

THE “FIVE SOLAS” OF OUR FAITH

Session Two: The Path to Salvation

in the Pre-Reformation Church of the Middle Ages

In the Medieval church, salvation was seen to be dependent upon a person’s participation in the Sacraments, obedience to church law, and the accumulation of “merit,” either through good works, spiritual disciplines (such as Pilgrimage), or borrowing merit from someone with far greater merit, such as a saint.

The Sacraments

The church recognised seven sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Reconciliation, Matrimony, Anointing of the Sick, and Holy Orders.

Through **Baptism**, a person enters the family of the church, through sharing the common rite of initiation and welcome. The parents (and Godparents) vow to raise the child in the Christian faith; if it is an adult being baptised, a sponsor would be appointed.

Confirmation is when an older child or young adult confirms their baptism, when after receiving instruction in the Christian faith, they themselves vow to live according to it. For adults, Baptism and Confirmation are generally simultaneous.

The **Eucharist** is another word for Communion; through the Eucharist, the saving work of Christ and the very real presence of Christ is with the people. One’s salvation could not be effectively maintained without it; To be deprived of the Eucharist (excommunication) was to be in danger of losing the faith altogether.

Reconciliation involves confession, penance and absolution. Confession of sin would be made to a priest; the priest would counsel the person on resisting sin; a form of penance would be prescribed, which may take many forms – prayers, alms, spiritual discipline, repentance. Once the penance was performed, the priest would pronounce absolution (forgiveness) of the sin.

Matrimony – although not necessary for salvation, Matrimony was regarded as a sacrament, and had to be performed under the auspices of the Church to be considered valid. Clergy were forbidden to marry; the example of Jesus and the advice of Paul were justifications for this rule.

Anointing of the Sick was done by a priest or healer in Holy Orders. Prayers for healing were given, and oil was applied – usually on the head, in the form of a cross – as a sign of the healing work of the Holy Spirit. Hospitals were staffed primarily by those in Holy Orders, since healing was regarded as a spiritual act, as much as physical.

Holy Orders - The Sacrament of Holy Orders is the continuation of Jesus Christ's priesthood, which He bestowed upon His Apostles. In the Sacrament of Holy Orders, a man (and only a man!) is incorporated into the priesthood of Christ at one of three levels: the episcopate (Bishop), the priesthood (for the conferring of the Sacraments), or the diaconate (Deacons – most often, preachers).

Salvation through Merits

Treasury of Merit - According to the medieval Roman church, just a drop of Christ's blood would contain enough merit to save the whole world. Obviously Christ shed a vast amount of blood as He was crucified. What happened to all this excess merit? God stored this merit in a “spiritual treasury” in heaven.

Mary (according to the medieval Roman church) was sinless. She gained far more merit than what was needed for heaven, and so the extra merit she acquired was added to the treasury, along with the merits of saints (who again had more than enough merit to enter heaven for themselves). All excess merit was stored in the treasury. Because of this, the more sinful believers could benefit from the merit of their more saintly brethren. This Treasury of Merit was thought to have been placed under the charge of the Pope, who alone possesses the keys, and he can dispense merit at his discretion in what is called “Indulgences.”

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matthew 16:18-19)

The Pope grants indulgences to those who fulfill certain conditions. These indulgences grant relief from the temporal punishments of purgatory and are measured in terms of time: hours, days, weeks, months and years in purgatory.

Purgatory has two purposes: a temporal punishment for sin, and the cleansing from the attachment to sin. Purgatory purifies the soul before the soul's grand entrance into heaven.

Catholicism doesn't teach that everyone goes to purgatory - the Roman Catholic Church believes that many people are purified or purged (hence the term purgatory) in this life. For example, the Church believes that many innocent persons who suffer from disease,

poverty, or persecution are living their purgatory now, and when they die, they probably go straight to heaven.

Also, people who live an exceptionally good and holy life bypass purgatory and enter directly into heaven. Almost everyone else, although not bad enough to go to hell, aren't good enough to enter into heaven with no need for some introspection and purification.

What are Relics?

In Christianity, relics are the material remains of a deceased saint or martyr and objects closely associated with those remains. Relics can be entire skeletons, but more usually they consist of a part such as a bone, hair or tooth. Pieces of clothing worn by the deceased saint or even an object that has come in contact with a relic is also considered a relic.

Relics have played an important role in Christian ritual since the earliest centuries of the church and were a major part of popular religion in the Middle Ages. Until 1969, relics were placed under the altar stones of all Roman Catholic churches. The veneration of relics was rejected by most of the Protestant Reformers and most Protestants today, but relics continue to play an important part in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity.

Relics in the Bible

Although the veneration of relics was not explicitly practiced in the Christian Bible, for Roman Catholic and some Orthodox Christians, these passages confirm their belief that God chooses to work miracles through material items associated with saints:

Once while some Israelites were burying a man, suddenly they saw a band of raiders; so they threw the man's body into Elisha's tomb. When the body touched Elisha's bones, the man came to life and stood up on his feet. (2 Kings 13:21, NIV)

Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding to 12 years came up behind him [Jesus] and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, "If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed." Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed from that moment. (Matthew 9:20-22, NIV)

People brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by... and all of them were healed. (Acts 5:15-16, NIV)

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them. (Acts 19:11-12, NIV)

Relics in the Early Church

The earliest surviving mention of relic veneration after the New Testament occurs in a work called *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, dated to about 150 AD. In this account of the death of the leader who was believed to have known the Apostle John, his admirers in Smyrna wrote:

We took up his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place, where the Lord will permit us to gather ourselves together, as we are able, in gladness and joy and to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom.

St. Jerome eloquently explained the practice this way:

We do not worship, we do not adore, for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore him whose martyrs they are. (Ad Riparium, XXII, 907)

A Theology of Relics developed, teaching that spiritual strength, merit, and even salvation itself could come from the possession, veneration of, or pilgrimage to a relic. Far beyond a simple “good luck charm,” a relic was considered to carry the very character and life of the source.

Are Relics Real?

A primary objection made to the veneration of relics is their dubious authenticity. The Church's position, however, is not to take a position as to the authenticity of particular relics. The Catholic Encyclopedia goes on to explain:

Supposing it [a relic] to be in fact spurious, no dishonor is done to God by the continuance of an error which has been handed down in good faith for many centuries. On the other hand the practical difficulty of pronouncing a final verdict upon the authenticity of these and similar relics must be patent to all.... Further, devotions of ancient date deeply rooted in the heart of the peasantry cannot be swept away without some measure of scandal and popular disturbance.... Hence there is justification for the practice of the Holy See in allowing the cult of certain doubtful ancient relics to continue. Meanwhile, much has been done by quietly allowing many items in some of the most famous collections of relics to drop out of sight....

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