

# **THE INCORRUPTIBLES**



# THE INCORRUPTIBLES

A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies  
of Various Catholic Saints and Beati

By

Joan Carroll Cruz

*The bodies of holy martyrs, and others now living with Christ, bodies which were His members and temples of the Holy Spirit, which one day are to be raised up by Him and made glorious in everlasting life, are to be venerated by the faithful; God gives men many benefits through them.*

—The Council of Trent

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*Blessed are the pure of heart: for they shall see God.*

—Matthew 5:8

To the memory of my sister,  
Elba Carroll Moore, who sees God



# CONTENTS

About the Author	xi
List of Illustrations	xiii
Preface	xv
Acknowledgments	xxi
Introduction	xxvii
1. Saint Cecilia (Unknown–177)	1
2. Saint Agatha (Unknown–251)	6
3. Saint Etheldreda (630–679)	8
4. Saint Cuthbert (Unknown–687)	12
5. Saint Werburgh (Unknown–699)	16
6. Saint Guthlac (667–714)	17
7. Saint Withburga (Unknown–743)	20
8. Saint Wunibald (702–761)	22
9. Saint Alphege of Canterbury (954–1012)	25
10. Saint Romuald (952–1027)	26
11. Saint Coloman (Unknown–1012)	28
12. Saint Edward the Confessor (1004–1066)	29
13. Saint Waltheof (Unknown–1159)	31
14. Saint Ubald of Gubbio (c. 1100–1160)	34
15. Saint Idesbald (Unknown–1167)	36
16. Saint Isidore the Farmer (1080–1172)	37
17. Saint Benezet (Unknown–1184)	39
18. Saint Hugh of Lincoln (1140–1200)	41
19. Blessed Bertrand of Garrigua (Unknown–1230)	46
20. Saint Edmund Rich of Canterbury (1180–1240)	48
21. Saint Rose of Viterbo (1235–1252)	50
22. Saint Sperandia (1216–1276)	52
23. Saint Zita (1218–1278)	54

24. Saint Albert the Great (1206–1280)	56
25. Saint Margaret of Cortona (1247–1297)	59
26. Blessed James de Blanconibus (Blessed James of Bevagna) (1220–1301)	61
27. Saint Nicholas of Tolentino (1245–1305)	63
28. Blessed Peter Ghigenzi (Blessed Peter of Gubbio) (Unknown–1306)	66
29. Blessed Angelo of Borgo San Sepolcro (Unknown–1306)	70
30. Saint Clare of Montefalco (1268–1308)	71
31. Saint Agnes of Montepulciano (1268–1317)	74
32. Blessed Mattia Nazzarei of Matelica (1252–1319)	78
33. Blessed Margaret of Metola (Blessed Margaret of Citta-di-Castello) (1287–1320)	81
34. Blessed John of Chiamonte (Blessed John of Caramola) (Unknown–1339)	84
35. Saint Peregrine Laziosi (1265–1345)	86
36. Blessed Sibyllina Biscossi (1287–1367)	88
37. Saint Catherine of Siena (1347–1380)	90
38. Blessed Andrew Franchi (1335–1401)	95
39. Saint Frances of Rome (1384–1440)	96
40. Saint Bernardine of Siena (1380–1444)	98
41. Saint Herculanus of Piegaro (Unknown–1451)	100
42. Saint Rita of Cascia (1381–1457)	101
43. Saint Antoninus (1389–1459)	106
44. Blessed Antonio Vici (Blessed Anthony of Stroncone) (1381–1461)	108
45. Saint Didacus of Alcalá (San Diego de Alcalá) (1400–1463)	111
46. Saint Catherine of Bologna (1413–1463)	114
47. Blessed Margaret of Savoy (Unknown–1464)	118
48. Blessed Eustochia of Padua (1444–1469)	120
49. Blessed Anthony Bonfadini (1402–1482)	122
50. Blessed Eustochia Calafato (1434–1485)	123
51. Blessed Bernard Scammacca (Unknown–1486)	125
52. Blessed Arcangela Giralani (1460–1495)	127
53. Blessed Osanna of Mantua (1449–1505)	129
54. Saint Catherine of Genoa (1447–1510)	132

55. Blessed Margaret of Lorraine (1463–1521)	135
56. Saint Anthony Maria Zaccaria (1502–1539)	136
57. Saint Angela Merici (1474–1540)	137
58. Blessed Lucy of Narni (1476–1544)	139
59. Saint John of God (1495–1550)	141
60. Saint Francis Xavier (1506–1552)	145
61. Saint Stanislaus Kostka (1550–1568)	154
62. Blessed Mary Bagnesi (1514–1577)	156
63. Saint Louis Bertrand (1526–1581)	159
64. Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)	161
65. Saint Charles Borromeo (1538–1584)	167
66. Venerable Catalina de Cristo (1554–1589)	170
68. Saint Catherine dei Ricci (1522–1590)	172
69. Saint John of the Cross (1542–1591)	174
70. Blessed Alphonsus de Orozco (1500–1591)	177
71. Saint Paschal Baylon (1540–1592)	180
72. Saint Philip Neri (1515–1595)	187
73. Saint Germaine Cousin (1579–1601)	191
74. Saint Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi (1566–1607)	194
75. Saint Camillus de Lellis (1550–1614)	198
76. Venerable John of Jesus Mary (1564–1615)	202
77. Saint Rose of Lima (1586–1617)	203
78. Venerable Maria Vela (1561–1617)	205
79. Saint Francis de Sales (1567–1622)	209
80. Saint Josaphat (1580–1623)	212
81. Venerable Mother Maria of Jesus (1560–1640)	215
82. Saint Jeanne de Lestonnac (1556–1640)	217
83. Saint Jane Frances de Chantal (1572–1641)	220
84. Saint John Southworth (1592–1654)	223
85. Saint Andrew Bobola (1590–1657)	225
86. Saint Vincent de Paul (1580–1660)	229
87. Saint Pacifico of San Severino (1653–1721)	231
88. Saint Veronica Giuliani (1660–1727)	233
89. Saint Lucy Filippini (1672–1732)	235
90. Saint Teresa Margaret of the Sacred Heart (Anna Maria Redi) (1747–1770)	237
91. Saint Julie Billiart (1751–1816)	243
92. Blessed Anna Maria Taigi (1769–1837)	246

93. Saint Vincent Pallotti (1795–1850)	250
94. Blessed Rose Philippine Duchesne (1769–1852)	254
95. Saint Jean-Marie-Baptiste Vianney (The Curé of Ars) (1786–1859)	257
96. Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat (1779–1865)	262
97. Saint Pierre Julien Eymard (1811–1868)	265
98. Saint Catherine Labouré (1806–1876)	267
99. Saint Bernadette Soubirous (1844–1879)	275
100. Blessed Paula Frassinetti (1809–1882)	278
101. Saint Charbel Makhoul (1828–1898)	281
102. Blessed Maria Assunta Pallotta (1878–1905)	288
Afterword	289
Selected Bibliography	291

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Writing comes second for Mrs. Joan Carroll Cruz, a New Orleans housewife and mother of five children, not that she is a second-rate writer—far from it. She simply cannot tolerate writing if there is housework left undone. For this reason she usually writes at night, when her regular work is finished. Actually, she writes every other night, during the wee hours of the morning, often rising by 2:00 a.m. to sit down to her typewriter. “That is the only time I have enough uninterrupted quiet to get anything done,” she states. She catches up with rest on alternate nights.

The catalyst that initiated her writing career was a challenge from her niece. Already she had done considerable reading in the lives of the Saints and was well aware of the phenomenon of incorruption when a family discussion evolved to the subject. She was noting that there are so many contradictions in this area that she would like to see someone write a book to clarify matters. When her niece challenged her to write one, the idea did not seem so far-fetched, and she accepted. After working a while on the project, she laid it aside, thinking herself unequal to the task. But later she resumed it with renewed vigor, and *The Incorruptibles* is the result.

During the research on this book, she conceived the outline of a novel inspired by the life of King Edward the Confessor of England, a work she pursued immediately upon completion of *The Incorruptibles*. It is now in print with the title *The Desires of Thy Heart*. Published by Tandem Press in hardbound, it quickly went through two printings and was accepted by New American Library for a pocket-book edition under the Signet label. It was their lead book

for November, 1977, with an initial printing of 550,000. Three companies are interested in the movie rights.

Already she has completed a second novel, *Love Endures Forever*, which appeared in the summer of 1978, and two children's stories, *Butterflies Clap Their Wings* and *Fish Fan Their Fins*, which came out at approximately the same time. Books in progress include a novel entitled *The Mustard Seed*, a children's fantasy called *The Crystal Forest* and a nonfiction Catholic work. "The more I write and research, the more ideas I get for new books," she says.

A native of New Orleans, Mrs. Cruz is the educational product of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, having attended grade school, high school and college under their tutelage. She attended boarding school at St. Mary of the Pines in Chatawa, Mississippi, and went to Notre Dame Junior College in St. Louis, Missouri. She is married to Louis Cruz, who works for a trucking company at the New Orleans Port Authority in various capacities.

Writing for Joan Carroll Cruz is the fulfillment of a long unexpressed drive for creative self-expression. Having already tried her hand at painting and fine needle-work, in an unsuccessful attempt to satisfy her creative urge, she was about to embark upon volunteer work when the possibility of writing a book occurred to her. Once solidly into it, she discovered she had found her medium and now plans to stay with it for some years to come.

Themes for her prose works are all religious, as is the background for her novels, into which she weaves a definite moral lesson. "Fiction without a moral to it is a waste of time," she comments. Her novels are all written without any of the suggestiveness or blatant openness so typical of popular writing today. She maintains, "a book does not need this," and she has solidly proved her point.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Saint Cecilia	5
Saint Sperandia	53
Saint Zita	55
Blessed Margaret of Metola (Citta-di-Castello)	83
Saint Rita of Cascia	105
Saint Catherine of Bologna	117
Blessed Osanna of Mantua	131
Saint Catherine of Genoa	134
Saint Angela Merici	138
Saint Francis Xavier	151
Saint Mary Magdalen de' Pazzi	197
Saint Andrew Bobola	228
Saint Lucy Filippini	236
Saint Teresa Margaret of the Sacred Heart	241
Saint Vincent Pallotti	253
Blessed Rose Philippine Duchesne	256
Saint Jean-Marie-Baptiste Vianney (Curé of Ars)	260
Saint Catherine Labouré	273
Saint Bernadette Soubirous	277
Blessed Paula Frassinetti	280
Saint Charbel Makhlouf	286



## P R E F A C E

How can one begin to explain what motivated her to compile and record such unusual subjects as the death, burial, exhumation and condition of the preserved bodies of Saints—topics that, to say the least, would at first appear of morbid and macabre interest but that eventually proved to be stimulating and fraught with mystery? First impulse would claim an inability to explain my attraction for this unusual matter, so far removed from my immediate preoccupations, but I must credit a long-standing interest in the Saints, plus the reading of countless biographies, as my introduction, however subliminally, to this subject.

I can recall being greatly impressed on first learning of that great phenomenon of our day, the perfectly preserved and bleeding body of Saint Charbel Makhlouf, but I lay the origins of this book to a sketch that appeared in a Catholic publication that outlined a reclining figure in a glass reliquary. The caption identified the enclosed form as the incorrupt body of St. Francis of Geronimo, a declaration that subsequent research revealed was completely incorrect. Although inaccurate, the sketch of this Saint, who was previously unknown to me, stimulated my curiosity regarding the number of Saintly preservations in existence, and my interest in this entire subject was immediately kindled.

My preliminary research was abandoned for a year when I was overcome by a feeling of complete inadequacy in the face of so extensive and phenomenal a topic. However, when research was resumed, so many errors and false impressions concerning these preservations were uncovered that a housewifely compulsion for order was aroused, which compelled me once again to undertake, and this time to finish, the compilation of this book.

Initial research involved correspondence with the Library of the Catholic University of America and the Bollandist Jesuits of Brussels. For over 300 years this order of Jesuit scholars has been reviewing and rewriting the lives of the Saints based on documents contemporary to their times. Their work has thus far been published in 68 volumes and is entitled the *Acta Sanctorum*—a work officially accepted as the most accurate record of the Saints. Both contacts revealed that, not only were there no estimates or compilations of these relics, but also there was no research material available, except for Father Herbert Thurston, S.J.'s *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, which contains one lengthy and extremely interesting chapter on the incorruption of the Saints. This book, unfortunately out of print, also explores other topics, such as levitations, stigmatizations, blood prodigies, mystical fasts and other subjects that provide very interesting reading.

Having secured with some difficulty a copy of this excellent work, my next steps were made in the direction of four of New Orleans' Catholic university libraries, as well as a number of public libraries. During my visits to these treasuries of information, literally several hundred biographies of Saints were scanned to obtain as many names of the incorruptibles as possible. In order to avail myself of other sources, my next field of exploration was the 14 volumes of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, in which every entry of Saints, blessed and venerables was read for possible mention of their incorruption. I likewise checked, with rewarding results, a number of anthologies, particularly Butler's *Complete Lives of the Saints* (1956 edition).

It must be carefully noted that *the Saints included in this present book are by no means the only Saints whose bodies have been preserved incorruptly*. Since the incorruption of their bodies was not always mentioned in their biographies, there are perhaps a goodly number of cases unintentionally overlooked; however, I feel certain that the great majority, and certainly the most famous, of these favored souls are included in this volume. To obtain an accurate number of the Saints so highly blessed with this unusual dispensation would necessarily constitute a monumental and virtually impossible task.

The next phase of research involved correspondence with the shrines of all those Saints reputed to be incorrupt. This was necessary for several reasons:

In a number of European churches there can be found crystal reliquaries that contain reclining statues representing particular Saints, the bones of the Saints being enclosed in their simulated figures. Because of the techniques employed in reproducing pictures of some of these models, the figures have been frequently mistaken for the actual bodies, producing errors such as that involving St. Francis of Geronimo, mentioned previously, and creating false rumors, as occurred with regard to St. Frances Cabrini, whose body was never found preserved. It was necessary, therefore, to check with the shrines of all those Saints reported as being incorrupt to determine if the enshrined figures were the actual bodies of the Saints or statues representing them.

Research revealed that the bodies of many Saints were reported as being incorrupt when in reality their bodies, which had been conserved for many years, were no longer preserved, due to the effects of floods or accidental fires. Many were also deliberately destroyed by the enemies of the Church during various political upheavals. It was again necessary to obtain verification from the shrines that the bodies were actually intact, as reported.

A third reason for contacting the shrines was to establish the exact location of these relics since many were moved—translated to various places throughout the years. It was frequently found that a relic was reported as being in two or three different churches, only to be found in a fourth. And in two instances, relics were recorded as being in either of two countries and were eventually located in yet another.

A further reason for contacting the shrines was to learn the exact condition of these relics since some, as can be expected, are in a better state than others. It also seemed necessary to obtain verification from the shrines that certain phenomena, including the transpiration of clear oils and perfumes, had proceeded from these relics as recorded. It was also important to obtain certain data concerning the phenomena that are still observed relative to many of these treasured relics.

The final and perhaps most important reason for this correspondence was to learn if the preservations were due to extensive

embalming. Of all those Saints mentioned in this volume, the preservations of only about one percent are credited to deliberate intervention, and this fact is mentioned in their individual chapters.

In order to report all of this essential information with the greatest accuracy, a reply from the shrines or religious orders involved was established as a requisite for a Saint's inclusion in this book. A departure from this norm was allowed in only two instances. Because of the volumes of authoritative information concerning the incorruption of the body of St. Bernadette of Lourdes, correspondence with her shrine seemed entirely superfluous. Contact with the shrine of St. Pascal Baylon was unsuccessful, but due to the availability of a great quantity of documented material and those biographies written by his contemporaries, verifications from his shrine also seemed unnecessary.

The response to my queries was overwhelmingly gratifying. My correspondents were not only pleased to be of assistance but rendered it with detail, supplying me with pictures when these were available and with many definitive works regarding their Saints. The responses were so gracious and generous as to fill me with profound and sincerest sentiments of appreciation.

Because some of the material supplied to me from archives and European publications had not previously been utilized by American biographers and because many interesting facts regarding the lives of these Saints, which were given emphasis in these foreign books, had been casually reported or neglected altogether in our editions, I thought it best, in order to bring many of these facts before the reader, that each Saint be given his or her own entry. Arranging this work in any other fashion would necessarily limit the amount of data assigned to each one. Organized as it is, this work provides easy access to those Saints of particular interest to the reader.

It will be noted that the titles of some of these people are variously stated as *Venerable* and *Blessed* (*Beatus*) although the author collectively refers to them as Saints. It should be explained that *Venerable* is a title given to servants of God after the Congregation of Rites in Rome concludes that they have practiced virtue to an heroic degree. This is the first step toward Sainthood. *Blessed* is an official ecclesiastical title, preliminary to Sainthood, bestowed on souls after God has testified to their sanctity by miracles

performed for others through their holy intercession. Further, it must be mentioned that prior to the bestowal of these titles, the recognition and examination of the remains are made. Incorrupt bodies are medically and scientifically examined, and all phenomena are carefully studied. Since only those souls who have been so recognized by the Church are included in this work, the phenomena reported herein have thus been scrutinized and verified by ecclesiastical authorities.

It is recommended that the entry of Saint Charbel Makhlof be given particular consideration because many of the unusual circumstances that surrounded the discovery of the incorrupt bodies of Saints in past ages were also witnessed not long ago at the tomb of this holy monk. It must be remembered that the pathways that are now seldom trod to the altars guarding the relics of many ancient and medieval Saints were once crowded with scurrying souls in search of a favor or a cure, as countless pilgrims are *now* doing when they climb the cedared hills of Lebanon to the shrine of this perfectly preserved Saint. It should be considered that the now-darkened relics of some of these earlier Saints were lifelike for many years longer than has been the body of Saint Charbel, now dead but 79 years, and that in many instances the undeniable presence of a heavenly fragrance, which is not noted in the case of this holy monk, further signaled the supernatural quality of other preservations.

May the veneration now deservedly lavished on the memory of Saint Charbel be renewed in equal measure in favor of all those incorruptibles from past ages who await in the shadows of their reliquaries the day of their glorious resurrection.

JOAN CARROLL CRUZ



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## INTRODUCTION

Preserved bodies found in countries around the world can be divided into three classifications: the *deliberately preserved*, the *accidentally preserved* and the *incurruptibles*. Specimens of the accidentally or naturally preserved were found even before Egyptian Pharaoh times when the art of embalming originated, producing for the first time the *deliberately* treated mummies that have survived for as many as 3,000 years. The incurruptibles, however, have existed only since early Christian days. Their preservations since that time have challenged the opinions of skeptics and contradicted and defied the laws of nature, all to the dismay of many examining physicians and the admiration of succeeding generations.

The more carefully we consider the preservation of the incurruptibles, the more baffling does the subject become, for their conservation seems to be dependent neither on the manner of burial nor on the temperature or place of interment. Nor were they adversely affected by extended delays between the time of death and their burials, by moisture in the tombs, by rough handling, by frequent transferences, by covering with quicklime or by their proximity to decaying corpses. The greater majority were never embalmed or treated in any manner, yet most were found lifelike, flexible and sweetly scented many years after death, in sharp contrast to the specimens of the other two classifications above, who without exception were found stiff, discolored and skeletal. The mystery of their preservations is further compounded by the observance of blood and clear oils—which have proceeded from a number of these holy relics—a phenomenon that again, needless to say, was never recorded with regard to the deliberately or accidentally preserved.

In order for the reader to appreciate fully the truly phenomenal, highly mysterious and, in most cases, absolutely miraculous aspects of the incorruptibles, it is of the utmost importance that we examine, however briefly, the methods employed in the deliberate preservation of human bodies from ancient times to our modern day and the conditions favoring the accidental or natural preservation of human remains. Final consideration will be given to the incorruptibles with an analysis of their attending prodigies.

## I

The artificial preservation of human bodies has been of interest to civilization since about the year 3000 BC. Believed to have evolved from the procedures used to preserve food by drying and salting, the elaborate methods employed to preserve bodies were first applied to satisfy ancient religious beliefs. The Egyptian creators of the art believed that the preservation of the body was essential for maintaining the identity of the deceased on his prolonged journey to his ultimate existence in the other world. In order to maintain this necessary housing of the spirit, they developed a number of embalming methods, some of which were not as successful as the natural preservations that were achieved by placing the remains in hot, dry sand.

There were basically three embalming techniques. The most elaborate and likewise the most expensive method, performed for the wealthier classes, involved the removal of the brain through the nasal passages and the extraction of the internal organs, except for the heart and kidneys, through standardized incisions. The cranial cavity was filled with hot resin and the abdominal cavity, after being cleansed with palm wine and aromatics, was filled with any one of a number of materials including spices, resin or resin-soaked sawdust. The body was then placed in natron, a sodium carbonate found in the Libyan Desert. After complete desiccation (dehydration or drying), which took as many as 70 days to achieve, the body was cleansed with various spices and oils. Then followed the elaborate wrapping of each digit, each limb and the entire body with as many as 450 yards of cotton or linen, into which were tucked bracelets, necklaces, rings, charms and jeweled

amulets, which were intended for the use of the spirit during its hazardous journey. After the linen was sealed with resin or gum, the body was returned to the relatives for storage in mummy cases, familiar to us in the case of the Egyptians.

One of the cheaper processes involved injection of cedar oil into the abdomen by the use of syringes and the desiccation of the body in natron. The oil and intestines were then withdrawn. In the simplest and cheapest method, the intestines were cleared out, and after 70 days in natron, the procedure was considered completed. In these simpler methods no wrapping with linen was undertaken.

Many Egyptian mummies have survived to modern times in remarkable states of preservation, as we know, but many were reduced to dust during scientific examinations or putrefied rapidly when the bandaging was removed.

The Incas of South America were also very successful at mummifying human remains, but the procedures used are not known for certain. It is thought, however, that the bodies were desiccated before burial, probably because of the hot, dry climate of the region.

In Tibet, mummification was used upon bodies of the highest lamas. After evisceration (disembowelment), the abdominal cavity was packed with lacquer-saturated padding and the body wrapped in lacquered silk. It was thoroughly dried by placing it in a lotus position in a salt-filled room into which, for several days, heated air was forced. After cooling and unwrapping, it was covered with gold leaf by experienced craftsmen and then conveyed to the Hall of Incarnations where it was seated on a throne in the solemn company of other gilded lamas of past ages.<sup>1</sup>

Very unusual substances have been used in man's efforts to conserve mortal flesh. In Babylon, preservations are said to have been effected by the immersion of bodies in honey; the remains of Alexander the Great are reputed to have been preserved in this manner. The body of Sir Gerard de Braybroke, who died in 1422, was discovered in the Church of Danbury in 1779, where examining doctors noted with amazement that it was lying in an

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1 T. Lobsang Rampa, *The Third Eye, The Autobiography of a Tibetan Lama* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1957), 241–45.

aromatic fluid that tasted like mushroom catchup spiced with Spanish olives, according to the adventurous soul who partook of it. In 1723, the well-preserved body of a naval commander was found steeped in rum, “as befitted one of his calling.”

More modern methods were devised when it became necessary to preserve bodies and various organs for anatomical dissection and storage in medical museums. Several original methods were used that necessitated the use of saltpeter, pitch, resin, tar, salt, camphor or cinnamon, but alcohol proved to be the most popular, except that it caused undue shrinkage and loss of color. In the 19th century the use of formaldehyde came into vogue, and anatomical specimens were treated with this, the color being restored by brief immersion in spirits and storage in a 50 percent solution of glycerine.<sup>2</sup>

Modern embalming methods, which are more detailed and scientifically formulated than one would ordinarily suppose, entail basically the drainage of the blood vessels and the injection, under pressure, of a solution of formaldehyde, glycerine and borax, the principle constituents of embalming fluids. These ingredients and many others may be used in various proportions and quantities as the embalmer deems proper and necessary. Depending upon the strength of the arterially injected fluid and the weight of the subject, as many as 10 to 14 pints of a strong solution may be used in an average adult body. If a weaker solution is employed, embalmers generally compensate for this by injecting a larger volume of fluid, which might measure from 24 to 32 pints, reckoned entirely upon the subject’s weight.<sup>3</sup>

The complete dissolution of some bodies may require several years depending upon the strength of the embalming fluid used, but even with these specialized chemicals the majority of tombs are ready for reuse after only one year’s occupancy.

Cemetery workers around the world could undoubtedly relate instances in which mummified remains have been discovered. Those sextons with whom the author spoke concerning

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2 C. J. Polson, R. P. Brittain, and T. K. Marshal, *The Disposal of the Dead* (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1962), 13.

3 *Ibid.*, 303–5.

this subject reported that the finding of such specimens is quite rare. One sexton of a large cemetery who had supervised the opening of vaults both above and below the ground for over 28 years related that only one such preservation was found during that time and that it was as dry and hard as stone. Other sextons, with as many as 15 years experience each, had never seen such a preservation but had heard that at least one of these rigid conservations had been found previously in their cemeteries. The mummified condition of these remains is believed by them to have been effected by strong embalming fluids, which halted dissolution until the desiccation of the tissues was completed under prolonged drying conditions.

Undoubtedly, the most modern method devised to preserve human bodies might well be said to belong to the realm of science fiction. This is the technique fostered by the Life Extension Society (Cryogenics) in which the bodies of persons dying of incurable ailments are frozen in a state of suspended animation in thermostatically controlled cylinders to be thawed and reanimated in future ages when science has developed a cure for their particular maladies. Tests involving the freezing and reanimation of animals have failed miserably, and the revival of those persons already frozen is hoped for with an unfounded optimism. The followers of this cult are, nevertheless, looking to the future and investing considerable sums of money in it.

Now that we have examined the methods and materials used during various ages in the deliberate preservation of human bodies, we will consider the conditions and elements favoring the *accidental* or *natural preservation* of human remains. This analysis is very important since the bodies of the incorruptibles have been erroneously classified by many as natural mummies. The origins and differences between the two groups are vastly distinct as further exploration of this subject will disclose.

## II

Moisture is the principle deterrent in the formation of natural or accidental mummies. Contrarily, interment in a warm, dry atmosphere, particularly in warm dry sand, permits the rapid

evaporation of the body fluids, completely arresting the dissolution of the internal organs, where the process of corruption usually begins. During the drying process, the skin loses its elasticity as the moisture and fatty materials below it evaporate, causing considerable wrinkling; or it may contract, producing an unequal distortion of the features.

Natural preservations have been achieved most successfully in the hot, dry climates of Egypt, Peru and Mexico. The hot, sterile sand of Egypt produced such satisfactory mummies of unembalmed bodies that during the late 19th century, European collectors were fraudulently provided with what were supposed to be mummies of Pharaoh times by grave robbers who dug up bodies from relatively new cemeteries and wrapped them in aged, yellowed linen, into which they tucked golden amulets for further deceptive purposes.

Natural mummies are occasionally produced in dry, cold air. A natural mummy was produced in a cave in the highlands of Chile. In February 1954, the body of an eight- or nine-year-old boy was found at 17,712 feet on El Plomo Peak. It is believed he was numbed by a narcotic and left to freeze as an Inca sacrifice. The mummified body was brought down with great difficulty, and with great caution, and is exhibited in a deep-freeze showcase in a Santiago museum. The body is in a sitting position with the arms wrapped around the legs, which were drawn up, permitting the boy's head to rest upon the knees. The death of the youngster, in this position, is thought to have occurred about 500 years ago.

Bodies of "Iron Age" farmers that have been preserved for nearly 3,000 years have been uncovered in the peat bogs of Denmark, Ireland and Scotland. These bodies are always greatly discolored, due to the chemical reaction of the peat fluids, the bodies ranging from a red color to a dark mahogany. The accidental preservation is attributed to the humic and tannic acid in the peat, which not only inhibits bacterial growth but also tans the flesh.

A strange and rare condition that permits the body to retain its corporal existence is the formation of a substance called adipocere, which is a waxy, brownish substance produced by the dead body during the chemical changes brought on by the breakdown of the tissues. This material has occurred in bodies that

have been interred in soil containing a great deal of decomposed matter or under certain conditions in which moisture plays an important role. These bodies cannot be considered truly incorrupt since the tissues are transformed into another substance. Some of the bodies thus transformed are said to retain the lines of the face, the features and expression and the hair, but for the most part they are hideous objects. Occasionally this unusual flabby mass—adipocere—is found only in the chest and abdominal cavities, but it is readily recognized by physicians. Since this condition is quite rare, it is not deserving of further attention but is presented here simply as another condition under which a body may retain its existence. It must be noted that this substance was never reported in connection with the bodies of the Saints mentioned in this volume, and if the material were actually a part of the bodies but not recognized by medieval examiners of such relics, it could only have been found in a very few indeed, since its formation is a rarity.

Radiation has been suggested in recent years as the reason for the preservation of the large number of bodies found in Wasserburg Somersdorf Castle in Mittelfranken Province, Germany, where the mummies found were thought to be about 250 years of age. Strong traces of radioactivity were discovered in the tombs, which is credited with having arrested dissolution. The remains, however, appear to be little more than hair and fragments of flesh covering ghastly skeletal remains.

The Church of St. Antony in Pechersk (also known as Kievo-Pechersk), Russia, overlooks the Caves of St. Antony, which contain underground chapels in which several rooms were set aside for the tombs of some 40 monks who lived during the 11th century. Their withered skeletal bodies lie in half-opened coffins beneath sheets of glass. Only a small portion of their bodies can be seen since a purple veil covers their skulls, and their bodies are clothed in blue robes. Their preservation is attributed to the “special components of the limestone” in the caves.

A curious condition exists in the lead cellar of the Bremen Cathedral (Der Dom Zu Bremen) in West Germany. During the 18th century, a young man fell into the cellar and succumbed to the injuries he sustained. His body was discovered several years

later in an excellent state of preservation. Soon after the discovery, members of the German aristocracy requested burial there, and their mummified bodies can now be viewed in their opened caskets. The truly astounding factor of this burial place is that animals or fowl hung there are mummified in due time, the flesh becoming like leather, even though fresh air circulates freely through opened windows. Specialists from time to time perform experiments there, taking bits of flesh for analysis, but as yet the preserving qualities of the place are left unexplained, although radiation could be extended as a contributing agent.

Now that the reasons for the *natural* or *accidental* *preservations* have been briefly outlined, we will advance to the circumstances under which the incorruptibles have been discovered, the reasons favoring their conservations being, in almost all cases, completely unexplainable.

### III

The incorruptibles have been incorrectly classified as natural mummies, but as we have seen, the products of the deliberate and accidental preservations, without exception, have been not more than shriveled specimens, always rigid and extremely dry. Most of the incorruptibles, however, are neither dry nor rigid but quite moist and flexible, even after the passage of centuries. Moreover, their preservations have been accomplished under conditions that would naturally foster and encourage putrefaction, and they have survived circumstances that would have unquestionably necessitated and resulted in the destruction of the others.

As previously noted, if natural mummification is to be accomplished, the process must be done swiftly under ideal drying conditions before various susceptible areas of the body begin the natural processes of deterioration. Nevertheless, the burials of a number of incorruptibles were delayed due to the reluctance of the devout to be separated from the object of their veneration. The body of St. Bernardine of Siena was for this reason left exposed for 26 days and St. Angela Merici for 30 days. St. Theresa Margaret of the Sacred Heart was likewise exposed for 15 days and St. Antoninus for 8 days, to name only a few such postponements.

The deliberate and speedy destruction of the bodies of three Saints was intended when lime was placed in the caskets of St. Francis Xavier, St. John of the Cross and St. Pascal Baylon. In the first two cases the hasty destruction of the bodies was anticipated so that their pending translations could be more conveniently and hygienically undertaken by the transference of their bones rather than the removal of their half-decayed corpses. In the case of St. Pascal, the hasty destruction was hoped for so that no offensive odors would be detected by the many visitors to his shrine, a fact that might detract from the devotion lavished on his memory. In all three cases, the preservation triumphed. In fact, in the case of St. Francis Xavier, in spite of this initial treatment, various translations, the amputation of his members for relics and the rough handling, the body endured when forced into a grave too small to accommodate its normal length, it was yet so beautiful 142 years later that the best description we have of him was recorded at the time of that examination. The body of St. John of the Cross remains even to the present day perfectly flexible.

Moisture is the chief factor that encourages dissolution, yet many of the incorruptibles encountered this condition during their entombments, their preservations being inexplicably maintained in spite of it. We might consider the case of St. Catherine of Genoa, who remained in the grave for 18 months but was found perfectly spotless in spite of a damp and decayed shroud. St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi was disinterred one year after her death, at which time her religious clothing was found wet, although her body remained completely unaffected. St. Madeleine Sophie Barat remained perfectly preserved for 28 years although she was found in damp and mildewed garments in a casket that was in a state of advanced disintegration. Nine months after her death, St. Teresa of Avila was found in a coffin, the top of which had rotted away, permitting damp earth to cover her body. Although her remains were clothed in dirty and rotten fragments of fabric, her body was not only fresh and perfectly intact after its cleansing but also mysteriously fragrant as well.

Such was the excessive moisture in the vault of St. Charles Borromeo in the Cathedral of Milan that it caused the corrosion and rotting of his two coffin lids, causing dampness to penetrate to

the body. Considering that the body had been embalmed in the customary manner in vogue at that time, it seems quite likely that the less-Sainted remains of another would have been either completely destroyed or seriously harmed under similar conditions. As stipulated by the rules of her order, St. Catherine of Bologna was confined to the grave without benefit of a coffin, yet her body remained undamaged after 18 days. The remains of St. Pacifico of San Severino were similarly entombed for four years; nevertheless, his perfect preservation was maintained.

Fifty-six years following the death of St. Catherine Labouré, her body was found perfectly white and natural looking, even though her triple coffin had been affected in various ways by excessive moisture. So great was the amount of humidity that penetrated through cracks in the caskets that part of her habit faded onto her hand, as observed by the attending physicians. The winding sheet was also found permeated with excessive dampness. The body of St. Catherine of Siena also endured abuses from dampness but was found unaffected after it had been placed in a cemetery where Bl. Raymond of Capua found that, "it was much exposed to the rain." Her burial garments were said to have suffered severely from the dampness.

Of the many Saintly relics that survived the expected ravages of moisture during their entombments, perhaps the most outstanding is the case of Saint Charbel Makhlof, who was consigned to the grave without a coffin, as recommended by the rule of his religious order. His body was found floating in mud in a flooded grave during his exhumation, conducted four months after his death—a span of time sufficient to allow at least its partial destruction. His body, which has remained perfectly lifelike and flexible for more than 70 years, constantly emits a bloodlike fluid, which has been acknowledged as truly prodigious.

The bodies of three Saints endured unusual conditions: that of burial in air, in water and in a bloody, mutilated condition. The preservation of the body of St. Coloman is quite noteworthy since his body remained suspended from the tree from which he was hanged for such a lengthy period that it was acknowledged by the townspeople as nothing less than miraculous. It must be noted that decomposition of a body exposed to air is eight times more

rapid than of those consigned to a tomb because of the activity of the microorganisms in the air.<sup>4</sup>

After the martyrdom of St. Josaphat, his body was thrown into a nearby river where it remained for almost a week. Upon being retrieved, it was found to have suffered no ill effects and was consigned to a grave, where it was again found undamaged five years later although the place was excessively damp, causing the deterioration of his vestments.

One of the most amazing preservations is that of St. Andrew Bobola. Prior to his martyrdom, he was partially flayed alive, his hands were hacked off and his tongue was torn from his head. Splinters of wood were driven under his fingernails, and his face sustained such mutilations that he was scarcely recognizable. After hours of further tortures and mutilations, he was dispatched by a sword's blow to the neck. His body was hastily buried by Catholics in a vault beneath the Jesuit church at Pinsk, where it was found 40 years later perfectly preserved, in spite of the open wounds, which would normally foster corruption. Although his grave had been damp, causing his vestments to rot, and in spite of the proximity of decaying corpses, his body was perfectly flexible, his flesh and muscles soft to the touch and the blood that covered the numerous wounds was found to be as if freshly congealed. The preservation was officially recognized by the Congregation of Rites in 1835. Even though the relic was roughly handled during its numerous translations, the body remains after more than 300 years in a marvelous state of preservation.

Who can explain the reasons for this strange dispensation, which affects so many holy persons who, moreover, represent many nations and who lived in various environmental conditions? Who can explain why these holy relics remained unharmed although buried under diverse situations and frequently in tombs in which the previous occupants had complied with natural laws? Further, who can account for the mysterious exudations of clear, sweet smelling oils that flowed at one time or another from most of these relics to the perplexity of examining physicians?

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4 Ibid., 284–85.

Apart from mysterious perfumes, the transpiration of this unusual liquid is the most frequently reported phenomenon. It has been recorded, to mention only a few of the Saints so favored, in the cases of St. Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, St. Julie Billiart, St. Hugh of Lincoln, St. Agnes of Montepulciano, St. Teresa of Avila, St. Camillus de Lellis and St. Pascal Baylon. The oil that flowed at various times throughout the centuries from the body of Blessed Matthia Nazzarei of Matelica, who died in 1320, has been flowing continuously from her hands and feet since the year 1920. The phenomenal conservation of Saint Charbel Makhlouf is continually attended by a perspiration of water and blood, which has flowed since its appearance four months after his death in 1898. In Toledo, Spain, the body of the Venerable Mother Maria of Jesus, a companion of the great St. Teresa of Avila, exudes a perfume described as that of roses and jasmines and additionally transpires an oil that continues to flow in our day. As early as the 8th century, St. John Damascene recognized this phenomenon when he wrote, "Christ gives us the relics of saints as health-giving springs through which flow blessings and healing. This should not be doubted. For if at God's word water gushed from hard rock in the wilderness—yes, and from an ass's jawbone when Samson was thirsty—why should it seem incredible that healing medicine should distill from the relics of saints?" Similar exudations have never been reported with regard to the deliberately or the naturally preserved, nor have they been explained by scientific observers.

The odor of sanctity, which was perceived and depose by witnesses of unquestionable integrity, is so frequently recorded as to be almost taken for granted.<sup>5</sup> The observers at the exhumation of St. Albert the Great, which was conducted 200 years after his death, were greatly astonished on detecting a heavenly perfume, which proceeded from the Saint's relics. The body of St. John of

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5 The phrase "died in the odor of sanctity" is found in countless biographies of the Saints and beati, and whereas it is normally used in a figurative sense to denote "dying a Saintly death," the expression has a foundation in fact, as the reader will come to understand as he progresses through the book. Consequently, the term "the odor of sanctity" is used in a literal sense in this work since the research presented here justifies this usage.

the Cross was fragrant many years after his death, and the body of Blessed Angelo of Borgo San Sepolcro was still sweet smelling 276 years after his passing. The mysterious fragrance that was noted about the body of St. Teresa Margaret of the Sacred Heart was found to have attached itself to all the objects she had used during her life. Similarly, the sweetness about the body of St. Lucy of Narni was noticed to cling to objects reverently touched to the relic during its exposition four years after her death. The scent that was often noticed about the body of St. Teresa of Avila during her lifetime was also noticed during the many exhumations and translations of her body and was last observed by the sisters of her convent at Alba de Tormes during the last exhumation of the body in 1914, more than 330 years after her death. The body of St. Rita of Cascia is also still fragrant after more than 500 years. The perfume that was noted about the body of St. Vincent Pallotti at the time of his death continued to linger in the room in which he died for one month following his death, in spite of an open window. The same is likewise the case with St. John of God, except that the fragrance that lingered in the death chamber for many days following his passing was renewed there for many years on each Saturday, the day on which his death occurred.

As previously considered, the bodies of natural mummies are hard and rigid. By way of contrast, we must observe that many, if not most, of the incorruptibles never experienced cadaveric rigidity and were flexible for many years after their deaths, many remaining flexible after the lapse of centuries. This departure from the general norm was observed in the cases of Bl. Alphonso de Orozco, whose body was flexible 12 years after his death, St. Andrew Bobola for 40 years and St. Catherine Labouré for 57 years. St. Catherine of Bologna's body was so flexible 12 years after her passing that it was placed in the sitting position in which she is still viewed. The body of Blessed Eustochia Calafato was also placed in that same position 150 years after her death. The body of St. John of the Cross, who died in 1591, is still perfectly supple as is also the body of St. Clare of Montefalco. This phenomenon is very common and will be mentioned in the chapters covering the particular Saints whose bodies were thus exempt from the natural law.

Another condition that defies explanation is the flow of fresh blood that proceeded from a number of these bodies many years after death. This prodigy is carefully analyzed in Fr. Herbert Thurston's *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, in which the reader may find interesting details. This spectacle was observed 80 years after the death of St. Hugh of Lincoln, when the head separated from the neck. Nine months after the death of St. John of the Cross, fresh blood flowed from the wound resulting from an amputated finger. During the solemn exhibition of the body of St. Bernardine of Siena, which lasted 26 days following his death, a quantity of bright red blood issued from his nose on day 24, as observed and recorded by St. John Capistran. During the medical examination of the body of St. Francis Xavier one and a half years after his death, one of the physicians inserted his finger into a wound on the body and withdrew from it blood, which was declared to be "fresh and untainted." The mortal wound on the forehead of St. Josaphat bled 27 years following his death. Forty-three years following the passing of St. Germaine de Pibrac, while workmen were preparing the tomb for another occupant, a tool used by them slipped and injured the nose of the corpse; the discovery of the young girl's perfectly preserved and flexible body, coupled with the miraculous flow of blood that came from the wound, set into motion the events that culminated in her canonization. And finally, 40 years after the death of St. Nicholas of Tolentino, a lay brother secretly detached the arms of the relic. He was ultimately caught and properly reprimanded when a copious flow of blood signaled the sacrilegious act. The two arms were seen to effuse blood on many occasions during the next 400 years, an occurrence that was accepted as miraculous by Pope Benedict XIV.

Although having nothing to contribute to the preservation of these relics, the appearance of light about the bodies and tombs of some of these Saints signaled, as it were, their heavenly endowment. The sanctity of St. Guthlac was affirmed by the many witnesses who saw the house wherein he died enveloped with a bright light, which proceeded from there into the heavens. The perfume that proceeded from the mouth of St. Louis Bertrand on his deathbed was accompanied by an intense light that brightened his humble cell for several minutes. Many other Saints were favored with this

illumination, including St. John of the Cross, St. Anthony of Stroncone and St. Jeanne de Lestonnac. Perhaps the most astounding manifestation occurred at the tomb of Saint Charbel Makhlof. The light that glowed brightly for 45 nights at his tomb was witnessed by many villagers and eventually resulted in the exhumation of his body, disclosing phenomena that are still observed.

*Even the most persistent and confirmed rationalist must admit, when confronted with these witnessed and avowed marvels, that the incorruptibles cannot be classified with the other preservations, but are, in reality, a unique and exclusive fraternity.*

The incorruptibles, for the most part, were never embalmed or treated in any manner. The few bodies that were deliberately conditioned will be mentioned when their cases are studied individually. Many of the religious orders of which these Saints were members strictly believed and maintained that the natural process of dust returning to its kind should be undertaken without chemical interference. This perhaps accounts for the large percentage of these relics that were unembalmed.

Rarely in these biographies will mention be made of the cause of death since in most instances only vague symptoms were recorded in ancient and medieval records. Some would believe that such maladies might furnish some insight into their preservations; however, we can safely assume that the incorruptibles' final illnesses were nothing unique, but those of a spectrum of infirmities from which millions of others suffered, died and were buried—never to be seen again.

Pope Benedict XIV included two lengthy chapters entitled *De Cadaverum Incorruptione* in his great work on the beatification and canonization of Saints. In these chapters he outlined the Church's position with regard to such preservations. The Pope ruled that the bodies of Saintly persons that are found intact, but disintegrated after a few years, could not be considered *miraculous* preservations. The only conservations he was willing to consider extraordinary are those that retain their lifelike flexibility, color and freshness, without deliberate intervention, for many years following their deaths. These requirements are, of course, magnificently met by most of the incorruptibles included in this volume. That Pope's opinion concerning this phenomenon and the Church's present

position is that the Church is reluctant to accept the incorruption of the body of a candidate for Sainthood as a miracle supporting proof of his sanctity. Several exceptions have been made, one of which was the preservation of the body of St. Andrew Bobola. Debated by successive Promoters of the Faith and the Postulators of his Cause in both 1739 and 1830, the condition of the body, though mutilated because of the wounds inflicted during his martyrdom, was ultimately accepted by the Congregation of Rites as one of the miracles required for his beatification.

The cause of beatification was well under way in most cases before the tombs were opened for the necessary recognition of the relics, as required by the Sacred Congregation of Rites, the discovery of the preservations contributing only further distinction to their candidacies. The dissolution of some of the relics had no detracting effect whatsoever on their causes, as evidenced by the large number of canonized Saints and the relatively small percentage of incorruptibles.

In the individual, present-day descriptions of these relics, it is often reported that their skin is dry or like parchment. This expected condition resulted *after* the bodies were inexplicably moist and lifelike for many years, sometimes for centuries. The darkened condition of some of these specimens can be considered a minor blemish, for we must recall that these relics were continually exposed to the organisms in the air after their disinterment, were additionally subjected to extensive handling during their numerous translations and endured in the process sudden changes in temperature and humidity. When we examine the paintings whose origins date from the times of these Saints and inspect their surfaces, which time has minutely etched, it seems quite extraordinary that human flesh, so vulnerable to temptation and susceptible to decay, should have survived the initially hazardous circumstances of the tomb, of many scientific examinations and of years of exposition, without special care or treatment of any nature. In spite of the darkness or dryness of some of these relics, it must be noted that well-conserved hearts and other relics were extracted from them without damage, and many of the bodies retained their flexibility in spite of their dry outer flesh.

Various arguments will be presented by the skeptics in an attempt to rationalize these preservations. Perhaps the most frequently forwarded will be that of radioactivity. As explored

previously, in the cases where this unseen condition was extended as a cause of preservation, many preserved bodies were found in each such place. With regard to the incorruptibles, only single cases were recorded, and in most instances, the tombs involved had been used previously with normal and expected results. It would seem unlikely for one grave to contain this cosmic element while others immediately adjacent remained unaffected.

One conjecture is that “ascetical diets” and abstinence from foods that would contribute to rapid putrefaction (whichever these may be) aided in these conservations. However, the phenomenon of incorruption was never recorded among victims of famines or in regions where, because of extreme poverty, the inhabitants lived on very “ascetical diets.”

The most mercenary of skeptics will argue that such conservations are nothing more than hoaxes perpetrated by the votaries at the shrines or by the religious orders. This opinion is strongly disputed, for when one considers that the members of the religious orders have always striven by a devotion to prayer and the performance of penances for a greater degree of perfection and have withdrawn themselves from the pleasures and comforts of the world to advance in the way of virtue, it would constitute an outrageous discourtesy to accuse them of participating in a deception of any nature. Furthermore, the relics periodically undergo scientific and medical examination, and many are exposed in public shrines and churches for the admiration and examination of visitors.

Those who would question the propriety of exhibiting such relics and criticize those who pay them respect must recall that the tombs of great personages have always been visited. The Russians feel fortunate in visiting and viewing the carefully embalmed body of Nikolai Lenin, which is exposed in the Lenin Mausoleum in Red Square. The body of Joseph Stalin was similarly glass-encased in the same mausoleum from the time of his death in 1953 until 1961 when, during the de-Stalinization program, his body was removed from its position of honor and placed in a plot of ground behind the Lenin shrine.

The presence or absence of faith will undoubtedly determine the viewpoint with which one would accept this phenomenon of incorruption. For those who habitually search for a natural or socioeconomic explanation for everything, there are no arguments

that will suffice to satisfy their doubts; therefore, this material is presented to those open-minded readers who would consider the factors involved with patient and respectful consideration.

For those of us who have admired and loved certain of these Saints, it is a comfort of sorts to know that they are not just somewhere in the great realms beyond, but that their actual bodies, which will one day be made glorious, are still present among us. Catholics are privileged, indeed, not only to have these unique relics, but also to be able to look upon the very faces of these religious paragons who fought a good fight, who finished the course of life in a most edifying manner and who kept and practiced the Faith to an heroic degree.

Now that the subject of the preservation of human bodies both Sainly and otherwise has been, it is hoped, adequately if not briefly introduced, it is an honor to present the incorruptibles.

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## SAINT CECILIA

Unknown—177

History indicates that the first Saint whose body experienced the phenomenon of incorruption is St. Cecilia, the patroness of musicians. The year of her birth is unknown, but it is believed she died about AD 177. Cecilia was a member of a rich and distinguished Roman family, who gave her in marriage to a young nobleman named Valerian, despite her desire to remain a virgin. On their wedding night Cecilia was successful in persuading the new groom to respect her vow of virginity and later converted him to the Faith when he was favored with a vision of Cecilia's guardian Angel. Valerian and his brother, Tiburtius, who was also converted by Cecilia, were later called upon by the early Christian persecutors to renounce their religion. When both heroically refused, they were beheaded and buried along the Appian Way. Cecilia was arrested for having buried their bodies and for this "crime" was given the choice of sacrificing to the heathen gods or being put to death. She steadfastly affirmed her faith and chose to die rather than renounce it.

Because of her nobility and youth, her captors decided to execute her in secrecy to avoid the expected criticism of the people. She was subsequently confined to the vapor bath of her home to die of suffocation. She remained a whole day and night in that stifling environment, yet remained unharmed. An experienced executioner was then sent to behead her, but due to a loss of courage at having to kill such a young and beautiful woman, he failed to sever her head with the three blows prescribed by

## 2 *The Incorruptibles*

law. He ultimately fled, leaving the Saint on the pavement of her bath, alive and fully conscious, with her head half severed. She was lying on her right side, her hands crossed in prayer before her. She turned her face to the floor and remained praying in that position for three days and nights. The position of her fingers, three extended on her right hand and one on the left, were her final silent profession of faith in the Holy Trinity.

The early Christians clothed the body of the martyr in rich robes of silk and gold and placed it in a cypress coffin in the same position in which she had expired. At her feet were placed the linen cloths and veils that were used to collect her blood. She was laid to rest in the Catacomb of St. Callistus by the future Pope Urban, who had baptized her husband and brother-in-law.

In the year 822, during the time of the restoration of the church dedicated to her memory, Pope Pascal I wished to transfer the remains of the Saint to a place of honor in her cathedral but could not locate her grave. The Saint appeared to him in a remarkable vision while he was at prayer and told him of the location of her body. The relic was found in exactly the place indicated. The Pope then had the body, along with the bones of her husband, her brother-in-law and the martyr Maximum, placed below the altar of the church.

Seven hundred seventy-seven years later, one of the most documented exhumations of any Saint's body occurred in 1599, when Cardinal Sfondrato ordered the restoration of some parts of the basilica. On October 20 of that year, during the course of work being done under and near the high altar, two white marble sarcophagi were discovered, which corresponded with the description left by Pascal I of the caskets containing the relics of the holy martyrs. The Cardinal had the sarcophagi opened in the presence of witnesses of unquestionable integrity. After the marble covering was removed, the original cypress casket was found in a good state of preservation. The Cardinal, with understandable emotion, raised the lid, exposing to view the treasure that had been confided to the grave by Popes Urban and Pascal. The mortal remains were found in the same position in which the Saint had died almost 1,500 years before. Through a silk veil that modestly

covered the body could be seen the gold-embroidered dress of the Saint, the mortal wound in the neck and the blood-stained clothes. Pope Clement VIII was informed at once of the discovery but was unable to visit the tomb immediately because of a severe attack of the gout but sent instead Cardinal Baronius, who together with Antonio Bosio, the explorer of subterranean Rome, left us priceless descriptive documents relating to the events of this exhumation.

Peering through the ancient veil that covered the body, they noted that Cecilia was of small stature and that her head was turned downward, but due to a “holy reverence,” no further examination was made. Bosio recorded his opinion that the Saint was found in the same position in which she had expired.<sup>1</sup>

Cardinal Sfondrato wished to retain as a memorial of this touching event a small piece of the blood-stained linen, and he distributed tiny pieces of this cloth to many cardinals in Rome. But upon inspecting the last piece, which he had reserved for himself, he discovered adhering to it a small fragment of the Saint’s bone, which had been dislodged by the sword and which an early Christian had unknowingly picked up with the cloth while staunching the wound of the holy martyr. Sfondrato preserved this relic as a dear and priceless treasure and placed it and the skulls of SS. Valerian, Tiburtius and Maximum in separate reliquaries for exposition.<sup>2</sup>

The Cardinal also wished to retain a small piece of the Saint’s dress and while engaged in securing this, he felt under the virgin’s clothing the cords and knots of a hair shirt.<sup>3</sup>

The casket of the Saint was placed in a hall located at the upper extremity of a nave of the basilica where it could be seen through a grated window. The platform and casket were covered with gold-embroidered silk drapery, and the room was magnificently

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1 Ludwig von Pastor, *The History of the Popes—Drawn from the Secret Archives of the Vatican and other Original Sources*, vol. XXIV (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1933), 521.

2 Ibid., 522.

3 Rev. Prosper Guéranger, Abbé de Solesmes, *Life of Saint Cecilia, Virgin and Martyr* (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons), 283.

decorated with candelabras, handsome lamps and flowers of silver and gold. The sanctuary was further enhanced by a mysterious and delightful flowerlike odor that proceeded from the coffin.<sup>4</sup>

On the orders of Pope Clement VIII, the relic was left exposed there until the feast of St. Cecilia, November 22, and so great was the outpouring of the Roman faithful who converged on the basilica to view the body that the Pontifical Swiss Guards were called upon to maintain order.<sup>5</sup>

At the end of the one-month period of exposition, the relic, still reposing in the ancient cypress casket, was placed in a silver coffin that had been commissioned by the Pope himself as a symbol of his veneration for the holy martyr. In the presence of 42 cardinals and diplomatic representatives from several countries, the Pope celebrated the Solemn High Mass during which the body of the Saint was again interred beneath the main altar.

A sculptor of unusual talents, Stefano Maderno (1576–1636), who it appears was engaged in performing his trade during the restoration of the Basilica, executed a statue of the Saint, which is reputed to be one of the most celebrated and best-known Italian works of art and is believed to represent the Saint in the exact posture of her body. This statue is found immediately in front of the high altar in a niche of black marble, which was designed by Maderno to give the appearance of an open sarcophagus. Doing so, Maderno introduced a new altar design, which was frequently imitated.<sup>6</sup>

The Basilica of St. Cecilia is believed to have been built on the site of St. Cecilia's family mansion. The second chapel, on the right aisle, is called the Caldarium and is the room where St. Cecilia was condemned to death. Here are found the remains of an ancient Roman bathroom; the conduits are preserved, which formerly contained the water that was heated in the lower room. The marble slab on the altar is the one on which Cecilia is believed to have survived the first martyrdom by suffocation and very well may be the slab that marked the place of her death.

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4 *Ibid.*, 284.

5 von Pastor, *op. cit.*, 523.

6 *Ibid.*, 525.



A statue of Saint Cecilia (d. 177) executed by Stefano Maderno in 1599 at the time of the second exhumation of her incorrupt body. The position is the same as that of the relic and is believed to be the position in which she expired. Note the wound in the neck. The statue is located in the Basilica of Saint Cecilia in Rome.