

THE HOLY DEAD: SAINTS AS SANCTUARIES

Joe Ricke on Physicality and Spirituality

I have a thing about saints and such. During my purgatorial passage through more “spiritual” churches (after a Catholic childhood and before my return in recent years), I remember all the critical hubbub about praying to saints and venerating saints and whatever else those erring Roaming Catholics did to, with, by, and for saints.

Even in those years, my religious practices were more than a little suspect. I wore my Our Lady of Guadalupe tee shirt when playing gigs. I kissed the base of a statue of the virgin which Joan of Arc had once kissed (In case you wonder, that officially qualifies as a “third-class relic” in the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Incorporated). I’m pretty sure I kissed some other rocks and dirt near some holy places on the off chance that the holy dead may have touched them too. I twice took the little-known pilgrim road from Texas to Kentucky and sneaked into the cemetery at Gethsemani to share a beer and the numinous cold with the rotting Brother Louis (Thomas Merton) on New Year’s Eve. And I love cemeteries.

When I walked the Camino de Santiago in Spain, I made sure, whenever possible, to take part in the festivities of any local saint being celebrated by the locals

with a mass, fiesta, fireworks, processions, running of brother bulls, or some combination thereof. At Santiago, in the cathedral, I hugged the image of Saint James himself, who admittedly may never have been to Spain. Then I left a relic of my own, the bandana my sister gave me for the journey, at his shrine. At Canterbury, I knelt where the martyred Archbishop, Saint Thomas Becket, died, although his blood and bones, according to the authoritative claims of his enemy, Henry the Fat, had long since been scattered.

In Germany, I created my own pilgrimage of houses, schools, churches, secret seaside seminaries, concentration camps, and execution sites once touched and now forever hallowed by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In Alabama, I have driven a hundred miles out of my way, several times, to touch the door of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery where Dr. King preached just a block away from where Governor Wallace held what felt to him like power in the Alabama State Capitol. And in Memphis, my daughter and I stood outside the door of Room 306, where a martyr was made on April 4, 1968.

Of course, one can admire and learn from holy people, saints and such (whether officially canonized or not), even if you are not standing on the holy ground once blessed by their presence and shoes (or their bare bloody feet in the case of St. Francis). Admiring and learning, we ponder their relevance to our lives as role models. Something worth doing, no doubt.

But that's not what I'm talking about. Because presence is presence, feet are feet, and saints, no matter how holy, are not now and never have been made of gas or even ideas. Even though some of them wrote of so-

called spiritual things in that way, I forgive them. Still, I must admit I tend to tune them out when they get too Platonic.

Late Medieval Christianity, to which I feel increasingly attached, obviously cared about the *vitae*, the lives (or stories of the lives) of saints, and the teachings of saints, but it also cared a great deal (some would say, *perhaps many of you would say*, an inordinate amount) about the bodies of these spiritual giants. Their blood, their bones, their hair, their organs, their skin . . . Just let me know when this starts creeping you out because then I will know I've made my point well.

Spirituality is not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about religion. The hem of his garment. The spittle and mud in the eyes. The stigmata. Even the tomb where the body which rots for long centuries will, according to the original hot-gospelers, rise again on that day when even those we now venerate as *practically* perfect will finally be made whole, no longer just super spiritual, but wholly holy.

I suppose some of my readers know, but, in truth, even lifelong Catholics sometimes forget, that a sacralized place, one recognized as a place where heaven comes down to humanity in the form of the sacraments and the sacramental-ish (via bread, wine, oil, water, rings, and even – once, the aforementioned spittle) is set off from other places, at least in part, by the presence of the relics of saints. Since the Second Council of Nicea (787 A.D.), it has been required that the main altar of a Catholic church *must* contain relics. No body parts (or the like), no sanctuary. That's the rule. The wording from the Council made it clear that such had already been the practice of the Holy Church but that they simply wanted

to make sure it was maintained. So, they just threw in the threat of excommunication as a little extra incentive.

I once wrote a scholarly paper (presented at Canterbury!) about literary representations of St. Thomas Becket of Canterbury. Although his story is both interesting and inspirational, I argued in the paper that Chaucer's four-line reference to Thomas in his *Canterbury Tales* captured the saint's importance *as saint* better than two modern biographical dramas -- T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and Jean Anouilh's *Becket* (1959). My point was that it presented the saint himself as the site of pilgrimage, as a sort of holy place -- one of many "ferne halwes" -- to which palmers (praying folk) and pilgrims desire to go ("longe to goone").

And specially, from every shires ende

Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende
[travel]

The hooly blisful martir for to seke, [seek]

That hem hath holpen [helped] whan that
they were seeke. [sick]¹

That's pretty much Chaucer's entire version, but it cuts to the heart of St. Thomas's importance for medieval pilgrims. He is the goal of pilgrimage, the site of veneration. The reason for traveling on, so to speak. His resistance to the powers was admirable, of course. But folks could stay home and hear that story. What drew

¹ Geoffrey Chaucer, "The General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales," in *The Norton Chaucer*, ed. David Lawton (New York: Norton, 2019), 77, lines 13-18.

them was his presence -- the place where he lived, struggled, died, and decayed to the glory of God.

One of the Acts of Mercy, after all, is caring for the dead. Reverence for the dead, a sense of our obligation to them, unites us with them in a bond that will last until doomsday and beyond. Cemeteries are holy places, and those who experience numinous awe there are well-adjusted human beings not freaks (*he insists, still trying to convince himself*). How much more the place where living saints lived and dead saints rest?

For those who have forgotten (what I refuse to believe folks haven't read), Dante's punishment in the Seventh Circle of Hell for those who threw away their bodies on earth is to live eternally *even in hell* as incomplete human beings, body and soul never quite incorporating even after the resurrection of the dead.² Human persons have bodies. Unless they don't, in which case they are incomplete. Likewise, a saint without her body is incomplete, perfected in only a relative way. Saints long, as we do, for the culmination of all things, when all good gifts, including bodies, will be restored.

That little side trip through hell and heaven was all to say this: we can't make a sanctuary by merely invoking the presence of the Spirit. Although we should do that. There is something human, something . . . animal, buried deep in the altar of a church, something reminding us of the physicality of our creaturehood, the permeability and vulnerability of our lives and even of the lives of the holiest among us. It is no coincidence that something as

² Dante, "Canto XIII," in *The Divine Comedy*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: New American Library, 1954), 104-111.

fundamental as a tomb becomes the consecrated table of the Body of Christ.

Of course, the world is literally crowded with divine reality and energy (how many angels, right now, are sitting on the point of my pen?). It is, as Father Hopkins wrote, “charged with the grandeur of God.”³ We need not, however, think of all this as “spiritual” reality. This divinized world is crammed, too, with the physical remainder and reminder of the holy dead who have gone before, in whose steps we follow, whose blood and bones we honor, whose stories and teachings live on, and whose decaying bodies – and the sites where they lived, moved, and suffered – sanctify the world.

³ Fr. Gerard Manley Hopkins, S. J., “God’s Grandeur,” in *The Gospel in Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selections from His Poems, Letters, Journals, and Spiritual Writings*, ed. Margaret R. Ellsberg (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2017), 98, line 1.

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