

CHAPTER 5

The Nature of Cult

Name, Body, Text

A saint was not a person of a particular type but a person who was treated in a particular way. That "way" can be summed up by the word "cult," and its three key elements were public recognition of the name and the day of the saint; special treatment of the saint's bodily remains; and celebration of the saint in writing.

In its very earliest and simplest form in the cult of the martyrs, the commemoration of a saint involved, as a minimum, the recording of a name and a day—the date of the martyr's death, his or her "birthday" into heaven. The Roman funerary inscription "Hyacinth, martyr, buried 11 September," mentioned earlier (on p. 8), or the earliest list of martyrs (see p. 13) are of this type. Clearly the name was necessary, since it is hard to invoke anonymous saints, while the day of their transition to the heavenly kingdom was a natural time for Christians to remember them.

Invocation means uttering a name, and the name itself has power. Both Christianity and other traditions stress the Holy Name, since it is important to know which supernatural power one is addressing. One of the things that Moses has to ask of God, when confronted with him at the burning bush, is his name. What, he asks, should he say when he tells the Hebrew slaves that God has sent him and they demand to know "What is his name?" (Exodus 3:13). The name unlocked supernatural energy. Jesus promised "whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do" (John 14:13). Similarly, to invoke the saints was to summon up their power through the utterance of their name. "Wherever St. Foy is named, there also is her power," wrote the author of her *Miracles*.¹ St. Francis's biographer, Thomas of Celano, described how the saint's miraculous help could be procured "simply at the invocation of his name."²

But more than one saint might have the same name. One eleventh-century German, instructed in a dream to seek out a cure for his ailments at the shrine of St. Maximinus, went first to the shrine of St. Maximinus of Trier, then to the only approximately appropriate shrine of St. Maximus at Chinon, before finally hitting

¹ Bernard of Angers, *Liber miraculorum sancte Fidis* 1. 33, p. 143.

² Thomas of Celano, *Vita prima sancti Francisci* 3. 120, p. 96.

the right spot in Micy near Orleans, where the monks of the monastery of St. Maximus (St. Mesmin) recorded his miraculous cure.³ And there are instances of medieval writers and artists getting their saints mixed up. A fifteenth-century Spanish breviary confuses two saints called Dominic.⁴ In one edition of the *Golden Legend*, the Life of the thirteenth-century Elizabeth of Thuringia is introduced by an illustration showing an incident in the life of her namesake, the biblical St. Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, while in another version of the same work her Life has a heading "Here begins the Life of St. Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist."⁵ In the first case the illustrator had become confused, or been given misleading instructions; in the second the rubricator responsible for the headings had obviously not read very far into the text.

The need to be exact about names is emphasized by a curious moment in the canonization process of Thomas de Cantilupe in 1307. One witness claimed that "St. Thomas" had appeared to him in a vision when he was in prison, promising that he would not die on the scaffold. The papal commissioners immediately launched into cross-examination. The witness had presumed the saint was Thomas de Cantilupe but there were other saints called Thomas, such as Thomas the apostle and Thomas Becket. They wanted to know how the witness could be sure that the visionary figure was Thomas de Cantilupe rather than some other Thomas.⁶

But sometimes such ambiguities were disregarded. The monk who recorded the miracles of St. Margaret of Scotland at her shrine in Dunfermline did not mind that many humble folk gathered there on the feast-day of St. Margaret the virgin martyr, for "perhaps they believed our Margaret to be the precious martyr of the same name." This "identity of name" had led them into "a devout error" but not deprived them of grace and reward. "There is no disunity between those who reign jointly in the kingdom of heaven," he remarked. Although the two Margarets differed "in essence," they were similar "in mind and work."⁷ A more rigorous attempt to identify the saint in question can be found in a rather different situation. When St. Martin's relics had found a temporary home in the church of St. Germanus in Auxerre, a dispute arose about which saint was responsible for the miraculous cures that were occurring—Martin or Germanus. To resolve these doubts, an empirical test was devised: a leper was placed overnight between the shrines of Martin and Germanus. In the morning only that half of the diseased man adjacent to Martin's tomb was found to be cured.⁸

The place of burial and the day of death are what the great hagiographical scholar Hippolyte Delehaye called, by analogy with geometry, "the hagiographic coordi-

³ Head, "I Vow Myself to Be Your Servant"; idem, *Hagiography and the Cult of the Saints: The Diocese of Orleans, 800–1200*, pp. 12–13, 169–71.

⁴ Lappin, *The Medieval Cult of Saint Dominic of Silos*, p. 380.

⁵ Bertelsmeier-Kierst, ed., *Elisabeth von Thüringen und die neue Frömmigkeit in Europa*, p. 274 and n. 57.

⁶ BAV, Vat. lat. 4015, fol. 221.

⁷ *Miracula sancte Margarete Scotorum regine* 8, p. 90.

⁸ *De reversione beati Martini a Burgundia* 5–6, cols. 827–29.

nates," that is, those two pieces of information, which together give a unique identification.⁹ These coordinates helped define a saint. As a consequence, there are many people of the late antique and medieval period whose day of death is known, but whose year of death is uncertain, since contemporaries were concerned to record which day they died, for commemorative purposes, but did not have the same concern with the much less highly charged fact of the calendar year. Specification of a saint's day allows saints with the same name to be distinguished: when St. Thomas, for example, is commemorated on 21 December, this must be the apostle; if on the 29 December, it is Thomas Becket, the murdered archbishop of Canterbury. The names of the saints had an impact on the naming choices of worshippers (see later), while the commemoration of their feast-days flowered into a major aspect of Christian liturgy (also discussed later), with special services for the main saints and careful recording of feast-days in ecclesiastical Kalendars.

Saints' days made their mark on secular life as well as on the round of church services. In the lands north of the Alps, dating for many purposes, economic and legal as well as ecclesiastical, turned on saints' days.¹⁰ For example, of the 209 agreements drawn up in the court of Richard I of England during the ninth year of his reign (1197-98), although three are so damaged it is not possible to be sure of their dating convention, of the remaining 206, no fewer than 204 are dated by reference to a saint's day or major church feast (of the two that are not so dated, one has no day at all, one has a date of the familiar modern form "19 January"). The most common feast-days of the 36 referred to are St. Matthew (26 cases), St. Luke (22), Easter (19) and the Conversion of St. Paul (13), and there are several singular occurrences (including the English saints Botolph, Swithun, and Bertholin). For the English royal judges of this period, their proceedings were signposted by the saints.¹¹

Dating by church festivals was by no means the only method. There were other ways of dating documents, notably the Roman system, which was based on reference to three fixed points in the month (Kalends, Nones, and Ides), and the continuous form (1 August, 2 August, 3 August) used in the modern world, and these were preferred in some times and places and by particular authorities. The popes and the Holy Roman emperors of the High Middle Ages, for example, dated their official documents according to the Roman system, as did many other rulers, while the modern system, always common in Italy, became increasingly important throughout western Europe at the end of the Middle Ages. It was the thirteenth century,

⁹ Delehaye, *Cinq leçons sur la méthode hagiographique*, pp. 13-14.

¹⁰ For the use of saints' days for dating documents, see Sachse, *Das Aufkommen der Datierungen nach dem Festkalender*; Bresslau, *Handbuch der Urkundenlehre* 2, pp. 393-478, "Die Datierung der Urkunden"; Loricin, "Le temps chez les humbles: passé, présent et futur dans les testaments foréziens"; Cheney, *A Handbook of Dates for Students of British History*, pp. 59-95; Rück, "Zur Verbreitung der Festdatierung im 13. Jahrhundert," with a survey of the bibliography and historiography at pp. 145-49; Mitterauer, *Ahnen und Heilige*, p. 472 n. 328.

¹¹ *Feet of Fines of the ninth year of the reign of King Richard I.*

in the lands north of the Alps, that saw, alongside an increasing precision in dating documents, a move towards dating by church feasts. For example, the number of Genevan documents dated to the day was around 40 per cent at the beginning of the thirteenth century, but around 95 per cent at the end of that century. The first Genevan document dated by a church feast occurs in 1201, and, by 1265, 60 per cent of documents dated to the day are dated in this way. The Roman and the continuous modern forms of dating are also found, and the latter takes over by the middle of the fourteenth century.¹² An interesting phrase in a Bavarian charter of 1226 suggests that the Roman system was considered less familiar to lay people than the system of church feasts: it is a grant dated "the second day before the Nones of May, which is known to lay people as the feast of St. John before the Latin Gate."¹³ The chroniclers and historians of the Middle Ages, who were frequently monks or clerics, also turned naturally to feast-days to date events, although they were often eclectic in their dating conventions.

Some saints' days had a wide significance in everyday life, like St. Michael's day (29 September), which coincided roughly with the end of harvest and the growing season, and was one of the commonest terms for paying rent in more than one part of Europe—in the twelfth century the tenants of the abbey of Santo Domingo de Silos in Castile paid their rent half at Easter and half on St. Michael's Day, while payments from the burgh of Elgin, more than a thousand miles from Santo Domingo, were made to the bishop of Moray in Scotland at exactly these same two terms.¹⁴ St. Martin's day (11 November, "Martinmas" as it was called in English from at least the tenth century) likewise made a natural break in the agricultural year, after the spring-sown grains had been harvested and the autumn-sown grains sown.¹⁵ When the archbishop of Magdeburg built up a new village in the eastern part of his diocese, he granted the settlers freedom from rent and tolls for five years, "starting on the feast-day of St. Martin in the year of the Lord's incarnation 1159."¹⁶ St. Remigius's (St. Remi's) day (1 October) had a similar significance in northern France. For instance, when Henry II endowed prayers for his father, Geoffrey of Anjou, from his income from Le Mans, the payments were to be made in four instalments: Easter, St. John's day, St. Remi's day, and Christmas.¹⁷

Fairs and markets were also linked to saints' days (modern German *Messe*, "fair," comes from *missa*, "Mass"). The burgesses of Hamburg were granted the right to hold a big market twice a year, "on the Assumption of St. Mary and on the feast-day

¹² Rück, "Zur Verbreitung der Festdatierung im 13. Jahrhundert," pp. 169–70.

¹³ *Monumenta Boica* 8, p. 324 (for Bernried).

¹⁴ *Documentación del monasterio de Santo Domingo de Silos (954–1254)*, no. 47, p. 61; *Acts of William I, King of Scots, 1165–1214* no. 360, p. 355.

¹⁵ "Martines mæssan": *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, s.a. 913, pp. 96–97.

¹⁶ Helbig and Weinrich, eds., *Urkunden und erzählende Quellen zur deutschen Ostsiedlung* 1, p. 76, no. 12.

¹⁷ *Recueil des actes de Henri II* 1, p. 494, no. 354.

of St. Vitus," giving them a nicely spaced pattern of an August and a March fair.¹⁸ St. Giles's fair, outside Winchester, was originally held annually "for three whole days, that is, the day before the feast, the feast, and the day after the feast" (31 August–2 September).¹⁹ In Sweden there was "St. Botvid's market" (St. Botvid's day was 28 July).²⁰ In this way, saints' days marked the course of the year and could even give their names to the products of the earth that became ripe at their season. The cultivated hazel nut known as the filbert derives its name from the fact that in Normandy it becomes ripe near St. Philibert's day (22 August), and hence entered Norman dialect as "Philibert-nut."²¹

"What's a saint?" ask the devils in Cardinal Newman's poem *The Dream of Gerontius*, and answer with glee, "A bundle of bones, which fools adore." One of the fundamental features of the cult of the saints was the positive role of dead bodies. They even had therapeutic power—"the dead body heals living bodies," as the hagiographer of St. Francis put it.²² It was also one of the most notorious aspects of Christianity in the eyes of its opponents (a subject to be discussed later). The cult of the saints began in the cemetery and ended, not only by bringing the dead into the city (unthinkable in the ancient world), but by making them a focus of devotion inside the place of worship itself. As mentioned earlier (p. 10), Jerome noted that "the city itself is moving; the people flood past the half-ruined temples and run to the tombs of the martyrs," and this attractive pull of the tomb became one of the defining characteristics of medieval culture. People ran to the tombs, the bones of the saints were brought into the city, human remains were prized, given and stolen. The corpse was a source not of pollution but of supernatural power. When Elizabeth of Thuringia's body was laid out after her death in 1231, crowds assembled and cut away portions not only of her clothing, but also of her hair, her nails, even her nipples, which "they preserved for themselves as relics."²³

Saints' bodies were treated differently from other bodies, for "no fleshly substance is more noble than the flesh of the saints."²⁴ This had been true from earliest times, and the building of martyr churches above the martyrs' graves from the fourth century was a spectacularly visible example of such distinction. When, in the early medieval period, Christian burial within churches became more common, the saints were still marked out by the treatment of their tomb, adorned with lights, precious cloths, and the like. The elaborate carved, jewelled shrines of the great saints were the culmination of this treasuring of dead bodies. Papal canonization only formalized the process. When the pope canonized Thomas Becket in 1173, he not only ordered

¹⁸ Helbig and Weinrich, eds., *Urkunden und erzählende Quellen zur deutschen Ostsiedlung* 1, p. 134, no. 28.

¹⁹ *Regesta regum Anglo-Normannorum* 1, no. 377, p. 96.

²⁰ *Acta et processus canonizationis Beate Birgitte*, p. 149.

²¹ *Anglo-Norman Dictionary*, p. 523, s.v. "philbert."

²² Thomas of Celano, *Vita prima sancti Francisci* 3. 121, p. 96.

²³ *Libellus de dictis quatuor ancillarum*, p. 139.

²⁴ Thiofrid of Echternach, *Flores epytaphii sanctorum* 1. 3, p. 16.

that the monks of Canterbury should celebrate the day of Becket's death "each year with fitting reverence," but also that they, "devoutly and reverently, in solemn procession, with clergy and people assembled," should place his body in an altar or in an elevated shrine.²⁵

Although they were treated with special reverence, saints' bodies could decay just like the bodies of any other human. Incorruptibility of the flesh was a rare gift, dependent on "divine miracles," according to Paul the Deacon.²⁶ It was certainly not a requirement for sanctity. Most long-dead saints had become just dust. When the remains of St. Æbbe were uncovered, more than 400 years after her death, the monk recording the event made no effort to conceal the utter decay of the saint's body—what was found was "dust," which soon dissolved, and bones, which turned to dust.²⁷ Even William of Malmesbury, writing in the 1120s, who claimed that the English had more incorrupt saints than any other people, actually knew of only five (Etheldreda, Werburga, Edmund, Alphege, and Cuthbert); and even this small tally was, he said, a special mark of divine favour.²⁸

Sometimes, the dissolution of the saint's body was actually planned as part of the treatment of the dead. When St. Birgit of Sweden died in Italy in 1373, it was decided that her body should be boiled, to soak off the flesh and enable the bones to be transported to Sweden. The water was already heating, and razors and swords were ready to carve off the flesh, when the temporary tomb was opened and, to everyone's amazement, "they found that all the flesh had decayed and the bones were bare and without flesh, just as if she had been buried for ten years (except for the head in which there was still a little of the brains)."²⁹ Here is a reversal of the usual miracle of the uncorrupted body: Birgit has considerably, and miraculously, decomposed, in order to help out the process of the repatriation of her bones. There could scarcely be a more telling demonstration that incorruptibility is *not* an essential feature of sanctity than physical decay being regarded as a miracle.

Nor was the decay of an incorrupt body necessarily something to be worried about. The hagiographer of St. Euthymius of Sardis (d. 831), a victim of iconoclast persecution, noted with pride that the saint's body was still whole and life-like forty days after his death. He thought that it was a particular grace that the more nauseating aspects of decomposition had been avoided: "Even if he becomes dust, like other saints, and dissolves over time, he suffered neither the onset nor the consequence of decay, namely swelling and liquefaction in stinking fluid."³⁰ The passage implies that Euthymius's body might eventually disintegrate, but in a clean and tolerable manner.

²⁵ *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket* 7, p. 546, no. 784 (Alexander III, 12 March 1173, *Gaudendum est*).

²⁶ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 6. 2, p. 165; on incorruptibility, see Angenendt, *Corpus Incorruptum*.

²⁷ *Vita et miracula sancte Ebbe virginis*, p. 24.

²⁸ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum Anglorum* 2. 207, p. 386.

²⁹ *Acta et processus canonizationis Beate Birgite*, p. 507.

³⁰ *Vita Euthymii Sardensis* 43, pp. 81–83.

But if incorruptibility was not a requirement for sanctity, when it occurred it was taken as a strong presumption that the dead person was a saint. When the body of Theobald, archbishop of Canterbury, was found "whole and solid" in 1180, during removal of his tomb, "the rumour resounded among the people and he was immediately called 'saint Theobald' by many, because of the unusual integrity of his body" (although his cult did not last long).³¹ And incorruptibility was viewed as a sign of purity of life. When the body of Gregory of Langres was uncovered, prior to being moved to a more honourable place in his cathedral,

Lo! His blessed face appeared so intact and unharmed that you would think him not dead but sleeping, nor was there any damage to the clothes he had been buried in. It was right that he should appear so glorious after death, since his body had not been stained by any sexual sin. Great is wholeness of body and heart, bringing grace in the present life and life eternal in the future.³²

It is worth noting that Gregory of Langres was not a virgin (he was the great-grandfather of Gregory of Tours), so that his "wholeness" consisted in sexual fidelity, not abstinence. "Virginity of the heart" could be praised as well as virginity of the body.³³

But the view that real saints should be incorrupt was not unknown. The great thirteenth-century canonist Hostiensis reported that lay people believed this: "For if they see bare bones, they take it as an occasion for disparagement and blasphemy, saying, 'this is mere trickery, for if he were a saint, he would not be decayed in this way.'"³⁴ And a concrete example of such a belief is recorded in ninth-century Spain. Eulogius of Cordoba, defending the claim that certain Christians killed by the authorities in Muslim Spain were truly martyrs, had to face objections from his fellow-Christians that the bodies of the dead had decayed. Obviously they believed that incorruptibility was a requirement for sanctity, however much Eulogius might object "that this temporal corruption of the body takes away nothing from the souls of the saints."³⁵ There is even a case of incorruptibility transmitted through contact: when the tomb of St. Odilia's wet-nurse was opened, eighty years after her death, in order to place another burial in it, it was found that the nurse's body had completely decayed, except for the right breast, with which she had suckled the saint.³⁶

³¹ Gervase of Canterbury, *Chronica*, pp. 25–26.

³² Gregory of Tours, *Liber vitae patrum* 7, p. 690 (repr., 1969, p. 240).

³³ "Virginitas cordis et corporis" was a common phrase from patristic times onwards. Hagiographers used it frequently, for example, Milo, *Vita Amandi episcopi* 6, p. 475; Garinus, *Vita Margaritae Hungaricae* (*Legenda minor*) 4, 25, p. 903.

³⁴ Nam et ex hoc sumunt materiam detrahendi et blasphemandi, videntes enim ossa nuda dicunt, trufe sunt, si esset sanctus, non esset sic consumptus: Hostiensis, *Lectura siue Apparatus super quinque libris Decretalium*, ad X. 3. 45. 2, *Quum ex eo*.

³⁵ Eulogius, *Memoriale sanctorum* 1. 26, pp. 389–90 (PL 115: 759).

³⁶ *Vita Odiliae abbatissae Hohenburgensis* 10, p. 43.

It was not long before body parts, as well as whole bodies, began to be revered. Reverence at a tomb is a feature of some strands of pre-Christian religion as well as of several non-Christian religions of the present day, but a concentration on body parts, detachable and moveable, is a distinctive feature of the Christian cult of the saints. And it was always emphasized that the power of these bodily fragments was just as great as that of the whole body. When welcoming the arrival of saintly relics in the 390s, bishop Victricius of Rouen set out to show that "the whole can be in a part," and, especially, that "healing power is no less in the parts than it is in the whole."³⁷ Not long afterwards, around the year 400, bishop Gaudentius of Brescia preached a sermon at the dedication of his basilica. He explained how he had acquired some of the relics of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste for the church and went on:

We took a portion of the relics, and we have confidence that we would possess nothing less if we were embracing and honouring the ashes of all forty . . . that part, which we have deserved to have, is completeness.³⁸

This sense of the part being as powerful as the whole lies behind the acquisition of often tiny fragments of saint's bones or other relics, although it should be noted that Victricius and Gaudentius seem to have felt the need to emphasize and argue the point.

The public commemoration of saints and the special treatment of saints' bodies marked them out from the rest of the Christian dead. This individual recognition was strengthened and enriched by the composition, recitation, and reading of literary works recounting their lives and miraculous deeds, including both those they performed during their life and those that occurred after death. The literature of the saints grew to enormous proportions and took many forms: the individual *Life* or *vita*, collections of such Lives in *Legendaries* and *Passionaries*, *Miracle Books*, accounts of translations of relics, and so on. This literature is discussed in more detail later.

These three components, the name and day, the body, and the literary commemoration, were the foundations of a saint's cult. Sometimes one or two were lacking: there are cases of saints whose names were known but whose remains were lost or forgotten, cases too of tombs where miracles took place but whose occupant could only be identified after a visionary revelation. Given the inventiveness of the medieval imagination when it came to tradition, it is no surprise that these lacks could be made good. A name, the bones, and a story were what was needed, and they could be provided.

A common situation was of a saint known by repute but whose burial place was unidentified. This was then revealed or discovered. Such a discovery was termed an "invention," not anything fraudulent, but from the Latin word *inventio*, meaning "finding." The most famous "invention" and among the earliest was the discovery of

³⁷ Victricius of Rouen, *De laude sanctorum* 10, 11, pp. 85, 86 (PL 20: 452-53).

³⁸ Gaudentius of Brescia, *Tractatus* 17, p. 150 (PL 20: 970).

the tomb of St. Stephen in the Holy Land in 415. His name and the story of his life and death had long been familiar from the Bible; now his physical remains could provide a concrete stimulus to his cult. Conversely, the absence of hagiographic writings was a disadvantage to a cult even when it had a focus in the tomb of the saint. Gregory of Tours tells the story of the shrine of the martyr Patroclus at Troyes in Champagne. It was extremely modest, consisting of a small oratory served by a single cleric. Gregory explains this neglect in significant terms:

For the people of that place showed little respect to the martyr, because there was no account of his Passion available. For it was the custom of rustic people to venerate more attentively the saints of God whose martyrdoms they read.³⁹

Needless to say, eventually an account of Patroclus's Passion turned up.

Patronage and Invocation: The Mutual Relationship

Intercession and Invocation

The name and day, the physical remains, and a written account of some kind were thus core elements of the cult of the saints. But what moved and motivated worshippers? The Miracles of Thecla (discussed earlier, p. 24) contain a concise but vivid description of what saints were, why they were needed, and what they did:

Since it is not an easy or simple thing for all men to attain to God, for his power is of the highest . . . while the race of men is always drawn towards danger, forever pierced with many and varied pains and troubles, God, because he loves human beings, . . . sowed the earth with saints, as if he were dividing up the world between some wonderful doctors, so that they could easily work wonders, being nearer to those in need, able to hear them at once and bring healing, and through God's grace and power to perform those great things which especially need his help, being ambassadors, intercessors, mediators, for nations, cities, races and peoples against plague, famine, war, drought, earthquake.⁴⁰

God is great but not easily accessible; human life is full of dangers; the saints are "sown" across the land by a loving God to act as the bridge between desperate human beings and his divine power. These were to be the fundamental ideas of the cult of the saints throughout its history.

The saint was a powerful, if usually invisible, patron—"an invisible friend"—who could provide direct help and also access to yet higher levels in the cosmic hierarchy.⁴¹ Any society that knew the patron-client relationships of the ancient world, or

³⁹ Gregory of Tours, *Gloria martyrum* 63, p. 531 (repr., 1969, p. 81).

⁴⁰ *Miracula Theclae* 4, pp. 294–96 (abbreviated).

⁴¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *De sancto Theodoro*, p. 70 (PG 46: 748).

the significance of lordship in the medieval one, would find the dynamics of invocation and saintly intercession self-explanatory. Saints were intercessors, intermediaries between needy human beings and the Almighty. The world of patronage and favours extended beyond this earthly life. A telling simile was that having a saint on your side was a bit like winning over the bodyguard of a great king to give you access to him.⁴² And, just as suppliants sought out powerful helpers, so too the honour of those helpers was increased by the requests made to them. To have clients and to be able to help them was a mark of power. This double aspect is made clear by Jacobus de Voragine, author of the *Golden Legend*, the most successful collection of saints' Lives ever put together, who explains at one point the reasons for praying to the saints:

The first reason is our need, . . . so that where our own merits are insufficient, we may receive the help of the merits of others; and . . . so that, we, who cannot receive the highest light in ourselves, should at least be able to see it in the saints; . . . for many an imperfect man feels more moved by one of the saints than even by God. The second reason is the glory of the saints. For God wishes us to invoke the saints, so that, while we beg for what we seek through their help, we glorify them and praise them more nobly.⁴³

The practice of invoking the saints implied that the dead cared about what was happening in the world of the living. This was not an entirely uncontroversial belief. "Can it be that a dead man brings help to a living man?," wondered one pagan.⁴⁴ Augustine thought that, in the normal and natural course of events, the dead could have no involvement in the affairs of the living, and that saintly intervention was "marvellous," not "natural": "the martyrs are involved in the affairs of the living through the divine power, for the dead cannot be involved in the affairs of the living through their intrinsic nature."⁴⁵ Jacobus de Voragine insisted that "the saints are able to know the requests of suppliants."⁴⁶ Critics of the cults of the saints often argued that the dead could not hear or heed the living (later, pp. 589, 592).

"Let your requests be addressed to the martyrs," Basil of Caesarea advised his flock in the later fourth century, and then drew a word-picture for them of a pious woman praying for her children, or for a husband who was away on a journey or sick.⁴⁷ These are moving scenes. Gregory the Great provides evidence, however, that some requests made at the tombs of the saints were more materialistic or could even be viewed as wicked:

⁴² Ibid., pp. 63–64 (PG 46: 740).

⁴³ Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea* 76 ("De letania maiori et minori") (1, pp. 477–78).

⁴⁴ Paul the Deacon, *Historia Langobardorum* 4, 16, p. 151.

⁴⁵ Augustine, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* 16, 19, p. 653 (PL 40: 607).

⁴⁶ Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea* 76 ("De letania maiori et minori") (1, p. 477).

⁴⁷ Basil of Caesarea, *Homilia XIX in sanctos quadraginta martyres* 8, col. 523.

We see, dear brethren, how many of you gather for the martyr's feast-day, kneel, beat your breast, utter prayers and confessions, water your face with tears. But think, I beseech you, about what you request. One prays for a wife, another requests a nice house, another demands clothing, another prays that he should be given food. And, indeed, when these are lacking, they should be sought from God. But another demands the death of an enemy, and pursues him in prayer, whom he cannot pursue with the sword. God commands that we should love our enemy, but nevertheless God is presented with a request that he should kill our enemy.⁴⁸

The idea of a Christian going to the tomb of a saint to pray that God would kill his enemy, while very much in the tradition of the Psalmist, shocked the great pope. It is not surprising that the literature that records the requests of the faithful, particularly the Miracle Books, is dominated by prayers for healing: perhaps the prayers for the death of enemies were more numerous than this type of source reveals.

A request to a saint, delivered with conviction, was expected to produce results. "Know," wrote Gregory of Tours in his account of Martin's miracles, "how quickly he will appear to deal with that for which he is invoked, if he is asked with faith."⁴⁹ Sometimes, however, the saint might first have to be woken up: when the monks of Gigny in the Jura went to the relics of St. Taurin that they possessed, "they stirred him up by their continuous prayers and unceasing orations like a sleeping man."⁵⁰

Invocation was a personal address, and the practice of visiting saints' shrines shows that many people thought that such appeals were best made in the presence of the physical remains. Saints were imagined as having a bodily location and a site that could be visited. But there was debate and discussion about the value of invocation at the tomb versus invocation at a distance, since there was always some tension between the belief that the saint was in some sense "in" his or her shrine, and the idea that a saint could be appealed to anywhere. Sometimes there is clear evidence of a belief that saints could only operate close to their shrine. A knight who invoked St. Eutropius to regain his lost horse was mocked by his acquaintances. "Do you think St. Eutropius, whom you continually invoke, can restore your lost horse? The saint is ten leagues away!"⁵¹

The devotees and guardians of any particular shrine faced a dilemma between a simple desire to get people to the shrine, which could best be done by emphasizing the miracles that occurred in that very place, and a more general desire to glorify their saint, which might well lead to the claim that the saint's power was ubiquitous and could be summoned up anywhere. The author of the *Miracles of Thecla* says

⁴⁸Gregory I, *Homiliae in Evangelia* 27. 7 (2, p. 176) (PL 76: 1208-9). Citation abbreviated. A theory about the context of the passage is advanced by Leyser, "The Temptations of Cult: Roman Martyr Piety in the Age of Gregory the Great," pp. 303-5.

⁴⁹Gregory of Tours, *De virtutibus sancti Martini* 2. 16, p. 614 (repr., 1969, p. 164).

⁵⁰*Circumvectio Taurini episcopi* 1. 2, p. 650.

⁵¹*Miracula Eutropii episcopi Santonensis* 4. 35, p. 743.

that "those who are not able to be present and attain to her shrine, if they make their invocations in the place where they are, readily obtain her aid in this way, since she is present and hears them."⁵² Medieval authors might argue that the saints' powers were strong not only at the spot where they were buried but also in churches or even at altars dedicated to them. Or they might assert that the power of a saint could be invoked anywhere:

The saints are perceived to make their appearance not only where they are seen to be present temporally in their ashes and remains, but they are believed to be of assistance to the faithful wherever they are invoked in faith, through him who is present everywhere, by the power and majesty of the creator rewarding their merits, in every place of his dominion.⁵³

The data gathered by André Vauchez show a definite tendency, over the course of the later Middle Ages, for the miracles recorded in canonization processes to take place less often at the tomb of the saint and more frequently at a distance. A particular disjuncture seems to occur around the middle of the thirteenth century.⁵⁴

There was even the, apparently paradoxical, argument that the saints exercised greater power in the absence of their physical remains. In his *Dialogues*, Pope Gregory the Great has his interlocutor ask him to explain the fact that the martyrs "do not manifest such great benefits through their bodies as they do by their other relics." Gregory replies,

there is no doubt that the holy martyrs perform innumerable miracles where they lie in their bodies . . . but since weak minds may doubt whether they are present to hear them in places where they do not lie in their bodies, it is necessary that they perform greater miracles there.⁵⁵

Reciprocity

"Bring me gifts! Ask my help!," saints demanded.⁵⁶ The gifts and the help were two sides of the relationship. Suppliants brought offerings of candles, wax, money, and other things, and gave gifts at the shrine to express their thanks for cures; but they expected help, and were sometimes vociferous when it did not appear to be forthcoming.

In 1376 a rich and powerful woman of Naples, named Alfarana, pregnant for the seventh or eighth time, was extremely worried, for all her earlier pregnancies had ended in stillbirths. She made a promise to St. Birgit of Sweden that if God granted,

⁵² *Miracula Theclae* 10, p. 310.

⁵³ Angsar, *Miracula Willehadi*, preface, p. 847.

⁵⁴ Vauchez, *Sainthood*, p. 447, table 40; see also Krötzel, "Miracles au tombeau—miracles à distance."

⁵⁵ Gregory I, *Dialogi* 2. 38. 2–3 (2, p. 246).

⁵⁶ Arcoid, *Miracula sancti Erkenwaldi* 10, p. 142 (the words are spoken in mockery by a blasphemer parodying the saint).

through the merits of the saint, that she give birth to a live child, "she would send to Rome, to the tomb of St. Birgit, a silver image in the shape of a little child." Happily, she bore a healthy son, and fulfilled her vow.⁵⁷ This is a classic example of an *ex-voto*, an offering made in thanks after a promise.⁵⁸ Alfarana had been quite specific about what she wanted, which saint she expected it from, and what she would give in return. And the idea of giving something of an appropriate shape was extremely common, although in her case the preciousness of the material marked her out as a wealthy suppliant.

Offerings to the saint, large or small, were an essential sign of reverence and devotion. Kings could make regal gifts, and did so from the early days of the cult of the saints. Around 400 a Scythian king sent his golden crown and breastplate to St. Phocas of Amasea in Asia Minor as a votive offering.⁵⁹ Reccared I, king of the Visigoths (586–601), offered a golden crown at the tomb of the martyr Felix in Gerona, an object which was presumably similar to the surviving Visigothic votive crowns in the Musée de Cluny in Paris and the National Archaeological Museum of Spain in Madrid.⁶⁰ Grants of land were often made, not simply to the church or clergy that housed and served the shrine of a saint, but to the saint himself or herself. Thus, when William the Conqueror granted land to the bishop of Durham, he declared that he was giving it "to God Almighty and the most holy confessor Cuthbert and to William, bishop of Durham."⁶¹ More modest gifts were made, down to the level of the single candle or small coin. Nor was the offering of a cheese to be spurned.⁶²

As in the case of Alfarana of Naples, it was common to give as a thank-offering a model or image, often in the shape of an affected body-part, or some other item associated with a miraculous cure. This was a practice that continued throughout the medieval period, and beyond. It is attested as early as the first half of the fifth century, when Theodoret of Cyrrhus mentions model eyes, feet, and hands donated by grateful pilgrims.⁶³ Papal commissioners, investigating the tomb of Vincent Ferrer at Vannes (Brittany) a thousand years later, in 1453, found a profusion of such mimetic objects:

We indeed saw wax offerings there, namely, many ships, wax images of bodies, heads, eyes, hands, arms, shin-bones, feet, and various other members, many sheets, wax breasts, crutches, and very many wooden crosses and some biers

⁵⁷ *Acta et processus canonizacionis Beate Birgitte*, pp. 282–83, 340–41, 410–11.

⁵⁸ On *ex-votos*, see Bautier, "Typologie des ex-votos"; Sigal, *L'homme et le miracle*, pp. 86–107; Trombetta, "L'ex-voto au Moyen-Age"; Sigal "L'ex-voto au Moyen-Age."

⁵⁹ Asterius of Amasea, Homily 9. 12, p. 127.

⁶⁰ Julian of Toledo, *Historia Wambae* 26, p. 522; *El tesoro visigodo de Guarrazar*, pp. 35–40 (pls. 1–6), 20–22 (plates 53–54), 322–32, 349–54; for crown offerings, see *Le liber ordinum en usage dans l'église wisigothique et mozarabe d'Espagne*, col. 165, section 59, with n. 2, and col. 545.

⁶¹ *Durham Liber Vitae* 1, p. 158 (fol. 54v).

⁶² For example, *Miracula beati Domitiani*, p. 703.

⁶³ Theodoret of Cyrrhus, *Graecorum affectionum curatio* 8. 64 (2, p. 333).

from dead people who, as they say, were brought back to life; there were so many that it would not be possible to enumerate them in many days.⁶⁴

The commissioners in the case of Thomas de Cantilupe at Hereford in 1307 were less easily daunted, and undertook a meticulous enumeration of the ex-votos at his shrine: 170 silver ships, 41 wax ships, 129 silver images of the complete body or limbs, 436 wax images of the complete body, 988 wax images of parts of the body, 77 images of horses, animals and birds, and so on.⁶⁵ Offerings such as these were in the care of the custodian of the shrine. One thirteenth-century account from Siena mentions an incident that occurred "when the custodian of the saint's tomb was arranging above the tomb the wax images which had been offered in his honour and declared the truth of his sanctity through miracles."⁶⁶ Some rare surviving wax ex-votos, dating to the fifteenth century, were discovered in Exeter cathedral when repairs were being made after air-raids in World War II. They include fragments of arms, legs, and heads, as well as the complete figure of a woman 20 centimetres (8 inches) high.⁶⁷

Neither Vincent Ferrer's nor Thomas de Cantilupe's shrine seems to have been adorned with a kind of ex-voto consisting of a picture of the saint, something that is mentioned in several Italian sources of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. For instance, in Apulia in the 1230s, a woman suffering from a lengthy illness vowed "that if she were freed by the merits of St. Benvenuto, she would have his picture painted and place it before his tomb in memory of him."⁶⁸ Likewise, a chaplain of the church of Sant'Angelo Magno in Ascoli Piceno vowed that, if St. Peter Martyr freed him from his ailment, "he would have his image painted."⁶⁹ A young woman of Pavia, who had become secretly engaged to a man who seemed unwilling to proceed to a public wedding, prayed to St. Thomas Aquinas that he would bring it about, promising to make a priestly vestment with her own hands, to perform a hundred genuflexions before the saint's altar, to visit his chapel every year, and "to have him painted in the church of the friars." Another Pavian lady also promised to have St. Thomas painted if he cured her of an ailment of the heart.⁷⁰ In 1323 a woman testified that the recently deceased Simon of Todi, buried in Bologna, had cured her little daughter of epilepsy, after she had vowed to have an image of Simon painted.⁷¹ There seems to be a pattern here: in every case the saint in question is an Italian friar, and in all cases bar one the devotee making the promise is a woman. Pious women commissioning pictures of saintly friars thus form one small tributary to the great river of

⁶⁴ *Notes et documents de l'histoire de Saint Vincent Ferrier*, p. 399.

⁶⁵ BAV, Vat. lat. 4015, fols. 74–74v.

⁶⁶ *Vita Andreae de Galleranis* 3. 30, p. 57.

⁶⁷ Radford, "The Wax Images Found in Exeter Cathedral."

⁶⁸ *Dialogus de gestis sanctorum Fratrum Minorum* 2. 8, p. 91.

⁶⁹ Ambrogio Taegio, *Vita sancti Petri martyris* 9. 72, p. 708.

⁷⁰ *Miracula sancti Thomae de Aquino* 22, p. 724.

⁷¹ *Miracula Simonis Tudertini* 6. 60, p. 828.

late medieval Italian painting. In the fifteenth century such ex-votos are common—a dozen are recorded in the miracle accounts of St. Bernardino from the mid-century.⁷²

A vow could involve a service as well as an object. One notary, who had been employed in writing letters to promote the canonization of Nicholas of Tolentino, promised that, if Nicholas healed his wounded hand, he would not only bring a wax hand to the saint's shrine and fast every year on the vigil of his feast but would also "write constantly in service of your canonization, without any pay and whenever required."⁷³

The worshippers thus had duties: to respect and revere the saint, to bring offerings, to participate in celebrations on feast-days. But the saint had duties too. He or she was expected to provide help, and it was unquestionably the worshipper's right to reproach saints who failed to help. On one occasion, for example, Adomnán, abbot of Iona, and the successor and hagiographer of St. Columba, had to "accuse" his patron saint. He was supervising the transport of timber by sea when a contrary wind sprang up. He records that,

We complained about how unwelcome it was that the wind was against us in this way, and we began to make a kind of accusation against our Columba, saying, "Does this set-back that we are suffering please you, O saint? Until now we have hoped to obtain from you, with God's aid, some encouraging help in our efforts, considering that you were someone of high honour with God."

Naturally enough, this imputation of low heavenly status stirred Columba to immediate action, and the wind changed.⁷⁴ In a similar vein, dissatisfied adherents might imply that their saint was dozing. When the Vikings attacked Tours in 903, the clergy ran to "the tomb of their defender"—St. Martin—and reproached him for his apparent negligence in letting the pagans reach their doors: "Martin, God's saint, why have you been sleeping so deeply?"⁷⁵ A disappointed suppliant at the shrine of St. Berengar in the church of St.-Papoul in the south of France beat the saint's tomb with his stick, shouted out, "So you are a saint? You never were nor will be a saint, nor have you ever done any miracles!" and stormed out. He was then rewarded with a cure.⁷⁶

If a simple rebuke were not enough, then the saint might be threatened with counter-measures. When St. Columba (in this case not the Irish saint but the female

⁷²Jansen, "Un exemple de sainteté thaumaturgique," p. 151, table III; the earliest surviving examples are fifteenth-century: Ciarrochi and Mori, *Le tavolette votive italiane*, pp. 7–8, pls. I–XII; see also Antoine, "Images de miracles," and the general comments in Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, pp. 136–60 ("The Votive Image").

⁷³*Il processo per la canonizzazione di S. Nicola da Tolentino*, p. 465.

⁷⁴Adomnán, *Vita Columbae* 2. 45, p. 174.

⁷⁵"Sancte Dei Martine, quare tam graviter obdormisti?": Radbod of Utrecht, *Libellus de miraculo sancti Martini* 5, p. 1243 (the text was written 903–17). St. Martin's body must have been brought inside the walled area from its suburban basilica at the time of the attack. For discussion, see Farmer, *Communities of Saint Martin*, pp. 31–34.

⁷⁶Flavius Anselmus, *Vita Berengarii* 9, p. 449.

martyr of Sens) was careless enough to let thieves get away from her church in Paris with some precious vessels, she was addressed sternly by bishop Eligius of Noyon:

Listen, Saint Columba, to what I say. My redeemer knows that, unless you quickly get back the vessels stolen from the shrine, truly I will bring thorns and block up this door, so that never will any veneration be offered to you in this place from this day on.⁷⁷

This blackmail worked. In a like mood, the mother of a sick girl, who had waited for ten days at a saint's tomb, praying for her daughter without any effect, eventually threatened the disappointing saint with public exposure: "I will turn everyone away from visiting your tomb because you have not heeded me." This naturally got an immediate result.⁷⁸ Another woman, whose daughter had been carried off by a wolf, went to a statue of the Virgin Mary and grabbed away from her the figure of the Christ child she was holding. "Lady," she said, "you will never get your child back unless you restore my child to me unharmed!" When her daughter was restored to her, through the Virgin's power, she replaced the image of the Christ child on Mary's lap.⁷⁹

Expectations about the patronage owed by a saint were unmistakably based on that owed by an earthly lord, and the parallel is sometimes made explicit. One sick man, entreating saintly aid from St. John the Baptist, St. Artemios, and St. Febronia in their joint cult-centre in Constantinople, was quite clear about their failure in this respect:

He broke out into a heartfelt lament, wetting his mattress with his tears and accusing the saints, saying, "Indeed, St. John and St. Artemios and St. Febronia, have I served you from the age of ten up to the present, in order that I should become maimed in old age? If I had attached myself to some man on earth, I would have been thought worthy of support and care and provision. See what satisfaction I have attained!"⁸⁰

This shaming of the saints is recorded by hagiographers of many times and places without any sense that it is incongruous or lacking in respect. Just as, in Old Irish law, dissatisfied plaintiffs dealing with higher-class defendants could bring moral pressure to bear on them by fasting outside their door, so the devotees of a saint could try the tactic of public reproach of their heavenly lord.⁸¹ Saints had duties to their followers.

The most public and physical embodiment of this pressurizing of the saint was the ritual known as "humiliation of relics"—literal humiliation, in the original sense

⁷⁷ *Vita Eligii* 1. 30, p. 686.

⁷⁸ *Miracula sancte Elyzabet* 3, p. 164.

⁷⁹ Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum* 7. 45 (2, pp. 63–64).

⁸⁰ *Miracula sancti Artemii* 22, p. 132.

⁸¹ Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law*, pp. 182–83.

of "placing on the ground (*humus*)."⁸² The customs of Farfa, from around 1030, describe how, when there is need, a cry should be raised to God, with the crucifix, Gospels and relics of the saints placed on a piece of sacking on the ground before the altar, while the monks lie prostrate reciting the psalm beginning, "O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever?"⁸³ When the abbot of Burton upon Trent, in the English Midlands, became involved in a violent dispute with a neighbouring noble, he had recourse to this tactic, going straight to the virgin saint enshrined in his church: "he and the monks entered the church, barefoot and groaning greatly, and placed the shrine of the blessed virgin, where her most holy bones lay, upon the ground. All together called out to the Lord with their whole heart."⁸⁴ A similar episode is recorded during a dispute between the canons of St. Osyth's in Essex and the bishop of London in the early twelfth century, when the canons decided "to take their complaint to God and to their lady, St. Osyth, whom they had served so well." They first took her image outside the church and then covered her shrine with a piece of coarse sacking. They were reminding her that "she ought to defend them against their enemies," and reproaching her for tolerating the wrongs they were suffering. The device worked. At the very hour that the canons were humiliating her image, the hostile bishop was struck with paralysis.⁸⁵

Humiliation—placing the relics or images low—could be combined with another common ritual of punishment, the use of thorns. A ritual book of Tours from the thirteenth-century describes the procedure: after recitation of the seven penitential psalms and the litany, the silver crucifix and the all the moveable reliquaries are placed on the ground and covered with thorns, while the great shrine of St. Martin is also covered and surrounded with thorns, and the wooden crucifix is treated likewise in the body of the nave and all the doors are semi-blocked.⁸⁶ A case of such a procedure is recorded from the same period. In 1260, during the course of a long dispute between the abbey of Senones in the Vosges and the noble house of Salm, the monks, seeing that they had "no true defender," took the images of Christ and their local saint, Simeon, from their usual locations in the church and "placed them on the ground on top of thorns, crying out to the Lord with tears and saying, "We have maintained peace, and it has not come; we have sought the good, and behold turbulence!"⁸⁷

⁸² Geary, "La coercion des saints"; idem, "L'humiliation des saints"; Little, *Benedictine Maledictions*, pp. 26–30, 131–34, 139–43.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 262; the Psalm is 73 in the Vulgate and 74 in the King James Bible.

⁸⁴ Geoffrey of Burton, *Vita sancte Modvenne virginis* 47, pp. 192–94.

⁸⁵ *La Vie sainte Osyth, virge e martire*, lines 1484–1525, pp. 426–30 (*envoie* is the word used for humiliation); see Zatta, "The 'Vie Sainte Osyth'"; Bethell, "The Lives of St Osyth of Essex and St Osyth of Aylesbury."

⁸⁶ Little, *Benedictine Maledictions*, p. 266.

⁸⁷ Richer of Senones, *Gesta Senoniensis ecclesiae* 4. 9, p. 335 (Simeon was a supposed early bishop of Metz).

One of the most enlightening passages about the humiliation of saints is, curiously enough, fictional; nor does it concern Christian saints. It occurs in the twelfth-century epic the *Song of Roland*. After a great defeat, the Muslims of Spain retreat to Zaragoza. There they turn on their gods, Apollo, Tervagan, and Muhammad. "O wicked god!", they rail at Apollo in his crypt. "Why have you brought us such shame? . . . You give poor rewards to those who serve you best." They remove Apollo's sceptre and crown, then smash his idol into pieces, going on to humiliate the idols of Tervagan and Muhammad in a similar way. Muhammad is thrown into a ditch for pigs and dogs to bite and trample.⁸⁸ The whole incident is, of course, nothing but ignorant Christian fantasy. But fantasies tell us something; and what this one tells us is that Christians assumed that the failures of powerful invisible protectors—be they saints or gods—could and should be punished. Because the passage concerns, not treatment of saints by Christians, but treatment of their so-called idols by Muslims, it is particularly revealing of the medieval assumption that your supernatural patrons could be punished for dereliction of duty.

But to some medieval churchmen, especially the sophisticated intellects of the age of high scholasticism, this berating of the saints had a primitive air about it. At the Second Council of Lyons in 1274, in a clause dealing with suspension of religious services during a dispute, they managed to have their say:

we strictly forbid that detestable abuse of those people who, in order to aggravate the suspension of services and with horrible lack of devotion, treat images or statues of the cross, the blessed Virgin and other saints with audacious irreverence, placing them on the ground under nettles and thorns.⁸⁹

These are the views of that active reforming party in the Church that had already replaced trial by ordeal with the more rational and centralized judicial procedures of inquisition and torture, and had developed the complex and bureaucratic examinations characteristic of modern canonization. You should not surround an image with thorns; you should simply kneel in front of it and pray. The age of humiliation of the saints was coming to an end.

⁸⁸ *Chanson de Roland*, lines 2580–91, p. 76.

⁸⁹ *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta*, p. 323 (cl. 17).