

St. Justin Popovich: On Holy Relics in the Orthodox Church



Fr. Justin Popovich (1894-1979)

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The Place of Holy Relics in the Orthodox Church

by St. Justin Popovich

Without doubt, matter is represented in the human body in a manner which is most puzzling, most mysterious, and most complex. The brain: What wondrous mysteries pass between its physical and spiritual parts! How vast is the experience of the human race. In no manner can one ever fully comprehend or grasp these mysteries. Indeed, little of this is accessible to the human senses or intellectual investigation. So it is also with the heart of man, formed as it is entirely and solely from cosmic mysteries. So formed, too, are every cell, every molecule, every atom.

Everyone and all are set on their mystical path toward God, toward the God-Man. Inasmuch as it was created by God, the Logos, matter possesses this same theocentricity. Moreover, by His advent into our earthly world, by His all-embracing condescension as God and Man for the redemption of the world, the Lord Christ clearly demonstrated that not only the soul, but matter also was created by God and for God, and that He is God and Man; and for it, matter, He is all and everything in the same manner as for the soul. Being created by God, the Logos, matter is, in its innermost core, God-longing and Christ-longing.

The most obvious proof of this is the fact that God the Word has become Incarnate, has become man (St. John 1:14). By His Incarnation, matter has been magnified with Divine glory and has entered into the grace- and virtue-bestowing, ascetic aim of deification, or union with Christ. God has become flesh, has become human, so that the entire man, the entire body, might be filled with God and with His miracle-working forces and powers. In the God-Man, the Lord Christ, and His Body, all matter has been set on a path toward Christ—the path of deification, transfiguration, sanctification, resurrection, and ascent to an eternal glory surpassing that of the Cherubim. And all of this takes place and will continue to take place through the Divine and human Body of the Church, which is truly the God-Man Christ in the total fullness of His Divine and Human Person, the fullness "that fills all in all" (Ephesians 1:23). Through its Divine and human existence in the Church, the human body, as matter, as substance, is sanctified by the Holy Spirit and in this way participates in the life of the Trinity. Matter thus attains its transcendent, divine meaning and goal, its eternal blessedness and its immortal joy in the God-Man.

The holiness of the Saints—both the holiness of their souls and of their bodies—derives from their zealous grace- and virtue-bestowing lives in the Body of the Church of Christ, of the God-Man. In this sense, holiness completely envelopes the human person—the entire soul and body and all that enters into the mystical composition of the human body. The holiness

of the Saints does not hold forth only in their souls, but it necessarily extends to their bodies; so it is that both the body and the soul of a saint are sanctified. Thus we, in piously venerating the Saints, also venerate the entire person, in this manner not separating the holy soul from the holy body. Our pious veneration of the Saints' relics is a natural part of our pious respect for and prayerful entreaty to the Saints. All of this constitutes one indivisible ascetic act, just as the soul and body constitute the single, indivisible person of the Saint. Clearly, during his life on the earth, the Saint, by a continuous and singular grace- and virtue-bestowing synergy of soul and body, attains to the sanctification of his person, filling both the soul and body with the grace of the Holy Spirit and so transforming them into vessels of the holy mysteries and holy virtues. It is completely natural, again, to show pious reverence both to the former and to the latter, both to soul and body, both of them holy vessels of God's grace. When the charismatic power of Christ issues forth, it makes Grace-filled all the constituent parts of the human person and the person in his entirety. By unceasing enactment of the ascetic efforts set forth in the Gospels, Saints gradually fill themselves with the Holy Spirit, so that their sacred bodies, according to the word of the holy Apostle, become temples of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 6:19; 3:17), Christ dwelling by faith in their hearts (Ephesians 3:17) and by fruitful love also fulfilling the commandments of God the Father. Establishing themselves in the Holy Spirit through grace-bestowing ascetic labors, the Saints participate in the life of the Trinity, becoming sons of the Holy Trinity, temples of the Living God (II Corinthians 6:16); their whole lives thus flow from the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. By piously venerating the holy relics of the Saints, the Church reveres them as temples of the Holy Spirit, temples of the Living God, in which God dwells by Grace even after the earthly death of the Saints. And by His most wise and good Will, God creates miracles in and through these relics. Moreover, the miracles which derive from the holy relics witness also to the fact that their pious veneration by the people is pleasing to God.

The pious veneration of holy relics, based on their miraculous nature, originated from Divine Revelation. Even in the Old Testament God deigned to celebrate with miracles the holy relics of certain of those who were well-pleasing to Him. Thus, by the touch of the holy relics of the Prophet Elisea, a dead man was resurrected. The tomb and bones of this Prophet, who had prophesied to Jeroboam the destruction of idolatrous altars, were greatly revered in Judea. The Patriarch Joseph also left a testament to the sons of Israel to preserve his bones in Egypt and, during their exodus, to carry them to the promised land (Genesis 50:25).

The New Testament raised the human body to the sublime and divine heights, endowing it with a glory which the Cherubim and Seraphim do not possess. The Good News of the New Testament concerning the body—the significance and goal of the human body—is that, together with the soul, it achieves and inherits immortal life in Divine eternity. The Lord Christ has come to deify, to make Christ-like, the entire man, that is, the soul and body, and this by the resurrection, insuring thereby victory over death and eternal life. No one ever elevated the human body as did the Lord Christ by His bodily resurrection, the ascension of His body into heaven, and its eternal session at the right hand of God the Father. In this way, the Resurrected Christ extended the promise of resurrection to the nature of the human body—"having made for all flesh a path to eternal life." Thus man now knows that the body is created for eternity through union with the God-Man and that his divine work on earth is to struggle, with the soul, for eternal life; to struggle, with all those means that convey grace and virtue, to make himself grace-filled, fulfilled by Divine grace, and created anew as the temple of the Holy Spirit, the temple of the Living God.

Bearing in mind that this New Testamental notion of the human body has been achieved and realized in the persons of the Saints, Christians show a pious veneration for the bodies of the Saints, towards holy relics, the temples of the Holy Spirit, Who by God's grace abides within them. But

Holy Revelation indicates that by God's immeasurable love for man, the Holy Spirit abides through His grace not only in the bodies of the Saints, but also in their clothing. So it is that the handkerchiefs of the holy apostle Paul healed the ill and expelled unclean spirits (Acts 19:12). With his mantle the Prophet Elias struck the water, separating the waters of the Jordan, and along the dry bed of the river crossed the Jordan with his disciple Elisea (IV Kings 2:8). The prophet Elisea did the very same thing, himself, with the same mantle, after the taking-up of Elias into heaven (IV Kings 2:14). All this has its verification and source in the Divine power that rested in the garments of the Savior, which encompassed His most pure and Divine body. Moreover, by His inexpressible love for man, the Divine Lord allows the servants of His Divinity to work miracles not only through their bodies and clothing, but even with the shadow of their bodies, which is evident in an occurrence with the holy apostle Peter: his shadow healed an ill man and expelled unclean spirits (Acts 5:15-16).

The eternal good news of Holy Revelation about sacred relics and their pious veneration is proved, and is continually being proved, by Holy Tradition from Apostolic times to the present day. Innumerable are the sacred relics of the holy Chosen Ones of God throughout the Orthodox world. Their miracles are innumerable. The pious veneration of these relics by Orthodox Christians is everywhere to be found. And without doubt this is because the holy relics, through their miracles, incite the Orthodox toward their pious veneration. From the very beginning, in Apostolic times, Christians piously preserved the honored relics of the Holy Forerunner and the holy Apostles, so that these could be preserved even for us. As well, during the times of persecution the sacred remains of the bodies of the holy Martyrs were taken away by Christians and hidden in their homes. From that time until now, the sacred relics of the holy Chosen Ones of God have, by their miracles, poured forth the immortal joy of our faith into the hearts of Orthodox Christians. The proofs concerning this are countless. We shall cite only several.

The way that the holy relics of the Saints were translated and greeted is in a touching manner described by St. Chrysostomos in a eulogy on St. Ignatios: "You, inhabitants of Antioch, have sent forth a bishop and received a martyr; you sent him forth with prayers, and received him back with crowns; and not only you, but all the cities which lay between. For how do you think that they behaved when they saw his remains being brought back? What pleasure was produced! How they rejoiced! With what laudations on all sides did they beset the crowned one! For as with a noble athlete, who has wrestled down all his antagonists, and who comes forth with radiant glory from the arena, the spectators receive him, and do not suffer him to tread the earth, bringing him home on their shoulders and according him countless praises. So also every city in turn received this Saint from Rome, and bearing him upon their shoulders as far as this city, escorted the crowned one with praises, hymning the champion.... At this time the holy Martyr bestows grace to the very same cities, establishing them in piety, and from that time to this day he enriches this city."

Speaking of the miraculous power of holy relics, Saint Ephraim the Syrian relates the following concerning the holy Martyrs: "Even after death they act as if alive, healing the sick, expelling demons, and by the power of the Lord rejecting every evil influence of the demons. This is because the miraculous grace of the Holy Spirit is always present in the holy relics." During the finding of the relics of Saints Gervasius and Protasius, St. Ambrose, in speaking to his listeners, relates this with pious enthusiasm: "You know—indeed, you have yourselves seen—that many are cleansed from evil spirits, that very many also, having touched with their hands the robe of the Saints, are freed from those ailments which oppressed them. You see that the miracles of old times are renewed, when through the coming of the Lord Jesus grace was more abundantly shed forth upon the earth, and that many bodies are healed as it were by the shadow of the holy bodies. How many napkins are passed about! How many garments, laid upon the holy relics and endowed with the power of healing, are claimed!

All are glad to touch even the outside thread, and whosoever touches it will be made whole."

Speaking of the miracles produced by holy relics, the blessed Augustine says: "To what do these miracles witness, but to this faith which preaches Christ risen in the flesh and ascended with the same flesh into heaven? For the martyrs themselves were martyrs, that is to say, were witnesses of this faith.... For this faith they gave their lives, and can now ask these benefits from the Lord in whose name they were slain. For this faith their extraordinary constancy was exercised, so that in these miracles great power was manifested as the result. For if the resurrection of the flesh to eternal life had not taken place in Christ, and were not to be accomplished in His people, as predicted by Christ..., why do the martyrs who were slain for this faith which proclaims the resurrection possess such power? ...These miracles attest this faith which preaches the resurrection of the flesh unto eternal life."

Saint Damascene, summarizing the life-giving teaching of Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition concerning the pious veneration of holy relics, preaches in a Cherubic manner from the altar of his God-bearing and Christ-like soul: "The Saints have become according to grace that which the Lord Christ is according to nature. That is, they have become gods according to grace: pure and living habitations of God. For God says: 'I will dwell in them, walk in them, and I will be their God' (II Corinthians 6:16; Leviticus 16:12). The Holy Scriptures likewise say: 'the souls of the righteous are in God's hand, and death cannot lay hold of them' (Wisdom of Solomon 3:1). For death is rather the sleep of Saints than their death. Further: 'Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His Saints' (Psalm 119:6). What, then, is more precious than to be in the hand of God? For God is life and light, and those who are in God's hand are in life and light. Further, that God dwells even in their bodies in a spiritual manner the all-divine Apostle attests: 'Know ye not that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit dwelling

in you?' (I Corinthians 3:16). And, 'the Lord is Spirit' (II Corinthians 3:17). Thus, the evangelical truth: 'If anyone destroy the temple of God, him will God destroy—for the temple of God is holy, and ye are that temple' (I Corinthians 3:17). Surely, then, we must ascribe honor to the living temples of God, the living dwelling-places of God. These, while they lived, stood with boldness before God. The Lord Christ granted us the relics of the Saints to be fountains of salvation unto us, pouring forth manifold blessings and abounding in sweetly fragrant oil. Let no one disbelieve this! For if water burst in the desert from the steep and solid rock according to God's will (Exodus 17:6), and from the jawbone of an ass to quench Samson's thirst (Judges 15:14-19), is it then unbelievable that fragrant oil should spring forth from relics of the holy Martyrs? By no means, at least to those who know the omnipotence of God and the honor which He accords to His Saints. According to the Old Testament law, everyone who touched a dead body was considered impure (Numbers 19:11). However, the Saints are not dead. For from the time when He Who is Himself Life and the Author of life was counted among the dead, we do not call those dead who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection and with faith in Him. For how could a dead body work miracles? And how, through the holy relics, are demons driven off, diseases dispelled, the sick made well, the blind restored to sight, lepers cleansed, temptations and tribulations overcome; and how does every good gift come down from the Father of lights (St. James 1:17) to those who pray with sure faith?"

The universal faith of the Church concerning the pious veneration of holy relics was confirmed by the God-bearing Fathers of the Seventh Œcumenical Synod in its decrees: "Our Lord Jesus Christ granted to us the relics of Saints as a salvation-bearing source which pours forth varied benefits on the infirm. Consequently, those who presume to abandon the relics of the Martyrs: if they be hierarchs, let them be deposed; if however monastics or laymen, let them merely be excommunicated."

...That a pious veneration of the holy relics is a constituent part of the salvation rendered by the God-Man is also evidenced by the following facts: from the depths of sacred antiquity, churches were built on the graves and relics of Saints, and the holy Liturgy is performed only on *antimensia*, in which are placed parts of the holy relics. Moreover, the divine service books, especially the *Menaion*, are replete with prayers and hymns which refer to the pious veneration of holy relics....

All in all, the mystery of holy relics is at the heart of the universal mystery of the New Testament: the incarnation of God. The full mystery of the human body is explained by the incarnation, the embodiment of God in the God-Man, the Lord Jesus Christ. For this reason, then, the Gospel message concerning the body: "The body for the Lord, and the Lord for the body" (I Corinthians 6:13). And through a human body also the entire creation, all of matter, received its divine significance, the universal meaning of the God-Man. By man, who is sanctified in the Church by the holy mysteries and the holy virtues, the creation and even matter are sanctified, united to Christ. There accrues to this also a joy—the myrrh-streaming property of many relics. This wonder of myrrh has been given to the holy relics in order to indicate that Christians are truly "a sweet-savour of Christ unto God" (II Corinthians 2:15), sweet-smelling to God and to heaven. The truth of the Gospel is that the sin of man is a foul odor before God and every sin pleases the devil. Through the holy mysteries and holy virtues, Christians become "a sweet-savour of Christ unto God." For this reason, then, the holy relics of the Saints pour forth myrrh.

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