

# For All the Saints: Veneration of Relics



On Tuesday, the Solemnity of All Saints, our collection of relics was placed on the side Altar for devotion during the month of November. Normally the relics are housed in the reliquary in the sacristy. Our relic collection includes: St. Peter, St. Joachim, St. Ann, St. Joseph, St. Appollonia, St. Cajetan, St. John the Baptist, St. Paul, St. Andrew Avellino, St. Francis Paola, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Aloysius Gonzaga, piece of the veil of the Blessed Virgin Mary and a piece of the True Cross of Christ. Other saint's relics include: St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, St. Leo the Great, St. Blaise, St. Pius X, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Hyacinthe, St. John Neumann, St. Polycarp, St. Innocent, Saint Marguerite d'Youville, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Thomas the Apostle, St. Maria Goretti and St. Ambrose. In addition, at the bottom of the reliquary is the original Altar Stone from St. Mary's Church with unknown relics.

*In the following interview with CNA, Fr. Martins answers questions and dispels some common misunderstandings about the tradition of relics. Father Carlos Martins, CC, is a Custos Reliquiarum, which is an ecclesiastically appointed Curate of Relics with the authority to issue relics.*

## **First of all, what is a relic?**

Relics are physical objects that have a direct association with the saints or with Our Lord. They are usually broken down into three classes:

**First class relics** are the body or fragments of the body of a saint, such as pieces of bone or flesh.

**Second class relics** are something that a saint personally owned, such as a shirt or book (or fragments of those items).

**Third class relics** are those items that a saint touched or that have been touched to a first, second, or another third class relic of a saint.

## **Where did the Catholic tradition of venerating saints' relics come from?**

Scripture teaches that God acts through relics, especially in terms of healing. In fact, when surveying what Scripture has to say about sacred relics, one is left with the idea that healing is what relics "do."

When the corpse of a man was touched to the bones of the prophet Elisha the man came back to life and rose to his feet (2 Kings 13:20-21).

A woman was healed of her hemorrhage simply by touching the hem of Jesus' cloak (Matthew 9:20-22).

The signs and wonders worked by the Apostles were so great that people would line the streets with the sick so that when Peter walked by at least his shadow might 'touch' them (Acts 5:12-15).

When handkerchiefs or aprons that had been touched to Paul were applied to the sick, the people were healed and evil spirits were driven out of them (Acts 19:11-12).

In each of these instances God has brought about a healing using a material object. The vehicle for the healing was the touching of that object. It is very important to note, however, that the cause of the healing is God; the relics are a means through which He acts. In other words, relics are not magic. They do not contain a power that is their own; a power separate from God.

Any good that comes about through a relic is God's doing. But the fact that God chooses to use the relics of saints to work healing and miracles tells us that He wants to draw our attention to the saints as "models and intercessors" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 828).

### **When did the veneration of relics begin?**

It was present from the earliest days of Christianity, during the Apostolic age itself. The following is an account written by the Church in Smyrna (modern day Izmir, Turkey) when its bishop, St. Polycarp was burned alive:

“We adore Christ, because He is the Son of God, but the martyrs we love as disciples and imitators of the Lord. So we buried in a becoming place Polycarp’s remains, which are more precious to us than the costliest diamonds, and which we esteem more highly than gold.”

(Acts of St. Polycarp, composed approx. 156 AD)

Polycarp was a significant figure. He was converted by John the Apostle, who had baptized him and subsequently ordained him a bishop. Thus we see that from its outset the Church practiced devotion to the remains of the martyrs.



### **What is the spiritual significance of relics?**

I think that St. Jerome put it best when he said:

“We do not worship relics, we do not adore them, for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the creator. But we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order the better to adore him whose martyrs they are.” (Ad Riparium, i, P.L., XXII, 907).

We venerate relics only for the sake of worshiping God.

### **When we collect relics from the body of a saint, what part of the body do we use?**

Any part of the saint’s body is sacred and can be placed in a reliquary. Any and every bone may be used. In addition, flesh, hair, and sometimes blood, are also used. Sometimes everything from the tomb is dispersed from it. Sometimes a tomb is preserved.

### **At what point in the canonization process are items or body parts considered official relics by the Church?**

Before the beatification takes place, there is a formal rite whereby the relics are identified and moved (the official word is “translated”) into a church, a chapel, or an oratory. Put simply, the grave is exhumed and the mortal remains are retrieved.

Only the Church has the juridical power to formally recognize the sanctity of an individual. When the Church does this – through beatification and canonization – their relics receive the canonical recognition as being sacred relics.

There is an importance difference between beatification and canonization. Beatification is the declaration by the Church that there is strong evidence that the person in question is among the blessed in heaven. Nevertheless, beatification permits only local devotion. That is, devotion in the country in which the individual lived and died. When Mother Teresa was beatified, for instance, only in India and in her native Albania was her devotion permitted. Her Mass could not be celebrated, for example, in the United States, nor could her relics be placed within its altars.

Whereas beatification permits local devotion, canonization, on the other hand, mandates universal devotion. It grants to the canonized individual the rights of devotion throughout the universal Church.

### **What is the proper way to keep relics?**

Relics are very precious. They are not something that was alive at one time and is now dead. In the case of first class relics, we are talking about flesh that is awaiting the general resurrection, where the soul of a saint will be reunited with his physical remains.

As such, the way we treat relics is of the utmost importance. Ideally, relics should be kept in a Church or chapel where they can be made available for public veneration.