

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DON BOSCO RELIC PILGRIMAGE

## ***The cult of relics in the Church***

### **Death according to the Christians of the first century**

The most important event in human history is the resurrection of Jesus. The apostles and the first disciples, after the apparitions of the Risen Lord and the coming of the Holy Spirit, began to understand all that the Son had revealed to them. The Gospels affirm that on more than one occasion Jesus had announced his death and his resurrection to his disciples. In the episode of the resurrection of Lazarus Jesus offers a sign of his saving power, assuring the first Christian community that all who believed in him, “the resurrection and the life,” would have eternal life.

“When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went to meet him; but Mary sat at home. Martha said to Jesus, ‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know he will rise, in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus told her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to him ‘Yes, Lord. I have come to believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one who is coming into the world’ (Jn 11, 20–27).”

Pagan religions of the Roman Empire had different ideas regarding death. At the most they imagined a hereafter where the souls of the dead continued existing, but like shadows, the “good” alongside the “bad.”

Christians thought that to enter paradise they had to believe in Jesus and follow his teachings. It was essential to belong to a ***Christian community*** since one could not be saved on one’s own. From the beginning Jesus had brought his disciples together around himself. Even after his Ascension, the faithful assembled to break bread together, as the Master had taught them.

### **Community in life and after death**

For Christians, faith in and the worship of only one God is not a *private* thing, but rather equally influences both one’s personal and social conduct. Jesus had revealed that God is Father. “See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are” (1 Jn 3,1). This awareness created in Christians a very unique relationship among them as children of God, which in the last analysis makes us all brothers and sisters. St. Paul, in some of his letters, compares the Christian community to a body with its members – which he calls the *mystical body* – stating that Jesus is the head: “He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things he himself might be preeminent” (Col 1,18).

Christ is present in the midst of the community of believers in a manner very mysterious but also very real: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18, 20).

Moreover, the Acts of the Apostles testify that in the first communities there existed an authentic and appropriate sharing of goods in common: they helped the poor, aided widows, and assisted the sick. The Church therefore was a communion between its living and deceased members. Thanks to the promises of Jesus, ***this union continued even after death.***

Reflecting upon Jesus' words, the Church early on extended its understanding even further, so that belonging to the *mystical body* referred also to the deceased, and consequently ***the unity of this communion was not broken by death.*** Death did not mean the end of something but rather a passage to a new life that after the final judgment would include also the body.

For this reason ***cremation as practised by the pagans was not accepted,*** but rather the interment of loved ones was preferred, according to the example of the Lord himself who was buried and rose again.

While pagans spoke of a "necropolis" or city of the dead, the Christians considered their cemeteries to be ***dormitories (coemeterium),*** or more properly, ***places of repose where one slept until the resurrection.*** Consequently, strictly following their faith in the resurrection, tombs were generally only used once.

In ancient Rome on the contrary, the custom existed of throwing the dead together in huge common pits, including even recently born abandoned babies and slaves, who were considered of no use.

## **Remembering Deceased Christians**

The mutual responsibility and solidarity which characterized the first Christian communities did not end with death, but rather embraced one's departed loved ones. If the deceased person, in fact, was unable to have a decent burial, the community assumed the responsibility for burial in a worthy tomb. This profound respect for the deceased as brothers and sisters in faith was something completely new in ancient Rome.

Mourning for the death of one's beloved family or friends, along with gratitude for the time which had been passed together, brought Christians continually to the visit the graves. The pagans also visited their deceased, but the Christians had a much more profound motivation: faith in the afterlife. They were completely sure that in the future they would be together again, when they would be reunited, and this time forever. Since they knew that they were all children of the same Father, brothers and sisters in faith, they thought: *Here where our dearly beloved sleep, we also will sleep until the day of the resurrection, in a place of communal rest,* buried together, with no account for fame, profession, wealth, or poverty. They knew that one day all of them would be included in the community's prayer for the eternal rest and peace of the dead.

## **The catacombs: the first Christian cemeteries**

In the second century the Christians in Rome did not have their own cemeteries. If they had property, they buried their dead there, and if not, they resorted to common cemeteries also used by the pagans. For this reason St. Peter was buried in the necropolis on Vatican Hill, like St. Paul who was buried in a necropolis on the Via Ostiana.

Christianity began to grow especially in the second century and to *convert pagans who belonged to rich and comfortable families*. These believers had property or family cemeteries which they put at the disposition of their brethren in the faith. As is well known, Christianity had to go through some great difficulties, chiefly because of pagan Roman emperors. Being monotheists, the Christians refused to consider the emperor as *dominus et deus*, Lord and God, thereby incurring the prejudice and wrath of the authorities. Other rumors and false accusations gave rise to the origin of a strongly founded hostility which transformed into a *persecution*, often systematically organized. Thus it could often happen that, when Christians visited their dead to pray before their tombs, people would mistreat them, or even vandalize and otherwise profane their tombs.

Thus there grew a **desire to have a special burial place reserved to the Christian community**, where they could reverence their dead without undergoing the risk of mistreatment. When the number of Christians grew, so did the need for new tombs. Roman law protected the right to have on one's own property a subterranean section of land for this purpose.

*From this history came the catacombs*. Many of these came into existence and were developed right alongside family sepulchers. With the passing of time, these burial sites expanded, perhaps through the initiative of the Church itself. The most famous of these is that of the catacombs of St. Callistus. The Church directly assumed its organization and administration.

## **Persecutions and the cult of the martyrs**

As previously alluded to, first century Christians were wont to be accused of disloyalty to the country, atheism, impropriety and even of hatred for the human race. Among other things they were suspected of occult crimes, such as incest – since they considered themselves all to be brothers and sisters. And as a consequence it was believed that they were the cause of natural calamities, such as plagues, floods and famine.

For this reason it was thought that the Christian religion was outside the law and was therefore persecuted, considered to be the strongest enemy against the power of Rome. This was all based on ancient Olympic religion and the cult of the emperor, instrument and personal symbol of the power and unity of the Empire. Thus many Christians died, giving their lives rather than deny their faith in Christ. The words of Christ concerning martyrdom tragically became reality:

"Before all this happens, however, they will seize and persecute you, they will hand you over to the synagogues and to prisons, and they will have you led before kings and governors because of my name" (*Lk 21,12*).

"Remember the word I spoke to you, 'No slave is greater than his master'. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours" (*Jn 15,20*).

The first three centuries were *an era of martyrs*.

In the year 313 with the "Edict of Milan," Emperors Constantine and Licinius granted freedom of worship to the Church. Before this edict there was persecution of the Christians, but it was neither always continuous nor universal, that is, neither extended throughout the entire empire, nor always equally cruel and bloody. Periods of persecution were followed by periods of relative tranquility.

The martyrs became “witnesses of the faith” *par excellence*. The great Christian writer Tertullian affirms that “their blood was the seed of new Christians.” Little by little *the memory of the dead became more intense*. They had put into practice the words of Jesus, sacrificing their greatest possession, their very lives:

“Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me” (*Mt 5,11*).

The *martyrs began to be venerated* and invoked by particular Churches, generally on their *birthdays*, that is, on the day of their birth into heaven. A constant praxis of the Church was that of gathering in liturgical assembly or in the place where the martyrs had given the testimony of their faith in God, or right at the site of their glorious sepulchers. As a matter of fact, many of the faithful began to seek burial right next to the martyrs’ tombs. Upon visiting the Catacombs of St. Callistus, you can notice how right near the tomb of St. Cecilia you find numerous niches of many devout faithful departed.

The prayer over the tombs of the martyrs *unites in a communion of praise and prayer both members of the Church on earth and those who already contemplate the face of God*. This communion finds its strongest moment in the Eucharist, when heaven and earth, angels, saints and the faithful on the way, are joined together in one singular moment of praise through Christ the Lord, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of God the Father.

## **The cult of the martyrs: St. Peter and St. Polycarp**

Among the first martyrs who gave their lives to defend the Gospel stands the witness of St. Peter. We already noted that he was buried in the cemetery located on the Vatican Hill, a cemetery open to everyone.

In 1952 excavations under the actual papal altar in the Basilica of St. Peter were restarted, with results that *help us understand how important it was for the first Christians to venerate the tombs of the martyrs*. There they had placed their relics. Funeral placards have been found on a local wall which came to be known as the ‘red wall’ because of its color and especially important because of the its numerous graffiti. These have been deciphered by scholars. *They all contain invocations to St. Peter*. Joined to his name are sometimes the names of Christ and Mary. Prominent is the term life “in Christ” and “in Peter,” whose name is written in a symbolic code. In the same Vatican necropolis, above the tomb of the Valerius family, is found this inscription:

“*Petrus, roga pro sanctis hominibus christianis ad corpus tuum sepultis.*”  
“Peter, pray for the holy Christians buried here beside your body.”

Evidently it’s a prayer for those Christians buried near the Apostle’s body, a “proof” that St. Peter himself was buried there and there venerated. It seems that around the year 150 AD, this very site in Rome upon the Vatican Hill was already a place of pilgrimage.

*St. Polycarp*, on the other hand, was born in Smirna, in what is now Turkey, in the year 69. Irenaeus, his disciple and bishop of Lyon, wrote that “the very Apostles named him bishop in Asia for the Church of Smirna,” around the year 100. He is venerated as the disciple of the Apostle John

and as the last witness of the Apostles. Around 157 a persecution began in Smirna. The elderly bishop (86 years old) was taken to the stadium for judgment by the Roman governor Cuadrado. Polycarp refused to defend himself before the governor, who actually wanted to save him. Polycarp publically declared himself a Christian. He died giving thanks to God the Father that he had been deemed worthy of being counted among the martyrs and of participating in the chalice of Christ.

The Church of Smirna, after the martyrdom of their bishop Polycarp along with eleven others of the faithful, wrote to nearby churches and to the whole community of the universal Church recounting his glorious death. These words testify to *the importance of the cult of the relics of the martyrs*

“We most worthily venerate the martyrs as disciples and imitators of the Lord and for their supreme fidelity to the King and Master. Oh that we might also become such companions and disciples! [...]  
*After collecting the bones of Polycarp, more precious than jewels and purer than the finest of gold,* we place them in a worthy place. And in this place we meet in joy and happiness whenever we can. We hope that the Lord will allow us to celebrate the anniversary of his martyrdom, with the memory of all those who have already faced this same fight, and in preparation for those who will have to do so in the future.”  
(Martyrium Polycarpi: XVII, 3; XVIII, 2-3).

With the same sentiments as our brethren of Smirna we want to pray together at the tombs of the glorious martyrs and joyfully celebrate their *birthday*. Thanks to their intercession our faith will be fortified so that we too can serenely face the trials of life.

RELICS AND MORTAL REMAINS OF THE MARTYRS  
ARE REMEMBRANCES TO BE PRESERVED WITH THE GREATEST OF RESPECT.  
It is not that they possess magical or miraculous powers.  
Rather these relics, as well as those of the saints,  
put us in contact with the heroic testimony of a life handed over completely to the Gospel.  
THEY STRENGTHEN OUR FAITH IN CHRIST, CAPABLE OF MOVING MOUNTAINS.  
FOR THIS REASON PRAYING BEFORE THESE GLORIOUS RELICS  
CAN OBTAIN FOR US SO MANY GRACES.

In the history of the Church not all Christians are called to be martyrs, but yes all are called to be witnesses of faith. *The Christians who have most fulfilled this vocation are the saints.* They have spent their lives for the kingdom of God. They have gone before us living their Christian faith responsibly, and by their example have set a path which leads to the house of the Father. They deserve to be remembered and venerated, since they help us reaffirm our own faith. In the next chapter we will speak of the holiness of these saints.

## **The meaning of holiness**

### **God the source of holiness**

The word “holy” can be understood in various ways.

In the Old Testament holiness is attributed exclusively to God. Only God is holy. “You alone are the Holy One,” we proclaim in the Gloria at Mass, and we repeat it again three times in the Sanctus and in the diverse Eucharistic prayers. These words of the Eucharistic liturgy derive from the book of the prophet Isaiah, where the prophet is permitted to contemplate and announce the glory and majesty of God.

“I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne... Seraphim were stationed above... ‘**Holy, holy, holy is the LORD** of hosts!’ they cried one to the other. ‘All the earth is filled with his glory!’” (*Is* 6,1-3)

While Old Testament holiness belongs exclusively to God, separating him from people, Jesus **diffuses holiness on all who believe in Him**. In Jesus, holiness is no longer about *separation*, but rather about *communion*. The entire Church is called to communion with God, the entire Church to holiness.

### **Christ calls the Church to holiness through a way of love**

In all his preaching Jesus taught **a way of love**. When he is asked which is the greatest commandment he responds:

"The first is this: 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (*Mk* 12,29-31).

In order to explain more concretely to his disciples how they are *to love God and others* in daily life, Jesus taught them the Beatitudes of the Kingdom (*Mt* 5,1-11).

**The practice of love** is therefore the way we will reach the goal of our lives, holiness, God himself! In the measure we love, we imitate God who is all love.

“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for **God is love**” (*1 Jn* 4,7-8).

Taking up this style of evangelical life, we have the joy of putting into practice this exhortation of Jesus: "So be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (*Mt* 5,48).

**Jesus has left to the entire Church the task of being holy**. For this He has given his life, to make the Church holy. God reaches out to all who believe in Him and are filled with his love. In this way

the faithful are welcomed to the house of the Trinity where the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit love always and where now, together with them, we will also live.

The Church, therefore, is holy! St. Paul, as we have said above, reflecting upon this mystery compares the communion of the faithful to a body: the mystical body. This means that Christ, accepting death on the cross, has united the Church to his body forming a new living being that is abundantly filled with the Holy Spirit, with love.

### **All who are baptized are called to be saints**

In the ancient Christian communities, for reasons which we have already presented, the attribute of being a “saint” was not reserved to a few chosen people, but rather was the common name for all the baptized. St. Paul greets the community of Corinth in his first letter:

"Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be holy, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (*1 Cor 1,1-3*).

Paul *calls saints all the faithful who are full of the love of God*, thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus, but at the same time he invites them to keep walking in love:

“For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. *This is the will of God, your holiness...*” (*1 Thes 4,2-3*)

How can we realize the project of love which God places upon us? How can we follow the path of the saints? Many answers could be given, but fundamentally it deals with putting into practice once again the words of St. Paul: “Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus ...” (*Phil 2,5*).

### **Canonised saints of the Church, “witness of the faith”**

From the beginning, Holy Mother Church in her wisdom has thought that to help the faithful walk the way of love, she did not need to write theological treatises. These would tend to be very complex and not even accessible to the humble. Rather she has understood that the *scientia amoris* – the science of love – is not learned in books, but in following the example of those faithful who have best known how to make the attitudes of Jesus their own. These are the *witnesses of faith* of whom we have spoken.

At the beginning, there were written testimonies of the martyrdom of the faithful called *Acts* or the *Passion* of the martyrs. After the third century, they began also to write the lives of holy monks, of holy bishops and other holy faithful who were proposed as models of holiness. *The Church began to officially pronounce* and personally point out examples of Christian life. These *eventually came to be called saints*. Often it was the faithful themselves who, impressed by the testimony of these great Christians, insisted that they be quickly recognized as saints for the Church.

The saints were imitated by everyone. There existed the conviction, and it still exists, that after death they had entered the house of the Trinity, and that they had been admitted to the presence of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

## Intercessors with the Father

Precisely due to the conviction that the saints were very close to the Father, *it was understood that they were powerful intercessors*. It is God who is prayed to through the intercession of the saints. He would not deny anything to those who had loved Jesus all during their lives. The saints, so close to God as they are, can more easily present the burning desires and problems which afflict the faithful on earth. Thus the union between the *pilgrim Church* on earth and the *celestial Church* already contemplating the face of God is strengthened.

*The saints then are not simply deceased persons*. The prayer *for the deceased*, of which we earlier spoke, had another meaning. In many inscriptions found written in the catacombs we find: "It is holy and salutary to pray for the dead so that they may be absolved of their sins," precisely because praying for them one hoped in a certain way to accelerate his own encounter with the Father. On the contrary *the prayer directed to the saints is a prayer of intercession*. This is not the same as the prayer of adoration which can and should be directed only to the Most Holy Trinity.

For this motive

THE SAINTS BEGAN TO BE VENERATED LIKE THE MARTYRS.

And their mortal remains and relics were venerated with the same devotion.

In *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council, we find a more precise synthesis of all that we have said so far.

"The Church has always believed that the apostles and Christ's martyrs, who gave the supreme witness of faith and charity by the shedding of their blood, are closely united with us in Christ; she has always venerated them, together with the Blessed Virgin Mary and the holy angels, with a special love, and has asked piously for the help of their intercession. Soon there were added to these others who had chosen to imitate more closely the virginity and poverty of Christ, and still others whom the outstanding practice of the Christian virtues and the wonderful graces of God recommended to the pious devotion and imitation of the faithful."

To look on the life of those who have faithfully followed Christ is to be inspired with a new reason for seeking the city which is to come (cf. Heb. 13:14 and 11:10), while at the same time we are taught a most safe path by which, despite the vicissitudes of the world, and in keeping with the state of life and condition proper to each of us, we will be able to arrive at perfect union with Christ, that is, holiness. God shows to men, in a vivid way, his presence and his face in the lives of those companions of ours in the human condition who are more perfectly transformed into him and offers us a sign of his kingdom, to which we are powerfully attracted; so great a cloud of witnesses we have (cf. *Hb* 12,1), and such a witness to the truth of the Gospel.

*And so not only do we venerate the memory of the saints in heaven for the example which they have given us, but we do it also to exercise that fraternal charity that brings about the unity of the Church in the Holy Spirit* (cf. *Ef* 4,1-6). Exactly as Christians united in communion on earth, this pilgrimage brings us closer to Christ, so our community with the saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from its fountain and head issue all grace and the life of People of God itself. ***It is most fitting, therefore, that we love those friends and co-heirs of Jesus Christ*** who are also our brothers and outstanding benefactors, and that ***we give thanks to God for them***, “humbly invoking them, and having recourse to their prayers, their aid and help in obtaining from God through his Son, Jesus Christ, Our Lord, our only Redeemer and Savior, the benefits we need.” Every authentic witness of love we can offer to those who are in heaven tends to and terminates in Christ, “the crown of all the saints,” and through him in God who is wonderful in his saints and is glorified in them” (*LG* 50).

## **The experience of the relic pilgrim of St. Dominic Savio**

The Salesian Congregation, in Italy and some other Provinces, have already had the experience of the pilgrim casket of St. Dominic Savio. In 2004 the Rector Major used the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of Dominic Savio to relaunch youthful holiness, precisely through the example of the life of the youthful saint. The 2004 Salesian theme (called the *strenna*):

“**WE PROPOSE ANEW TO ALL YOUTH WITH CONVINCED JOYFULNESS  
THE COMMITMENT TO HOLINESS AS THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF ORDINARY CHRISTIAN LIFE.**”

In those years Pope John Paul II was proposing to the whole Church, and especially to youth, the perspective of holiness, as the foundation and central point of the pastoral program for the new millennium.

“Young people of every continent, do not be afraid to be the saints of the new millennium! Be contemplative, love prayer; be coherent with your faith and generous in the service of your brothers and sisters, be active members of the Church and builders of peace” (*Message for XV World Youth Day 2000*).

The relic pilgrimage was ***an extraordinary occasion to rediscover the testimony and the example of Dominic Savio***. Praying before the casket, the small and great alike placed in his hands so many prayers and intentions, asking that he who had so loved the Lord might intercede for them. So many hopeful mothers prayed for their children, certain that Dominic their protector would plead before Jesus to hear their petitions that were attuned to the will of the Father. So many young people once again took in their hands the life of Dominic Savio written by Don Bosco, which had already done so much good to generations of young Christians, including bishops and popes.

Faith, prayer, the desire for holiness and special graces are the most beautiful fruits that the Father, through the intercession of Dominic, desired to pour upon the faithful who came to visit the pilgrim urn.

## **The significance of the relic pilgrim of Don Bosco**

As we come to the end of our small journey, we come to the conclusions that must already seem clear to the reader.

Also in this instance the occasion is extraordinary. The strenna for 2008 has invited us to “educate with the heart of Don Bosco”; the 26<sup>th</sup> General Chapter, in the same line, has asked us to return to the sources of our charism according to the motto of our Founder, “*Give me souls; take away the rest.*” The Rector Major wants the ***whole Salesian family*** to continue evangelizing the young whom the Lord has confided to us with these same sentiments. To achieve this it is necessary that we ***reflect upon our own very identity***. It is then fundamental to keep loving and deepening our knowledge and love for Don Bosco. The Strenna for 2009 reads this way:

“LET US COMMIT OURSELVES TO MAKING THE SALESIAN FAMILY  
A VAST MOVEMENT OF PERSONS FOR THE SALVATION OF THE YOUNG.”

Two great events justify and enrich the choice of the Strenna for 2009:

- the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Salesian Congregation
- the preparation for the bicentennial of the birth of Don Bosco (1815-2015)

With the 150th anniversary of the Salesian Congregation we also begin the preparation for the bicentennial of the birth of Don Bosco. Such a celebration will mean a renewed fidelity to Don Bosco, to his spirituality, to his mission; it will be a “***Salesian Holy Year.***”

The pilgrimage of the casket will be an occasion to take up once again in our hands the life of Don Bosco as desired by the Rector Major. The testimony of his life will help us to imitate his faith, his love of the Lord and his zeal for all people, but above all for the young and the poor. The worldwide Salesian Family will come to pray before the casket, forming a community of faith called by Christ to holiness, a family which desires to sanctify itself following the example of Don Bosco. Praying before the casket, little ones and grown-ups alike will place in his hands so many prayers and intentions asking that he who loved the Lord so much would intercede for them.