host from her mouth and wrapped it in her veil with the intention of conveying it to the sorceress. Within moments blood issued from the Host and increased in volume until it dripped from the cloth, thereby attracting the attention of bystanders. On seeing blood on the woman's hand and arm, and thinking her injured, the witnesses rushed forward to help. The woman avoided their concern and ran to her home, leaving a trail of blood behind her. Hoping to hide the bloody veil and its contents, she placed them in a chest; but during the night she was obliged to reveal her sin to her husband when a mysterious light penetrated the trunk and illuminated the house.

Both knelt in adoration for the remaining hours until dawn, when the priest was summoned. News of the mysterious happenings spread quickly, attracting countless people who wished to contemplate the miracle. Because of the furor, an episcopal investigation was promptly initiated.

The Host was soon taken in procession to the Church of St. Stephen where it was encased in wax and secured in

the tabernacle. Sometime later, when the tabernacle was opened, another miracle was discovered. The wax that had encased the Host was found broken in pieces with the Host now enclosed in a crystal pyx. The Host was later placed in the gold and silver monstrance in which it is still contained.

After receiving the approbation of ecclesiastical authorities, who saw no reason to condemn or suppress the miracle, the Church of St. Stephen was renamed the Church of the Miracle. It is here that the Host is still preserved and willingly displayed for the admiration and veneration of pilgrims.

The Host, as seen by visitors, appears to be a thin piece of flesh with delicate streaks of blood running from top to bottom, where a quantity of blood is collected. In the opinion of a physician who recently examined the miracle, the blood that is coagulated at the bottom appears to be fresh blood of recent clotting.

This miracle, occurring as it did in the early part of the thirteenth century, has endured for over seven hundred years.

Siena, Italy, is known worldwide as the home of St. Catherine, the Dominican mystic and the second woman installed as a doctor of the Church, and also as the home of St. Bernardine, the Franciscan reformer and preacher. The city is, regrettably, little known outside the region for the sustaining miracle that is guarded in the Church of St. Francis.

To introduce the miracle we must first look back through history to the thirteenth century when the people of the city first began the traditional vigil services in honor

of the Feast of the Assumption. On August 14, 1730, while most of the Sieneese population were attending the services in the cathedral, together with all the priests of the city, thieves entered the deserted Church of St. Francis. Taking advantage of the friars' absence, they made for the chapel where the Blessed Sacrament was kept, picked the lock to the tabernacle and carried away the golden ciborium that contained consecrated Hosts.

The theft went undiscovered until the next morning when the priest opened the tabernacle at the Communion of the Mass. Later, when a parishioner found the lid of the ciborium lying in the street, the suspicion of a sacrilege was confirmed. The resultant anxiety of the parishioners forced a cancellation of the festivities planned for the feast. The archbishop ordered public prayers of reparation, while the civil authorities began a search for the consecrated Hosts and the culprits who had taken them.

A few days later, on August 17, while a priest was praying in the Church of St. Mary in Provenzano, his attention was directed toward a whiteness protruding from the offering box attached to his prie-dieu. Recognizing the substance as a Host, the cleric informed the other priests of the church, who in turn notified the archbishop and the friars of the Church of St. Francis.

When the offering box was opened in the presence of local priests and the representative of the archbishop, a large number of Hosts were found, some of which were suspended by cobwebs. The Hosts were compared with the unconsecrated ones used in the Church of St. Francis,

and these proved to be exactly the same shape and had on them the same stamp that was impressed by the irons upon which they were baked. The number of Hosts corresponded exactly to the amount the Franciscan friar had estimated he had placed in the ciborium before they were consecrated. These numbered 348 whole Hosts and six halves.

Since the offering box was opened but once a year, the Hosts were covered with dust and debris that had collected in it. After being carefully cleaned by the priests the Hosts were enclosed in a ciborium that was placed inside the tabernacle of the main altar of the Church of St. Mary. The following day Archbishop Alessandro Zondadari, in the company of a great gathering of townspeople, carried the Sacred Hosts in solemn procession back to the Church of St. Francis.

It has been wondered through the two centuries that followed why the Hosts were not consumed by a priest during Mass, which would have been the ordinary procedure in such a case. While there is no definite answer, there are two theories. One explanation is that crowds of people from both Siena and neighboring cities gathered in the church to offer prayers of reparation before the Sacred Particles, forcing the priests to conserve them for a time. The other reason the priests did not consume them is perhaps because of their soiled condition. While they were superficially cleaned after their discovery, they still retained a great deal of dirt. In such cases it is not necessary to consume consecrated Hosts but to permit them to deteriorate naturally, at which time the Real Presence would no longer exist.

To the amazement of the clergy, the Hosts did not deteriorate, but remained fresh and pleasant smelling. With the passage of time the Conventual Franciscans were convinced of a continuing miracle of preservation.

Fifty years after the recovery of the stolen Hosts an official investigation was conducted to determine the validity of the miracle. The minister general of the order, Father Carlo Vipera, examined the hosts on April 14, 1780, and upon tasting one of them found it fresh and incorrupt. Since a number of the Hosts had been distributed during the preceding years, the minister general ordered that the remaining 230 particles be placed in a new ciborium and additionally forbade further distributions.

A more detailed investigation took place in 1789 by Archbishop Tiberio Borghese of Siena with a number of theologians and other dignitaries. After an examination of the hosts under a microscope, the commission declared that they were perfectly intact with no trace of deterioration. The three Franciscans who had been present at the previous investigation of 1780 were questioned under oath by the archbishop. It was then established that the Hosts under examination were the same ones stolen in 1730.

As a test to strengthen the authenticity of the miracle, the archbishop, during this 1789 examination, had unconsecrated hosts placed in a sealed box that was kept under lock in the chancery office. Ten years later these were examined and were found to be not only disfigured, but also withered. In 1850, sixty-one years after they were placed in a sealed box, three unconsecrated hosts were found reduced

to particles of a dark yellow color while the consecrated Hosts retained their original freshness.

Other examinations were made at intervals throughout the years, the most significant one taking place in 1914 on the authority of Pope St. Pius X. At this time the archbishop selected a distinguished panel of investigators, including various scientists and professors from Siena and Pisa, as well as theologians and Church officials.

The results of acid and starch tests performed with one of the fragments indicated a normal starch content. The conclusion reached from microscopic tests indicated that the Hosts had been made of roughly sifted wheat flour that was well preserved.

The commission agreed that unleavened bread, if prepared under sterile conditions and if kept in an airtight antiseptically cleaned container could be kept for an extremely long time; unleavened bread prepared in a normal fashion and kept exposed to air and the activity of microorganisms could be kept intact for no more than a few years. It was concluded that the stolen Hosts were both prepared without scientific precautions and were kept under ordinary conditions that should have caused their decay more than a century before.¹⁵ The commission concluded that the preservation was extraordinary, “... *e la scienza stessa che proclama qui lo straordinario.*”¹⁶

15 *Una Delle Piu Grandi Meraviglie*, Felice M. Rossetti, Edizioni Periccioli, Siena, Italy, 1965. pp. 159–160.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 161.

Another investigation was conducted in 1922, this one in the presence of Cardinal Giovanni Tacci, who was accompanied by the archbishop of Siena and by the bishops of Montepulciano, Foligno, and Grosseto. Again the results were the same: the Hosts tasted like unleavened bread, were starchy in composition, and were completely preserved with no explanation being given for their conservation.

In 1950 the miraculous Hosts were taken from the old container and placed in a more elaborate and costly one that caught the eye and the fancy of another thief.

Despite the precautions of the priests, another sacrilegious theft took place during the night of August 5, 1951. This time the thief was considerate enough to take only the container and left the Hosts in a corner of the tabernacle. Placed temporarily in a silver ciborium which the archbishop himself sealed, the Hosts were counted and were found to be 223 in number. After being photographed they were placed in an elaborate container that replaced the one that was stolen.

The miraculously preserved Hosts are displayed publicly on various occasions, but especially on the seventeenth of each month, which commemorates the day the Hosts were found after the first theft. On the Feast of Corpus Christi the sacred particles are placed in their processional monstrance and are triumphantly carried in procession from the church through the streets of the town, an observance in which the whole population participates.

Of the many distinguished visitors who have worshiped the Hosts are St. John Bosco and Pope St. John XXIII, who signed the album of visitors on May 29, 1954, when he was still the patriarch of Venice. Although unable to visit the miraculous Hosts, Popes Pius X, Benedict XV, Pius XI, and Pius XII issued statements of interest and admiration.

With a unanimous voice the faithful, priests, bishops, cardinals, and popes themselves marvel and worship the Holy Hosts as a permanent miracle, both complete and perfect, that has endured for 250 years—a miracle that has kept the Hosts shiny, whole, and maintaining the characteristic scent of unleavened bread. Since the particles are in such a perfect state of conservation, theology assures that the Hosts consecrated in 1730 are still in reality the Body of Christ.¹⁷

The late Professor Doctor Siro Grimaldi, professor of chemistry of the University of Siena, director of the Municipal Chemical Laboratory, and the holder of several other distinguished positions in the field of chemistry, was the chief chemical examiner of the Holy Particles in 1914. Thereafter he gave numerous and elaborate statements concerning the miraculous nature of the Hosts and in addition wrote a book about the miracle entitled *Una Scienziato Adora* (A Scientific Adorer). In 1914 he declared: “The Holy Particles of unleavened bread represent an example of perfect preservation ... a singular phenomenon that inverts

17 *Il Miracolo Eucaristico Permanente Di Siena*. A cura dei Frati Minori Conventuali del Santuario Eucaristico di Siena, Siena, Italy, 1962, p. 71.

the natural law of the conservation of organic material. It is a unique fact in the annals of science.”¹⁸

The eucharistic miracle of Faverney, France, involved not a Host turned to flesh nor one that bled, but consisted of a holy, yet a flagrant, disregard for the laws of gravity.

The abbey in whose church the miracle occurred was established by St. Gudwal as far back as the eighth century. Under the Rule of St. Benedict it was named *Notre Dame de la Blanche*, Our Lady of the White, for a small statue that is now situated in the chapel to the right of the choir. Construction of the church was begun in the eleventh century with monks replacing the nuns in 1132. Various architectural enlargements and improvements were made throughout the centuries before the year 1608 when the grand miracle took place.

The religious life of the abbey at that time was not fervent, with the community numbering only six monks and two novices, of which one, Friar Hudelot, was only fifteen years of age. In order to maintain the people’s faith then weakened by the Protestant cynicism of the time, every year the monks organized certain ceremonies, including adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, in honor of Whitsunday (Pentecost) and the Monday following the feast. In preparation for the ceremonies an altar of repose was arranged before a decorative grille near the entrance gate of their choir. The services on Whitsunday were attended by a great number of people, and at nightfall, when the doors to the church were shut and

18 *Ibid.* p. 71.

the monks were preparing to retire, two oil lamps were left burning before the Sacrament left exposed on the altar.

The following day, Monday, May 26, when the sacristan, Don Garnier, opened the doors he found the church filled with smoke and flames rising on all sides of the altar. He at once rushed to the monastery to warn the monks, who lost no time in joining his efforts to save the church. While the flames were being extinguished, the young monk, Hudelot, discovered the monstrance suspended in the air, slightly inclined toward, but not touching, the grille at the back of the altar.¹⁹

News of the miracle spread quickly, with villagers and priests from surrounding areas soon filling the church. Many knelt in awe before the suspended monstrance while a great many of the skeptics approached the altar to examine the miracle for themselves. Throughout the rest of the day and during the night no restrictions were made and the curious were permitted to move freely about the altar.

During the early morning hours of Tuesday, May 27, priests came from surrounding neighborhoods and took turns in unbroken sequence in offering Holy Mass during the time of the miracle. At about ten o'clock, during the Consecration of the Mass celebrated by the priest—Nicolas Aubry, Curé of Menoux—the congregation saw the monstrance move its angle to a vertical position and slowly descend to the altar below it that had been

¹⁹ *Le Miracle de Faverney*. M. Lescuyer & Fils. Imprimeurs a Lyon. 1957. pp. 19–22.

constructed for that eventuality. The suspension of the monstrance had lasted thirty-three hours.²⁰

As early as May 31, an inquiry was ordered by His Grace, Archbishop Ferdinand de Rye. Fifty-four depositions were collected from monks, priests, peasants, and villagers. Two months later, on July 30, 1608, after studying the depositions and the material collected during his investigation, the archbishop concluded in favor of the miracle.

We should study in some detail certain pertinent aspects of this miraculous happening.

Burned in the fire were the altar table, which was reduced to a heap of ashes with the exception of the four legs; all the altar linens and certain ornaments were destroyed. One of the two chandeliers placed as decoration on either side of the altar was found melted from the force of the heat, yet despite this heat the ostensorium was preserved from harm. The two Hosts in this vessel were intact and suffered only a slight scorching. Four articles inside the crystal tube attached to the ostensorium were also spared injury. These included a relic of St. Agatha, a small piece of protective silk, a papal proclamation of indulgences, and an episcopal letter whose wax seal melted and ran over the parchment without altering the text.

Concerning the suspension of the ostensorium, fifty-four witnesses, including many priests, affirmed that while the vessel seemed to incline toward the grille, the little cross atop the monstrance was not in contact with

²⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 30–31.

it and that the monstrance remained without support for thirty-three hours. These witnesses who gave sworn statements also signed a document that is still preserved in the church. They also swore that the suspension of the vessel was not affected by the vibrations of the people who moved around it, nor from people constantly moving in and out of the church, by those standing and whispering beside the burned altar, by those who touched the nearby grille, nor by the activities of the monks in removing the effects of the fire and assembling a temporary altar in the same location.²¹

In December 1608, the year of the miracle, one of the two Hosts that was in the monstrance at the time of the miracle was solemnly transferred to the city of Dole, which was then the capital of the county.

During the time of the French Revolution of 1790, the ostensorium was unfortunately destroyed, but the Host was preserved from harm by members of the municipal council of Favorney who kept it hidden until the danger passed. In time a monstrance was reproduced from paintings dating before the Revolution. The Host kept within this new monstrance is the same one that survived the fire of 1608.

The wonder of this miracle, in addition, of course, to the suspension of thirty-three hours, is how and why the Hosts were preserved together with the crystal tube containing perishable articles, while the force of the

21 *Ibid.*, pp. 26–31.

heat was such that a nearby chandelier was reduced to a melted ruin.²²

The Holy Manger

To catalogue the relics of Jesus Christ, these being articles He touched or used during His lifetime, we should perhaps start at the very beginning with His holy birth. The first relic to be considered would be the manger at Bethlehem. The remains of this consist of boards, blackened with age, that are kept in a sumptuous reliquary. These five boards are of special interest to visitors and those who report on the holy relics kept in the Basilica of St. Mary Major in Rome. The boards are believed to have been brought to the basilica from the Holy Land during the pontificate of Pope Theodore (640–649), who was himself a native of Palestine. Four of the boards are considered to be boards from the Holy Manger. One board is different than the others. On its surface are Greek characters which are understood to be a note etched by an artist as a reminder of religious figures still to be sculptured. The remaining four boards were examined in 1893 and were found to be of sycamore wood, of which there are several varieties in the Holy Land.

22 Eucharistic miracles are numerous and have occurred in all ages of the Church. Because their histories are so varied and interesting, they will be the subject of the author's next work.

The crib or manger in which the Child Jesus was placed after His birth is thought to have been the place in the stable where food for domestic animals was placed, and is believed to have been hewn from the limestone of the cave walls. One theory is that the four boards were used as supports for the limestone manger, two on each end in the form of an X. Another theory is that the shape of the wood suggests that when fitted together with certain additional parts, they would have formed a proper bottom for a crib.

The gold and silver reliquary in which the relics of the crib are kept is topped by a figure of the Christ Child in a reclining position with one hand raised in blessing. Beneath him is a container in the shape of a bowl having several crystal windows through which the boards may be seen. The five pieces of wood are secured to one another by two metal strips which suggest an ancient assembly.

Of the many relics kept by the Basilica of St. Mary Major, the two most greatly prized are the portrait of Our Lady, *Salus Populi Romani*, mentioned elsewhere in this volume, and the relics of the manger.¹

The Swaddling Cloth

A cloth believed to have served as the Baby Jesus' swaddling garment is kept in a unique reliquary in the shrine

¹ The preceding was summarized from a paper supplied by the Basilica of St. Mary Major, entitled *La Sacra Culla*.

that Charlemagne built called Aix La Chapelle in Aachen, Germany.

The city of Aachen was made the capital of the empire by Charlemagne and it remained the capital of the Holy Roman Empire until the middle of the sixteenth century. Thirty-seven German emperors were crowned there. When Charlemagne built the cathedral, he took pride in securing for it many important relics from the Holy Land and Rome. One of the most valued of these was the cloth believed to have been worn by the Infant Jesus.

The golden reliquary, whose hollow encloses the relic, depicts the Presentation in the Temple. Called the Reliquary Shrine for the Arm of St. Simeon, the shrine was built to house the bone of the saint, but actually enshrines the Holy Cloth. On one side of the small short-legged, gem-studded table is a golden figure of the Blessed Mother with her outstretched hands holding the two doves of the temple offering. On the opposite end is the golden figure of Simeon with his outstretched arms holding a figure of the Infant Jesus.

The relics in the cathedral are carefully guarded and were seldom exposed to public veneration before the 14th century. Since then they have been shown on an average of once every seven years, when great pilgrimages flock to Aachen to venerate them.