

QUESTION 51

Christ's Burial

Next we have to consider Christ's burial. And on this topic there are four questions: (1) Was it fitting for Christ to be buried? (2) What about the manner of His burial? (3) Did His body decompose (*fuerit resolutum*) in the sepulcher? (4) How long did He lie in the sepulcher?

Article 1

Was it fitting for Christ to be buried?

It seems that it was not fitting for Christ to be buried (*non fuerit conveniens Christum sepeliri*):

Objection 1: Psalm 87:5-6 says of Christ, "He has become like a man without help, free among the dead." But the bodies of the dead are enclosed in a sepulcher, and this seems to be contrary to freedom. Therefore, it does not seem to have been fitting for Christ to be buried.

Objection 2: Nothing should have been done to Christ that did not contribute to our salvation. But Christ's having been buried does not seem relevant in any way to the salvation of men. Therefore, it was not fitting for Christ to be buried.

Objection 3: It seems to be unfitting for God, who exists above the highest heavens, to be buried in the earth. But that which belongs to Christ's dead body is attributed to God by reason of the [hypostatic] union. Therefore, it seems not to have been fitting for Christ to be buried.

But contrary to this: In Matthew 26:10 our Lord says of the woman who anointed Him, "She has done me a good turn," and then He adds (26:12), "In pouring this ointment on my body, she has done it for my burial."

I respond: It was fitting for Christ to be buried:

First of all, in order to prove the reality of His death. For an individual is not placed in a sepulcher except when things are clear concerning the reality of his death. Hence, in Mark 15:44-45 we read that before Pilate allowed Christ to be buried, it was by a careful inquiry that he ascertained that Christ was dead.

Second, because by the fact that Christ rose from the sepulcher, hope is given for rising through Him to those who are in the grave—this according to John 5:25-28 ("... all those who are in their tombs will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear shall live").

Third, to give an example to those who, through Christ's death, are dying spiritually to their sins and who are hidden away "from the disturbance of men" (Psalm 30:21). Hence, Colossians 3:3 says, "You are dead, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." Thus, the baptized, who through Christ's death die to their own sins, are, as it were, buried with Christ through immersion—this according to Romans 6:4 ("We are buried together with Christ by baptism into death").

Reply to objection 1: Even as buried, Christ showed Himself to have been free among the dead in the fact that He could not be impeded by being enclosed in the sepulcher from leaving it by rising.

Reply to objection 2: Just as Christ's death contributed to our salvation as an efficient cause, so, too, did His burial. Hence, in *Super Marcum* Jerome says, "We rise by Christ's burial." And a Gloss on Isaiah 53:9 ("And they will make his grave with the wicked") says, "That is, He will give the gentiles, who were without piety, to His God and Father, because He has procured them while dead and buried."

Reply to objection 3: As it says in a sermon from the Council of Ephesus, "Nothing of the things that save man does any injury to God; they show Him to be not passible, but merciful." And in another sermon from the same Council we read, "God does not count anything as an injury which is an occasion of men's salvation. Thus, you should not think that God's nature is so lowly that it could sometimes be subject to injuries."

Article 2

Was Christ buried in a fitting manner?

It seems that Christ was not buried in a fitting manner (*non convenienti modo Christum fuisse sepultum*):

Objection 1: His burial corresponds to His death. But Christ suffered the most abject death of all—this according to Wisdom 2:20 (“Let us condemn him to the most shameful death”). Therefore, it does not seem to be fitting that Christ should have been accorded an honorable burial in the sense of being buried by men of position—namely, by Joseph of Arimathea, who was “a noble counselor,” as Mark 15:43 reports, and by Nicodemus, who was “a ruler of the Jews,” as John 3:1 reports.

Objection 2: Nothing should have been done concerning Christ that was an example of excess. But it seems to have been excessive that Nicodemus came to bury Christ “bringing with him a mixture of myrrh and aloes weighing a hundred pounds,” as John 19:39 reports—especially because a woman had previously arranged “to anoint [His] body for burial,” as Mark 14:8 reports. Therefore, it was not fitting for this to be done concerning Christ.

Objection 3: It is not fitting for anything to be done that is discordant with itself. But the burial of Christ was simple in one part, viz., since, as Matthew 27:59 explains, “Joseph wrapped His body in a clean linen cloth,” and “not with gold or gems or silk,” as Jerome points out in commenting on this passage. But in another part Christ’s burial seems to have been excessive, insofar as they buried Him with fragrant spices (John 19:40). Therefore, the manner of Christ’s burial does not seem to have been fitting.

Objection 4: As Romans 15:4 says, “Whatever has been written”—and especially about Christ—“has been written for our instruction.” But certain things are written in the gospels which do not seem to pertain to our instruction, e.g., that the sepulcher was located in a garden, and that the grave belonged to another and was new, and that it was hewn out of a rock. Therefore, the manner of Christ’s burial was not fitting.

But contrary to this: Isaiah 11:10 says, “And His sepulcher shall be glorious.”

I respond: The manner of Christ’s burial is shown to be fitting with respect to three things:

First of all, with respect to strengthening faith in His death and resurrection.

Second, with respect to commending the piety of those who buried Him. Hence, in *De Civitate Dei* 1 Augustine says, “In the gospel those people are mentioned with praise who, with diligence and due reverence, took care of wrapping up His body and burying it after it had been taken down from the cross.”

Third, with respect to the mystery whereby those who “are buried together with Christ into death” (Romans 6:4) are molded.

Reply to objection 1: As regards Christ’s death, the patience and constancy with which He endured death are commended—and all the more to the extent that His death was more abject.

On the other hand, in His honorable burial one thinks of the virtue of the dead man, who, contrary to the intention of those who killed Him, is buried with honor now that He is dead; and this prefigures the devotion of the faithful who were going to serve the dead Christ in the future.

Reply to objection 2: As for the evangelist reporting that they buried Him “after the Jewish manner of burying” (John 19:40), in *Super Ioannem* Augustine comments, “He advised us that in duties of this kind that are rendered to the dead, the customs of each nation should be observed.” Now it was the custom of this people that the bodies of the dead should be anointed with various spices in order that they might be preserved from corruption for a longer time. Hence, in *De Doctrina Christiana* 3 Augustine says, “In all such matters, it is not the use of the things in question, but the disordered desire of the user

that is at fault.” And later he adds, “What in the case of other people is for the most part shameful, in the case of a divine or prophetic person is a sign of something great. For instance, myrrh and aloes by their bitterness signify the repentance by which an individual preserves Christ within himself without the corruption of sin, whereas the odor of the spices signifies a good reputation.”

Reply to objection 3: The myrrh and aloes were applied to Christ’s body in order to preserve it from corruption, which seemed to involve a sort of necessity. Hence, we are taught by example that we can licitly use certain precious substances medicinally to deal with the necessity of preserving our bodies.

On the other hand, the wrapping of the body had to do just with a suitable propriety. And in such matters, we should be content with simple things. Yet through this it was signified that, as Jerome explains, “the one who wraps Jesus in a clean linen is the one who receives Him with a pure soul.” And from here Bede adds in *Super Marcum*, “The custom of the Church that has prevailed is for the sacrifice of the altar to be celebrated not on silk or dyed cloth, but on earthy linen—just as our Lord’s body was buried in a clean and winding sheet of linen.”

Reply to objection 4: Christ was buried *in a garden* in order to signify that by His death and burial we are liberated from death, which we incurred through the sin of Adam committed in the garden of paradise.

Now as Augustine explains in a sermon, the reason why “our Savior was placed in *someone else’s sepulcher* is that He died for the salvation of others, and a sepulcher is the dwelling place of death.” Again, one can thereby appreciate the abundance of the poverty that was undertaken for our sake. For the one who did not have a home in life is after His death laid to rest in the tomb of another, and, naked, He is covered by Joseph [of Arimathea].

Now He is placed in a *new tomb*, as Jerome explains, “lest, after His resurrection, with other bodies remaining, it might be pretended that someone else had risen. Also, the new sepulcher can be pointing to Mary’s virginal womb.” Again, we might thereby be given to understand that we are all made new by Christ’s burial, with death and corruption having been destroyed.

Now, as Jerome explains, He was laid in a tomb *hewn out of a rock*, “lest, if it had been constructed of many stones, it could be claimed that He was stolen by digging away at the foundations of the sepulchral mound.” Hence, the “great stone” which was set shows that “the sepulcher could not have been opened without the help of many men.” Again, as Augustine points out, “If the grave had been in the earth, they could have claimed, ‘They dug out the earth and stole Him.’” Moreover, as Hilary explains, what is signified mystically here is that “by the teaching of the apostles, Christ is inserted into the gentile’s stony heart, hewn out by the work of teaching, unpolished and new, not accessible to the fear of God by any previous entry. And since nothing besides Him needs to enter into our hearts, a great stone is rolled against the door.”

And as Origen explains, “It is not by accident that it was written that ‘Joseph wrapped Christ’s body in a clean and winding sheet, and placed it in a new tomb’, and that ‘he rolled a great stone.’ For all the things surrounding the body of Jesus are clean and new and exceedingly great.”

Article 3

Did Christ’s body decompose in the sepulcher?

It seems that Christ’s body decomposed in the sepulcher (*corpus Christi in sepulcro fuerit incineratum*):

Objection 1: Just as death is a punishment for the sin of the first parent, so, too, is decomposition (*incineratio*). For as is said to the first man after his sin in Genesis 3:19, “You are dust, and to dust you

shall return.” But Christ endured death in order to liberate us from death. Therefore, His body should likewise have decomposed in order to liberate us from decomposition.

Objection 2: Christ’s body is of the same nature as our bodies. But our bodies begin to decompose immediately after death and are disposed toward putrefaction, since, when the natural heat is diffused, extraneous heat supervenes and causes putrefaction. Therefore, it seems that this happened in a similar way in the case of Christ’s body.

Objection 3: As has been explained (a. 1), Christ wanted to be buried in order to give men hope of rising even from their graves. Therefore, He likewise should have suffered decomposition, in order to give the hope of rising after decomposition to those who have decomposed.

But contrary to this: Psalm 15:10 says, “Nor will you allow your holy one to see corruption.” In *De Fide Orthodoxa* Damascene that this concerns the corruption which occurs by decomposition into the elements.

I respond: It was not fitting for Christ’s body to be putrefied or to decompose in any way at all. For the putrefaction of any body stems from the weakness of that body’s nature, which cannot any longer hold the body together as a single entity (*non potest amplius corpus continere in unum*). But as was explained above (q. 50, a. 1, ad 2), it was not fitting for Christ’s death to be associated with the weakness of His nature, lest someone believe that His death was not voluntary. And so He willed to die not from any disease but from suffering which was inflicted on Him and to which He offered Himself freely.

And that is why, lest His death be ascribed to a weakness in His nature, Christ did not want His body to be putrefied or to decompose in any way at all; instead, in order to show His divine power, He wanted that body to remain uncorrupted. Hence, Chrysostom, says, “With other men, viz., those who have lived strenuously, their deeds shine forth while they are alive, whereas when they die, their deeds die with them. But in the case of Christ, it is quite the contrary. For leading up to the cross, everything is gloomy and weak, whereas once He has been crucified, everything becomes clearer, in order that you might acknowledge that it was no mere man who was crucified.”

Reply to objection 1: Since Christ was not subject to sin, neither was He liable to death or to decomposition. Yet for the reasons explained above (q. 50, a. 1), He voluntarily endured death for the sake of our salvation. But if His body had putrefied or decomposed, this would have instead been detrimental to human salvation, since it would not have been believed that there was divine power in Him. Hence, Psalm 29:10 says in His person, “What profit is there in my blood while I go down to corruption?”—as if to say, “If my body were to corrupt, the profit of the blood that was shed would be lost.”

Reply to objection 2: As regards the condition of a passible nature, Christ’s body was able to putrefy—though not as regards what makes a [human body] deserve putrefaction (*licet non quantum ad meritum putrefactionis*), viz., sin. However, the divine power reserved Christ’s body from putrefaction, just as it raised that body from the dead.

Reply to objection 3: Christ rose from the grave by the divine power, which is not limited by any boundaries. And that is why the fact that He rose from the grave was sufficient proof that men were going to be raised by the divine power not only from their graves, but also from any sort of mortal remains (*a quibuscumque cineribus*).

Article 4

Was Christ in the sepulcher for one daytime and two nighttimes?

It seems that Christ was not in the sepulcher for one daytime and two nighttimes (*Christus non fuerit in sepulcro solum una die et duabus noctibus*):

Objection 1: In Matthew 12:40 Christ Himself says, “Just as Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three daytimes and three nighttimes, so the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth for three daytimes and three nighttimes.” But He was “in the heart of the earth” while He was in the sepulcher. Therefore, it was not the case that He was in the sepulcher for just one daytime and two nighttimes.

Objection 2: In an Easter homily Gregory says, “Just as Samson carried off the gates of Gaza in the middle of the night, even so Christ rose in the night, taking away the gates of hell.” But after He rose, He was no longer in the sepulcher. Therefore, He was not in the sepulcher for two entire nighttimes.

Objection 3: Through Christ’s death the light overcame the darkness. But the nighttime pertains to the darkness, whereas the daytime pertains to the light. Therefore, it was more fitting for Christ’s body to be in the sepulcher for two daytimes and one nighttime rather than vice versa.

But contrary to this: As Augustine says in *De Trinitate* 4, “There are thirty-six hours from the evening of His burial to the dawn of the resurrection, that is, a whole nighttime along with a whole daytime and a whole nighttime.”

I respond: The time itself that Christ remained in the sepulcher represents an effect of His death. For it was explained above (q. 50, a. 6) that through Christ’s death we are liberated from two deaths, viz., from the death of the soul and from the death of the body. And these two deaths are signified by the two nighttimes during which Christ remained in the sepulcher. On the other hand, since His own death did not proceed from sin but was undertaken out of charity, it had the character of daytime and not of nighttime. And so it is signified by the entire daytime during which Christ was in the sepulcher. And this is why it was fitting for Christ to be in the sepulcher for one daytime and two nighttimes.

Reply to objection 1: As Augustine says in *De Consensu Evangelistarum*, “Some individuals, ignorant of the usage of Sacred Scripture, wished to count as *nighttime* the three hours from the sixth hour to the ninth hour, during which the sun was darkened (cf. Matthew 27:45), and as *daytime* those other three hours during which the sun was restored to the earth, i.e., from the ninth hour until its setting. For the coming nighttime of the Sabbath follows, and if this is counted along with its daytime, there will already be two nighttimes and two daytimes. Now after the Sabbath there follows the nighttime of the primary Sabbath, that is, of the dawning day of the Lord, at which time our Lord rose. And so the counting of three daytimes and three nighttimes will still not stand. What remains, then, is to find the solution in the customary usage of speech in the Scriptures, whereby the whole is understood from the part”—so that, namely, we take one nighttime and one daytime as one natural day. And so the *first* day is reckoned from its last part, at which time Christ died and was buried on Friday; whereas the *second* day is a whole composed of twenty-four hours, both nocturnal and diurnal; and the nighttime following it belongs to the *third* day. “For just as the first days [of creation] were counted from light to nightfall because of man’s future fall, so these days are counted from darkness to daylight because of man’s restoration.”

Reply to objection 2: As Augustine explains in *De Trinitate* 4, Christ rose at dawn, at which time some sunlight appears and yet some of the darkness of nighttime still remains. Hence, John 20:1 says of the women, “They came to the tomb when it was still dark.” Therefore, it is by reason of this darkness that Gregory says that Christ rose in the midst of nighttime—not, to be sure, in the middle of the night as divided into two equal parts, but rather within the darkness. For the dawn can be counted as part of the nighttime and part of the daytime because of what it shares in common with both of them.

Reply to objection 3: Light prevailed in Christ's death only in the sense that it is signified by one day that removes the darkness of the two nighttimes—that is, as has been explained, the two nighttimes of our twofold death.