

THE RISE OF THE CULT OF THE SAINTS IN THE WESTERN CHURCH

BY

NOAH J. BRUCKSCHEN

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF DIVINITY

PROF. ROBERT WENDLAND, ADVISOR

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

MEQUON, WI

FEBRUARY 16, 2024

## CONTENTS

CONTENTS.....	II
ABSTRACT.....	III
INTRODUCTION .....	1
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	3
SAINT VENERATION IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH .....	7
Distinctions Between <i>Dulia</i> , <i>Hyperdulia</i> , and <i>Latria</i> .....	9
The Council of Trent .....	11
St. Robert Bellarmine .....	14
THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS .....	19
<i>The Martyrdom of Polycarp</i> .....	19
Cyprian, <i>To Cornelius in Exile</i> .....	22
Ignatius' Epistle to the Romans .....	24
THE ENVIRONMENT THAT LED TO SAINT WORSHIP .....	27
The Landscape .....	27
The Persecution .....	30
Ascension to Sainthood .....	32
CONCLUSION.....	36
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	38

## ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to understand just why Saint Veneration emerged within the Western Church. It begins with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, citing sources such as the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the writings of Robert Bellarmine, and the decrees of the Council of Trent. From there it transitions to the early church fathers, who are cited by Catholic doctrine as proof for the dogma. After the writings of the church fathers are considered, it is necessary to consider the environment in which they lived to get a proper understanding of their point of view. A study of said environment in the first few centuries is also called for in order to see how the culture and environment influenced the rise of the Veneration of the Saints. The paper's conclusions reiterate the assertion that the Veneration of Saints in the Catholic Church originated from a combination of Greek culture, persecution of the Christians, as well as the growing number of conversions of peoples who previously worshipped the Greco-Roman Pantheon.

## INTRODUCTION

If a person walks into a Roman Catholic Church for the first time, there will be a lot that catches their eye. They may see a beautifully ornate altar up front, with a crucifix depicting the suffering Christ, dying for his people. They might also see stained-glass windows, detailing the ministry of Jesus from the moment of his birth to His ascension into heaven. Or perhaps they might see the beautiful pipe organ, which seems to take up the entire back of the sanctuary. When it plays, it fills the room with melodies and harmonies so sweet that they seem to be resounding from heaven itself.

Then their eyes are drawn off to the side of the church, and they see a smaller altar. A bye-altar. It's littered with candles to light to various saints. If the church serves a Hispanic population, you are certain to find one for Our Lady of Guadalupe, or perhaps a candle for the Blessed Virgin Mary, or even Saint Anthony of Padua. One is invited to light one of these candles and pray to the saint, in hopes that their prayers will be heard by that saint, who will, in turn, intercede for the sinner to the Lord.

A completely unchurched pair of eyes might look at this situation and see a striking resemblance to religions unlike Christianity. They might gaze upon the candles and hear the prayers of the saints and make a connection to a time when much of the world worshipped countless different gods (sometimes side-by-side) and saw no problem or contradiction with it. They may note that it seems to bear a resemblance to the polytheism that was dominant in the Greco-Roman world.

Among the differences between the Roman Catholic Church and many of the Protestant churches is the teaching of Saint Veneration<sup>1</sup>. This is a teaching that, according to the Catholics, goes back to the church fathers, can be found in Scripture, and is well-established by church tradition. Veneration of the saints is prominent in the Catholic Church today, as seen by the many Roman Catholics who wear pendants of their chosen patron saint, or various candles lit at any given mass. With the roots of this church teaching stretching back into history as far as they do, it becomes difficult to nail down exactly *how* this teaching made its way into Catholic dogma. Difficult as it may be, the question is worth asking: What were the circumstances that led to this *cultus* becoming so prominent to the point that councils anathematize those who would disagree with it?

The focus of this paper will attempt to sift through the various writings and teachings of the Roman Catholic Church as they pertain to the Veneration of the Saints in order to determine how the practice began in the first few centuries after Jesus' ascension. This topic is worth looking into simply *because* of its continued prominence in the culture of Roman Catholicism into the present day. It is an entirely possible event for a Roman Catholic parishioner to say more Hail Mary's than Lord's Prayers in a given week. How did this come to be? As this paper will prove, the teaching of the Veneration of the Saints became prominent in the Roman Catholic Church from a combination of the influence of Greek culture on the early Christian Church, the frequent persecutions of the early Christians under Roman law, and the rapid increase of Christian converts in the first few centuries of the Church's existence.

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, when the term is capitalized it refers to the Roman Catholic dogma, and when it is not it refers to veneration in a broader, Scripture-pleasing sense.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Since this paper deals with the Roman Catholic teaching on the Veneration of the Saints, it will rely heavily on the teachings and writings of the Roman Catholic Church. As such, it will look at Roman Catholic sources such as the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the teachings and decrees of the Council of Trent, and notable Catholic theologians such as Robert Bellarmine. The Catholic Catechism is very clear in its stance on the saints: They are in heaven. They are interceding on our behalf to the Father<sup>2</sup>. The Christian's communion with the departed saints brings them closer to God. It also teaches that it is a good and helpful thing for Christians to honor the memory of the dead.

The Council of Trent (1545-63) is even more poignant on the subject. It outright condemns (*anathema sit*) those who would stand against Rome's teaching of Saint Veneration. For the Veneration of the Saints is a way in which God bestows gifts (such as prayers, assistance, and support) upon those still on this earth. Interestingly, the Council of Trent also makes note of the fact that some in the Catholic Church have misunderstood just *how* the saints are to be worshiped, and as such, put checks and balances in place to ensure that the bishop oversees things regarding saint worship, relics, and idols to ensure that they were being properly venerated. This makes more sense when one looks at the different levels of veneration that can be given in Catholic dogma, which will be discussed later in the paper.

---

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 956.

Saint Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) was a key figure in the Counter-Reformation (circa. 1545-1648). He wrote extensively on Saint Veneration in his work, *On the Canonization and Veneration of the Saints*. This work was written to combat the “false teachings” that were coming out of the Protestant churches at and before his time. Bellarmine intended to prove that Saint Veneration (as the Catholics teach) was not only established by church tradition and the testimony of the church fathers, but it is also biblical. While he has many arguments, coming from reason, Scripture, church tradition, and the testimonies of the church fathers, his arguments from Scripture proved to be the smallest in number (and perhaps weakest) in his work.

The purpose of this paper focuses on the rise of Saint Veneration in the Western church. It is only natural, then, to look at the writings and accounts of the early church fathers. Many of these men would have been living in a transitional era when Christianity was separated from Judaism but was not yet the official religion of the Roman empire. They would have seen the horrors and atrocities committed to the Christians, and, more importantly, they witnessed the church grow, become more structured, and develop its own identity. These church fathers are cited as proof by Catholic theologians that the Veneration of the Saints is a Christian teaching. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (circa. 155), for example, is referenced as proof that Christians immediately following the time of the apostles were showing reverence and veneration to the fallen saints. Similarly, one can find in Ignatius’ *Letter to the Romans* (circa. 160-80) a state of mind that yearns for persecution and death.

Looking at the writings of these early church fathers is important because understanding the context in which the early Christians found themselves will help to shed light on the actions, words, and teachings of those Christians. The culture that early Christianity found itself in was

greatly influenced by Greek and Roman culture. It is important to understand this framework when looking at the writings of men and women who lived through these times.

As mentioned above, Ignatius's letter to the Romans is a good example of this. As one reads the letter, it is evident that Ignatius fears life rather than death. This can, of course, be understood in a Christian context, insofar as every Christian yearns to shake the sin of this world from himself as the dust that it is. Ignatius, though, seems to take it further, pleading with the Christians in Rome *not* to intervene or defend him in his incoming trial. He *wants* to be a martyr.

The Greek and Roman world was not monotheistic. Paul's address to the Areopagus alone proves this point. Within the Greco-Roman context, one can and did pray to whatever god or goddess whose assistance was required at the time. It was a polytheistic society. What's more than that, Greek culture dominated the Mediterranean world at the dawn of the Christian Church. In many respects, it was similar to American culture today. Greek and Latin were the common second languages of the civilized world. It was not only the language that permeated other cultures, however. Authors such as Darshan and Walker claim that in addition to language, among other things that infiltrated other cultures was Greek philosophy. This can be evidenced in the usage of Socratic terms in Jewish and Christian theology, as well as use of the polemic structure in debates well into the Protestant Reformation.

Darshan, in writing about the transition from pagan religion to Christianity in the Anglo-Saxon lands, points out similarities between the two religions. This made the transition more accessible for the Anglo-Saxon people as they began to follow Christ. Darshan also points out that many of their revered kings were canonized into sainthood, possibly to please the common people as their culture slowly converted from paganism to Christianity.



Walker and Rainy, while writing about the first few centuries of the Christian Church, show in their writing that the veneration of the saints did not happen in a vacuum. There were cultural reasons why this took place. They cite the influence of Greek and Roman culture. The world at the dawn of Christianity was heavily influenced by Greek culture. The Greek language was spoken in many places outside of Greece; their philosophies and schools of thought, such as Stoicism and Gnosticism, were widely popular. They also cite the persecution and martyrdom of many Christians, such as Polycarp and Justin. It was a common practice in Greek culture to give honor to those who had died serving the community. This practice bled into the Christian community as their friends and families faced persecution and martyrdom in the face of religious adversity. Walker and Rainy also cite the influx of pagan converts as Christianity made its way into Rome as the empire's official religion. Cunningham adds to this the assertion that saint veneration was less about dogma and more about ceremony. In other words, the practice of venerating the saints was a practice of the laity that became church doctrine. It came from the bottom up, and not from the top down.

## SAINT VENERATION IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

For a proper understanding of how saint veneration became so popular, it must be put into its proper context. When did saint veneration or honoring begin to appear in the church? How does the Church differentiate between adoration of God and the Veneration of the Saints? Is the differentiation valid at all? Do we see this practically in the Catholic church today? Several sources will be discussed and laid out to get a proper look at the origins and continuations of the Veneration of the Saints in the Catholic Church today: resources that Catholic parishioners look at today when asking the same question, the teachings of the council of Trent, and its contemporaries such as Bellarmine. A separate look will also be given to the testimonies of the early church fathers, who precede the previously stated testimonies of the Catholic Church.

Regarding the Veneration of the Saints, the Catholic Church makes clear through its catechism that it is established doctrine: “Being more closely united to Christ, those who dwell in heaven fix the whole Church more firmly in holiness.... [T]hey do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, as they proffer the merits which they acquired on earth through the one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus.... So, by their fraternal concern is our weakness greatly helped.”<sup>3</sup> The saints, according to the Catholic Church, continually intercede for us as they dwell in holiness in heaven. Now, where is the proof? The Catechism of the Catholic Church, similarly to what was stated above, looks to the early church fathers for proof of this

---

<sup>3</sup> U. S. Catholic Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Complete and Updated*, Revised edition. (USCCB, 1995), 271.

doctrine: “[T]he Church in its pilgrim members, from the very earliest days of the Christian religion, has honored with great respect the memory of the dead; and ‘because it is a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead; that they may be loosed from their sins’, she offers her suffrages for them. Our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective.”<sup>4</sup> According to Catholic doctrine, it is a mutually beneficial teaching that Christians venerate the saints. The saints triumphant benefit by our veneration, and the church militant benefits from the intercession of the saints as mediators to God on their behalf.

Despite calling the saints mediators on our behalf, the Roman Catholic Catechism continues to claim at the same time that Christ Jesus is the one mediator between God and man. How exactly do these two “truths” cooperate in Catholic doctrine? The Catholic Church attempts to answer this very question in the next paragraph of the Catechism: “Exactly as Christian Communion among our fellow pilgrims brings us closer to Christ, so our communion with the saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from its fountain and head issues all grace, and the life of the People of God itself.”<sup>5</sup> The saints assist in the act of joining us to Christ, coming to him on behalf of all the sinners who come to them while still here on earth. The act of venerating them brings the Christian closer to Christ by praying to those who are closer to him than we are.

How do the Catholic theologians come to these conclusions? As stated later in this paper, the Roman Catholic Catechism teaches that doctrine comes from more sources than the written Word of God. The Roman Catholic Church obtains this doctrine from church tradition, which begins with the testimonies of the early church fathers until the present day. When it comes to

---

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 272.

<sup>5</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 271.

establishing doctrine, the Catholic Church takes a decidedly different approach than Protestant churches, relying more on church tradition, decrees of councils, and their own theologians rather than Sacred Scripture. This is fundamental in understanding *why* the Veneration of the Saints has been instilled and advocated in the Roman Catholic Church throughout history.

### **Distinctions Between *Dulia*, *Hyperdulia*, and *Latria***

A Roman Catholic wholeheartedly believes that they are not worshipping the saints. Had they met the person in the introduction and been asked about their “saint worship,” they would have denied it wholeheartedly. They would say that they do not worship the saints, but rather, they venerate them. There is a distinction in Catholic theology between the Veneration shown to the saints and the praise reserved for God. This distinction needs to be discussed between the three different terms that the Roman Catholic Church has come to use when distinguishing between their levels of worship: *dulia*, *hyperdulia*, and *latria*. These terms are essential to understand, as any person with a question on the Veneration of the Saints (or Mary, or the human nature of Christ for that matter) will come across these three terms within five minutes of searching on the internet. So, what exactly are the differences in *dulia*, *hyperdulia*, and *latria*? *Catholic Answers* is one such website where people can ask theological questions about the Catholic Church. In response to a question about saint worship, the author explains that, in part, the terms help to ensure that Catholic Christians are not “worshipping” the saints or the Virgin Mary:

As the terminology of Christian theology developed, the Greek term *latria* came to be used to refer to the honor that is due to God alone, and the term *dulia* came to refer to the honor that is due to human beings, especially the saints. Scripture indicates that honor is due to these individuals (Matt. 10:41b). A special term was coined to refer to the special honor given to the Virgin Mary, who bore Jesus—God in the flesh—in her womb. This term, *hyperdulia* (*hyper* [more than]+ *dulia* = “beyond *dulia*”), indicates that the honor due to her as Christ’s own Mother is more than the *dulia* given to other saints. It is

greater in degree, but since Mary is a finite creature, the honor she is due is fundamentally different from the *latria* owed to the infinite Creator.<sup>6</sup>

According to Catholic doctrine, these three terms denote three levels of Veneration. At the lowest level, there is *dulia*, which is reserved for the saints. The highest form of honor or worship is given to God, which is *latria*. Somewhere in the middle is *hyperdulia*, which is reserved for Mary. Now, how exactly do these terms get differentiated in everyday use? How does the Catholic parishioner give a smaller amount of Veneration to Mary or the saints than to God Almighty in their daily practice? According to Bellarmine, the differences are not always obvious: “As regards outward acts, it is not easy to distinguish the species of adorations; for nearly all outward acts are common to every adoration, *with the exception of sacrifice*, and those things assigned to it namely churches, altars, and priests.”<sup>7</sup> The waters become even more murky when Bellarmine also says, “If some religious cult were due to the saints, it would certainly be *dulia*, not *latria*, as Catholics teach. But it is inept to say the saints are venerated without *latria*; to worship without *latria* is to worship without worship.”<sup>8</sup> These terms, while serving an important purpose in the minds of Catholic theologians, can seem to be a bit hazy when put into practice, as Bellarmine clearly demonstrates.

---

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Brom, “Saint Worship?,” *Catholic Answers*, 10 August 2004, <https://www.catholic.com/tract/saint-worship>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Bellarmine, *On the Canonization and Veneration of the Saints*, trans. Ryan Grant (Post Falls, ID: Mediatrix, 2019), 109.

<sup>8</sup> Bellarmine, *On the Canonization and Veneration of the Saints*, 103–4.

## The Council of Trent

The Council of Trent took place from 1545–1563. It was held in response to the Protestant Reformation and was a crucial component of the Catholic Counter-Reformation. With the advent of “false” teachings coming out of Germany and Switzerland, Pope Paul III called for a council to reaffirm the teachings of the Catholic Church. This would be the last church council to be called until the organization of Vatican I, held more than three centuries later. In the twenty years and twenty-five sessions of its existence, the Council of Trent would issue decrees on an incredible number of Catholic teachings and doctrines, covering a vast majority of Catholic dogma, including, for the purposes of this paper, the invocation, Veneration, and relics of the saints.

The Council of Trent, in its twenty-fifth session, spoke to the reformers’ objection to their teaching of the veneration of the saints: *On the Invocation, Veneration, and Relics of Saints, and on Sacred Images*. The Council decreed that the Church is correct in its teachings of the Veneration of the Saints, and anathematized anyone who disagrees:

The holy council commands all bishops ... instruct the faithful diligently ... teaching them that the saints who reign together with Christ offer up their prayers to God for men, that it is good and beneficial suppliantly to invoke them and to have recourse to their prayers, assistance, and support in order to obtain favors from God through His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who alone is our redeemer and Savior; and that they think impiously who deny that the saints who enjoy eternal happiness in heaven are to be invoked, or who assert that they do not pray for men, or that our invocation of them to pray for each of us individually is idolatry, or that it is opposed to the word of God and inconsistent with the honor of the *one mediator of God and men, Jesus Christ*, or that it is foolish to pray vocally or mentally to those who reign in heaven.<sup>9</sup>

The Council goes on to explain the benefits of such practices. In honoring the saints and relics, the worshippers are in fact honoring them as prototypes for what they represent: Christ.

---

<sup>9</sup> Henry Joseph Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* (London: B. Herder, 1941), 215.

The Council also praises the didactic benefit to the images: that they teach the Christian more about the Lord as they mediate on them. It is also mentioned that what is being done is not worship and, should there be any misunderstanding or miscommunication about what exactly is happening as one prays to a saint or Venerates a relic, the supervising bishop is to intervene and clear up any confusion immediately. The Tridentine decree is attempting to make it abundantly clear that “[t]he honor which is shown [to the saints, images, and relics] is referred to the prototypes which they represent, so that by means of images ... we adore Christ and venerate the saints whose likeness they bear.”<sup>10</sup> They feel that they are not doing anything wrong. This is a way for the Christians to adore Christ by adoring those whom he sent before.

It's clear from the words of the Council of Trent that there was a vigorous effort to uphold the longstanding teaching of the Veneration of the Saints. It is equally as clear from the lengthy digressions on practice and discipline that it wasn't so cut-and-dry for laity and even clergy at times. It's logical to think on account of this discourse that the teaching of the Veneration of the Saints was neither consistent nor clear to “Joe Catholic.” This is why it was so important to include the bishop should something come up. Cunningham sums up the Council of Trent's effect on the teaching of Saint Veneration: “The Council of Trent, then, did two things. First, it reiterated the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church on the legitimacy of the invocation of the saints, the veneration of their relics, and the proper use of images within the context of Catholic worship and devotion. Second, it issued some practical instructions for bishops to check abuses in the cult of the saints and for the proper ways of fostering correct devotion.”<sup>11</sup> So, the

---

<sup>10</sup> Schroeder, *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 216.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Cuninghame, *Brief History of Saints* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 62.

decree was twofold: to double down on the doctrinal practices and to instruct and teach how to handle situations as they emerge.

An interesting note is that the Council of Trent decree does not include arguments from Scripture, the church fathers, or church tradition. It's peculiar that this decree would speak so authoritatively and yet not cite any evidence for this teaching. This comes from the authority of the magisterium. In Catholic doctrine, the Word of God comes to man in three forms: Sacred Scripture, apostolic tradition, and through the magisterium (or teaching office) of the Catholic Church. In the Roman Church, interpretation of Scripture and doctrine comes from the church and the church alone: "The task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God, whether in its written form or in the form of Tradition, has been entrusted to the living, teaching office of the Church alone. Its authority in this matter is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ. This means that the task of interpretation has been entrusted to the bishops in communion with the successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome."<sup>12</sup> The Council of Trent needed no proofs in their statements concerning the Veneration of the Saints (or anything else) because in the system of Catholic doctrine, the decrees of the magisterium were sufficient to establish doctrine.

The reformers took issue with this doctrine. Church tradition and the magisterium of the church was not good enough for them to believe that the Veneration of the Saints was to be taught and declared true Christian doctrine. They needed proof that this doctrine or teaching can be drawn from the Holy Scriptures:

However, it cannot be demonstrated from Scripture that a person should call upon the saints or seek help from them. "For there is only one single reconciler and mediator set up between God and humanity, Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 2[:5\*]). He is the only savior, the only high priest, the mercy seat, and intercessor before God (Rom. 8[:34\*]). He alone has promised to hear our prayers. According to Scripture, in all our needs and concerns it is

---

<sup>12</sup> Church, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 32.



the highest worship to seek and call upon this same Jesus Christ with our whole heart. “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ.”<sup>13</sup>

The reformers’ point here was a valid one. By claiming that the saints were able to intercede on behalf of the Christians still on earth, the Catholic Church had diminished the role of Christ. The Son of God was no longer the only mediator in the Catholic Church; there were many. The reformers took this as a direct contradiction to 1 Tim 2:5. The downplaying of the work of Jesus Christ was something that the reformers never took lightly. They felt not only that they *should* stand up and denounce this teaching, but they felt that they *must*. And as the reformers wrote against Catholic doctrines, Catholic theologians on the other side wrote just as vehemently against the reformers.

### **St. Robert Bellarmine**

Bellarmino was a Catholic cardinal and theologian from the sixteenth century. He was part of the Jesuit movement and a staunch defender of the Catholic faith during the Counter-Reformation. He was canonized as a saint in 1930 and appointed “Doctor of the Church,” a title given to a rare few. He wrote extensively in defense of the cult of the saints in his work, *On the Canonization and Veneration of the Saints*.

Among their many objections to certain teachings and traditions of the Catholic Church, the Reformers took issue with what the Roman Catholic Church taught concerning the Veneration of the Saints. Cunningham writes, “The cult of the saints was seen as unnecessary for the Christian life; indeed, it was judged a survival from a pagan past. It was common enough in

---

<sup>13</sup> Kolb/Wengert. AC XXI, 2–4.

polemical literature to link the devotion of the saints to pagan myths, pointing, for example, to the devotion of Saints Cosmos and Damien as a holdover from the myths of Castor and Pollux or to Saint Christopher as a thinly disguised Hercules.”<sup>14</sup> This quote, while adequate in summarizing the conflict between the Catholic and Protestant camps in this teaching, does not do justice to the polemic nature used by both sides to sling mud.<sup>15</sup> When the Reformers are writing and publishing works in which they call out the Roman Church for outright paganism or idolatry, it only makes sense for a lifelong Catholic, priest, cardinal, and Jesuit like Bellarmine to respond in kind to the accusations hurled against his faith and church. It would be seen as an insult from the reformers. In his mind, they were questioning the authority of the Catholic Church. They were questioning the authority of the Bishop of Rome, Peter’s successor. This could not stand. So, Bellarmine, like many others, took to writing against the reformers and their teachings.

In his work, Bellarmine lays out his arguments supporting the Veneration of the Saints in a very polemic, middle-ages way. He cites support from church tradition, Scripture, the Church Fathers, and reason. He then goes on to describe whose job it is to canonize saints and what the saints do for the faithful, and he finishes by answering the objections of his opponents.

Some of Bellarmine’s arguments pertaining to Scripture are not applicable to this paper, as he argues for Saint Veneration at the same time as he argues for the saints’ present glory that they are enjoying in heaven. The former is the focus of this paper, while the latter is not disputed.

---

<sup>14</sup> Cuningham, *Brief History of Saints*, 60.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, *The Book of Concord (New Translation): The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles P. Arand, 2nd edition. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 238. In this excerpt, Melancthon writes concerning the Catholic theologians citing the church fathers in support of saint veneration: “These jackasses do not see that in Jerome’s controversy with Vigilantius, there is not a syllable about invocation [of the saints]. He speaks about honoring the saints, not about invoking them. Nor do the rest of the ancient writers prior to Gregory I mention invocation. Such invocation, together with the theories that the opponents now teach about the application of merits, clearly lacks the support of the ancient writers” (Ap XXI 2–3).

However, the places in Scripture that he goes to for proof are questionable at best. His first proof from Scripture is taken from 1 Sam 28 (cited as 1 Kingdoms 28 in Bellarmine's work) where he uses the account of King Saul searching out for the medium that he might commune with the prophet Samuel after he had already died. "Moreover," Bellarmine writes, "it is certain that civil honor is not fitting for the souls of the dead, nor can it be said in this that Saul erred, seeing that neither Samuel himself nor the Scripture rebukes Saul."<sup>16</sup> While it is true that there is no *direct* admonition of Saul's actions in the account, he certainly was not praised for it either. It cannot be said that God has ever encouraged his people to seek out pagan mediums in the hope that they will allow them to commune with the dead, and it is doubtful that the Roman Catholic Church would affirm this practice. Furthermore, the message given to Saul through the medium was very clear: the Lord had forsaken Saul, and he ended his life only a few chapters later.

Bellarmino's following two arguments from Scripture center around Elijah and Elisha. He cites the adoration of Elijah from Obadiah in 1 Kgs 18:7, as well as the sons of the prophets bowing low to the prophet Elisha in 2 Kgs 2:15. The problem with these usages is that Bellarmine does not consider the customs of different cultures. There is a noticeable difference between the cultures of the Middle East and Palestine and the cultures of Western Europe, particularly at the time of Bellarmine. This "veneration" that Bellarmine cites can be simply a show of gratitude or respect when taken in the broader context of these more Eastern cultures. This can easily lead to the actions of Biblical figures being skewed due to the presuppositions of the author. Furthermore, a big difference between the Elijah/Elisha accounts and the Veneration of the Saints is that Elijah and Elisha are not saints in glory but rather living men at this time.

---

<sup>16</sup> Bellarmine, *On the Canonization and Veneration of the Saints*, 119.

This leads us to Bellarmine's final argument from Scripture, taken from Dan 2:46: "Then King Nebuchadnezzar fell prostrate before Daniel and paid him honor and ordered that an offering and incense be presented to him" (NIV). Bellarmine's argument comes from the distinction of the Hebrew terms for sacrifice: "[B]ut Nebuchadnezzar did not offer ... (*zebach*) to Daniel, but ... (*mincha*), and ... (*ninchochin*), this is gifts and incense, both of which are customarily offered to God and men.... Moreover, we also offer sweet odors in the very church to images, and relics, although still, we assert, sacrifice must be offered to none but God alone."<sup>17</sup> A similar issue with Bellarmine's interpretation can be raised as with Elijah and Elisha. Furthermore, the argument can be made that Bellarmine, while arguing usages from Scripture, puts church tradition and practice side by side with the "biblical principle" that he is using to prove his case. It seems to be a circular argument. Bellarmine is trying to prove that the Bible supports Veneration of the Saints, and in doing so he seems to be saying that tradition proves the teachings of Scripture.

After looking at his arguments from Scripture, one may feel to be lacking. Bellarmine's scriptural evidence lacks overall consistency (two of the four cases intimately involve the actions of unbelievers). He also attempts to use descriptive passages as prescriptive to prove that this doctrine does, in fact, come from Scripture. In none of his cited passages is there a command made or precedent set for praying to saints or the saints' intercession for the faithful. This demonstrates that there is, in fact, no scriptural evidence for the Veneration of the Saints as taught in the Roman Catholic Church.

Bellarmino's lack of convincing scriptural evidence in his work could possibly be attributed to the teachings of the Catholic Church on the Word of God. As stated above, the

---

<sup>17</sup> Bellarmine, *On the Canonization and Veneration of the Saints*, 119–20.

Catholic Church places church tradition and the magisterium (or teaching office of the church) on the same level as the written Word of God. This would mean that, for Bellarmine, there wouldn't necessarily have to be an abundance (or possibly, any) evidence of a teaching in the Scriptures for it to be valid and authentic for the Christian faith. In other words, if the Church has been doing it long enough, or if the Pope and the theologians put their stamp of approval on it, that would be just as validating as reading it in the Bible. With this being the case, it is quite possible that Bellarmine was not quoting Scripture as often as those writing against him because he felt that he did not need to. There were differing standards of authority and expectations on both sides of this conflict. If Bellarmine had been asked to write concerning the Veneration of the Saints in an environment where the reformers were not a factor, would he have included references in the written word at all? Based on the ratio of scriptural arguments to arguments from church tradition and the church fathers, it is entirely possible that he might not have. This question cannot be conclusively answered, but only speculated about.

## THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

The church fathers are referenced frequently in the writings of Catholic theologians regarding the veneration of the saints. Bellarmine alone cites no less than thirty-six of the Greek and Roman church fathers in support of his claims. With this in mind, in no way will all these fathers be referenced in this paper, but some will be addressed and reviewed. It can be seen by their writings that, at least in part, saint veneration (note the lack of capitalization) has been around since the time of the early Christian Church. That being said, is it fair to assume that the veneration that is mentioned in these writings is the same Veneration that the Roman Church practiced at the time of the Reformation? Or is it possible that the veneration done by the early Christians was quite different than the veneration done by the Roman Catholic Church years later? This question will be considered in the following section.

### *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*

One of the earliest and most interesting sources that pertains to saint veneration is *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* (circa. 155). This work, accurately named, details the account of the capture, trial, and execution of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna at the time. It also includes what the Christians did with Polycarp's remains. It's interesting to read because there was, without a doubt, a real amount of honor or veneration given to Polycarp: "For nearly all the preceding events happened in order that the Lord might show us once again a martyrdom which is in accord with the gospel. For he waited to be betrayed, just as the Lord did, in order that we too

might be imitators of him.”<sup>18</sup> Polycarp was viewed, particularly after his death, as a reminder of Christ’s sacrifice and an archetype for others to follow. It’s very interesting how Polycarp was perceived by his fellow Christians during his life and after his death. Cunningham writes, “[*The Martyrdom of Polycarp*] is a narrative of the events leading up to the death of the aged bishop, but what is more interesting is the theological framework within which the story is told.... The martyr performed, as it were, an end to life similar to the supreme martyr of the Christian faith, Jesus, who died on the cross under a sentence also pronounced by the Roman authorities.”<sup>19</sup> Clearly, Polycarp was venerated by those around him after his death. But can it be said that he was Venerated?

The account itself is a fun read. As the story goes, Polycarp fled the city to escape the authorities but was betrayed and arrested. He apparently treated the soldiers so well that they regretted arresting him. He was offered incense and a chance to proclaim that “Caesar is lord,” but he refused. So, they brought him to the stadium to be burned at the stake. As they set fire to the wood, it is said that the flames created an arch around Polycarp but did not burn him. One of the soldiers then stabbed him through the heart, and so much blood poured out from his body that it extinguished the flames. Polycarp, now dead, was burned by the Romans reigniting the blaze, leaving only his bones behind:

But the jealous and envious Evil One ... saw to it that not even his poor body should be taken away by us, *even though many desired to do this and to touch his holy flesh*. So he incited Nicetes, the father of Herod and brother of Alce, to plead with the magistrate not to give up his body, “or else” he said, “they may abandon the crucified one and begin to worship this man”—all this being done at the instigation and insistence of the Jews, who even watched when we were about to take it from the fire; they did not know that we will never be able either to abandon the Christ who suffered for the salvation of the whole

---

<sup>18</sup> J. B. Lightfoot, J. R. Harmer, and Michael W. Holmes, eds., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings* (Baker, 1992), 227.

<sup>19</sup> Cunningham, *Brief History of Saints*, 14–15.

world of those who are saved, the blameless on behalf of sinners, or to worship anyone else.<sup>20</sup>

What is telling in this excerpt is the emphasized statement. Many of the Christians who were present at the execution of Polycarp desired to “touch his holy flesh.” This appears to show that the Christians who were there had some form of veneration on their minds when it came to what remained of Polycarp’s body. There may have been an idea that some benefit could be gained by doing nothing more than touching the body of the departed martyr. Though clearly, according at least to the author, this action and veneration towards Polycarp in no way diminished the praise and honor that the Christians in Smyrna had for their Savior. They saw no contradiction between venerating Polycarp and worshipping Jesus.

It would be possible to understand this action in a way that does not necessarily fall into an unscriptural practice of saint veneration. One could simply attribute it to a high level of respect shown to Polycarp by his fellow Christians. As one reads the account, however, it becomes more difficult to discern the difference. Later on in the account the reader is told what happened to Polycarp’s remains after the execution: “And so later on we took up his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and deposited them in a suitable place. There gathering together, as we are able, with joy and gladness, the Lord will permit us to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom in commemoration of those who have already fought in the contest, and for the training and preparation of those who will do so in the future.”<sup>21</sup> *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* makes it plain that the Christians were showing veneration to the martyrs and saints astonishingly close to the time of the apostles. The simplest reading of

---

<sup>20</sup> Lightfoot, Harmer, and Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 241. Emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> Lightfoot, Harmer, and Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 241.



the text, however, would advocate for veneration, rather than Veneration in the Catholic sense. With a lack of prescriptive passages in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, it is near impossible to prove that Veneration in the Catholic sense is what the Christians in Smyrna were going for. What makes this fascinating is that there was not much of a structured church at this time. There were bishops and overseers, absolutely. But as far as a structured church hierarchy goes, the church was much more loosely tied than it was later in history.

Should this account of Polycarp's death be considered as proof for Saint Veneration? One's first reaction upon reading the account would likely be to answer, "Yes". But with a closer examination, an argument can be made that this was a form of veneration that is completely in line with the teaching of Heb 13:7 "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (NIV). In addition to the lack of prescriptive passages mentioned above, it not said once in the account that the believers prayed *to* Polycarp. The believer may well have been simply thanking God for the wonderful leader that he had graciously given to them.

### **Cyprian, *To Cornelius in Exile***

The letter that Cyprian wrote to Cornelius was addressed in the Lutheran Confessions, so it seems apt to include it here. The Lutheran reformers write concerning Cyprian: "They cite Cyprian, because he asked Cornelius, while he was still alive, to pray for his disciples after his departure. From this example they prove the invocation of the dead."<sup>22</sup> In the final few sentences of his farewell to Cornelius, Cyprian pleads with him that they both continue to pray for each

---

<sup>22</sup> Kolb/Wengert Ap XXI 2.

other: “Let us remember one another in concord and unanimity. ‘Let us on both sides always pray for one another. Let us relieve burdens and afflictions by mutual love, that if any one of us, by the swiftness of divine condescension, shall go hence the first, our love may continue in the presence of the Lord, and our prayers for our brethren and sisters not cease in the presence of the Father’s mercy. I bid you, dearest brother, ever heartily farewell.’”<sup>23</sup> The passage can be taken in a way that it advocates for Christians to continue to pray after their deaths (or intercede, to use the terminology of the doctrine of the saints in the Catholic Church) for their brothers and sisters who are still on earth.

That being said, the language used by Cyprian need not necessarily be interpreted in that specific way. There are several other ways in which the end of this letter can be understood. For one example, it is entirely possible that this appeal by Cyprian may be no more than a Christian appealing to his brother, encouraging them to pray for their brothers and sisters into eternity. The Lord commands his people to pray for each other (Jas 5:16), and this would make a fitting statement for what could presumably be Cyprian’s last communication with Cornelius. As another example, when one reads this passage, it may even call to mind the words of the apostle John in Rev 6:9–11, where the saints cry out in anguish to the lamb: “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the full number of their fellow servants, their brothers and sisters, were killed just as they had been.” How fitting it

---

<sup>23</sup> Cyprian, *To Cornelius*, in Alexander Roberts, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.d. 325: The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, The Ante Nicene Fathers (Cosimo Inc, 2007), 5:352.

would be, if Cyprian were simply reminding his friend Cornelius that when the believer dies, he joins the victorious masses in heaven, crying out to their God to relieve those still on earth! He very well may not be speaking in favor of the intercession of the saints, but simply speaking of the praises and prayers that the departed saints sing in heaven based on the sufficient and completed merit of Jesus Christ.

### **Ignatius' Epistle to the Romans**

A third source from the early church fathers that is worth examining is Ignatius, especially his letter to the Christians in Rome. This letter was written by Ignatius as he travelled to Rome to be executed. As he writes this letter, pouring his heart out to his brothers and sisters in Rome, the reader gets some valuable insight into the mindset of a Christian in Ignatius's time period. It is widely agreed upon that Ignatius was executed during the reign of Emperor Trajan (ca. 110–117 A.D.); this was not at all too far removed from the time of Christ and the apostles.

In his letter, Ignatius seems to display a desire for martyrdom. He pleads several times with the Christians in Rome *not* to interfere with his pending trial and execution: “For the beginning is auspicious, provided that I attain the grace to receive my fate without interference. For I am afraid of your love, in that it may do me wrong; for it is easy for you to do what you want, but it is difficult for me to reach God, unless you spare me.”<sup>24</sup> It is entirely possible that Ignatius had a strong faith in his savior, and was pleading with the Christians in Rome to respect the authorities that God had placed over them. It is also possible that Ignatius' mindset was

---

<sup>24</sup> Lightfoot, Harmer, and Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 169.

something akin to this: it would be much too dangerous to remain alive, and it would be better for his spiritual life should he die.

Ignatius sees those who captured him as no different than the beasts that he presumed would devour him upon entering Rome: “From Syria all the way to Rome I am fighting with wild beasts on land and sea, by night and day, chained amidst ten leopards (that is, a company of soldiers) who only get worse when they are well-treated. Yet because of their mistreatment I am becoming more of a disciple.”<sup>25</sup> Ignatius saw his persecution and trials on this earth as a way to be more like the examples that he had before him: Christ Jesus and the apostles. He wished to emulate their example, following their footsteps to his own “cross.” For Ignatius, as for many others, the cross he bore led him to trust in Christ more as he got closer to his death.

There is something to be said here of the Christian’s suffering while here on earth. While Jesus was on earth, he promised the Christian that their life would not be one of peace. Jesus says as much in Matt 10:34, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword.” There is no question that the Christian will endure hardships while on this earth, but that does not mean that the Christian is to *seek out* his suffering and do nothing to avoid it. While not for certain, it is possible that this is what Ignatius was doing. Presumably, the Christians in Rome could have done something to help his sentence, such as make an appeal in the court. Otherwise, Ignatius would not have wasted ink asking them not to intervene. The simple fact is, if they were able to help, Ignatius did not want it:

For I will never again have an opportunity such as this to reach God, nor can you, if you remain silent, be credited with a greater accomplishment. For if you remain silent and leave me alone, I will be a rod of God, but if you love my flesh, then I will again be a mere voice. Grant me nothing more than to be poured out as an offering to God while there is still an altar ready, so that in love you may form a chorus and sing to the Father in

---

<sup>25</sup> Lightfoot, Harmer, and Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 173.

Jesus Christ.... It is good to be setting from the world to God, in order that I may rise to Him.<sup>26</sup>

Either Ignatius did not want the Christians to rebel against the authorities placed over them, or he had his mind set on martyrdom. Either way he did not wish to continue living but preferred to go to the grave.

A final point on the letter of Ignatius is how he spoke of his body after he had died. He writes to the Roman Christians, “Let me be food for the wild beasts.... Better yet, coax the wild beasts, that they may become my tomb and leave nothing of my body behind, lest I become a burden to someone once I have fallen asleep.”<sup>27</sup> This statement can potentially be taken two different ways: The simplest answer would be that Ignatius did not want his remains to be something that the Christians in Rome had to worry about burying. But one can read this and see the connection to the treatment of relics in the same way the Christians treated the remains of Polycarp after his death, as shown previously in this paper. Perhaps Ignatius did not want anything to be left over of his body because he did not want the Christians to gather his bones into a shrine that they might revisit and pray to him. It is not that much of a leap that it be discounted immediately, even if at the same time, it would be near impossible to prove beyond doubt.

---

<sup>26</sup> Lightfoot, Harmer, and Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 169–71.

<sup>27</sup> Lightfoot, Harmer, and Holmes, *The Apostolic Fathers*, 171.

## THE ENVIRONMENT THAT LED TO SAINT WORSHIP

As is important when studying anything in antiquity, the context in which these practices arose among the Christians are key to understanding just how they arose. This is particularly important in light of the fact that there is no real mention of the Veneration of the Saints as taught in the Roman Catholic Church in the earliest church fathers. Many times, understanding the culture, geography, and philosophies that were prevalent in the given time period helps to shed light on a particular situation. The same concepts apply to the teaching of the Veneration of the Saints. A thought must be given to culture, societal influences, and the environment that the early Christians found themselves in. It is also important to understand their social status in that environment.

### **The Landscape**

The early Christians found themselves in the middle of a Greco-Roman society. As the conquest of Alexander the Great spread to the edges of the known world, the Greek language became the *lingua franca*, and Greek culture permeated societies all over the world. As a result, Greek culture was in many places blended with the native cultures. Israel and Palestine were not immune to this effect, as is evident in the writing of the New Testament in the Greek language.

Already before the time of Christ, Greek culture, especially, was making an impact on Jewish society. Walker writes,

In its turn, the Judaism of the dispersion was much influenced by Hellenism, mainly by Greek philosophy, and nowhere more deeply than in Egypt. There, in Alexandria, the Old Testament was given to the reading world in Greek translation, the so-called Septuagint, as early as the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (B. C. 285–246)... In Alexandria, also, Old Testament religious ideas were combined with Greek philosophical conceptions, notably Platonic and Stoic, in a remarkable syncretism. The most influential of these Alexandrian interpreters was Philo.... The belief that the Old Testament and Greek philosophy were in essential agreement was one of far-reaching significance for the development of Christian theology. This allegorical method of Biblical explanation was greatly to influence later Christian study of the Scriptures.<sup>28</sup>

Greek culture (much like American culture today) permeated the societies that it touched. Greek was the common second language for many, and schools of Greek philosophy were prevalent and popular. The combination of Greek philosophy and the Judeo-Christian culture would come to formulate how the Jewish people (and later Christians) spoke, taught, and debated their respective religions. Jewish and Christian theologians would come to use Greek philosophical terminology for the foreseeable future.<sup>29</sup>

Fast-forward a few hundred years or so, and besides Judaism, a new religion that originated in Jerusalem is on the scene. The Greco-Roman world was familiar with and tolerated Judaism, but there were some remarkable differences between the Jews and this new sect that grew from their ranks. As the Christian Church grew in the time period after the destruction of Jerusalem, the Roman Empire went through a period of instability. Leadership in the Roman Empire had a short turnover rate, there were famines and disasters in the lands, and a scapegoat was needed. Rainy writes, “During this time of frequent calamity and distress, outcry against the Christians as the guilty cause stimulated governors to persecute; and about the middle of the third century some of the emperors, and those not in the worse, judged it to be in the interest of

---

<sup>28</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1954), 17.

<sup>29</sup> Examples of such terminology would include the usage of *essence*, *accident*, and *attributes* in respect to theology.

the State to authorize new and special measures in order to put down Christianity. Persecutions then became very severe. But from the time of Gallienus, A.D. 260–268, these attempts ceased.”<sup>30</sup> The Christians found themselves in a difficult situation with the Roman government.

Why exactly were the Christians chosen as the scapegoats during this uncertain time in the Roman Empire? In short, they were counter-cultural from the Greco-Roman mindset. They did not participate in festivals and sacrifices. They were perceived as isolationists by their fellow citizens: “The very expectation of the Lord’s return, while it helped the Christian to bear persecution, might render him indifferent to current social interests. Then his purer morals and his more spiritual but exclusive religion seemed to mark him as one who claimed to be a superior person and who disapproved of his neighbors.”<sup>31</sup> The Christians were seen as those on the outside—those who did not wish to be partakers in the things that made the Roman Empire, well, the Roman Empire.

The Christians’ neglect of the Roman way of life was met first with uneasiness, then resentment, and then persecution:

Out of all this, then, arose in the Gentile world, speaking generally, an intense popular aversion to Christianity. For in regard to this whole region of human life the new religion [Christianity] seemed to threaten indefinite disturbance. It interfered with the established ways of society—with trade interests, with family life, with popular amusements, with accepted religious observances.... Add to all this that the regular worship of the gods was thought to guarantee the State against calamities, and that neglect of it might bring disaster upon the whole community. For, indeed, the public religion was the consecration of the State, and in a manner the basis of it. And the Christian, not contented with quietly disbelieving, must openly repudiate it. All this fermented together in the popular mind.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Robert Rainy, *The Ancient Catholic Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902), 4.

<sup>31</sup> Rainy, *The Ancient Catholic Church*, 10.

<sup>32</sup> Rainy, *The Ancient Catholic Church*, 9, 11.



This was not only a religious discrepancy for the Roman citizens, but it was a civic issue. The Christians were not simply irreligious, but they were questioning, in a very real sense, the foundation of the society they lived in.

### **The Persecution**

Due to the conditions stated above, persecutions and executions of Christians became commonplace in the early Christian Church. The Christians were seen as outsiders among their fellow citizens of their respective cities. They refused to participate in ceremonies and festivals that were not only religiously significant to their contemporaries but also politically significant. These were seen as nothing short of treasonous activities. And so, the persecutions of Christians in the first few centuries, though sporadic and irregular,<sup>33</sup> was quickly becoming a regular part of the Christian life.

The persecution of the Christians came as a response to their “offenses” against the Roman way of life. The citizens with whom they interacted were getting increasingly agitated with how counter-cultural the Christian way of life was: “The mere fact that Christians, as we have seen, awoke repugnance and irritation in many minds, was in itself enough to dispose a Roman magistrate to hostile action; the order and tranquillity of society were great public interests, and novelties that were troublesome, and that savoured of wilfulness, were never looked upon as entitled to much toleration.”<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Cunningham writes that the first empire-wide persecution did not take place until A.D. 250 during the reign of Decius.

<sup>34</sup> Rainy, *The Ancient Catholic Church*, 13.

These persecutions ranged in intensity, mode of execution, and brutality. In *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, Polycarp was burned at the stake and stabbed. But there are some instances of Christians being thrown to wild animals, being beheaded, and being crucified. Oftentimes many Christians were executed in groups, as Rainy writes: “Martyrdom might be solitary, but it was often social—those who had worshipped together dying together.”<sup>35</sup> The Roman officials saw this as a way to put down this new religion, but in many cases, it had the opposite effect:

Naturally, scenes like these produced great excitement. Sometimes spectators, who had never before professed Christianity, became so impressed with what they saw at the scaffold, or with the spirit and bearing of Christian sufferers in prison, that they surrendered themselves to Christ and His religion, and accepted all the consequences. Sometimes Christian onlookers, who had not up to that time been themselves accused, could not resist the impulse of sympathy and indignation; they stood out, denounced the persecutor, and offered themselves to condemnation. Or Christians carried out of themselves by the “passion” in which they felt it a privilege to share, could even join the sufferers, apparently without waiting to be either accused or condemned.<sup>36</sup>

Christianity, despite the best efforts of certain Roman officials, survived and even thrived under the persecutions they faced. The result of this was rapid church growth in the first few centuries after the time of the apostles—growth that came from the power of the gospel spreading to those who had witnessed the Christian faith from their Christian neighbors who held to their faith in the face of adversity, persecution, and threats of death.

---

<sup>35</sup> Rainy, *The Ancient Catholic Church*, 44.

<sup>36</sup> Rainy, *The Ancient Catholic Church*, 48.

### Ascension to Sainthood

How were men and women made saints in the early church? Many of the martyrs during these times of persecution are canonized by the Roman Catholic Church (made saints) today, or at least, many of the ones of whom there is a record. The concept of just how someone becomes a saint (before the time in which the Christian Church is rigorously structured) seems to be election by popular opinion, as Bellarmine writes: “Therefore, what shall we say about so many saints who, before those times, were venerated in the Church? *I respond*: Older saints began to be venerated in the universal Church not by some law, as it were, but by *custom*.... [S]o the cult of any saint that was introduced generally by the custom of the Churches, has its force from the tacit or express approval of the Supreme Pontiff.”<sup>37</sup> Cunningham concurs, writing, “There was nothing like any formal canonization process in the first millennium of Christian history. Veneration of the saints developed from the ground up.”<sup>38</sup> In the early church, it was the laity, not the clergy, who canonized the saints. This might be a shocking revelation, but it makes sense when thought about in context. In the time period following the apostles, the structure of the Christian Church was (as stated earlier) not as official or “put-together” as the church would be later on. There were still “bishops” (Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna), but they were in no way the same as the bishops of the church in later years. The churches were, in a way, free from the hierarchy of the church as a whole and were able to establish their own traditions, such as the veneration of certain local saints.

*The Martyrdom of Polycarp* is a fine case study to look at in this situation. After his death, his followers gathered his remains and laid them to rest in a place where they would be

---

<sup>37</sup> Bellarmine, *On the Canonization and Veneration of the Saints*, 94–95.

<sup>38</sup> Cunningham, *Brief History of Saints*, 22–23.

able to visit and remember him. This practice was the standard procedure for many other martyrs of Christendom:

What was new in the practice of the Christians was to observe the date of the martyr's death as a "birthday", i.e. that day in which they were born anew to the realm of God. This veneration had a deep religious significance evidenced by the fact that the same *Martyrdom of Polycarp* was quick to point out to some Jews of Smyrna, who accused them of abandoning Christ, that they observed the cult of the martyrs "because of their unsurpassable devotion to their own King and Teacher" who were "disciples and imitators of the Lord."<sup>39</sup>

After the Christian's martyrdom, they were seen as the ideal which one should strive for. They were held in the highest regard. They were venerated. And yet, the *simplest* reading of the text can still argue that this veneration is not the veneration we see in the Roman Catholic Church later. What has been said of the saints in the quote above is perfectly in line with what Scripture teaches (Heb 13:7).

The veneration of the saints did, however, eventually find its way off the straight and narrow path of sound doctrine. For example, the Christians placed high value in the remains of the departed saints. Fragments of bone, clothing, and anything owned by the saint while living became relics that brought blessing to the one who held them in their possession. It is likely that, just like their philosophy, Greek culture also permeated Christian culture in how fallen heroes were treated:

Ancient Greek literature ... abounds with examples of the way in which a hero or protector of the *polis* [city]—in particular his bones—brought a blessing upon the city, enhancing its military power and economic prosperity. While this idea is well known from the veneration of the relics (*reliquiae*) of the Christian saints, the Greek sources attest that this cult was known in the ancient Mediterranean from a much earlier period. A

---

<sup>39</sup> Cuningham, *Brief History of Saints*, 16.

city's inhabitants worshipped their hero's relics in a special festival, constructing temples to house his bones and other items belonging to him.<sup>40</sup>

If this sounds familiar to how the Christians treated the body and possessions of a departed saint, it should. There are striking similarities between the two: special festival (or service) in the hero's honor and constructing a place (perhaps a shrine or church) to house his bones and possessions. With many Christians growing up in the Greek culture, it only makes sense that some traditions and ceremonies would translate somehow into Christianity.

As time went on in the Greco-Roman world, more and more people were being converted to Christianity every year. With more Christians came more saints, as Walker writes:

With the conversion of Constantine, however, and accession to the church of masses fresh from heathenism, this reverence [of the saints and martyrs] largely increases.... Men looked back on the time of persecution with much reason, as a heroic age, and upon its martyrs as the athletes of the Christian race. Popular opinion, which had long sanctioned the remembrance of the martyrs in prayer and worship, had passed over, before the close of the fourth century, to the feeling that they were to be prayed to as intercessors with God, and as able to protect, heal, and aid those who honored them.... The martyrs, for the masses, took the place of the old gods and heroes.... Inclusion in [the saints'] ranks was a matter of common opinion. They were guardians of cities, patrons, or trades, curers of disease.<sup>41</sup>

When put into the context of Roman society, the Christians' love of the saints—especially veneration of the saints—is much more understandable. They were no longer seen as mere examples to follow, mere men and women to look up to as believers who clung to their Savior in the face of immense adversity. They had become protectors of cities, good luck charms for certain professions, “demigods” who looked out for those still on earth.

---

<sup>40</sup> Guy Darshan, “The Reinterment of Saul and Jonathan's Bones (II Sam 21,12-14) in Light of Ancient Greek Hero-Cult Stories,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 125.4 (2013): 642.

<sup>41</sup> Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 170.

As this practice went on, it can be identified that the Christian Church was canonizing those who were already being venerated by their people for the good deeds they had done which had nothing to do with their personal faith. Chaney writes concerning the canonization of Anglo-Saxon kings by the church:

The frequent example of sainthood bestowed upon kings who die violent deaths may well be regarded as a Christian substitute for the ritual king-slaying of paganism. Not only were northern kings sacrificed to get good crops, as the Ynglingar Domaldi and Olaf Tretelgia of Sweden, but kings were worshipped after their death. So in England kings such as Edwin and Egfrid of Northumbria and Edmund of East Anglia, who fell in battle against the heathen, Oswini of Deira, who was murdered by King Oswiu, Aethelberht of East Anglia, beheaded by Offa of Mercia, and others who died unjust and violent deaths became popular saints.<sup>42</sup>

The men mentioned by Chaney here were obviously loved by their people for various reasons. Their lives and deaths, however, gave no indication of faith life worthy of imitating or even a martyr's death concerning their faith. They did, however, support their people in various ways. There was even, in Anglo-Saxon culture, a ritual where the king would be sacrificed to ensure the soil would produce crops in the coming seasons. His death would bring prosperity to the land which he ruled, and he was celebrated after his death for doing so. One cannot help but see the similarities between the Anglo-Saxon culture and the Greek culture. They both showed honor, respect, and veneration to those who gave everything for the good of people and *polis*.

---

<sup>42</sup> William A Chaney, "Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England," *Harvard Theological Review* 53.3 (1960): 212.

## CONCLUSION

Many defenders of the teaching of the Veneration of the Saints point to church tradition and the church fathers in support of this teaching. The church fathers are not conclusive on their own. There are certainly elements that could be considered Veneration in the Catholic sense, but it cannot be said without a doubt that these accounts alone support Veneration of the Saints. Additionally, the source of this teaching is not found in Scripture.

The teaching of the Veneration (and intercession) of the saints in the Catholic Church can be traced back to the environment and culture in which the Judeo-Christian religions resided in before, during, and after the time of Christ. There was a perfect storm of environmental variables that brought out this teaching. First, there was the influence of the Greek culture. Hellenism permeated society in many different ways, ranging from language to philosophy to religious and ceremonial ideas. Second, the Roman way of life was threatened by the presence of Christianity. They did not participate in ritual festivals, sacrifices, and perhaps most importantly, the imperial cult. Naturally, this caused problems with non-Christian Roman citizens, which led to the frequent persecution of Christians. As the Christians were persecuted, there were naturally those who were put to death for their “crimes” of being Christian. These men and women who lost their lives were seen by Christians as examples to follow and even archetypes of Christ himself. While there might not be anything wrong with this statement in itself, and there is little evidence in the early church that the respect and veneration shown to those martyrs was done in an unscriptural way, the problem came when the Christians began praying to those same departed

saints with the hope that they would derive some benefit from it. This became more prevalent as more and more converts came into the Christian fold in the second and third centuries, bringing with them presuppositions and traditions of their old pagan religions.

All of these factors mixed together in the first few centuries to create the perfect cocktail that became saint veneration. There was no one party or variable that was responsible for the rise of the cult of the saints in the Western Church. It was, rather, a product of the environment that early Christianity found itself in.

The result of Saint Veneration in the Western Church makes sense when a logical, historical approach is taken to look at how it grew. It may make sense logically, but there is no scriptural evidence to support this teaching as something that should be practiced. The believers who have died and are residing with the Father in heaven can be apt examples for the Christian to look to in times of trouble, but that is where the relationship must stop. Any plea to the saints for help or intercession violates and diminishes the continued role of Christ. As St. Paul writes in 1 Tim 2:5, “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus.”

SOLI DEO GLORIA



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bellarmino, Robert. *On the Canonization and Veneration of the Saints*. Translated by Ryan Grant. Post Falls, ID: Mediatrix, 2019.
- Brom, Robert H. "Saint Worship?" *Catholic Answers*, 10 August 2004.  
<https://www.catholic.com/tract/saint-worship>.
- Chaney, William A. "Paganism to Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England." *Harvard Theological Review* 53.3 (1960): 197–217.
- Church, U. S. Catholic. *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Complete and Updated*. Revised edition. USCCB, 1995.
- Cunningham, Lawrence. *Brief History of Saints*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005.
- Darshan, Guy. "The Reinterment of Saul and Jonathan's Bones (II Sam 21,12-14) in Light of Ancient Greek Hero-Cult Stories." *Zeitschrift Für Die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 125.4 (2013): 640–45.
- Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert. *The Book of Concord (New Translation): The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Translated by Charles P. Arand. 2nd edition. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.
- Lightfoot, J. B., J. R. Harmer, and Michael W. Holmes, eds. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*. Baker, 1992.
- Rainy, Robert. *The Ancient Catholic Church*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1902.
- Roberts, Alexander, ed. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.d. 325: The Apostolic Fathers With Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*. The Ante Nicene Fathers. Cosimo Inc, 2007.
- Schroeder, Henry Joseph. *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*. London: B. Herder, 1941.
- Walker, Williston. *A History of the Christian Church*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954.