



About Incorruptibles

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*From **The Cure' of Ars, St. Jean-Marie-Baptiste Vianney, According to the Acts of the Process of Canonization and Numerous Hitherto Unpublished Documents***
By Abbe Francis Trochu

[Note: St. John Vianney died on August 4, 1859. His body was exhumed on June 17, 1904 because of his impending beatification. It was found intact.]

When, on April 2, 1905, the old men of Ars, who had known M. Vianney well, were shown the relic as it is seen today by pilgrims, they burst into tears and exclaimed with one voice: "Oh, how truly like him!"

*From **The Incorruptibles; A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati***
By Joan Carroll Cruz

[Cruz details 102 cases of incorruptibles in her book.]

Preserved bodies found in countries around the world can be divided into three classifications: the deliberately preserved, the accidentally preserved, and the incorruptibles. Specimens of the accidentally or naturally preserved were found even before Egyptian Pharaoh times, when the art of embalming originated, producing for the first time the deliberately treated mummies which have survived for as many as three thousand years. The incorruptibles, however, have existed only since early Christian

days. Their preservations since that time have challenged the opinions of skeptics and contradicted and defied the laws of nature, all to the dismay of many examining physicians and the admiration of succeeding generations.

The more carefully we consider the preservation of the incorruptibles, the more baffling does the subject become, for their conservation seems to be neither dependent on the manner of burial nor on the temperature or place of interment. Nor were they adversely affected by extended delays between the time of death and their burials, by moisture in the tombs, by rough handling, by frequent transferences, by covering with quicklime, or by their proximity to decaying corpses.

The greater majority were never embalmed or treated in any manner, yet most were found lifelike, flexible, and sweetly scented many years after death, in sharp contrast to the specimens of the other two classifications above, who, without exception, were found stiff, discolored, and skeletal. The mystery of their preservations is further compounded by the observance of blood and clear oils—which have proceeded from a number of these holy relics—a phenomenon which again, needless to say, was never recorded with regard to the deliberately or accidentally preserved.

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Through history, the bodies of a considerable number of deceased Catholic Saints and other blessed persons, have not undergone the normal processes of disintegration. Without any kind mummification or embalming methods, their corpses have thus remained incorrupt, a few even after 1500 years. The accounts of incorruptible bodies are a part of Christian history from the first century right through to the 21st.

Many of those, whose bodies have been found incorrupt, had died either by violence or diseases, conditions which normally would encourage the disintegration processes rather than preserve the bodies. Some had been buried in close proximity to other bodies that decomposed normally. Some had been consigned to the bare earth. Others survived burial in such damp conditions that their clothes rotted off their intact bodies. Some had been lying in lime, water or left in the open. But apparently unaffected by exterior influences, the bodies were found preserved as if they were still alive.

From the beginning, the phenomenon was seen as tangible proof of the sacredness and purity of a saint. The incorruptible bodies were therefore not buried but placed into sumptuous reliquaries and exposed above or behind the altar for everyone to see.

During the Middle Ages, churches that had one of these incorruptible saints became especially popular among pilgrims. It therefore became customary to exhume all candidates for beatification and canonization (the various steps on the way to sainthood).

Because of the Vatican's quite strict canonization process, these exhumations have usually been witnessed with oaths and affidavits by ordinary working people as well as

respectable doctors and medical specialists. The phenomenon is therefore among the most thoroughly documented of all alleged miracles.

Disregarding the irrational elements and proven frauds, there is enough evidence of remarkable occurrences surrounding the incorruptibles to take the phenomenon seriously. It hasn't been systematically examined by science and no rational explanations have yet been offered. The devout therefore continue believing that the bodies of these individuals have been miraculously preserved by God because of their sacredness and purity - as a reminder of their wonderful deeds.

Other supernatural characteristics usually related to incorruptibles are: an absence of rigor mortis; a persistent pleasant fragrance emanating from the body; in rare cases a bleeding long after death (from stigmata wounds or injuries suffered in martyrdom); in a few cases bodies have been warm long after death; even more rarely there has been some kind of ritualized movement of the limbs (for example, giving a blessing or even talking), which cannot be accounted for by mere contraction of muscles.

Secret or long-forgotten burial places of incorruptible saints have often been revealed to the discoverers by dreams or visions. Sometimes the discovery has been caused by unusual noises or a strange light emanating from the burial place. Long-dead bodies, or their remaining parts, have sometimes exuded a fragrant, clear oil known as "Oil of Saints" or "Manna Oil of Saints". This liquid, as well as any relic related with the incorruptible saints, like blood or clothing, are usually attributed great powers of healing.

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Because there have been many impeccable accounts of incorruptibility, many presumed saints were exhumed and re-interred. It soon became the custom to exhume all candidates for beatification or canonization. Throughout the Middle Ages, churches vied for possession of incorrupt bodies, as they were a proven magnet for pilgrims (who, of course, brought offerings and donations). Despite its damp climate, mediæval Britain has nurtured a good number of saintly characters whose bodies didn't decay, including Cuthbert, Werburgh, Waltheof and Guthlac. Amongst them were two royal sisters (Etheldreda and Withburga), a king (Edward the Confessor), a bishop (Hugh of Lincoln) and an archbishop of Canterbury (Alphege). At the Reformation, all their shrines were destroyed and the incorrupt body parts dispersed. When her shrine at Ely Cathedral was destroyed, the saintly Queen Etheldreda's hand was preserved by a devout Catholic family. The still incorrupt hand was enshrined, some 400 years later, when a little Catholic Church was re-established in Ely. An apocryphal story relates how the present Queen, on a tour of the cathedral, met the crusty Irish priest of the little Catholic Church. She asked him if it wouldn't be a 'nice gesture' to return the hand of St. Etheldreda to the cathedral; he replied that it would be a nice gesture for her to return the cathedral to the Catholic church.

The accounts of saints' bodies not decaying despite being buried for years continue to the present day.

The two most amazing modern accounts are of St. Bernadette and St. Charbel Makhlouf. St. Bernadette was the shepherd girl who saw the Blessed Virgin Mary at Lourdes. She died in a convent at Nevers in 1879 and was buried in the chapel crypt. In 1909, a commission investigating her saintliness exhumed her body with the bishop and two doctors as official witnesses. They were joined by two stonemasons and two carpenters. All of them swore beforehand to tell the truth of their findings. They found that the saint's body was incorrupt. A nun who had witnessed the burial 30 years before noted that the only change was that the dead nun's habit was damp.

Bernadette was re-buried and exhumed again in 1919. As before, both civil and religious witnesses were gathered under oath. The doctors who examined the body wrote: "When the coffin was opened the body appeared to be absolutely intact and odourless... there was no smell of putrefaction and none of those present experienced any discomfort." On a third exhumation in 1923, the body was found still to be in the same condition. At that point, the body was opened and the internal organs were found to be supple. After 46 years, the doctor reported, "the liver was soft and almost normal in consistency."

St. Charbel Makhlouf, who died in 1898, was a Maronite monk from Lebanon. In his life, he seemed unremarkable except for his quiet and intense devotion. After his death, for 45 nights, strange lights appeared over his grave. Because 45 days is the traditional length of time for a body's decomposition, the monastic authorities called for his exhumation. His body was found perfectly fresh, despite the fact that recent rains had reduced the cemetery to a quagmire and the body was found floating in a muddy pool. Charbel's body was re-clothed and transferred to a wooden coffin, but a strange blood-like "oil" kept exuding from his body... so much so that the clothes had to be changed twice a week. In 1927 – 29 years after his death – his still incorrupt body was examined and found to be totally flexible. It was then re-buried in a niche in the ancient abbey church. Pilgrims to the shrine in 1950 noticed liquid seeping from the tomb and the coffin was opened again.

The body was still incorrupt but exuding the peculiar oily sweat; many miraculous cures have been attributed to this substance. The body remained incorrupt for 67 years, finally decaying in 1965.

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