

Module 208: Guibert de Nogent

The Saints And Their Relics Guibert de Nogent; Trans. C.G. Coulton [c.1910] Modernized and abridged by Stephen Tomkins. Prepared for the web by Dan Graves.

“Do they believe John the Baptist was two-headed?”

Module Introduction

Devotion to the relics of saints, prayer to them (or to God through them) and celebration of their feast days began pretty early in the story of the church.

In the second century, friends and devotees of the martyr Polycarp took his bones and buried them in a secret place where they met annually to celebrate his martyrdom and elevation to glory. It is easy to see how people might start to feel that the body of a glorified saint was a place where heaven touched the earth with special power, and uniquely close to the hearing of God. It is also not hard to see how prayer and worship at the graveside or memorial of a saint might develop into the idea that the saints might reiterate ones prayers to God, and be worthy of veneration themselves.

And so throughout the Middle Ages the saints were absolutely central to Christian worship. Prayer was offered through and to them, believers made pilgrimages to visit their relics for spiritual blessing, healing etc., and the calendar revolved around their festivals.

Whatever the merits of such spirituality (during the Reformation Catholics and Protestants violently disagreed on this issue), there was always a danger of superstition; and the moneymaking possibilities of supposed holy bones invited widespread corruption.

This writing is a criticism of the abuse of medieval relics and saint-worship. But it is not by a later Protestant like Martin Luther or a humanist like Erasmus - both of whom denounced the whole thing. The writer, Guibert de Nogent, was a French abbot who lived from 1053 to ca. 1122, and ruled the great abbey of Nogent-sous-Coucy. He fully supported worship centered around

the saints, but saw grave abuses that needed to be challenged.

He was also involved in church politics, and supported Bernard in condemning Abelard.

What shall I say about the saints who have no reliable testimony to support their fame, and who are obscured rather than illuminated by the worthless stories that surround them? The ones whose origins and middle years are unknown, and whose death - about which all their praise is sung - is a matter of fiction? Who can pray for their intercession without knowing whether they possess any merits before God?...

I knew some men who brought the body of a "saint" from Brittany, revering as a confessor [i.e. one imprisoned for faith]. Then they suddenly changed their minds and celebrated him as a martyr. When I asked why, they had no better reason for his martyrdom than for his confessorship.

I call God to witness, that I have read about one St. Pyro, but when I researched into the death of this man that I had taken for a saint, I found his mark of sanctity to be this - that he fell into a well when drunk with wine, and died.

I also remember what Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury, said about one of his predecessors who had been thrown into prison, and the only reason he was killed is that he refused to pay the ransom.... [editor's note: He refers to Alphege, whose reason for not paying the enormous ransom was admirable—he wished to spare his people hardship, for they had already been bled dry by the Danes.]

So, let the bishops and the guardians of God's people see to it that, if the people have a zeal for God it is based on knowledge, so that they might not sin by their lack of discernment. If the prophet is right to say, "Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil," [Isaiah 5:20] then what perversity can be greater than to thrust bodies on the sacred

altars of men who, in their lifetime, deserved to be thrust out of the Church itself!

I once saw, and blush to relate, how a common boy, closely related to a certain highly renowned abbot, died in a village near Beauvais on Good Friday. Simply because of the holy day on which he died, people began to attribute an uncalled-for sanctity to the dead boy. Rumors spread among the country-folk, always desperate for something new, and the next thing you know villagers from all over were coming to his tomb with prayers and wax tapers. A monument was built over him, then a stone building, and crowds of the lower classes visited from all over Brittany. That wise abbot and his monks saw this, and were enticed by the multitude of gifts the people brought, and permitted them to invent false miracles. Well, the vulgar, covetous herd may be impressed by feigned deafness, counterfeit madness, fingers deliberately cramped into the palm, and feet twisted up under the thighs, but about a modest, wise man, who claims to aim at holiness, who supports such things?

We often see these things made trite by gossip, and by people ridiculously carrying round sacred shrines in order to collect alms. Every day we see some man's purse emptied by the lies of those men who shake us with their swindles and religious flattery, as St Jerome said, gobbling more than parasites, gluttons, or dogs, and chattering more ceaselessly than ravens or magpie.

But why do I accuse the multitude, without citing specific examples of this error? A famous church once sent its servants wandering around with its shrine. [Probably the Cathedral of Laon]. It employed a preacher to get donations for repairing recent damage. This man, after a long and exaggerated sermon about his relics, brought out a little case and said, in my presence, "In this little container is some of the very bread the Lord pressed with his own teeth. And if you do not believe me, this great man" - pointing to

me — “whose renown in learning you all know, will come forward, if need be, to corroborate my words.”

I blushed for shame to hear this, and if it had not been for my reverence for his employers I would have unmasked the forger.

If claims to martyrdom are this hard to judge, how shall we decide when it comes to confessors? The common consent of the Church agrees in the case of St. Martin, St. Remy, and such great saints, but what about those new saints who appear every day and are set up in rivalry to them by the common folk of our towns and villages? How do they expect a man to be their patron saint concerning about whom they know nothing whatsoever? You will find no record of them but their names. And yet, while the clergy hold their peace, old wives and herds of base wenches chant the lying legends of these patron saints at their looms and their embroidering-frames - and if you refute their words they will attack you in defense of these fables not only with words but even with their spindles.

Who but a complete lunatic would call on such saints to intercede for him when there is not the faintest idea left in men’s minds to tell what they once were? And what is the point of a prayer said in utter uncertainty of the one supposed to be interceding with God? How can it be profitable when it cannot be without sin? For if you pray to a man whose sanctity you do not know, then you sin by not discerning rightly.

But why should I labor this point at such length, when the whole Holy Church is so modest in her claims that she dares not even state that the body of the Lord’s Mother has been glorified by resurrection because she cannot prove it by the necessary arguments! If we may not state this of her whose glory no creature can measure, we must call for eternal silence for those of whom we do not even know even

whether they are saved or damned.

There are things written about certain saints which are far worse than old wives' fables, with which we should not even pollute the ears of swineherds. Since many claim a great history for their patron saints, they demand in these modern times that their biographies should be written - something I have often been asked to do. But I may be deceived even in that which passes under my own eyes - how can I tell the truth of those things which no one ever saw? If I were to repeat what I have heard said about these unknown saints, then I would be as guilty as they.

Leaving these unauthorized saints, let us consider those of which we have sure faith. Even among these there are infinite errors. Sometimes one and the same saint is claimed by two different churches: e.g., the clergy of Constantinople claim to possess the head of John Baptist, yet the monks of Angers maintain the same claim. Do both these bodies of clergy believe him to have been two-headed? But seriously, since the head cannot have been duplicated, one or the other follows a grievous falsehood. And if they attack each other in this pious matter with arrogance and lies then they worship not God but the Devil. Therefore, both the deceived and deceivers the worship wrongfully that very relic they boast about. And if they worship an unworthy object, what a great peril all the worshippers are exposed too. Even if, not being John Baptist's head, it belongs to some other saint, there is still the serious matter of lying.

But why focus on the Baptist's head, when I hear the same tale daily concerning innumerable saints' bodies? When my predecessor, the Bishop of Amiens, came to translate the body (supposedly) of St. Firmin from the old shrine to a new one, he found not a shred of parchment there - not even a single letter - to prove who lay there. This I have heard with mine own ears from the bishops of Arras and Amiens. So the Bishop wrote FIRMIN THE MARTYR, BISHOP OF AMIENS on a

lead plate, and laid it in the shrine.

Soon afterwards, the abbot at the monastery of St Denis performed a similar removal of their own saint to a more splendid shrine. But in the ceremony of translation, as his head and bones were taken from their wrappings, a slip of parchment was found in his nostrils, affirming him to be FIRMIN, BISHOP OF AMIENS!

Here is an illustration of my complaints, which may pass judgment on the instances I have mentioned. Odo, Bishop of Bayeux, was eager to possess the body of St Exuperius, his predecessor, who was specially worshipped in the town of Corbeil. So he paid a hundred pounds to the sacristan of the church that had the relics. But the sacristan cunningly dug up the bones of a peasant named Exuperius and brought them to the Bishop. The Bishop, not content with assertion, exacted from him an oath that these bones brought were those of Saint Exuperius.

"I swear," replied the man, "that these are the bones of Exuperius: as to his sanctity I cannot swear, since many who earn the title of saints are far from holiness."

Thus the thief assuaged the Bishop's suspicions and set his mind at rest. But the townsfolk heard of the bargain which the custodian had made with their patron saint, and called him before them.

He replied, "Look at the seals on his shrine, and, if you find them broken, I will pay the penalty."

You see what disgrace this Bishop's bargain brought upon religion when the bones of this profane peasant Exuperius were thrust upon God's holy altar, which maybe will never be purged of them. I can remember so many such things done everywhere that I do not have the time or strength to tell them here - fraudulent bargains in limbs or portions of limbs, common bones being sold as relics of the saints. The

men who do this are plainly the kind St Paul talks about: they suppose gain to be godliness. They make into a mere excrement of their money-bags the things which (if they only knew it) would be the salvation of their souls.

Discussion Starters:

What, to sum up, are Guibert's complaints?

"If the people have a zeal for God it [should be] based on knowledge." Why, according to Guibert, is it so bad for people to be misinformed and misled about the saints? Is he right to take it this seriously?

How do you imagine such tall stories about the saints might develop? And what about falsely identified relics? Do the stories Guibert tells here provide any answers?

What is Guibert's attitude to the veneration of saints in general? What does he say about valid examples? What do you think of this attitude?

What is his attitude to uneducated believers? What responsibility do you think they bear for the abuses and problems? What measures could or should the Catholic church have taken to improve things?

As he criticizes apocryphal stories so strongly, how reliable do you think Guibert's own stories are?

What impression do you get from this passage of the spiritual life of ordinary medieval Christians?.

Bible Verses

2 Kings 17:35-39

Psalm 149 Acts 14:11-18

2 Timothy 2:1-8

Hebrews 11:32-12:3