

The Incorruptibles

By Greg Witherow

Early in my pilgrimage into the Church I stumbled across a web site that struck me as strange. I had unearthed a piece of Catholic piety that I had never heard of, that violated my Calvinistic sensibilities and to be honest, was somewhat revolting. I had discovered the Incorruptibles. The Incorruptibles are holy people whose remains have been dramatically delayed from decomposition¹. It is a phenomena found in both the Catholic and Orthodox churches². While there is no official count, by some reckoning there are nearly one hundred Incorruptibles on display in parishes and Cathedrals around the world. In this short essay we will review our topic from a secular source, the Bible and Saint Augustine's Confessions.

A Secular Viewpoint on the Incorruptibles

When researching alleged Catholic miracles it is quite common to find two views in the extreme. In one camp there are Catholics who are willing and even desirous to believe almost any claim. While there are arguably benefits to such an attitude in building personal piety, it is of little use in apologetics³. In the other camp is the unbeliever who seeks to undermine any positive proof. These committed skeptics are convinced miracles are impossible, whether found in the Bible or in the history of the Church. However, level headed analysis can be found. In apologetics, it is always more credible to quote people from outside your particular "tribe". Such voices hold more weight for those inside and outside the Church.

"Howstuffworks" is a secular web site that examines various topics from a scientific viewpoint. It is therefore by its nature skeptical of the supernatural. From an apologetics perspective this is always a good starting point. What follows are the sites comments on the Incorruptibles (emphasis mine).

"It's easy to dismiss a corpse that's been mummified as a fraudulent incorruptible. Other instances aren't as cut and dry. Saint Catherine of Bologna died in 1463 and was buried casketless in the ground. After a few weeks, she was dug up, showing no signs of decay. This didn't exactly convince anyone she was incorruptible, but the fact that she's been on display since 1500 **suggests something pretty mysterious at work**. She's seated in a chair among candles at the chapel of Poor Clares (a Catholic sisterhood she oversaw) in Bologna, and even though her skin is browned and her appearance is a little shriveled, **her continued physical integration hasn't been explained by science.**"

The same web sites continues by commenting on Saint Bernadette, another Incorruptible.

"Bernadette died in 1879 and was exhumed under candidacy of beatification in 1909. Her corpse was uncorrupted. She was reinterred in her crypt and dug up again in 1919 and 1923. Upon the

¹ I wish there was a term other than "incorruptible". It is obvious in looking at most of the pictures of Incorruptibles that they have corrupted to some degree. These are not pictures that you would hang in your children's bedrooms unless you wanted to put them into therapy! However, the term is accurate in that the bodies have not decomposed at the rate nature demands. Finally, we are only talking about cases that cannot be explained. Mummification, natural or man-made, does not qualify as a miracle.

² A distinctive of Catholicism is how it historically has embraced death and the dead. The corpus of Christ hanging on a crucifix, worshipping Mass in the catacombs, praying for the dead and the intercession of the saints are all examples. Canon law prescribes that relics of saints or martyrs be placed within every Catholic altar, a practice derived from Revelation 6:9. Praying for the dead in graveyards is also an ancient practice. On All Souls Day in 2013 my priest was approached by police using a spot light as he prayed in a local cemetery late at night. The officers had never heard of the pious Catholic act but did not arrest him.

³ Catholics who speak of headless saints walking around holding their severed head will not be taken seriously when explaining transubstantiation to non-Catholics. Who can blame them? *Certified* miracles are one thing, *non-certified* legends another.

third exhumation, she was dissected. **Her organs were still soft and malleable** [source: [Fortean Times](#)]. She was placed on display in a reliquary, where she remains today, at the convent of St. Gildard at Nevers, France. Bernadette stands (or lies) as a sterling example of incorruptibility. But her corpse also provides ammunition for skeptics. Her hands and face appear incredibly lifelike, but this is due to a wax covering. Beneath the waxy exterior, her skin has browned. While there's no scientific explanation for why her body would have remained so well-preserved without the aid of embalming or environmental conditions, she shows that all bodies will eventually rot.”⁴

Finally, the author briefly contrasts mummification with the Incorruptibles and then expounds on the topic.

“These examples of preserved humans (Note: The article just reviewed examples of mummification) share a common theme: Science can point to the means (either intentional or environmental) by which they were preserved. **This is not the case for some of the incorruptibles** found around the world -- **their existence baffles scientists**. While the preserved remains of mummies are generally found in states of rigor mortis-like petrification, incorruptible corpses are pretty pliable. Their skin is supple, even years after their deaths. They appear, for all intents and purposes, to be sleeping or only recently dead.

What's more, these corpses don't show signs of having been embalmed. And the local conditions don't appear to have had a preservative effect on them. While they remained in a perfect state of composition, other corpses interred nearby were degenerating like normal. Yet, some of these incorruptibles met violent ends or died from ravaging diseases that should have accelerated -- not deterred -- decomposition [source: [Ferrari](#)].”⁵

Biblical Evidence Weighed

There are no incidents of Incorruptibles in the Bible. However, if we broaden the context of the Incorruptibles to “God doing something miraculous with a dead body” we find an example that comes close in the book of 2 Kings.

“So it was, as they were burying a man, that suddenly they spied a band of raiders; and they put the man in the tomb of Elisha; and when the man was let down and touched the bones of Elisha, he revived and stood on his feet.”⁶

In performing a miracle on the body of an Incorruptible or through skeletal remains of Elisha, God testifies and honors to the holiness of such a person. In this, Elisha and the Incorruptibles hold something in common.

Saint Augustine Weighs In

I read Saint Augustine's Confessions long before I became interested in the Catholic Church. In hind sight, after converting to Catholicism I remembered things in the book that had seemed “Catholic” at the time. A passage on Incorruptibles is one example. As was my habit, if something didn't fit into my

⁴ HowStuffWorks, “How Can a Corpse Be Incorruptible?”, HowStuffWorks, <http://people.howstuffworks.com/incorruptible.htm> (accessed January 2, 2014). All incorruptibles will rot? But how can one predict the future of the admittedly unexplainable?

⁵ Ibid

⁶ 2 Kings 13:21, New King James Version

Protestant paradigm I would just set it aside and forget about it. At the time I had no idea this kind of thing continued to happen in the Catholic Church. The following is Saint Augustine's account.

“It was at that time too that you (God) revealed to your bishop Ambrose in a vision the place where the bodies of the martyrs Protasius and Gervasius were hidden. All these years you had preserved them incorrupt in your secret treasury, so that when the time came you could bring them to light to thwart the fury of a woman – a mere woman but one who ruled an empire. For after the bodies had been discovered and dug up, they were carried to Ambrose's basilica with the honor that was due to them. On the way several persons who were tormented by evil spirits were cured, for even the devils acknowledged the holy relics. But this was not all. There was also a man who had been blind for many years, a well-known figure in the city. He asked why the crowd was running wild with joy, and when they told him the reason, he leaped to his feet and begged his guide to lead him where the bodies lay. When he reached the place, he asked to be allowed to touch the bier with his handkerchief, for it was the bier of your saints, whose death is near in your sight. No sooner had he done this and put the handkerchief to his eyes than his sight was restored.

The news spread. Your praises rang out loud and clear, and although this miracle did not convert the mind of your enemy Justina, to sound beliefs at least it restrained her from the madness of persecution.”⁷

Conclusion

As in the 4th century with Saint Augustine, there are churches around the world today that have bodies of Incorruptibles on display. Men of science have examined the evidence and have concluded there is no explanation. For Catholics these holy relics attest to the holiness of those whose lives are honored, much as Elisha's skeletal remains did. The reason for Christ's miracles was to help us see the Truth. While strange and perhaps abrasive to 21st century Western sensibilities, the Incorruptibles attest to the existence of the God who performs the miracle and the validity of the Church that venerates them.⁸



Saint Catherine Laboure (1806-1876)



Blessed Jacinta Marto (died 1920)
One of the three children at Fatima

⁷ Confessions, page 192.

⁸ As a matter of taste, the pictures shown here depict two of the best preserved Incorruptibles I could find. I did not include Saint Bernadette as her face and hands are waxed. While there is no doubt her preserved body is a miracle, from an apologetics perspective the waxing is border line cheating, over emphasizing what has taken place. It is better not to give the skeptics an opening – even if the opening does not in fact exist. There are enough examples that science cannot explain.