The Cult of the Saints - It's rise and function in Latin Christianity

[4. The Very Special Dead]

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One of the most moving fragments of late antiquity is now attached to the wall of the Mediterranean room in the Louvre. It is the epitaph of a little Sicilian, Julia Florerltina, “a most dear, innocent child,” who died at the age of eighteen months, having received Christian baptism, experienced a momentary remission, “and lived on four hours longer, just as she had once been before.”

*While her parents bewailed her death at every moment, the voice of [God's] majesty was heard at night, forbidding them to lament for the dead child. Her body was buried in its tomb in front of the doors of the shrine of the martyrs.*

We have here a glimpse of a Mediterranean family thinking about the unthinkable fact of death. Their inscription is a reminder of the force of the tensions latent in early Christian attitudes to death and the afterlife.

For, compared with the Christian piety of later ages, the early church tended to leapfrog the grave: the long processes of mourning and slow adjustment to the great sadness of mortality tended to be repressed by a heady belief in the afterlife. The *vox maiestatis* in the night intervened to cut short the mourning of the little girl's parents. The ceremonial of the funeral procession was presented as a foretaste of the clarity of the resurrection:

*Pate ecce fidelibus ampli via lucida iam paradisi.*

*[See now for the faithful a shining way lies open to the spacious garden of paradise.]*

The gleaming white shrouds, the incense, the strict control of demonstrations of grief were a triumphal reminder of Christ's triumph over “black death.” Tombs in the late-Roman Christian cemetery at Pees even show a trellis fence that identified the grave with the "spacious garden of paradise."

Yet the sadness of the tomb survived. Of all late-antique thinkers, one might have expected Gregory of Nyssa and his circle to have been the one whose thought had equipped him best to gaze through that sadness to another world. 6 Far from it. When he had to place the body of his sister Macrina beside her parents in the family tomb, an ancient horror of the dead gripped him. Fear came over him "remembering the divine command, 'Do not uncover the shame of thy father or thy

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mother." He did not wish to look upon "the common shame to which all human beings come." The bodies of his parents had to be covered with a new shroud before he leant over the tomb to place his sister above them. Outside the town, the harsh Anatolian landscape was dotted with derelict tombs, their contents partially exposed. Gregory assumed that, for all members of his congregation, this could not be other than an ugly and deeply disturbing sight. The "shining way to Paradise" of Christian art and liturgy had in no way rendered translucent the facts of death for the average Mediterranean man.

Hence the emotional force that thrust the graves of the martyrs into prominence. Here, at least, were the graves of the very special dead. They had died in a special way; they lay in the grave in a special way; this fact was shown by the manner in which all that was most delightful and most alive in late-antique life could be thought of as concentrated in their tombs and even (perhaps, as we shall see, particularly) in detached fragments of their dead bodies. Hence the final consolation of the parents of Julia. She at least would lie beside those very special dead for whom mourning was unthinkable. The late-antique cult of the martyrs represents) therefore, a consistent imaginative determination to block out the lurking presence, in the cemeteries of the Mediterranean world, of "black death."

We should not underestimate the psychological momentum behind this effort. In itself belief in the afterlife does little to explain it. What we shall have to follow in this chapter is the working of an imaginative dialectic which led late-antique men to render their beliefs in the afterlife palpable and directly operative among the living by concentrating these on the privileged figure of the dead saint. Let us begin with the sadness of late-Roman cemeteries. They were very large and full of very ordinary people. In the Polyandrion, the "place of the great majority" outside Autun, the silence of the night was broken only by a few mysterious echoes of chanted psalms, which betrayed the presence, among so many thousands, of "a few tombs of faithful souls worthy of God." We should never forget this sharp streak in late-antique Christian piety, especially as it was expressed by those ascetic leaders whose anxieties we described in the last chapter. The all too solid shame of the grave had been transmuted by very few.

For the martyrs and the other holy dead were the predestinate: Gregory of Tours writes of them as "the snow white number of the elect." Late-antique men in the Latin West did not suffer from post-Reformation anxieties about the identity of the elect. The elect could be identified, if only posthumously, with absolute certainty. Thus, the late-fourth-century cult of the saints as practiced in North Africa and elsewhere provided Augustine with the solid ground course on which he raised his dizzying doctrine of predestination. For Augustine's problem in his last years had been to fit the non-elect, that is, the damned, into the dark weave of God's wisdom. The elect, by contrast, were the one clear thread. They presented no problem to Augustine or his contemporaries. Even in those last treatises that "bruise human reason" when they speak of the justice of God in hardening the hearts of
the many, the elect have reassuringly familiar features. Their qualities are securely rooted in the expectations of late-antique Christian piety. They are those who have received from God the gift of perseverance: they had enjoyed

\[ a \text{ liberty ... protected and made firm by the gift of perseverance that this world should be overcome, this world in all its deep loves, in all its terrors, in all its countless ways of going wrong.} \]

And who had persevered unto death more magnificently and more publicly than had the martyrs?