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MARTIN CHEMNITZ
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first Topic

CONCERNING THE RELICS OF THE SAINTS

*from the 25th Session
of the Council of Trent*

SECTION I

What the Point at Issue in This Topic Is

1 Sacred Scripture is called canonical because it is and ought to be the canon or rule according to which everything that is in dispute in the church of God either about dogmas or about worship is to be examined, and according to which it is to be decided. If this dispute about the relics of the saints is examined according to this rule, that is, according to the statements and examples of Scripture, the judgment will be easy and plain.

However, in order that it may be possible to do this more easily and rightly, we shall to begin with set forth the chief points in this controversy about the relics of the saints. For the point at issue in this controversy does not revolve around the question whether the bodies, relics, or bones of the saints whose souls God has called from this mortal life to the heavenly fatherland are, on account of the hope of resurrection and glorification, to be treated and buried honorably and reverently. Rather, when the papalists dispute about the veneration and honor of relics, they contend most of all about these chief points.

That the bodies, ashes, or bones of the saints are to be taken out of the sepulchers and placed in an elevated place, for instance above the high altar or in another conspicuous place, and adorned with gold, silver, silk, etc.

That these relics are to be carried about in public processions and supplications, and displayed and placed before the Christian people, to touch, kiss, or at least to gaze upon.

They teach, *Extra. De reliquiis et veneratione sanctorum*, that such relics must be approved by the Roman pontiff, which the canonists say is done through canonization, which Antonius defines thus in Part 5 of his *Summa*, Title 12, ch. 8, that through canonization the saints are set forth by the pope as examples of faith and a holy life, and are to be *adored*¹ by all and *invoked* in times of need.

They teach that it is a unique and meritorious worship of God if the people, for the purpose of imploring aid (as the Tridentine decree speaks),

¹ Emphases, here and elsewhere, are by Chemnitz.

SECTION II

The Teaching of Sacred Scripture About the Bodies, Bones, or Relics of the Saints

1 The Gentiles, not knowing what the Word of God says about the resurrection and glorification of the body (although they had some thoughts, as if through a dream, about the immortality of the soul), had a dread about the cadavers of the dead as something abominable, on account of the stench and uncleanness, as Julian, according to Cyril, Bk. 10, showed. Therefore some barbarians cast the dead bodies of human beings before dogs and birds to rend and devour. And the Laws of the Twelve Tables strictly forbade the burial of the bodies of the dead within the city, lest people be rendered unclean by them. This prohibition was later also confirmed by the decrees of a number of rulers.

Scripture, however, teaches not only the excellence and immortality of the soul, but it also praises the sanctification of the bodies of the godly in this life, and promises their future glorification after this life in the resurrection. For even as God created not only the soul, but also the human body, so the Son of God, the Mediator, wanted to assume and redeem not only the soul, but also the human body. And in "the washing of regeneration and renewal" [Titus 3:5] the Holy Spirit washes, seals, and sanctifies not only our souls but also our bodies; as Irenaeus says, our bodies receive the Eucharist, which consists of two things, an earthly and a heavenly, namely the body and blood of Christ. And Paul affirms that the bodies of the faithful are also in this life dwellings and temples of the Holy Spirit, who inhabits them, and of the grace of God (1 Cor. 6:19 and 2 Cor. 6:16). The same apostle declares that also the bodies of the godly are members of Christ (1 Cor. 6:15; Eph. 5:30). And in and through their bodies God performs and shows many glorious and wonderful works in the saints, as through the hands of the apostles He worked signs and wonders, and the shadow of Peter healed the sick (Acts 5:12-16). We yield our members to the righteousness of God (Rom. 6:19). And we glorify God not only through our spirit, but also through our body, both of which belong to God, who bought them with a price (1 Cor. 6:20).

DECREE OF THE COUNCIL OF TRENT CONCERNING IMAGES

Furthermore [the holy synod enjoins] that images of Christ, of the Virgin Bearer of God, and of other saints are to be had and retained particularly in the churches, and that due honor and veneration be shown them; not as though it were believed that any divinity or power resided in them, on account of which they are to be worshiped, or that anything should be requested of them, or that trust should be placed in images, as was formerly done by the heathen, who placed their hope in idols, but because the honor which is shown them is bestowed on the prototypes they represent, so that through the images which we kiss, and before which we uncover our head and bow down, we may adore Christ, and venerate the saints whose similitude the images bear, as has been defined by the decrees of councils, especially of the Second Nicene Synod, against the opponents of images.

This the bishops should teach diligently, that through the histories of the mysteries of our redemption, expressed by means of pictures and other likenesses, the people are taught and confirmed in remembering and assiduously reflecting upon the articles of faith, that indeed also great benefit is received from all sacred images, not only because by means of them people are reminded of the benefits and gifts which are bestowed on them by Christ, but also because the miracles of God done through the saints, and their salutary examples, are set before the eyes of the faithful, that they may give thanks to God for them, order their lives and customs to imitation of the saints, and be incited to adore and love God, and to cultivate piety. But if anyone shall teach or hold what is contrary to these decrees, let him be anathema!

If, however, any abuses have crept into these holy and salutary observances, the holy synod desires most earnestly that they should be entirely abolished, so that no images may be set up which encourage false doctrine and furnish occasion for dangerous error to the unlearned. But if at any time, when it shall be expedient for the unlearned people, it happens that histories and accounts of sacred Scripture are represented and pictured, let the people be taught that the divinity is not thereby pictured, as though it could be seen by bodily eyes or be represented by colors or figures.

Moreover, all superstition should be removed in the invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, and the sacred use of images, all filthy gain eliminated, and finally all wantonness avoided, in such a way that images may not be painted or adorned with a wanton beauty, and that people may not misuse the festivals of the saints and the visitation of relics for reveling and drunkenness, as though festival days in honor of the saints were observed by means of excess and wantonness.

Finally, let such care and diligence be used by the bishops in connection with these things that nothing disorderly or that is unbecomingly and hastily arranged, nothing profane, nothing dishonorable may appear, since holiness becomes the house of God.

In order that these things may be the more faithfully observed, the holy synod ordains that no one be permitted either to place or to cause to be placed any unusual

SECTION II

History of Indulgences, That Is, How from the Rites of Public Penitence in the Ancient Church, from the Relaxation, Commutation, or Redemption of Canonical Penalties, a New Kind of Indulgences Was in Later Times Built Up

When Lindanus notices how hateful and shameful it is that the invention of papal indulgences is so recent that it cannot be proved by any approved and suitable testimony or example of the ancient church through nearly 1,200 years from the birth of Christ, he tries to create a fog for his readers from the history of the canonical satisfactions of the ancient church. For because one often reads that these were lessened, cut short, and relaxed, when the mind of the penitents seemed to have been sufficiently explored, he contends that papal indulgences are granted for the same reason, and that they rest on the same foundation, although he is not ignorant of the fact that those rites of the ancient church differed greatly from the traffic in papal indulgences. This can be shown to the eye (as the saying is) if the description of papal indulgences, set forth above, is compared with the rites of public penitence in the ancient church.

Therefore, lest the reader be disturbed by that fog, some things must be said about this argument of Lindanus. And in order that the refutation can be made with some benefit, without wearying the reader, we shall show by means of a historical study what the rites of public penitence were in the ancient church, for what causes and to what end these canonical punishments were either imposed on the lapsed or relaxed, how with the passage of time they developed into unbearable rigor and severity, so that it became necessary to think about changing them, what wrong, superstitious, and wicked opinions gradually were attached to these rites, and how finally, when other reasons and purposes had been thought up, other satisfactions and new indulgences were thought up, which developed into the most shameful quest for gain.

When Christ, by His Word, through the ministry of that venerable man, Dr. Martin Luther, had mightily overturned the tables of this traffic, which

SECTION I

[The True Teaching of Scripture About Fasting and the Choice of Foods]

CHAPTER I

That True Fasting Has Testimonies and Examples of Sacred Scripture in Both the Old and the New Testament

1 Fasting of itself and in its origin is not a work prohibited by a command of God, or one that militates against the Word of God, neither should nor can it simply be numbered among the things which, as being without testimonial or example in Scripture, arose and were instituted on the basis of human tradition alone. For it has not just a few and obscure, but many and clear testimonies and examples in the Scriptures of the Old as well as the New Testament, which it is good to keep in view for this reason: On account of the papalist abuses some are so afraid of the teaching about fasting that they shrink back when they only hear the term “fasting” mentioned, as though they had heard either murder or adultery; and some reject the whole teaching about fasting without discrimination among human traditions.

But Scripture censures the abuses of fasts (Is. 58:3-7; Zech. 7:3-6; Matt. 6:16-18), not that it may simply condemn fasting itself, but that it may show its true manner and godly use and approve and confirm it by many godly examples. For whatever has clear examples in the Word of God and approved examples of the saints in Scripture must not be numbered among human traditions; but if human traditions have patched any superstitious abuses or wrong opinions onto fasting, these must be discerned and separated from the exercises of fasting as they are taught in testimonies of the Word of God and approved by examples of Scripture. And care must be taken that, when superstitious opinions are rejected and foul abuses are removed, the thing itself, as it is taught in testimonies and examples of Scripture, is restored to the church.

2 Therefore David says, Ps. 35:13: “But I, when they were sick—I wore

SECTION II

[The Testimony of the Ancient Church]

CHAPTER I

A Number of Testimonies of the Ancients

That Agree with the Doctrine of Scripture About True Fasting

1 When there is a controversy about some dogma of the church, and a worried mind asks which understanding it ought to follow as true, firm, and salutary, and what opinions it ought to flee from, the conscience is not satisfied if testimonies and examples are put forward only from human writings. For faith seeks a basis and norm on which it can rest with certainty and safety, namely the voice of God Himself, who reveals His will in His Word. For it remembers that it is written: "You shall not do . . . every man whatever is right in his own eyes . . . but what I command you, that only shall you do . . . for the Lord your God" (Deut. 12:8, 31-32). "Do not walk in the statutes of your fathers. . . . I the Lord am your God; walk in My statutes" (Ezek. 20:18-19). "In vain do they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men" (Matt. 15:9). And in Col. 2:22-23, where Paul speaks specifically about foods, he says: ". . . according to human precepts and doctrines. These have indeed an appearance of wisdom, but in superstition" [cf. Vulgate]. Therefore Cyprian rightly says that one must not look to see what some have done before us, but what He, who is before all, commanded to be done.

2 Therefore I first wanted to set forth the true understanding of fasting on the basis of testimonies and examples from the Word of God. For once the true understanding has been established and confirmed from Scripture, then afterward it is not useless to add also certain testimonies of the ancient church that are in agreement with it. Why and for what purpose this should be done, and according to what norm such statements of the fathers should be selected, namely those which agree with the norm of Scripture, which is for this reason called canonical, we have set forth in Part I [pp. 256 ff.] of this examination in the words of the fathers themselves. About the chief points

CHAPTER XVIII

How After A.D. 460, Since There Were None Who Contradicted, the Superstitious Laws and Opinions About Fasting Were Heaped Up Through the Decrees of Popes and Councils, Until the Scholastic Theology Was Built Up from Them

1 Until now we have shown that until A.D. 450 laws of fasting were repeatedly and in various ways attempted in the opinion that fasting is necessary and meritorious. However, they were always repressed and refuted, for there were in all those times always some who showed the true teaching of the divine Word about fasting, contradicted the superstitions, and defended Christian liberty. But from this time on, when the lights of the church had been extinguished, when scarcely anyone was found who was able or dared to undertake the defense of freedom and truth against the superstitious laws, these laws were multiplied and established through edicts of Roman popes, through decrees of later councils, and through regulations of the monks, so that the greater part of worship was spent in these observances, which were both preferred to the commandments of God, and claimed for themselves the merit of grace and of the forgiveness of sins, with contempt for Christ, which we have shown above from the scholastic theology which arose from all this. We shall briefly draw together the history of the subsequent times from the discourses of Leo and from those who later collected these laws and constitutions in the decretals.

2 Now this Leo, whom they call "the Great," around A.D. 460 publicly proclaimed and commanded solemn fasts four times a year, namely the 40-day fast, the Pentecost fast, and the fasts of the seventh and tenth month, for we have many discourses of Leo about the fasts of those times. With respect to the fast of the seventh and the tenth month he does not try to hide the fact that they were through a bad imitation taken from the observances of the Jews (Zech. 8:19). For he says, Sermon 4, about the fast of the seventh month: "When we urge you to observe certain things that were instituted in the Old Testament, we are not subjecting you to the yoke of a Jewish observance, for although it agrees with respect to the times, it nevertheless does not agree in the customs." But this trick does not do away with the argument about the abrogation of the observances of the Old Testament in Gal. 4 and Col. 2:16-23.

Chrysostom, in explaining the passage of Paul in Gal. 4, writes that Paul had said what he did about the matter of a fast day, in order to show that he was putting down those who wanted to impose on consciences in the New Testament—even if not entirely at least in some part—the observances of the

SECTION I

Position and Teaching of Scripture About Festival Days, Such As It Was in the Old Testament and Such As It Is in the New

1 In the Old Testament God distributed pedagogical reminders and marks of divine blessings and promises about the worship of God, about exercises of piety, and about the salvation of eternal life in such a way, through times, years, months, and days, that the people might come together at certain set times for hearing of the Word, for meditation on the blessings and promises of God, for prayer, praise, giving of thanks, and for public exercises of worship of God and of piety. Thus, church meetings were held every day, both morning and evening, to ask for and praise divine governance and protection in the daily business of life, to pray for remission of sins and for the grace of the Holy Spirit. Then, during the seven days of the week, the festival of the Sabbath was established, that the blessings of God in the creation and preservation of all things might be known (Ex. 20:8-11), in memory of the wonderful liberation from Egyptian slavery (Deut. 5:12-15), as a sign of sanctification (Ezek. 20:12), and to signify the inward or spiritual and eternal sabbath (Heb. 4:4-6). For the months He established the new moons, that they might be reminded of the movements of the stars, and consider the changes in the times as a particular work of God, and that they might count up the benefits of God in their life month by month. He instituted festivals at the beginning and at the end of the year in order that the people might remember and praise the benefits of God which He had showered on them in the church, the state, and the household during the year.

2 He adds other celebrations at certain times of the year about the more outstanding blessings of God bestowed on the people in old time, in leading them out of Egypt, in leading them into the promised land, in the giving of the Law, in establishing the Israelite church and state. These festivals were at the same time marks and reminders of the promises about the future blessings of the Messiah, and about eternal life. On account of these significations and reminders, special festivals had also been instituted for every 7th and