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Relics from Bethlehem manger in Chicago?

Robert McClory | Jan. 3, 2013 NCR Today

I have written before about the movement within the hierarchy to resurrect and recommend to the faithful the pieties and practices of an older age. I was thinking especially of things like indulgences, relics, visions and miraculous happenings. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with such devotions, I believe there is a great tendency for these practices to lapse into superstition and lead people into a kind of juvenile credulity. In the past, they have been used to arouse emotion, to encourage blind obedience for the purpose of raising money to support crusades, build enormous edifices and other causes of interest to the hierarchy.

In the era of Benedict XVI, it is no surprise to see an uptick in the promotion of this sort of pious spirituality. It's an integral part of the movement back toward a smaller, more obedient Catholic church.

Consider one very recent example. Several days before Christmas, the *Chicago Tribune* reported on the donation of a few actual relics to Holy Family Church, one of the oldest churches in the city. According to the story, the sacred items include "crumb-size fragments from the manger where Jesus was born, the cloak of St. Joseph and the veil of the Virgin Mary."

I am not making this up. Two-thousand-year-old "nearly microscopic" crumbs from the Bethlehem stable and actual clothing of Mary and Joseph? Are we expected to believe that? Or is it some kind of Christmas-season joke?

No, we are told. These artifacts come accompanied with a certificate of authenticity from the Vatican. Two respected Catholic priests are cited in the article. Fr. Richard Fragomeni apparently had possession of them for some time at The Shrine of Our Lady of Pompeii, where he serves. He decided to turn them over to Fr. Jeremiah Boland, administrator of nearby Holy Family, so they could be widely visited and viewed during this Christmas season and the celebration of the church's 155th anniversary.

Boland said he is not concerned about the "scientific credibility" of the objects. They are intended, he said, to increase "faith and devotion." I would suggest they are the sort of things that will instead lead some thoughtful people to ridicule faith and devotion. That doesn't mean that a great many will not come to the church simply because the priest and the Vatican say they should come. But many thoughtful Catholics who hear of this latest piety will simply shake their heads and wonder how far church leadership will go in straining its credibility.

The use of sacred and blessed objects has a long history in Catholicism. But the practice easily slips into exaggeration and misuse of the sacred and has in the past unfortunately promoted the infantilization of gullible believers, not growth in the faith. I used to think that era was over. Clearly, it's not.

Read the full story here [1].

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[1] http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/ct-met-christmas-relics-20121228,0,6103035.story