

The Second Sunday of Lent – The Holy Relics, and St Gregory Palamas.

THE HOLY RELICS

“Though the soul is not present, a power resides in the bodies of the saints.”

(St Cyril of Jerusalem (313-386))

The second Sunday of the Great and Holy Lent is distinguished by a liturgical commemoration peculiar to the Melkite Greek-Catholic Church. On this day, the Church especially venerates the earthly remains of the saints. The Roman Catholic Church has a similar feast, usually but not universally, celebrated on the fourth Sunday of November, and which honours the relics preserved in each local diocese.

It was in 1843 that Melkite Patriarch Maximos III (Mazloum) set aside the second Lenten Sunday as a Feast of the Holy Relics. He also composed a number of liturgical hymns for the Feast. The relics carried in today's procession and offered for veneration are small particles of bone taken from the remains of canonised saints.

From the earliest times, the Christian People have revered the remains of the Saints, the exemplars of the Faith, and who are our models in the Christian life. At first these relics were generally the remains of martyrs. So often we read of the faithful rushing forward to dip cloths in the blood of those who died for Christ. Such happened at the martyrdom of St Polycarp in the second century. One of the complaints that the persecuting emperor, Julian, the Apostate, (AD 332-363) made against Christians was that they preserved the relics of their martyrs in the churches. He was fond of calling Christian churches “charnel houses” – i.e., places to store human bones!

It is clear from the teaching of the Church that, although the remains of the saint deserve it, it is not simply the *matter*, the *physical chemical stuff*, of the relics that is being honoured, but the saint from whose remains the relic(s) came. In a sense, the relic makes the saint present to us in his or her completeness. Likewise, we might suggest that the *theology of icon* and the *theology of relics* are interwoven in Byzantine spirituality.

Even today, the holy remains of many saints are the object of regular miraculous activity – in Bari (Italy) the bones of St Nicholas of Myra exude of a fragrant oil which is decanted from his sarcophagus each year; in Naples the blood of the martyr bishop, St Januarius, liquefies on the anniversary of his martyrdom. Despite poor burial conditions, the corpses of many saints remain incorrupt after centuries. The body St Charbel (Makhlouf) remained as fresh as the day he was buried.

It cannot be denied that God often uses the remains of the saints as the focal point for his intervention in the things of this world. In the Second Book of Kings, a man is raised to life after coming into contact with the bones of the Prophet Elisha (2Kings 13:14, 20-21). The history of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches is replete with accounts of Heavenly Favours granted after the Faithful prayed before the relics of a particular saint. The holy relics are pledges, as it were, of that blessed conclusion that is possible for each of us – heaven and an eternal companionship with the saints in the Presence of God.

St John Chrysostom reminds us that, “...not just did the bodies of the holy apostles work wonders, but even their napkins and aprons, and not only the napkins and aprons, but even the shadows of Peter worked wonders stronger than life.” (Sermon *On the Relics of the Martyrs*.)

ST GREGORY PALAMAS (1296-1359) Archbishop of Thessalonica.

In the traditional liturgical practice, we also commemorate on this day, the Archbishop of Thessalonica, St Gregory Palamas. He was the champion of *hesychism* – the theology of a

prayerful waiting in silence for the gift of the vision of the Uncreated Light- that light which flows from the very presence of God; the same light that Peter, James and John saw on Mount Tabor. This is accompanied by the constant repetition of the Jesus Prayer. Pope St John Paul II was an admirer of St Gregory and much appreciated his theology and his spirituality. Although St Gregory was canonised by Constantinople after the 1054 “schism”, Pope St John Paul II, in one book and several public addresses, referred to him as “Saint Gregory” and commended his theology to all Christians.

Because of a misunderstanding of his profound theology, the commemoration of St Gregory ceased in many of the Eastern Catholic Churches. It was restored in our Melkite Church by the Holy Synod in 1971. He is also remembered on 14 November. His last words in this life are recorded as, “To the heights! To the heights!”

When the Melkite Feast of St Gregory was returned to its traditional day, the second Sunday of Lent, the “recent” (1843!) the Feast of the Relics was maintained – thus, giving this Sunday a double celebration. In fact this was a happy development. St Gregory’s *hesychast* theology is bound up with the concept of *theosis* or *deification* – the becoming like God – a destiny intended not only for the soul but also for our bodies which will be resurrected on the Last Day.

There could be no better reminder of that invitation to *theosis* than the earthly remains of those who have already achieved that heavenly state.

“Let not one think, my fellow Christian that only priests and monastics need to pray without ceasing and not lay people. No, no; every Christian without exception ought to dwell always in prayer.” (St Gregory Palamas, c.1296-1357)

Archdeacon Anthony Lawrence