



WHAT ARE RELICS?



St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † December 2014

By Fr. William Saunders

ISSUE: What are relics?

DISCUSSION: Relics include the physical remains of a saint (or of a person who is considered holy but not yet officially canonized) as well as other objects which have been “sanctified” by being touched to his body. These relics are divided into two classes: First class or real relics include the physical body parts, clothing and instruments connected with a martyr’s imprisonment, torture, and execution. Second class or representative relics are those which the faithful have touched to the physical body parts or grave of the saint.

The use of relics has some, although limited, basis in Sacred Scripture. In II Kings 2:9-14, the Prophet Elisha picked-up the mantle of Elijah, after he had been taken up to heaven in a whirlwind; with it, Elisha struck the water of the Jordan, which then parted so that he could cross.

In another passage (II Kings 13:20-21), some people hurriedly bury a dead man in the grave of Elisha, “but when the man came into contact with the bones of Elisha, he came back to life and rose to his feet.” In Acts of the Apostles we read, “Meanwhile, God worked extraordinary miracles at the hands of Paul. When handkerchiefs or cloths which had touched his skin were applied to the sick, their diseases were cured and evil spirits departed from them” (Acts 19:11-12). In these three passages, a reverence was given to the actual body or clothing of these very holy people who were indeed God’s chosen instruments—Elijah, Elisha, and St. Paul. Indeed, miracles were connected with these “relics”—not that some magical power existed in them, but just as God’s work was done through the lives of these holy men, so did His work continue after their deaths. Likewise, just as people were drawn closer to God through the lives of these holy men, so did they (even if through their remains) inspire others to draw closer even after their deaths. This perspective provides the Church’s understanding of relics.

The veneration of relics of the saints is found in the early history of the Church. A letter written by the faithful of the Church in Smyrna in the year 156 provides an account of the death of St. Polycarp, their bishop, who was burned at the stake. The letter reads, “We took up the bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable place, where the Lord will permit us to gather ourselves together, as we are able, in gladness and joy, and to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom.” Essentially, the relics—the bones and other remains of St. Polycarp—were buried, and the tomb itself was the “reliquary.” Other accounts attest that the faithful visited the burial places of the saints and miracles occurred. Moreover, at this time, we see the development of “feast days” marking the death of the saint, the celebration of Mass at the burial place and a veneration of the remains.

After the legalization of the Church in 313, the tombs of saints were opened and the actual relics were venerated by the faithful. A bone or other bodily part was placed in a reliquary—a box, locket and later a glass case—for veneration. This practice especially grew in the Eastern Church, while the practice of touching cloth to the remains of the saint was more common in the West. By the time of the Merovingian and Carolingian periods of the Middle Ages, the use of reliquaries was common throughout the whole Church.

The Church strived to keep the use of relics in perspective. In his Letter to Riparius, St. Jerome (d. 420) wrote in defense of relics: “We do not worship, we do not adore, 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.”

Here we need to pause for a moment. Perhaps in our technological age, the whole idea of relics may seem “strange.” Remember, all of us treasure things that have belonged to someone we love—a piece of clothing, another personal item, a lock of hair. Those “relics” remind us of the love we share with that person while he was still living and even after death. Our hearts are torn when we think about disposing of the very personal things of a deceased loved one. Even from an historical sense, at Ford’s Theater Museum for instance, we can see things that belonged to President Lincoln, including the blood stained pillow on which he died. More importantly, we treasure the relics of saints, the holy instruments of God.

During the Middle Ages, the “translation of relics,” meaning the removal of relics from the tombs, their placement in reliquaries and their dispersal grew. Sadly, abuses grew also. With various barbarian invasions, the conquests of the Crusades, the lack of means for verifying all relics and less than reputable individuals who in their greed preyed on the ignorant and superstitious, abuses did occur. Even St. Augustine (d. 430) denounced impostors who dressed as monks selling spurious relics of saints. Pope St. Gregory (d. 604) forbade the selling of relics and the disruption of tombs in the catacombs. Unfortunately, the Popes or other religious authorities were powerless in trying to control the translation of relics or prevent forgeries. Eventually, these abuses prompted the Protestant leaders to attack the idea of relics totally. (Unfortunately, the abuses and the negative reaction surrounding relics has led many people to this day to be skeptical about relics.)

In response, the Council of Trent (1563) defended invoking the prayers of the saints, and venerating their relics and burial places: “The sacred bodies of the holy martyrs and of the other saints living with Christ, which have been living members of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit and which are destined to be raised and glorified by Him unto life eternal, should also be venerated by the faithful. Through them, many benefits are granted to men by God.”

Since that time, the Church has taken stringent measures to insure the proper preservation and veneration of relics. The Code of Canon Law (No. 1190) absolutely forbids the selling of sacred relics and they cannot be “validly alienated or perpetually transferred” without permission of the Holy See. Moreover, any relic today would have proper documentation attesting to its authenticity. The Code also supports the proper place for relics in our Catholic practice: Canon 1237 states, “The ancient tradition of keeping the relics of martyrs and other saints under a fixed altar is to be preserved according to the norms given in the liturgical books,” (a practice widespread since the fourth century). Many Churches also have relics of their patron saints which the faithful venerate on appropriate occasions. And yes, reports of the Lord’s miracles and favors continue to be connected with the intercession of a saint and the veneration of his relics. In all, relics remind us of the holiness of a saint and his cooperation in God’s work; at the same time, relics inspire us to ask for the prayers of that saint and to beg the grace of God to live the same kind a faith-filled life. Therefore, let us approach [...] relics [...] with this understanding and faith.

From Catholic Education Resource Center; “What are relics?” originally published in *Arlington Catholic Herald*.
<http://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/what-are-relics.html>.