



■ Grotto of St Michael the Archangel, Monte Sant'Angelo, Italy

Photo: Angelo Torre

Stones from the grotto of the Archangel

Among the devotional items available for sale during missions on St Michael the Archangel are white stones in special reliquaries. What is their significance and why are they necessary?



Stone is a common and naturally occurring material, utilised by mankind since the earliest times. Its characteristic properties are hardness, roughness and durability, which is why it was considered suitable for the writing of texts considered worthy to be preserved in perpetuity. The particular shapes and mysterious colours present within stone seem to indicate the existence of superhuman power, which filled primitive man with an almost religious awe and fear. The word 'stone' appears 337 times in the Bible as a noun and 30 times as an adjective.

Jacob set up a stone slab as a monument (Genesis 31:45). Moses hewed the words of the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone (Exodus 34:4). After crossing the Jordan, Jacob set

up twelve stones in the middle of the river, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel (Joshua 4:1-24), the foundations of the Temple were laid, using specially quarried and dressed stones (1 Kings 5:17). Elijah arranged twelve stones as an altar in honour of the Lord (1 Kings 18:31-32). A stone was used as a monument on the grave of Rachel (Genesis 35:20) and rolled against the entrance of Jesus' tomb (Mark 15:46).

Stone was particularly prized in the Ancient World. It was considered propitious. It indicated prosperity and a change in fortune for the better. In court proceedings, it meant that the accused was being set at liberty. It was also awarded as a prize to the victor of wrestling contests and was given to

the candidate chosen to hold high office. White stones were used to mark happy and festive occasions. In the Bible, we read of a white stone on only one occasion, and that in the Book of Revelation, where Jesus Himself will give a white stone: "to those who prove victorious I will give some hidden manna and a white stone, with a new name written on it, known only to the person who receives it" (Revelation 2:17). The victors will share a happy fate – they will inherit the Kingdom of God, in which each person will take up the place which has been reserved for them and will be called by their own name. God's creative love will express the true identity and essence of the beloved person by means of their name.

Great miracles, simple signs

Stone plays an integral part in the story of the revelation of St Michael at Gargano. When, in 1656, the plague was decimating the population of Italy, a worried Bishop Alfonso Puccinelli entreated the help of St Michael the Archangel. In order to prevail on the Archangel for his swift intervention with the Lord, he placed into the hands of his statue the words of a prayer composed on behalf of all the town's inhabitants. The reply received on 22nd September at the bishop's palace in Monte Sant'Angelo was swift in coming. During his morning prayer, Bishop Alfonso first heard what sounded like an earthquake, after which, in a flash of dazzling light, he saw St Michael the Archangel. He was also commanded to bless stones from the grotto, on which he was to inscribe the sign of the cross and the letters M.A. (Michael the Archangel). At the same time, St Michael assured him that whoever shall possess such a stone and keep it with devotion will be preserved from sickness. This promise proved true and all who possessed the stones were soon freed from the fatal disease. In the centuries since this took place, the monument erected on the square opposite the bishop's palace with its Latin inscription with the words: "This monument is erected in eternal gratitude to the Prince of Angels, Vanquisher of disease, our Patron and Protector, by Alfonso Puccinelli, 1656."

History shows that God makes use of simple signs even when performing great miracles. The Israelites who journeyed through the desert with Moses grumbled against God and experienced great sickness when Yahweh sent down

fiery serpents whose bite brought death to many in Israel. Conscious of their sin and helplessness, the people then begged Moses to intercede with God on their behalf to save them from the serpents. Moses began praying for the people and was told to "make a fiery serpent and raise it as a standard. Anyone who is bitten and looks at it will survive" (Numbers 21: 8).

St Michael behaved in a similar way to the people who asked the bishop to intercede for them in order to overcome the plague. He used a simple object, a stone, which the person needed to have in his or her possession. It is obvious that a stone cannot of itself have the power to heal. It is an inanimate object, moreover, one which is symbolic of a hard, unfeeling, cold and lifeless heart. But when a person has faith, then God has the power to refresh and change that person's heart and life. A belief in God and faith in the intercessory power of St Michael the Archangel can banish plague.

Jesus Christ casts stones

In the porch of the church of Our Lady of the Martyrs of Poland in Przysiek, Poland, hangs a great plaque, placed there to commemorate the visit of the statue of St Michael the Archangel to this Michaelite parish. People passing it can read the words: "Who is like to God! St Michael the Archangel protect us from the snares and deceits of Satan, so that at the end of our earthly lives we may be welcomed into the Kingdom of Light." Below the text there is a cross, together with the letters M.A. Below the cross has been placed a reliquary with stone from the grotto and below

that a further inscription: "Stone from the grotto – the heavenly basilica in Gargano, Italy. In memory of the visit of the pilgrim statue of St Michael the Archangel from the shrine in Gargano, 3-6 May 2013 A.D."

One family has placed one of these stones in the door of their house. They frequently look at it, touch it and point it out to visitors to their home. Most importantly – in accordance with the promise given by St Michael the Archangel – they ask for and experience his protection. A door is very important in every home. Through it, we go out into the world and through it we come back home, where the Father is present (Matthew 6:6). Before the door Jesus stands and knocks, entreating us to open (Revelation 3:20), but we must not forget that Satan, and with him, all that is evil, is also trying his hardest to enter (Matthew 12:43-45).

Many priests and faithful feel and understand this danger and therefore invite the statue from Gargano into their parishes and communities. And so, St Michael the Archangel comes, and leaves us small stones from the heavenly grotto. This white stone is today our weapon and a stone as a weapon against evil signifies Christ.

César of Arles said: "When Christ – the true David – throws a stone, he does so accurately. The stone thrown by Him is symbolic of Himself and it strikes the spiritual Goliath, the enemy of our souls, right in the forehead, a forehead not marked by the sign of the cross."

The Apostle Peter goes deeper and teaches us that Jesus is the living stone, chosen by God and precious to Him, so that, "as living stones making a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:4-5), with the assistance of St Michael the Archangel.

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