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The Materiality of Incorruption:

From "Miraculous Bodies" to "Bodies on Display" in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Centuries Italy

LEONARDO ROSSI

Leonardo Rossi is a postdoctoral researcher at the Ruusbroec Institute, University of Antwerp.

leonardo.rossi@uantwerpen.be

One of the characteristics shared by most of the 102 *incorruptibles* traced by Joan Carroll Cruz in two millennia of Christian history, in addition to the alleged absence of material corruption, is the staging of the miracle.[1] Whole bodies or portions of them (hands, legs, organs) are still today – or have been for years or even centuries – on display in precious reliquaries or in stately glass cases. Faces reshaped, softened and covered with wax, bones hidden by fabrics, folded hands and eyes closed in a sweet sleep demonstrate what Alain Corbin called "the meaning of the body in the imagination of fervent Christians" in the nineteenth century.[2] In the era of ceroplastic simulacra[3] and the efflorescence of the theology of the resurrection,[4] European church-

1 The results presented in this article are the outcome of the research conducted for "Contested Bodies. The religious lives of corpses", a Belgian-Swiss project funded by FWO/SNF. Joan Carroll Cruz, *The Incorruptibles: A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati*, Charlotte 2012, VII–X.

2 Alain Corbin, "L'emprise de la religion", in A. Corbin et al. (eds.), *Histoire du corps*, vol. 2, Paris 2005, 51–83 [75].

3 Massimiliano Ghilardi, "The Simulacrum of Martyrdom: Manufacture, Distribution and Devotion of Holy Bodies in Ceroplasty", *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 183 (2018), 167–187 and idem, "Antonio Magnani and the Invention of Corpisanti in Ceroplastic", in R. Ballestriero et al. (eds.), *Ceroplastics: The Art of Wax*, Rome 2019, 59–66.

4 Fernando Vidal, "Brains, Bodies, Selves, and Science: Anthropologies of Identity and the Resurrection of the Body", *Critical Inquiry* 28 (2002), 930–974, https://doi.org/10.1086/341240; Bradford Bouley, "Negotiated Sanctity: Incorruption, Community, and Medical Expertise", *The Catholic Historical Review*, 102 (2016), 1–25 [5–8], https://doi.org/10.1353/cat.2016.0056.

es were filled with prodigious bodies not subject to the laws of nature and putrefaction. Is a corporeal miracle enough to transform a person who died in an "odour of holiness" into an officially recognised hero of the faith? And, above all, does it legitimise public exposure to the devotion of the faithful?

Although a powerful symbol full of cultural meanings and a potential receptacle of sanctity, the dead body has no religious value *in re ipso*, even when it seems to behave out of the ordinary. For the Roman Catholic Church, the lack of corruption, the flexibility of post-mortem flesh and the emission of fragrances are not evidence of divine election or supernatural phenomena; therefore, they do not justify particular reverence or honour on the altars. Alexandra Walsham argues that what gives religious significance to a corpse is the union of "beliefs and practices that accumulate around" it.[5] Thus, it is not a corporeal prodigy that transforms – or re-signifies – a body into a devotional object. In the centuries-old Catholic history, we know numerous legends that tell of corpses that did not rot or stink in the days following their death. After the initial popular clamour, however, the burial marked progressive obliteration from memory, and no one claimed the nature of temporary corruption to be extraordinary.

On the contrary, if beliefs and devotional practices centred around the dead body, the story could take another turn, pushing local communities to ask civil authorities to exhume the remains and ecclesiastical ones to inaugurate the canonisation process. If these dynamics took place, a widespread belief could emerge that transformed a miraculous body into *corpus incorruptus* and sometimes even considered worthy of being exposed to the veneration of believers. The *incorruptibles* described by Cruz exhibited in many places of worship were not only prodigious corpses but embodiments of success stories in which beliefs and practices transformed organic wrappers into objects with religious significance and therefore deserving to be displayed.

In this article, I will illustrate the strategies and steps that led from the perception of the corporeal miracle to its public display through the analysis of the widespread phenomenon of uncorrupted bodies in Italy from the nineteenth until the first half of the twentieth century. In particular, I will point out the elements that allowed this evolution which had four fundamental stages. First, (1) the legal and conceptual shift from organic matter to objects with religious significance. (2) The corpse's incarnation of the saint's charisma and community identity, becoming a "cultural capital" with historical and social value. (3) The canonisation process and numerous

5 Alexandra Walsham, "Introduction: Relics and remains", *Past & Present; Supplement* 5 (2010), 9–6 [14], https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtq026.

body analysis practices. (4) Finally, the "making of incorruption" that is the process aimed at publicly displaying the remains. Before examining these steps, I consider it appropriate to analyse the incorruptibles in more detail. Who were they, and what is meant by uncorrupted bodies?

The Italian Incorruptibles

The English Jesuit Herbert Thurston, a famous "investigator" of the supernatural, identified six main categories in which to classify posthumous corporeal phenomena: a preternatural fragrance released by the dead body, the total absence of *rigor mortis*, immunity to natural decay, bleeding after death, the presence of body heat and, finally, the "movement" of parts of the body (such as bent heads, spasms and muscle jerks).[6] These indications of holiness could occur separately, appear jointly, or all at the same time. For the Jesuit, these phenomena, particularly the incorruption of bodies, have always had a significant impact on the faithful. The first testimonies were reported from the fourth century of the Christian era, and since then, hundreds of cases have been traced.[7] The power of this alleged miracle was such that, before the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries reforms to the canonisation process, alone it could be enough to create cults and devotions to saints.[8] Kenneth Woodward agrees, affirming that although "the Roman Catholic Church does not regard an uncorrupted body as a sign of sanctity", traditionally believers attribute to incorruption "a strong indication of divine favour".[9] What is meant by incorruption?

Cruz distinguishes three types of incorruption: "the deliberately preserved, the accidentally preserved and the incorruptibles".[10] By "uncorrupted" we mean the last type, those bodies not embalmed or subjected to conservation techniques, and not naturally mummified but miraculously free from corruption. The absence of decay can affect specific organs (such as the heart), parts of the body (head and hands), or the whole corpse. It can also have a limited duration (a few days after death) or continue for years. While Cruz focuses on the supernatural dimension of post-mortem corporal phenomena, as if the miracle was enough to create cults and legends, the object of this article is not the phenomenon itself but rather the dynamics that have led some corpses to be singled out as religiously meaningful. This deci-

6 Herbert Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, London 1952, 233–234.

7 Cruz, *The Incorruptibles: A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati*, XXVII.

8 Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism,* 236.

9 Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why*, New York 1990, 83–84.

10 Cruz, *The Incorruptibles: A Study of the Incorruption of the Bodies of Various Catholic Saints and Beati,* XXVII.

sive distinction allows me to pay attention not only to the supernatural fact or to its (contested) nature but to the perception of it and how the faithful, clergy, and scholars have approached it. Scholarship has indicated that the concept of incorruption is not unanimous and immutable; it changes according to contexts, historical periods, the evolution of medical discoveries and the interaction between science and religion.[11] What in the past was considered free from decay could now be seen differently. Furthermore, although exceptional, the miracle is not decisively valid proof. That requires it to be approved, remembered and eventually confirmed or replicated. In line with modern studies on relics and the materiality of the sacred, it is more productive to analyse which perceptions, convictions and beliefs were widespread about these exceptional corpses, not only by the authorities in power (religious, civil, cultural) but also – and above all – by pious believers and members of local communities.

In collaboration with Andrea Pezzini,[12] we have identified 186 bodies that behaved in extraordinary ways in the lands that make up modern Italy between the end of the eighteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.[13] This number does not claim to be definitive but represents the tip of the iceberg of a more complex and underground phenomenon, whose ephemeral or hidden experiences often escape the historian's radar. By "ephemeral" and "hidden" experiences, I mean those cases in which the news of the incorruption did not excite widespread rumours but only circulated within a small circle of the faithful and then disappeared quickly. Furthermore, not all corpses of heroes of the faith are constantly scrutinised or publicly displayed, so there is no official list or other way to identify them. Having made this necessary premise, we can see the distinction between temporary and permanent incorruption even in the traced cases. For some corpses, the exceptional preservation lasts only a few days after death (44,5%), while others were found without decay even years after their demise before becoming dust (8,5%). Today a hundred bodies (53,75%) are on display, often in churches, shrines, and religious institutes. The phenomenon affects men and women, with a slight majority of the former

11 Bouley, "Negotiated Sanctity: Incorruption, Community, and Medical Expertise", 4.

12 Andrea Pezzini is a PhD in the history of Christianity and religious studies at the University of Bern (Switzerland) and a member of the international team "Contested Bodies". I would like to take this opportunity to thank Andrea for his meticulous and painstaking research in archives and libraries, which has made it possible to gain a better – though likely not yet complete – understanding of the phenomenon of incorruptibility of bodies with religious significance in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italy.

13 In addition to Thurston and Cruz, another attempt to census the uncorrupted, with particular focus on Italian cases, was made by Giuseppe Fallica, *Il miracolo dei corpi incorrotti in 2000 anni di storia della Chiesa*, Tavagnacco 2008.

(56,5%). On the other hand, the number of members of religious orders appears to be much higher, 85% of the total. Unsurprisingly, many belonged to religious orders (Capuchins: 6,5%, Franciscans: 3%, Passionists: 3%, Carmelites: 2%). There were also bishops and archbishops (8%), popes (1,5%), lay people (15%) and above all founders and foundresses of new religious institutions (40%). From a mere quantitative point of view, we observe how the nascent religious communities in nineteenth and twentieth centuries Italy aspired to have the bodies of the founders with them. Immediately after the death of the future saints, they contacted religious and civil authorities asking that their human remains be transported within the foundation and, after a successful canonisation process, publicly exposed to members of the religious institute and the faithful. The shared perception was that their bodies, even if dead, encapsulated the essence of the founding mothers and fathers, keeping their charisma "alive" and thus perpetuating their spiritual model over generations.

From this overview of the Italian framework, I want to underline some essential aspects helpful for this article. First, I focus on a hundred cases in which bodily relics were exhibited and not whole miraculous bodies. Why did only some corpses attract the limelight while others did not? Moreover, as we have seen, most of the uncorrupted bodies on display belong to founders of new religious institutes. Is it a simple coincidence, or is there a deliberate strategy behind it? Finally, it does not seem to be by chance that the Roman Church officially recognises the human remains of these founders and foundresses with post-mortem corporal phenomena as servants of God, blessed or saints. Did their wonders influence the canonisation, or did formal ecclesiastical approval underlie public display? I will answer these questions by illustrating the steps that led to the conceptual and material evolution from prodigious bodies to bodies on display, focusing in particular on the uncorrupted founders of new religious institutes.

From Organic Bodies to Relics

The first step of transforming a body into an object full of religious meaning is to lose its connotation of organic matter, that is, to be declared an inorganic substance by law. We can demonstrate this essential turning-point through the sources kept in the archives of the Sisters of St Dorothea in Rome relating to their founder and future saint Paola Frassinetti (1809–1882). At the urging of the sisters, on 12 March 1903, the first *recognition* of her body took place under the supervision of clergy members and representatives of the Rome municipality. Doctor Gualdi, head of the Health Department, declared that "the body was perfectly preserved and intact, even

if the face was a dark wood colour and the hands were lighter but stripped of skin".[14] This finding was interpreted in three ways. On the one hand, the nuns acclaimed a miracle: Frassinetti had been divinely graced by another prodigy, namely the incorruption of the flesh. On the other hand, Gualdi asserted that it was natural mummification, while the head of the public cemetery stated that "the remains are still in a phase of putrefaction, so the corpse cannot leave the graveyard."[15] Despite the heated protests of the sisters, the body was put back in the coffin and left in Verano.

However, the Sisters of St Dorothea did not lose hope but continued to send petitions and complaints to civil and religious authorities until they arranged the second recognition on 24 February 1906. Even in that case, "the body for the goodness of the Lord is perfectly intact as it was three years ago".[16] Doctors and specialists agreed that "her human remains are to be considered a real inorganic substance and no longer a corpse". From a legal point of view, "since it is no longer a real corpse, there is no reason to observe those provisions prescribed by the Mortuary Police regulations for the burial".[17] With these words, the prefect of Rome guaranteed the "conversion" of Frassinetti's body into an inorganic object no longer subject to Article 72 of the Mortuary Police Regulations of 25 July 1892, so it could leave the cemetery to be transported to the congregation she founded. As we will see later, civil officers and physicians of the municipality continued to intervene, examining the human remains of the saint-to-be, but this passage marks the fundamental step in the shift of both responsibility and perception. For the secular authorities, Paola Frassinetti was simply one of the many deaths buried in the Verano cemetery and their task was to ensure that her body – like that of any other person – was not desecrated. On the contrary, for the nuns, that dead body embodied a multiplicity of meanings: it proved the divine election of the founder, visibly confirmed her miracle, encapsulated her charisma and conferred legitimacy and continuation on the new foundation.

From the convent's sources, we know that the primary concern of the nuns was to preserve the miracle as much as possible. For them, the fact that Frassinetti's human remains appeared uncorrupted twenty-four years after her death was no guarantee that this material state would last for-

14 Rome, Archive of the Congregation of the Sisters of St Dorothea della Frassinetti [hereafter ACSSDF], *Relazione della prima ricognizione della salma della Madre Fondatrice*, f. 3r

15 ACSSDF, *Relazione della prima ricognizione*, f. 4r.

16 ACSSDF, *Notizie sulla Salma della Fondatrice ricavate dal Diario di Sant'Onofrio dell'anno 1906*, 3.

17 ACSSDF, Letter from the Prefect of Rome to the Mother Superior, 24 Feb. 1906, unnumbered page.

ever. They adopted two strategies. Through detailed descriptions, medical reports, and photographs, they tried to produce abundant evidence that would certify and remind future generations of the phenomenon. In addition to creating the basis of memory, the nuns did everything to ensure that "the body would remain incorruptible indefinitely".[18] Under the supervision of Dr Gualdi, the body was subjected to numerous chemical treatments. It was immersed for three months in a special antiseptic liquid based on zinc salts and bleach. Later it was washed, exposed to the open air, subjected to various procedures, but always treated with the utmost reverence.[19] For the religious community, it was not a simple inorganic object as the municipal officials had declared, but a precious relic that had to be cared for and protected. As exceptional as it may seem, Frassinetti's case is not unique but rather part of a trend. The sisters of another saint-to-be, Maria Crocifissa Di Rosa (1813–1855), appealed to the bishop and the emperor of Austria so that they could return the body of the foundress from the public cemetery of Brescia to the Mother House.[20] The same was done by new congregations recently established who felt the need to possess the founder's body at their headquarters. This first step marks a practice that may seem obvious but is often forgotten by scholars: long years can pass from the observation of the miracle to the permanent display of the corpse. Before this happens, someone needs to claim the mortal remains, take care of them and keep the saint's fame alive by promoting beliefs and practices imbued with precise meanings for the faithful community. But what meanings and powers do these prodigious bodies embody?

The Body as "Preservation of Charisma" and "Cultural Capital"

Weberian theories on charisma have profitably inspired sociologists and historians, who have not hesitated to define world-famous political leaders, spiritual and religious mentors, celebrities and contemporary pop stars as charismatic figures.[21] As far as saints, prophets and mystics are concerned, scholarship has dealt abundantly with the Middle Ages and the early modern period,[22] while still little has been done on the more recent saints.[23]

18 ACSSDF, *Seconda ricognizione della venerata salma della Madre Fondatrice Paola Frassinetti*, 1906, f. 10r.

19 Ibid., f. 5v and f. 13r.

20 Brescia, Diocesan Historical Archive [hereafter ASDBs], Rel. 14, Religiosi, Fascicolo 1, Ancelle della Carità-Ospitaliere, 1855–1859, Letter from the Bishop of Brescia Girolamo Verzeri to Franz Joseph I of Austria, 22 Dec. 1855, f. 11v–12r.

21 John Potts, *A History of Charisma*, Houndmills 2009, 106.

22 Gary Dickson, "Charisma, Medieval and Modern", *Religions* 3 (2012), 763–789 [769–772], https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3030763.

23 Among the recent studies on contemporary charismatic leaders with religious see

We might ask how their communities perceived these uncorrupted bodies during their lifetime? Did they enjoy a reputation as charismatic leaders? These questions could deflect our focus on their post-mortem history to return to talking about their earthly story. In fact, this reflection helps us to understand the posthumous dynamics and why these bodies were claimed, preserved, venerated and in some cases even exposed. As is well known, for Max Weber, charisma is one of the possible forms of power.[24] This type of authority – based on the leaders' recognised, proven and extraordinary qualities – is built on the mutual relationship between leaders and followers. As long as they manage to provide for the needs of the community, their power is maintained. Weber calls charismatic religious leaders "religious virtuosi" and argues that they must perform miracles to preserve their special status.[25] The death of the leader, and therefore the cessation of this dynamic, implies for Weber a delicate moment of transition in which the genuine but unstable charismatic authority is routinised, that is, the process in which the power is conveyed to other entities (successors, councils, a bureaucratic office holder).[26]

Dan Lainer-Vos and Paolo Parigi offer a different view. For them, charisma does not die with the leaders, and they can continue to prove their exceptionality even after death with miracles. For this reason, scholars prefer the expression "preservation of the charisma" instead of "routinisation".[27] In essence, the post-mortem miracles are the new way in which leaders' authority is expressed to the faithful, and the community does not replace them with a successor. Stories of miracles and healings, rituals and relics can maintain the relationship of trust between leaders and the audience. These dynamics seem to mainly reflect those related to the bodies of the founding saints of nineteenth-century Italy. In life, founders and foundresses of religious institutes were perceived as charismatic leaders in their communities and already looked upon as saints, even without any formal recognition. Through their individual qualities and the ability to provide for the demands of the audience (spiritual reforms, assistance to the poor and the sick, creation of schools and hospitals), they built their authority, supported

Women's History Review 29:1 (2020).

24 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Berkeley 1978, 244.

25 Leonardo Rossi, "'Religious Virtuosi' and Charismatic Leaders: The Public Authority of Mystic Women in Nineteenth-Century Italy", *Women's History Review* 29:1 (2020), 90–108 [102], https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2019.1590500.

26 Ibid., 246.

27 Dan Lainer-Vos & Paolo Parigi, "Miracle Making and the Preservation of Charisma", *Social Science History* 38 (2015), 455–481 [459–462], https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2015.21.

not only by their status within the Catholic hierarchy but by their miraculous skills. Most saints-to-be were famous in their lifetime as *machines à miracles*, (miracle machines) capable of prophesying future events, working miracles and embodying supernatural signs. Unlike other saints, where the relics maintain direct contact with the faithful, the phenomenon of incorruption represented the emblem of the posthumous miracle, proof that the Lord continues to give the founder divine grace. Their bodies, devoid of decay, thus encapsulate the essence and power of the saint, becoming what Myriam Nafte called "cultural capital".[28] For Nafte, the corpses are not only devotional objects but much more. They are a receptacle of holiness and thaumaturgical powers, have an identity and legitimising function and guarantee the institution's prestige. In sum, they are monuments of memory.

The case study of Maria Crocifissa Di Rosa can help to exemplify this theoretical reconstruction. Di Rosa became famous in her lifetime not for her privileged social status (she belonged to the high aristocracy) but for her heroic charitable activity during the cholera epidemic of 1836. With the support of the local clergy, she founded a pious union of women – called *Spedaliere*, then officially recognised as the congregation of the Handmaids of Charity (*Ancelle della Carità*) in 1851 – devoted to the care of the sick and the education of young people. Her personal charisma was based on her tireless philanthropic work but also on alleged mystical gifts. Numerous witnesses called to testify for her canonisation process stated that Di Rosa was endowed with divine grace (penetration of hearts, knowledge of occult and future things, and thaumaturgical powers).[29] Her congregation grew and expanded during her life, opening numerous houses in northern Italy. When Di Rosa died, however, everyone worried about the foundation's continuation. The sisters and the clergy defined her demise as "a public misfortune".[30] In the sources of the trials, we read that "when the Servant of God expired amid the groans and weeping of all the Handmaids, the older Sisters competed with each other for the honour of presenting final services to the body of their Foundress, whose face is still today beautiful and composed, from it breathed a celestial air that inspired devotion and respect".[31] In the hours following her death, news began to spread that her body was exempt

28 Myriam Nafte, "Institutional Bodies: Spatial Agency and the Dead", *History and Anthropology* 26 (2015), 206–233 [206], https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2015.1030636.

29 ASDBs, *Processus informativus. Ordinaria Auctoritate constructus Brixiae super Fama Sanctitatis vitae virtutibus et miraculis Servae Dei Sor Mariae Crucifixae di Rosa, Fundatricis Ancillarum a Charitate*, 139–140.

30 ASDBs, *Processus Super Virtutibus et Miraculis in specie,* 1914, 138.

31 Ibid.

from *rigor mortis* and continued to be flexible. The candles near her coffin did not melt, and the flowers remained fresh and fragrant. For three days, the people went to "see and touch the venerated remains, so much so that to prevent riots, guards had to be placed at the gates".[32]

According to the argumentation set out by Lainer-Vos and Parigi, the miracle of the incorruption of her flesh allowed the preservation of her charisma upon death. As already mentioned, a year later, the nuns convinced the Bishop of Brescia to ask the emperor to transport her body to the convent. The motivation they provided was "the ardent desire that everyone had to keep our mother with us".[33] The posthumous miracle and possession of the corpse had the function of keeping her charisma alive, preserving the privileged link created by Di Rosa with religious and secular authorities, and attracting the faithful eager to pray at her tomb. The same story can also be read in the sources preserved in the convent of St Dorothea in Rome. Once the body returned, the sisters visited the body of the foundress. The daily agenda rotated around her: morning prayers were made in her chapel as was the "greeting" in the afternoon and evening. Each novice was introduced into the congregation by going to "meet" the foundress, who was a special object of attention. In essence, the community seemed to maintain a relationship with the saint-to-be as if she were still alive and they took concrete action in spreading her fame further, distributing relics and devotional images, organising masses and events in her memory, and financing the canonisation process. Ultimately, we can say that the life of the religious community gravitated around the body-capsule of the saint's charisma, so much so that it became an emblem of the congregation's identity.[34]

The Canonised Body: Formal Recognition

In addition to keeping the mortal remains, conserving and placing them at the centre of devotional practices, it was necessary to take a further step to obtain ecclesiastical approval. A fundamental condition in preserving charisma is not to assert authenticity independently but, in the Catholic context, to appeal to the recognition of Rome.[35] Canonisation involves the official creation of new saints and their cult, guaranteeing full support to the beliefs, practices and devotions developed around them. For the faithful and especially the religious communities, it was an almost obvious act to ask the diocesan authorities to open the beatification process. This represented not only new and hoped prestige for the foundation but also the respect of

32 ASDBs, *Processus Informativus*, 145.

33 ASDBs, *Processus Super Virtutibus*, 241.

34 ACSSDF, Letter from Sr Riccarda Chini to the Sisters, 30 Dec. 1990, f. 1r.

35 Lainer-Vos & Parigi, "Miracle Making and the Preservation of Charisma", 456.

specific protocols. The seventeenth-century reforms wanted by Pope Urban VIII (1623–1644) strictly prohibited any form of the public veneration of the saint-to-be before the *fiat* of the Congregation of Rites (currently known as the Dicastery for the Causes of Saints) and the pontiff. In particular, news about miracles and supernatural phenomena, visible manifestations of devotional practices and cults went against the decrees of the *non-cultu* and involved the exclusion of the candidate from the race to the altars.[36] Among the condemnable acts were the lighting of votive candles near the tomb, the placement of ex-votos, and the publication of books of miracles or news circulating by word of mouth about posthumous wonders.

From the time of the reforms of Prospero Lambertini (future Pope Benedict XIV), supernatural phenomena were no longer considered proof of holiness, but only the heroic virtues were the *conditiones sine qua non* for a positive outcome of the cause.[37] The uncorrupted corpses do not constitute proof of a miracle; however, some exceptions were recognised (for example, the prodigy of the tongue without decay of St John Nepomucen).[38] Even a well-known sceptic like Thurston thought that "under very exceptional circumstances, the supernatural preservation of a body of a saint is sometimes admitted".[39] Regardless of possible supernatural phenomena, the material dimension of the body held particular importance in the canonisation process. The human remains were subjected to various exhumations and specific examinations of the body. The goal was to check the conditions in which it was, verify that the body of the future saint was not in danger and that no one had stolen parts of it for illicit purposes. In the cases of the Italian *incorruptibles* studied, we can note that the religious community or the local clergy often requested the analysis of the bodies. In addition to being a preparatory stage for the process, it was seen as a moment in which the community could come into close contact with the founder. In the archive of St Dorothea (Figure 1), some photographs testify how the nuns used to rush in groups to pray around her remains, touch the body, take it in procession in the convent, and show it to novices and the most trusted faithful.[40] These moments could be defined as "community building" as they also were intended to revive and strengthen the connection between

36 Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who Becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why,* 75–76.

37 Mario Rosa, "Prospero Lambertini tra *regolata devozione e mistica visionaria*", in G. Zarri (ed.), *Finzione e santità tra medioevo ed età moderna*, Turin 1991, 521–550.

38 Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism,* 243–244.

39 Ibid., 252.

40 ACSSDF, *Notizie sulla Salma*, 6.

the younger members and the founding leader. Masses, songs and stories functioned to recall and spread the charismas of the saint-to-be.

In addition to making public cults lawful, officially confirming the saint's charisma and examining the human remains, the beatification (or subsequent canonisation) guaranteed another significant advantage: the possibility of displaying the body. In the previous paragraphs, we have seen how the sisters claimed the corpse of the foundress and did everything they could to obtain it. In 1906, Frassinetti's body returned to the Mother House, and her uncorrupted body was welcomed as a prestigious relic.[41] After analysis and preservation efforts, the nuns asked the person in charge of the canonisation to intercede with the pope to bury Frassinetti above ground and in a crystal coffin. The permission was granted; however, he remembered that although Frassinetti's body seemed exceptionally uncorrupted, it could not – yet – be exhibited.[42] In fact, putting a body on display was considered contrary to the norms of the *non-cultu*. Finally, with the beatification, which took place on 8 June 1930, the nuns could destroy the wall that prevented the faithful from admiring her body.[43] Only with formal ecclesiastical recognition could the uncorrupted body, after almost half a century, be displayed for public veneration.

Figure 1. The Sisters of St Dorothea around the body of the foundress. Photo: Archive of St Dorothea, Rome.

41 Ibid., 4.
42 Ibid.
43 "Il Messaggero", 6 Jun. 1930, 5, 52, 134.

The Creation of Incorruption: the Body on Show

The Vatican's recognition of the heroism of the saint was the necessary authority for the exhibition of a prodigious body. However, not all human remains were as well preserved and cared for as that of Paola Frassinetti. In some cases, usually with the last recognition of the beatification, the body was recomposed. On 17 November 1919, yet another intervention was carried out on Di Rosa's body. Sixty-four years after the death and the temporary incorruption, it appeared to have gravely deteriorated.[44] The doctors thus reassembled the corpse for the exhibition after her beatification (1940). However, the difficult period of the Second World War and the transfer of Di Rosa's body to a safer place delayed the exposition operations, which took place only after her canonisation.

Even more particular is the case of Bartolomea Capitanio (1807–1833), co-founder with Vincenza Gerosa (1784–1847) of the Congregation of the Sisters of Maria Bambina. Only a month after signing the opening act of the foundation, the young Capitanio – considered a "living saint" by the inhabitants of Lovere – died, leaving the newborn and unstable institution in the hands of Gerosa. In this case, probably because Gerosa guaranteed the succession of the charismatic power, there was no particular interest in her body, even if – respecting the nineteenth-century hagiography topos – it was free of corruption during the days of the exposure to the public.[45] In fact, in the papers of her beatification process, we do not see significant references to her body or legends relating to the phenomenon of incorruption. The story took another turn at the death of the other co-founder. After eleven years of burial in the municipal cemetery and with the introduction of the beatification process, the coffin of Gerosa was transported into the convent on 1 December 1858.[46] When it was opened, the onlookers discovered the wonder. Although inside there was water and mud, her corpse was completely uncorrupted, flexible, and even – from some cuts on her tongue and fingers made by surgeons for tests – blood came out.

The news of the miracle spread in the diocese to the extent that the Bishop of Brescia, Mons. Girolamo Verzeri, opened an investigation.[47] Despite this, the nature of her incorruption remained open and led to frequent examinations of the body. It is important to emphasise that once both foundresses were beatified and the new sanctuary dedicated to them completed (consecrated on 1 October 1938), the sisters asked permission to exhibit the bodies

44 ASDBs, *Exuviarum recognitio canonice,* 9–11.
45 ASDBs, *Acta primordialia super fama sanctitatis*, f. 33v.
46 ASDBs, *Ricognizione della Tomba S. Vincenza Gerosa*, ff. 11-1v.
47 Ibid., f. 2r.

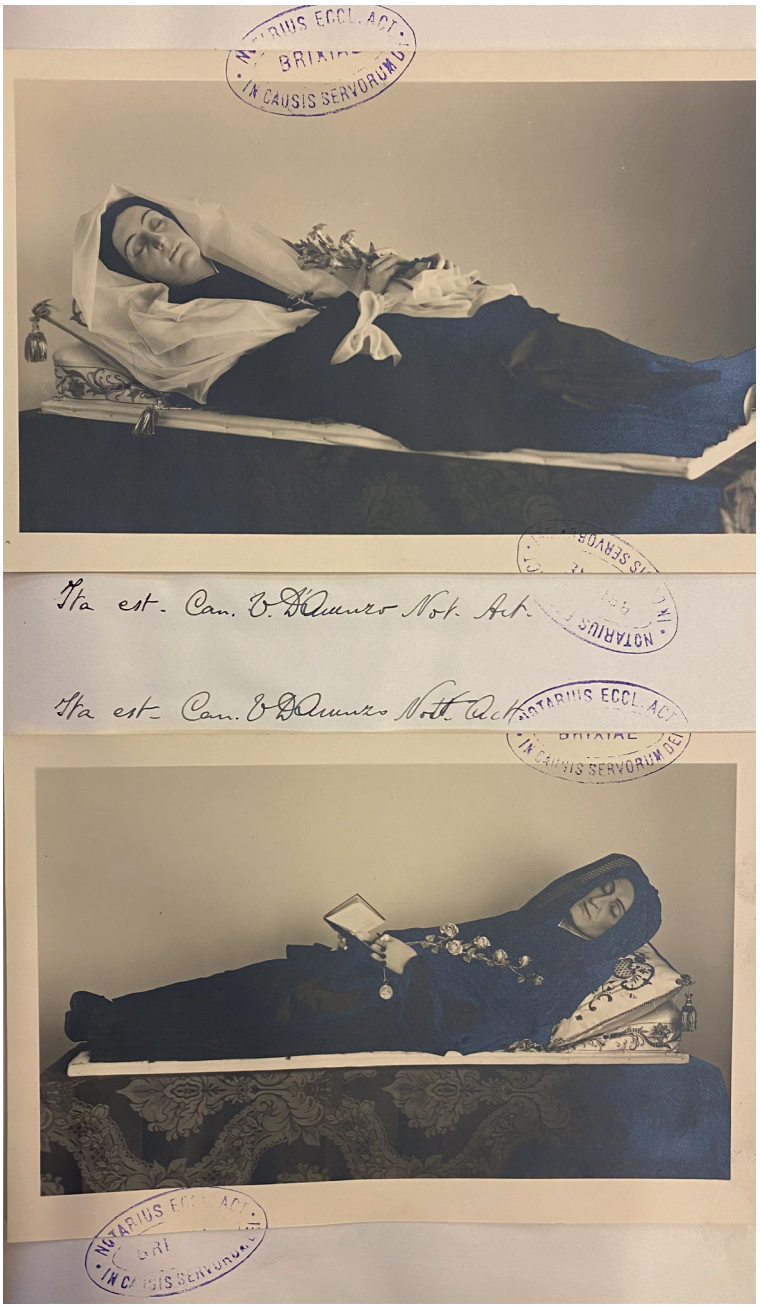

Figure 2. Photograph of the bodies-simulacra of St Bartolomea Capitanio and St Vincenza Gerosa in the sanctuary of Maria Bambina in Lovere. Photo: Diocesan Historical Archive, Brescia.

of the future saints. The Milanese sculptor Leonardo Secchi was commissioned to make the death masks to be placed on the face and hands, while other experts reassembled the bodies (especially that of Capitanio, of which only the bones remained), thus making the "miracle" of incorruption.[48] As we saw, while the absence of corruption had already been emphasised in the case of Gerosa, no one had ever talked about the prodigious body of Capitanio before. After the display of the simulacra, like two sleeping women, the inhabitants of Lovere and the faithful cried out for a miracle and considered their preservation extraordinary despite the well-known intervention of artists and sculptors. When on 18 May 1950, Pius XII canonised the foundresses, their bodies were carried in procession throughout the town and made the tour of Lake Sebino by boat to show all believers the miracle of the uncorrupted saints.[49]

The long process consisting of the attestation of the miracle, checks of the body and the opening of the beatification process ends with the creation of incorruption and the public exposure of the body. The beauty of it symbolised to the faithful the Christian victory over death, the triumph of faith over sin and the saint's holiness.

Conclusion

In this article, rather than focusing on the phenomenon of incorruption, I have concentrated on the dead bodies of people who lived in Italy between the nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century and displayed due to their religious significance. Among a hundred bodies still on display traced, 52% belonged to founders of new religious institutes. One explanation may be that these communities used the posthumous miracles of the founders as a strategy to preserve their charisma. The prodigious bodies were seen as a "vessel of holiness",[50] and the members tried to bring them back into the institution, starting the "new" life of the body as an object full of religious meanings.

In addition to the perception of the wonder, these corpses underwent a long process before being publicly exposed. The Catholic Church does not recognise any value to supernatural phenomena and prevents improper cults for heroes of the faith not yet formally canonised. Thus, although a corpse was perceived as uncorrupted after death, it was treated as an ordina-

48 ASDBs, *Canonizationis BB Bartholomeae Capitanio et Vincentiae Gerosa*, Sessio Secunda, 12 September 1938, f. 4r.

49 Carla Vitali Mandaia (ed.), *Memorie dalla canonizzazione delle sante loveresi alla celebrazione del cinquantenario 1950-2000*, Lovere 2001, 41–47.

50 Thomas Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains,* Princeton 2015, 45, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400874514.

ry human body and buried in civil cemeteries. Thanks to the interest of the religious community or the faithful, it could later be transferred to another place, and the steps necessary to verify the miracle could be taken. Among these, there was the examination of the remains, the attribution of specific meanings (such as the preservation of the leader's charisma or the function of "cultural capital"), the introduction of the canonisation process and the creation of incorruption (that is, the material reconstruction of the supposed miracle). When all the stages of this journey were accomplished, the prodigious body could be transformed into a body on display.

Ultimately, the goal of this contribution was to demonstrate that behind these human-shaped simulacra, there is not simply an alleged posthumous miracle. The perception of it and the creation of beliefs are more important than the actual state of conservation of the bodies. Complex and linked dynamics involving the religious community, the faithful and also the diocesan and Vatican clergy transform private and local devotions into formalised cults through the canonisation processes. It is not surprising that the Italian *incorruptibles* with religious significance all belong to saints and *beati* officially recognised by the Holy See, while at the same time, maintaining a solid popular devotion and specific local meanings for each community. ▲

SUMMARY

This article examines incorrupt bodies in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries Italian Catholic context, focusing on the founders of new religious institutes. The aim is not to analyse the supernatural phenomenon itself but rather to understand the dynamics that led certain bodies to be perceived as religiously significant and thus displayed for veneration by the faithful. It identifies four key phases: (1) the legal and conceptual transformation of the deceased into religious objects; (2) the embodiment of the founder's charisma and communal identity, creating 'cultural capital'; (3) the canonisation process, including exhumations and examinations; and finally (4) the 'making of incorruption' that is the procedure aimed at publicly displaying the remains. The article concludes that the perception of miracles and the creation of beliefs surrounding them are more important than the state of preservation of the corpses. The cases analysed demonstrate that behind the display of incorrupt bodies lies not merely a presumed posthumous miracle but a social construction of religious meanings.