

What Are Dead Bodies For?: An Augustinian Thanatology

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Introduction

St. Augustine's *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* is one of the earliest sources for Christian thought on dead human bodies. In this work, he examines traditional Christian practices of care for the dead and provides a theological interpretation of those practices. In *De cura*, Augustine does not aim primarily to help the reader discern what are licit and illicit behaviors, but rather to discover what is occurring in the context of the funerary practices of Christians with reference to the economy of salvation. It examines, in other words, how the bodies of the departed Christian faithful, both the saints and ordinary believers, affect and are affected by the prayers of the living and the dead. For this reason, *De cura* is an invaluable resource for reflection on Christian practices surrounding relics. Augustine maps some of the possible avenues of interchange between the living and the dead while ruling out others. In doing so he provides fodder for theological reflection upon the question of what Christians should think is happening when they view, pray before, kiss, or touch to their bodies the pieces of bone, flesh, blood, hair, clothing, jewelry, or footwear of the Church's saints.

The following examination consists in two parts. The first is a close look at *De cura* in which I will argue that the conclusions of that work concerning the physical remains of Christian's are best considered in light of Augustine's ecclesiology. The second involves a speculative extension of the findings in the first part to show how relics work. This speculation is useful and warranted because the Catholic Church has had relatively little to say on this matter magisterially. While the Church teaches *that* the veneration

of relics is beneficial and provides some guidance as to *what* the practice ought to entail, the question of *how* the particular matter of saintly bodies functions remains ambiguous. In these two parts I will show that relics may be understood as a sacrament of the Church's unity. They are visible signs of the invisible unity of the Church across time and space.

De cura pro mortuis gerenda

Proximity

Augustine's *De cura* is a response to a question from his fellow bishop, Paulinus of Nola. Paulinus is interested in the question of *ad sanctos* burial, the Christian practice of interring the dead near the earthly remains of martyrs (*ad sanctos*). This practice was thought to give "some access to their intercessory powers or special assistance on Judgment Day."¹ Paulinus wants a theological answer about the liceity and function of *ad sanctos* burial, for which he turns to Augustine. On the whole, Augustine is set against the idea that mere proximity to a martyr's remains aids in the salvation of the departed. But his words on the subject are nuanced, and he seeks to provide an orthodox explanation of the practice.² He describes the benefit of *ad sanctos* burial primarily in terms of *memoria*. As Peter Brown has argued, *memoria* was not understood as a passive faculty by the citizens of the ancient world. Instead, *memoria* was an active tool to facilitate social cohesion, especially in the context of client–patron relations.³ This is how Augustine thinks of it, and explains the comforts provided by funerary arrangements with reference to it.

I do not see what aid those [comforts] are to the dead, except this: that when they reflect upon where the bodies of those whom they love may be buried, they should entrust them by prayer to the same saints who have undertaken, like patrons, to aid them before the Lord.⁴

The client–patron relationships of the late ancient world alluded to by Augustine in this passage involve the active bonds of intercession. Proximity to the saints might serve as an actuator of *memoria*, but not simply by virtue

¹ J. Patout Burns and Robin M. Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa: The Development of Its Practices and Beliefs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 118.

² Burns and Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 118.

³ Peter Brown, *The Ransom of the Soul: Afterlife and Wealth in Early Western Christianity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 39.

⁴ Augustine, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* 4.6 (PL, 40:596).

of the physical closeness of the bodies. Instead, as Augustine goes on to claim, "When, therefore, the soul reflects upon where the body of a dearly beloved person has been buried, and it meets in that place the name of a venerable martyr, the devotion of recollection and prayer entrusts the beloved soul of the departed to the same martyr."⁵ *Memoria* can be engaged in other ways, but Augustine does not rule out the utility of burial *ad sanctos* as an aid to this faculty. His point is simply that whatever can be had by virtue of proximity can be had only through the burial location's effect on a living intercessor.

What, then, does the proximity of the dead to the body of a martyr afford? Augustine answers, "we cannot suppose anything to reach the dead for whom we have care, except what we solemnly pray for them either by sacrifices of the altar, or of prayers, or of alms."⁶ Brown's characterization of *ad sanctos* burial, drawing on Augustine's thoughts, is sober. "Burial beside the saints did nothing whatsoever to aid the soul. All that such prominent burial did was to jog the memory of the bereaved by reminding them to resort with greater fervor to the traditional means of helping the departed"⁷ Is this the right way to frame Augustine's position in *De cura*? Yes and no. Yes, because the proximate burial itself does not aid the soul of the departed. But also no, because the act of praying in the vicinity of the martyr's tomb does aid the one praying on behalf of the dead. The effect on the soul of the departed is an indirect but real one. This is how Augustine describes it.

What aids the departed spirit is not the location of the dead body, but the memory of the place, from which comes the mother's living devotion. For the one entrusted and the one to whom entrusted touch simultaneously, and by no means fruitlessly, the religious mind of the one praying. For they also perform prayer using the parts of their body in a manner befitting that of supplicants, when they bend their knees, when they stretch out their hands, or even lie prostrate upon the ground, and any other thing they visibly do...And while these movements of the body may not be made except from a preceding movement of the soul, somehow the bodily movements made visible externally, in return, magnify the internally invisible movements which made them: and in this way the disposition of the heart, which preceded so that they might be made, increases because they are made.⁸

⁵ *De cura* 4.6 (PL, 40:596).

⁶ *De cura* 18.22 (PL, 40:609).

⁷ Brown, *Ransom of the Soul*, 79.

⁸ Augustine, *De cura* 5.7 (PL, 40:597).

Just as the movement of the body is an outward sign of an interior disposition which both initiates the visible actions of supplication and is further excited by them, so too the memory of the saint and the one entrusted to their care prompts the supplicant on to prayer. To downplay the role *memoria* plays in the interchange of souls and the relation it bears to the physical location of the dead body is a mistake.

Paula Rose presents something comparable to Brown's position on this point. "The place of the burial near the grave of a saint," she says, "may remind the deceased's relatives of their task to invoke the saint's assistance for the deceased in the presence of God. This is the only benefit of *ad sanctos* burial that Augustine can imagine."⁹ The question here turns on what Augustine means by "For at once, the one entrusted and the one to whom entrusted touch, and by no means fruitlessly, the religious mind of the one praying."¹⁰ Augustine's use of the verb *attingo* has a tactile dimension. The effect upon the mind of the one praying occurs by way of contact, the contact of the "mother's living devotion" with "the one entrusted and the one to whom entrusted simultaneously."¹¹ As Rose observes, "burial near the patron saint is indeed effective, but *only* in an indirect manner, as it intensifies the commemoration prayers by a devoted mind."¹² Phrasing the observation this way leads one to believe that Augustine is minimizing the role of *ad sanctos* burial. A more interesting reading might result if we were to instead observe that the effect comes about *precisely* in an indirect manner. Living devotion enables real contact between the living and the dead.

Under this rubric, the deceased are able to receive the particular benefits that result from the *memoria* of their loved ones. This *memoria* is excited and enhanced by the location of the burial. Brown is right to claim Augustine is concerned with overturning the special place afforded to *ad sanctos* burial. The thought that something could be had by the wealthy but not the poor to aid their soul's passage to the afterlife is rejected.¹³ Those persons buried *ad sanctos* have no exclusive claim on the intercessory powers of the martyr next to whom they have been interred. "Wherever, then," Augustine says, "the dead flesh lies or does not lie, rest must be gained for the spirit."¹⁴ But

⁹ Paula J. Rose, *A Commentary on Augustine's De Cura pro Mortuis Gerenda: Rhetoric in Practice*, Amsterdam Studies in Classical Philology (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 177.

¹⁰ Augustine, *De cura* 5.7 (PL, 40:597).

¹¹ Augustine, *De cura* 5.7 (PL, 40:597).

¹² Rose, *A Commentary on Augustine's De Cura Pro Mortuis Gerenda*, 209 (emphasis mine).

¹³ Brown, *Ransom of the Soul*, 79.

¹⁴ Augustine, *De cura* 5.7 (PL, 40:597).

holy places do figure into Augustine's thinking. You can see this in a letter where he entrusts an important decision regarding a scandalous accusation against one of his priests to the intercession of St. Felix. He does so by sending the two men concerned to the martyr's shrine in Nola, Italy—the very shrine about which Paulinus is writing to Augustine. While he is careful to explain that God's action is not limited to this or that shrine, he does maintain that God sets apart particular places as the locations where he frequently manifests his power.

God is indeed everywhere, and he who fashioned all things is in no way limited or confined to a place, and it's fitting that his true worshippers call upon him in spirit and truth, that hearing in secret, he may also justify and crown in secret. Who can scrutinize his plan, however, that miraculous things—which are visible signs to humans—occur in some places and not in others?¹⁵

The shrine of St. Felix has been the source of many miracles. As Augustine says, “to many, the holiness of the place is well-known.”¹⁶

It is not the physical location of the burial that effects contact between the martyr and the deceased, but the presence of the living person at the shrine of a martyr. Holy places do exist. Their effects are real. But being buried in one will not accomplish the work absent the devotion of a living intercessor. The effects of the burial in a holy place do not accrue directly to the person buried. But, the indirect effects are the result of the special nature of the martyrs' shrines, as places God has set apart. It is possible when formulating his position in this way that Augustine had in mind the point made by Cicero in his *Tusculan Disputations*.

Therefore, everything said here is worthy of scorn concerning ourselves, but not to be neglected concerning our friends, so long as we know that dead bodies know nothing of the living. Nevertheless, the living ought to attend to how much may be conceded to custom and tradition, but in such a way that they understand nothing about it matters to the dead.¹⁷

¹⁵ Augustine, Epistle 78, no. 3 (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* [CSEL], 34/2:335).

¹⁶ Augustine, Epistle 78, no. 3 (CSEL, 34/2:335).

¹⁷ Cicero, *Tusculanae disputationes* 1.45, edited by M. Pohler (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubneri, 1965), 273.

The dead are not interested in the particulars of the burial. These cannot aid them. But the doctrine of the communion of saints means that what affects the living, insofar as the funerary arrangements are concerned, may indeed affect the soul of the dead. It does so by affecting those who remain, exciting them to more fervent acts of *memoria*. In order to explain what I mean here, I'll turn briefly to Augustine's thinking on the nature of the Church. This will support the remainder of my argument concerning the contribution of *De cura*.

Charity and the Unity of the Church

The Church is one body united in charity under its head, who is Jesus Christ. Augustine makes this point in a sermon preached against the Donatists. There, he compares the charity that animates and binds the Church together to the health of a human body.¹⁸ God bestows various gifts on the Church, Augustine claims, citing 1 Cor 12:28. Although these gifts are given differently to different people, because those people are united in the bond of charity, the graces are had by all in the one body of Christ. As he puts it, "Now whatever my brother may have is mine if I have not been jealous and have loved. In myself I don't have it, but in him I do. It would not be mine if we were not in one body and under one head."¹⁹ This point, that love is the essence of the Church's unity, drives his denunciation of the Donatist schism. Just as an amputated limb cannot be healed, neither can the Donatists, while they remain separated from the Church, partake of the charity that would unite them in Christ.²⁰ The references to the health of the body are more than a passing metaphor. As Augustine explains in *De baptismo*, "For [union] should not be judged by bodily movement to or from, rather than by spiritual movement. For as the connection of bodies results from the continuity of place, so also the agreement of wills is a kind of contact of souls."²¹ In the Church, "one faith holds everyone, one network of charity includes everyone."²² As a network of charity, the Church includes but is

¹⁸ Augustine, Sermon 162a, no. 6 (*Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* [CCSL], 41b:169). Cf. *De baptismo* 8.11.

¹⁹ Augustine, Sermon 162a, no. 4, (CCSL, 41b:167).

²⁰ Augustine, Sermon 162a, no. 7 (CCSL, 41b:170).

²¹ Augustine, *De bapt.* 1.1.2 (CSEL, 51:147).

²² Augustine, Sermon 162a, no. 11 (CCSL, 41b:178). I have borrowed the translation of *compago* from the Edmund Hill's translation of Sermon 162a in vol. III/5 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*. The use of "network" highlights the Church as structure "joined together" by love, but also has the nonphysical connotation necessary to grasp the connection between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven.

greater than its individual parts. These parts are united in a communion that can be understood as spiritual contact through love.

Because the parts are united in this way, as a body whose members have whatever the others have, it is possible to say that the prayers and the states of the faithful affect the states of the other members of the body. This body of Christ exists not only in the visible, institutional Church on earth, but also in heaven, where the angels and saints are gathered around the ascended Lord.²³ Erik Saak argues that this “ontological tension” in the Church, “the dialectical relationship between the historical and the transhistorical,” is central to Augustine’s ecclesiology.²⁴ You can see this relationship between the earthly and heavenly Church in Sermon 159. There Augustine describes the Church as the communion of saints gathered as one physical and spiritual body in the context of the Mass. He invites those present to look and see “the thousands of martyrs right before our eyes.”²⁵ The physical relics of the martyrs are a sacrament of this unity. They make visible what is otherwise hidden, the presence of the saints in the union of wills under the one head that is Christ, who ensures their spiritual contact.

Intercession of the Living for the Dead

In *De cura*, Augustine emphasizes the importance of spiritual practices which aid the dead, “for whom we solemnly supplicate by sacrifices either of the altar, or of prayers, or of almsgiving.”²⁶ Augustine makes this point elsewhere when he explains, “It must not be doubted that by the prayers of the Church and by the saving sacrifice and by the alms which are distributed for their spirits, the dead can be aided; so that something more merciful may be done with them by God than their sins merited.”²⁷ Benefits accrue to the dead whose souls are not yet experiencing the bliss of heaven but who are destined for eternal beatitude. It is not physical contact that affects them, but the contact that exists by way of the network of charity, the *caritatis compago*. This bond exists in the unifying act of love, which enables spiritual contact. For this reason, the living person’s intercession for the dead cannot consist simply in corporeal activities—burial *ad sanctos* or visiting a shrine containing a martyr’s relics—divorced from an accompanying spiritual

²³ Eric L. Saak, “Ecclesiology,” in *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, ed. Karla Pollman and Willemien Otten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 912–13. Cf. *De doctrina christiana* 3.32.45 and *De civitate Dei* 18.49.

²⁴ Saak, “Ecclesiology,” 912–13.

²⁵ Augustine, Sermon 159, no. 8 (*PL*, 38:871).

²⁶ Augustine, *De cura* 18.22 (*PL*, 40:609).

²⁷ Augustine, Sermon 172, no. 2 (*PL*, 38:936).

disposition. This does not mean physical actions, objects, or locations have no role to play, just that, absent the accompanying spiritual actions, they are not sufficient to positively impact the souls of the dead. As Augustine says in *De cura*, “If, however, these supplications, which are made for the dead in right faith and piety are lacking, I think that nothing would be of benefit to their spirits no matter how holy a place in which the lifeless bodies may be buried.”²⁸

Intercession of the Dead for the Living

Included in Augustine’s considerations of the Church as a network of charity are the prayers of the saints, especially those of the martyrs. This class of departed Christians do not require the prayers of the living, but act as powerful intercessors for the living and the dead. Augustine makes this point in Sermon 159.

Therefore, the teaching of the Church—which the faithful understood—is that at the spot where the martyrs are recited before the altar of God, it is not they who are prayed for. It is, on the contrary, prayed for the other remembered dead. It’s an insult to pray for the martyrs, to whose prayers we ought to entrust ourselves.²⁹

It is this faith in the power of the martyrs to intercede that inspires the practice of burial *ad sanctos*, as it inspires the formation of the cult of the saints generally. The veneration of their relics is an early documented practice. In the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, for example, the burnt bones of the martyr are collected and safeguarded as objects worthy of reverence.³⁰ After the legalization of Christianity, martyr shrines, often full-scale basilicas, were erected in areas outside the walls of cities, in the graveyards where the martyrs were buried.³¹ With Christianity’s rise to prominence came clarifying statements like Augustine’s above concerning the status of the saints as intercessors.

The reasons for requesting a saint’s intercessory support become obvious when we continue to reflect on Augustine’s thought. Dante’s Virgil makes the point eloquently and often in the *Inferno*. When challenged by various

²⁸ Augustine, *De cura* 4.6 (*PL*, 40:596).

²⁹ Augustine, Sermon 159, no. 1 (*PL*, 38:868).

³⁰ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18.12, in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Cyril C. Richardson (New York: Collier Books, 1970).

³¹ Robert Bartlett, *Why Can the Dead Do Such Great Things?: Saints and Worshippers from the Martyrs to the Reformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 7–10.

characters while leading Dante deeper into hell, Virgil replies with an answer like the one he gives to Minos, "Do not impede his going, which is decreed: this is willed where what is willed can be done, so ask no more."³² This, and further variations indicate that whatever is willed by a soul in heaven, in Dante's case by Beatrice, can be accomplished—effected by the willing. Augustine makes this point when he says of the heavenly homeland that nothing will need to be prayed for, "Because nothing is wanting. What is believed here, is seen there; what is hoped for here, is held there; what is asked for here, is received there."³³ Heaven, for Augustine as for Dante, is a place of fulfillment. Were a saint to will something that could not be accomplished, that person would not be experiencing beatitude. Enlisting the help of those for whom "what is willed can be done" is an appealing thought, yet without a doubt a contentious one.

Augustine, following Tertullian and Cyprian of Carthage, was skeptical of the ability of even the martyrs to effect forgiveness for those who had not lived a sufficiently dedicated Christian life.³⁴ In *City of God*, he argues against those who say, "God will indeed surrender them . . . to the prayers of his saints, whose prayer is more effective and worthy of God's answer, who are then praying for their enemies by as much a greater degree as they are no doubt holier, having no sin at all."³⁵ Why would the saints, who on account of their "most perfect holiness" and their "most pure and merciful prayers," which have "all the power to accomplish it," not intercede for all and thus gain pardon for all, even the fallen angels, "for whom eternal fire is prepared"?³⁶ The prayers of the Church for saintly intercession are, in fact, heard, but only, he says, "on behalf of those who, having been reborn in Christ, neither lived life in the body so badly that they were judged to be as such unworthy of mercy, nor so well as to be found such as to have no need of mercy."³⁷ Early in *De cura*, he makes this same point concerning spiritual works this way:

There are those whom these [works] do not at all aid; whether they are done for those whose merits are so evil that they are not worthy to be aided by such [works]; or for those whose merits are so good,

³² Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* 5.22–24, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

³³ Augustine, Sermon 159, no. 1 (*PL*, 38:868). Cf. *De civ.* 21.24.

³⁴ Burns and Jensen, *Christianity in Roman Africa*, 520–22.

³⁵ Augustine, *De civ.* 21.24 (*CSEL*, 40.2:557).

³⁶ Augustine, *De civ.* 21.24 (*CSEL*, 40.2:557).

³⁷ Augustine, *De civ.* 21.24 (*CSEL*, 40.2:559).

that they have no need for the assistance. By the kind of life, therefore, which each has borne through the body that which may benefit or not benefit is accomplished, whatever is piously done for that person when he has left the body. For the merit by which these things may benefit is sought in vain after this life, if none is obtained in this life.³⁸

Augustine insists on the importance of living a life of Christian virtue. For the saints either cannot hear or cannot will to intercede for those who have led lives without merits that dispose them to receive the spiritual aid of the other members of the body of Christ.

Communication

This leads to another issue: the lack of awareness the dead have of the living. Augustine addresses this in *De cura* as well. As he puts it, “the spirits of the dead are there, where they do not see whatever things are done or that happen in this human life.”³⁹ This lack of awareness is critical for Augustine’s account—mirroring the Ciceronian point—that the dead are not concerned with circumstances of their burial or lack of one.⁴⁰ Not only this, but in order for those souls in heaven not to be laden with the grief “they bear by suffering with others”⁴¹ it must be that they remain blissfully unaware of the afflictions undergone by the living. Augustine is left with a conflict: “How do the martyrs, by those benefits which are given to those who pray, reveal themselves to be interested in human affairs if the dead do not know what the living are doing?”⁴² To preserve the felicity of the saints, Augustine is forced to deny them immediate awareness of the mundane tribulations of those who remain below.

Augustine distinguishes three possible ways the saints in heaven may obtain mediated knowledge of those still on their earthly pilgrimage. The first is that the dead may learn of events progressively. As people die and make their way to heaven, they fill the gaps in the saints’ knowledge of world events.⁴³ A second possibility involves angelic messengers, “able to be now here, now there,” ferrying to the souls of the deceased that which they should know.⁴⁴ Third, the saints may be informed of past, present, and future events

³⁸ Augustine, *De cura* 1.2 (*PL*, 40:593).

³⁹ Augustine, *De cura* 13.16 (*PL*, 40:605).

⁴⁰ Augustine, *De cura* 2.4 (*PL*, 40:594–95).

⁴¹ Augustine, *De cura* 13.16 (*PL*, 40:605).

⁴² Augustine, *De cura* 16.19 (*PL*, 40:606).

⁴³ Augustine, *De cura* 14.17 (*PL*, 40:605).

⁴⁴ Augustine, *De cura* 15.18 (*PL*, 40:606).

on earth by means of divine revelation, like the prophets.⁴⁵ Each of these methods of communication is governed by divine providence. The dead may tell “not, indeed, everything, but those things which they are permitted to reveal . . . and of which it is proper for those to whom these things are revealed to hear.”⁴⁶ The angels deliver only those messages “which he to whom all things are subject judges each of the dead ought to hear.”⁴⁷ Finally, as with the prophets, divine revelation exposes only those things “which the providence of God judged ought to be revealed to them.”⁴⁸ For Augustine, the answer to the question of why the dead do not will to intercede for all the living or all the dead is their providential ignorance.

God deems it necessary for the dead to know some things and not others. By whatever method of selective revelation—none of the methods above are ruled out or deemed mutually exclusive by Augustine—the saints are involved in the outworking of God’s providential plan for creation. They *are* able to intercede, and in doing so to have a real effect on the living and the dead, but only in such a way that maintains the providence of God in ordering and governing creation toward its final end. The martyrs cannot be thought to have power that can operate in opposition to or independent of the will of God. “Rather it must be thought that the martyrs take part in the affairs of the living through divine power, since by their own nature they are not able to intervene in the affairs of the living.”⁴⁹ For Augustine, the import of this point is less his interest in establishing the mode of saintly knowing than it is in answering a question: to whom the glory?

Right Worship

While Augustine embraces the tradition of venerating martyrs’ relics and is convinced of the holiness of particular physical locations, he is nonetheless concerned that the role of saints and their relics is prone to misunderstanding. For this reason, he distinguishes the worship due to the Lord with the honor and veneration paid to the saints and their relics. This topic comes up in the sermons he preaches on the relics of St. Stephen. Stephen’s relics made their way into Augustine’s North African see late in his episcopacy and were associated with a number of miracles. Some of these are enumerated in the last book of *City of God*.⁵⁰ Augustine acknowledges Stephen’s miracles in Sermon 316, but he points to Christ and his worship as the reason for them.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *De cura* 15.18 (*PL*, 40:606).

⁴⁶ Augustine, *De cura* 15.18 (*PL*, 40:605).

⁴⁷ Augustine, *De cura* 15.18 (*PL*, 40:605–606).

⁴⁸ Augustine, *De cura* 15.18 (*PL*, 40:606).

⁴⁹ Augustine, *De cura* 16.19 (*PL*, 40:607).

⁵⁰ Augustine, *De civ.* 22.8.

Stephen did these things, but through the name of Christ. And he does no more than this now. Whatever you see done through the memory of Stephen, it is done in the name of Christ, so that Christ may be commended, Christ may be adored, Christ may be expected as the judge of the living and the dead, and so that those who love him may be stood up in the ranks to the right.⁵¹

The honor paid to the saint does not detract from the honor owed to the Lord. Right worship is properly directed only toward God. Stephen's power as an intercessor is linked directly to Christ's power, and the miracles performed because of his intercession are finally ordered toward drawing the world to Christ. Augustine says in another sermon: "For in this place we have not built an altar to Stephen, but from the relics of Stephen an altar to God."⁵²

Right worship of the Lord cannot be confused with the devotion shown to the saints. As Augustine writes in *City of God*, "our martyrs are not gods, because we know only one and the same God, who is both the martyrs' and ours."⁵³ The saints themselves have no power to miraculously intervene apart from the providential care of God. Prayers are answered through the saints by God, not apart from him. There's tension here, and the possibility of deep confusion on the part of the ill-catechized, which is why Augustine makes the distinctions between the saints and the Lord explicit in his preaching. Augustine's approach is representative of what would become the doctrinal position of the Catholic Church on this topic. While acknowledging the tension and the possible dangerous confusion associated with veneration of saints, the Church nevertheless embraces the practice.

Let me summarize the findings of this investigation of *De cura*. We can say: (1) Physical proximity to the remains of a deceased saint is not a sufficient condition to attain the spiritual benefits associated with intercession. This is especially true in the case of *ad sanctos* burial, where the lifeless body is simply incapable of receiving these benefits. (2) This does not preclude the possibility of the true holiness of particular locations, for example a martyr's shrine, through which God may bestow significant spiritual benefits upon those who visit them. (3) The benefit had by virtue of a location's holiness accrues to the living person visiting the place to the extent that they are spiritually disposed to receive it. (4) The benefits received by a supplicant can

⁵¹ Augustine, Sermon 316, no. 1 (*PL*, 38:1432).

⁵² Augustine, Sermon 318, no. 1 (*PL*, 38:1438).

⁵³ Augustine, *De civ.* 22.10 (*CSEL*, 40.2:613–14).

also be received by the soul of the deceased who has need of them, effected by the bond of love. (5) The saints can be made aware of and aid the living and the dead only by virtue of God's providence. These five findings can be extended to the Catholic practices involving saintly relics generally. I'll say more about the particular mode of interchange between the living and the dead in a moment. Augustine makes no definitive judgment concerning the specifics of the contact between the living and the dead, whether by a saint's presence,⁵⁴ the ministry of the angels,⁵⁵ or some combination of the two.⁵⁶ But while, as Rose says, "Augustine transforms his lack of wisdom into the climax of the treatise," passing over in silence the mechanics of intercession, his description of the Church as a *caritatis compago* (network of charity) is suggestive of his underlying ecclesiology. Within this framework, the relics of the saints are best understood as sacraments of the Church's unity.

The Church and Her Saints

Gregory of Nyssa

In order to better understand what I am advocating on Augustinian grounds, I want to survey an alternate position on the efficacy of relics. Gregory of Nyssa offers a view based on his understanding of the persistence of the body-soul connection. He sketches this position in *On the Soul and the Resurrection*. There, Gregory places the observation on the lips of his sister, Macrina, "The soul is in those elements which it has once entered, and no necessity breaks it off from its union with them."⁵⁷ Gregory, contra Augustine, is arguing for the soul's persistent awareness of the elements of the body, both in life and after death. This line of reasoning comes in the context of an argument for the immortality and simplicity of the soul, which, once "united in some ineffable manner to the compound of the elements, would also remain forever with those elements with which it was mixed."⁵⁸ This union is put in even stronger terms when discussing the general resurrection. The soul's awareness of the body's now-disintegrated physical matter is essential to that body's reconstitution. Therefore, Gregory argues, "whatever elements were joined to the soul at the beginning, it remains with them even

⁵⁴ Augustine, *De cura* 16.19 (*PL*, 40:607).

⁵⁵ Augustine, *De cura* 16.19 (*PL*, 40:607).

⁵⁶ Augustine, *De cura* 16.19–17.21 (*PL*, 40:607–9).

⁵⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. John Behr, Popular Patristics Series 12 (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1992), 48 (*PG*, 46:47–48).

⁵⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 46 (*PG*, 46:43–46).

after their dissolution, stationed like a guard over its own.”⁵⁹ This account of the soul’s continued intimacy with the body, its vigilance in watching over its members, even in death, provides a much more straightforward path to understanding both *ad sanctos* burial and the veneration of relics. Nyssa’s observations make plausible a direct connection between the souls of the dead via the proximity of their physical remains. Likewise, intercessory prayer before the bones of a martyr could be conveyed via the dead physical body to the living soul, which never breaks off contact. Relics of the saints act as direct communication devices between the living and the dead and, perhaps, the dead and the dead.

There are two difficulties with this position. The first, treated by Augustine, involves the providential ordering of communication between the living and the dead. If the soul of a deceased person is aware of her earthly remains, where they are and to what use they have been put, one must account for what both Augustine and Cicero were quick to dismiss as problematic notions of the soul’s continual concern for its own body and funerary arrangements. Further, the ongoing awareness of earthly grief brought about by the persistent union of body and soul would disrupt the beatitude of souls in heaven. To make this work, you would need to give a further account of what the soul’s blessedness in heaven consists in, if the soul is thought to remain in some way conscious of its body.

The second and more problematic of the two difficulties involves modern scientific knowledge about the nature of the human body and its changes over time. One example is the loss and replacement of cellular matter over the course of a human life. Does the soul maintain an awareness of the body’s scattered particulate matter? Why, then, am I unaware of these stray cells and their activities, even as I am of the parts of my body presently enlivened by my soul? The position is vulnerable to a *reductio ad absurdum* when one considers that much of any given person’s bodily matter has been part of another human body in the past and will be so again in the future. Do multiple souls, watching over their matter, lay claim to particular skin cells? Are there disagreements between souls regarding to whom a single carbon atom properly belongs? Gregory’s position can be attributed to an anthropology that thought about human bodies in ways no longer available to persons with a modern understanding of biology, and this makes it problematic for our considerations of the material of dead bodies.

Gregory is not the only one with an interest in the matter of dead human bodies. Augustine also addresses the question of the body’s matter and its

⁵⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 68 (PG, 46:75–78).

reconstitution, going so far as to ask how discarded hairs and fingernail clippings will be reintegrated at the general resurrection.⁶⁰ And in *De cura* he explicitly counts the works of piety surrounding the care for the dead as beneficial “on account of the faith of resurrection.”⁶¹ More recently, the International Theological Commission (ITC) weighed in on the issue of fleshly remains. Citing the Council of Trent, the ITC associates the cult of relics with faith in the bodily resurrection. At the same time, it explains: “The Church has never taught that the very same matter is required for the body to be said to be the same.”⁶² In other words, while attention to the matter of dead human bodies is important, we need not be bound to Nyssa’s view of the ongoing connection between body and soul after death. In fact, this is liable to cause more problems than it solves. Likewise, difficulties in Augustine’s thought concerning the particular matter of a dead body and its relation to the resurrected body can be avoided if we avoid this view.

Care for the bodies of the dead signals faith in the resurrection, but in light of some of the difficulties just highlighted, it is worth asking whether the cult of the saints and their relics is primarily motivated by this association. As I have already suggested, drawing support from Augustine’s *De cura*, it may be more appropriate to think of relics as sacraments of the Church’s unity. Having briefly compassed the difficulties of one alternative perspective, I will now turn to some of the conciliar teachings of the Church that touch on relics and the practices surrounding them. The primary sources for this come from the Second Council of Nicaea, the Fourth Lateran Council, the Council of Trent, and the Second Vatican Council.

Conciliar Definitions

Nicaea II groups the veneration of relics into the category of unwritten ecclesiastical traditions. Here, the adoration due “to sacred, memorial relics” is the same owed to “venerable and sacred images” and “to the figure of the precious and life-giving cross and to the sacred gospels.”⁶³ This adoration is carefully distinguished from “true worship, which according to the faith is proper to be bestowed only to the divine nature.”⁶⁴ Further, it threatens excommunication for those who reject these teachings concerning the

⁶⁰ Augustine, *De civ.* 22.19 (*CSEL*, 40.2:628–31).

⁶¹ Augustine, *De cura* 3.5 (*PL*, 40:595).

⁶² International Theological Commission, *Some Current Questions in Eschatology* (1992), section 1.2.5.

⁶³ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner and Giuseppe Alberigo (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 135–36.

⁶⁴ Tanner, *Decrees*, 136.

“sacred relics of the martyrs.”⁶⁵ According to Nicaea II, we can affirm that relics are worthy of adoration, that this adoration is distinct in kind from the worship accorded only to the Lord, and that the practice bears a resemblance to the honor afforded the crucifix, the book of the Gospels, and the holy icons. The Council also decries the practice of the iconoclasts, who removed not only the holy icons but also the relics of the martyrs. It reinstates the tradition of accompanying the consecration of churches with the installation of relics, and bishops are threatened with deposition if they are found to have abandoned the practice.⁶⁶ This provides some aid in discerning what should be done with relics, but no strict definition of how they should be understood to function.

At Lateran IV, further specification is given to the kinds of licit practices associated with relics. The “ancient relics, from this point forward, may neither be displayed outside their case nor put up for sale.”⁶⁷ The Council also prohibits the veneration of newly discovered relics until first approved by the Pope, and there is a definite attempt to rein in the stories surrounding the cult of relics. Prelates are advised not to allow people “to be deceived by empty fictions or false documents.”⁶⁸ These directives are meant to curb abuses in the cult of the martyrs. They point out possible areas of tension between the local and universal Church. Again, however, the definitions of Lateran IV are not concerned with the mode of interchange between the living and the dead effected by relics.

Trent offers more specifics on the way relics function. These specifics align well with my reading of Augustine’s *De cura* and add plausibility to my speculative suggestion about the role of relics. Bishops and those in a teaching capacity are instructed to “diligently instruct the faithful about the intercession, invocation, honor of the relics, and legitimate use of images of the saints.”⁶⁹ The veneration of relics is here directly associated with requests for the intercession of the saints, who, “reigning together with Christ, offer their prayers to God for the people.”⁷⁰ The benefits of their intercession are explained as coming “from God through his Son Jesus Christ our lord.”⁷¹ Further, the Council affirms that the bodies of the saints and martyrs are themselves a locus of such blessings.

⁶⁵ Tanner, *Decrees*, 137.

⁶⁶ Tanner, *Decrees*, 145.

⁶⁷ Tanner, *Decrees*, 263.

⁶⁸ Tanner, *Decrees*, 263.

⁶⁹ Tanner, *Decrees*, 774.

⁷⁰ Tanner, *Decrees*, 774.

⁷¹ Tanner, *Decrees*, 774.

The sacred bodies of the saints and also the martyrs and others living with Christ, which were living members of Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit, are due to be raised and glorified by him to eternal life. They deserve to be venerated by the faithful, and through them many blessings from God are manifested to the people.⁷²

Trent makes explicit the connection between the bodies of the saints and their intercession. It further associates the veneration of relics with Christian hope in the resurrection. This Council also, following Nicaea II, identifies the honor due to the relics with the use of images of the saints. This connection between relics and icons suggests a trajectory for speculation about how the Church as a *caritatis compago* functions to bring about the blessings to be had through the relics of the martyrs. Before turning to that, I want to examine how the question of relics is treated in the documents of Vatican II.

Vatican II's first constitution, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, reaffirms the tradition of honoring the saints, and of holding "their authentic relics and images in veneration."⁷³ While this is the only explicit mention of relics the Council makes, it is notable that it once again provides conciliar evidence of an explicit connection between icons and relics. The Council goes on in *Lumen Gentium* to give a full-throated affirmation of the unity of the pilgrim Church on earth and those who sleep in the peace of Christ. This unity is by no means weakened by their death. "On the contrary, according to the perennial faith of the Church, the communication of spiritual goods is strengthened."⁷⁴ The saints in heaven add to the unity of the Church because they are "more intimately united with Christ," and this intimacy is communicated to the Church as a whole on earth as in heaven.⁷⁵ Interceding for the Church and ennobling the Church's worship, they gain many good things for the Church here below "by fraternal solicitude."⁷⁶ Although this section of *Lumen Gentium* is not dealing with the practices surrounding relics, the affirmation of the Church existing on earth and in heaven, united with Jesus Christ in such a way as to be able to share the benefits of that union with the Church on earth, can be understood in terms of the spiritual contact described by Augustine in *De baptismo* or a further explication of the *caritatis compago* from Sermon 162a. The Council's affirmation of the traditional connection between relics and icons and its explanation of the

⁷² Tanner, *Decrees*, 775.

⁷³ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §111, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 839.

⁷⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, §49, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 889.

⁷⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, §49, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 889.

⁷⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, §49, in Tanner, *Decrees*, 889.

Church united in Christ will serve as two focal points for applying the findings from *De cura* to the doctrinal teaching of the Catholic Church on this point.

The Theology of Icons

Jean-Luc Marion, in his reading of the Nicaea II's definitions on icons, emphasizes the connection between the icon and the Cross. Both, he explains, are types: "The icon, like the Cross, is equivalent to a type."⁷⁷ Like the Cross, icons "should also be received as types, according to a mode that approaches the type par excellence: the Cross."⁷⁸ As a type, the Cross, and by extension the icon, "does not reproduce its original according to degrees of similitude but rather refers itself paradoxically to a prototype more indicated than shown."⁷⁹ This places the icon outside the category of mimetic representation according to similitude. Just as in Jesus Christ on the Cross, the pierced, lifeless body of a man, reveals the divinity and holiness of God not by way of similarity but by way of paradox, so too can the holy icons, as types of this type, bridge the gap between the image and the one imaged. In the Cross, "the distance between the invisible sense and the effectively visible spectacle is never so ruptured as it is here, where it is a matter of crossing from this exhausted corpse to the glory of the living God."⁸⁰ Crossing this gap is not and cannot be accomplished by imitation, but rather "moves from the visible to the invisible by recognition."⁸¹ The icon, like the Cross of Christ, "repeats the transition from the visible to the invisible that made the Cross the sign of the glory of the Holy."⁸² This transition from visible to invisible, accomplished by recognition rather than imitation, as when the centurion exclaims, "Truly, this was the Son of God!" (Matt 27:54; cf. Mark 15:39), functions, in Marion's treatment, under the sign of return.

Not only does the icon not imitate the prototype it figures by attempting to accomplish a visual likeness by way of similitude, it instead repeats the self-emptying of the Son on the Cross by way of an "aesthetic asceticism."⁸³ The icon is not itself holy except in referring or transferring holiness to the

⁷⁷ Jean-Luc Marion, "The Prototype and the Image," in *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 69.

⁷⁸ Marion, "Prototype," 70.

⁷⁹ Marion, "Prototype," 70.

⁸⁰ Marion, "Prototype," 73.

⁸¹ Marion, "Prototype," 74.

⁸² Marion, "Prototype," 75.

⁸³ Marion, "Prototype," 76.

invisible. "The icon is ordered to holiness by never claiming it for itself."⁸⁴ Marion's logic is immediately evident in icons of Christ, who is God, but it is also easily extended to icons of the saints, whose lives make sense only in terms of a transfer and return of holiness to the one who makes holy. This is the force of God's command to "consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:44). The language of consecration connotes dedication and helps make sense of the lives of the saints under the sign of return. The force of this statement may be interpreted "consecrate yourselves" to me, God, for then you will "be holy, for I am holy." In referring her life to God by consecrating it, the saint effects the transfer necessary to make holiness present. An image of a saint accomplishes this transfer at a remove: an image (the icon) of the image (the saint) of the image (Jesus Christ) of the Father. The orientation of this transfer ensures that the glory is passed appropriately to God, and to that extent obviates the iconoclastic worry that the icon or the saint portrayed might be worshipped rather than venerated.

Key to this understanding of the role of the icon is what Cardinal Christoph Schönborn has called "the ultimate root of all theology of the icon," that "God has a perfect icon of himself."⁸⁵ The relationship between Jesus Christ and God the Father is one of making present the latter by way of the former without collapsing the fundamental difference between the persons.⁸⁶ The persons are, in fact, constituted in this way, with the Son as the image of the Father, such that "the Father works *through* the Son, and for this reason the Father is known *through* the Son."⁸⁷ The identity and difference, or perhaps the identity *through* difference, here described can be accomplished, as Marion has suggested, only by recognition. Such recognition is not due to anything obviously visible, but is instead the work of God, for "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3). Another clear example of this occurs in Matt 16, where Peter, having confessed Jesus as the Christ, is told by Jesus, "Blessed are you Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 16:17). Recognition of the invisible via the visible, whether of the consubstantial nature of person of Jesus Christ with the Father or the holiness of an icon, occurs by the grace of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. What is made visible in Christ's "outward humbleness," per Schönborn, "is the very revelation of the greatness of love from which it flows. The self-abandonment

⁸⁴ Marion, "Prototype," 77.

⁸⁵ Christoph Schönborn, *God's Human Face: The Christ Icon*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 13.

⁸⁶ See John 14:9.

⁸⁷ Schönborn, *God's Human Face*, 42.

even to the point of the ugliness of death makes visible the love of the Father, a love willing to give the Son in sacrifice.”⁸⁸ Only by this grace can an icon—can Christ—be recognized. The revelation of the love of God also reveals its transitive quality. It flows out in the Incarnation and back in the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. The pattern of outflow that makes possible a return governs the theology of the icon. As I will argue in my conclusion, this reinforces and further explains the work of relics within the *caritatis compago* that is the Church.

Conclusion

Relics function sacramentally by making present the unity of the Church as it exists in heaven and on earth. The treatment of relics in the doctrine of the Church suggests that we ought to think of them functioning in a manner similar to icons. The doctrinal collocation of the *imagines* and *reliquae* invites a further speculative suggestion. Painting an icon, the human act of collecting materials, mixing paints, applying them to a surface with the intent to make present the holiness of the person imaged, bears a deep resemblance to the process by which the physical matter of human bodies is sanctified. Rather than being painted by humans, however, the bodies of the saints are icons painted by God.⁸⁹ Their bodies are sanctified by their actions insofar as they are ordered to God, an ordering made possible by living in Christ. As St. Paul puts it, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). By putting on Jesus Christ (Rom 13:14), the saint is consecrated to God and can be holy as God is Holy (Lev 11:44). Nowhere is this more evident than in the lives and deaths of the martyrs. As Servais Pinckaers has argued, “What first makes the martyr is the action of Christ, reproducing in the believer his Passion, with its two dimensions of suffering until death and victory over death through the power of the Father’s love.”⁹⁰ This identification with Christ’s Passion is evident in the martyr narratives

⁸⁸ Schönborn, *God’s Human Face*, 89–90.

⁸⁹ Interesting examples of overlap between the position advocated here present themselves in the tradition of the icons “not made by hands,” the *archeipoiētoi*. Various cases—the vernicle, the mandylion, the Shroud of Turin, or the tilma of St. Juan Diego—all present themselves as instances of this phenomenon and suggest a precedent for thinking of God as a painter or maker of icons. For a treatment of some of these cases and their complicated history, see Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a ‘True’ Image* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991).

⁹⁰ Servais Pinckaers, *The Spirituality of Martyrdom: To the Limits of Love*, trans. Patrick M. Clark and Annie Hounsokou (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 71.

themselves. This often takes the form of explicit self-identification, as when Ignatius of Antioch finds himself “being in bonds united with Christ Jesus,”⁹¹ or when Polycarp is honored to drink “the cup thy Christ.”⁹² Similarly, the narrators of the martyr accounts make similar claims, as when Blandina in the *Martyrdom of Lyon and Vienne* was “hung on a wooden beam” and “was clothed with Christ.”⁹³ Importantly, the martyr acts, as acts of witness, are not self-referential. They are oriented away from the self in two directions, first toward Christ, as the source and inspiration of the martyr’s holy suffering, and second toward the Church, which as the body of Christ is strengthened by the martyr’s witness unto death. In the way that Christ visibly mediates the presence of the invisible God, so the martyr re-mediates the physical reality of Christ, thereby becoming an image of the image of God. By enduring the descent into physical suffering and death, the martyr can truly claim to be “crucified with Christ” such that it is no longer the martyr who lives but Christ who lives in him (Gal 2:20).

The mediating capacity of the martyr’s body is found in Ignatius’ claim, “I am God’s grain, I am being ground by the beasts’ teeth in order to be found to be the pure bread of Christ.”⁹⁴ Likewise, Polycarp’s body, upon being engulfed in flames, gives off a scent, “not as burning flesh, but as bread baking.”⁹⁵ This Eucharistic imagery evokes the great unifying and mediating sacrament of the Church, in which the martyr’s bodily self no longer partakes, but itself becomes. As Pinckaers explains, “Martyrdom is inscribed into the unity of the body of Christ; . . . [it] should be understood in the context of that unity of Christ’s body and the church, particularly as that unity is signified by the Eucharist.”⁹⁶ The importance of the physical remains of the martyrs as objects sanctified by their holy deaths was often recognized by the Christians present at the martyrdom. In the case of Polycarp, they collected his burnt bones and safeguarded them as objects of veneration.⁹⁷ The claim I am making here is that these physical objects, the bodies of the martyrs ideal-typically and the saints more generally, continue to function in a mediatory manner.

⁹¹ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 1.1, in *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity*, ed. and trans. Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie (London: Routledge, 2002).

⁹² *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14.2.

⁹³ *Martyrdom of Lyon and Vienne* 5.1.41–42, in *Martyrdom and Noble Death*.

⁹⁴ Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans* 4.1.

⁹⁵ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 15.2.

⁹⁶ Pinckaers, *Spirituality of Martyrdom*, 77.

⁹⁷ *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 18.1–3.

The saints make present the unity of the Church that is the body of Jesus Christ in having emptied themselves and referred themselves body and soul to God. This action sanctifies the physical matter of these bodies, which remains holy even after the death of the saint precisely under the sign of return. The dead human bodies of saints function like the painted icon of Christ or one of his saints. They can do so when they are recognized as objects whose holiness is referred and transferred to the one imaged, Jesus Christ. Those who approach relics in the faith that God can work through the bones of a deceased martyr are able to recognize this holiness. As living members of the Church, they are connected to the *caritatis compago*, the network of charity as a trans-spatiotemporal entity. Love transits this network, passing from God to creature and creature to God, powered by the recognition of holiness that engenders the unity of will ordered to the source of all holiness. The blessings and miracles that Augustine readily attributes to God working through the saints are part of this network's proper functioning. These manifestations of holiness, centered on the bodies of the saints sanctified, painted, by God for this purpose, make sacramentally present the unity of the Church's body by directing prayer along the same trajectory of return traced by that body in Jesus Christ's self-gift on the Cross. The flowing out from God and the flowing back to God which the Church seeks to embody in her liturgical life is thus active in the relics of the Church's saints, which have been made holy by God for that purpose.