

What are Relics...and, Why are they important?

Msgr. James E. Kruse, J.C.L.

Nearly every human being has a cherished treasure from a loved one: a family heirloom, a favorite picture, a lock of hair, jewelry and so on. These items help us to be connected to our loved one and remember them, especially after their death. There is something natural and very human about keeping and treasuring an heirloom. These heirlooms are a type of relic.

Drawing from this natural cherishing of heirlooms, Catholics have always held dear to their heart relics of saints. These relics could be an actual bone, vial of blood, an item used by the saint such as a prayer book, or a cloth touched to the saint's body. Overtime the Church categorized relics: First Class: a part of the saint's body; Second Class: something personally used/owned by the saint; Third Class: an item touched to a first or second class relic.

Just as we have a natural desire to remember our loved ones or be close to them through cherishing an heirloom, even more, we should cherish our brothers and sisters of faith – the saints. The saints are an example of faith. They teach us ways of holiness. They right now live in heaven. And, they are interceding for us to join them in heaven. Relics are a way for us to be connected to our holy brothers and sisters. Because the relic is connected to the saints who are eternally joined to Christ in heaven, relics are greater than a family heirloom. They are like a conduit to heaven and divine power.

Throughout history relics have been a source of miraculous healing, inspiration of faith, and advancement of the Kingdom. These miracles have been documented, even beginning in the scriptures. Moses carried the bones of Joseph out of Egypt (Ex. 13:19). Men placed a dead man into the tomb of Eliesus and the dead man came to life (2 Kings 13:21). People touched cloth to St. Paul's hands. Then, they touched that cloth to the sick. They were healed (Acts 19:11). St. Ambrose and St. Augustine wrote about personally witnessing miracles after a martyr's relic touched a sick man. Even today, many miracles have been reported in relation to relics of the recently canonized Saint Padre Pio. Of course, not every veneration of a relic results in miraculous healings. But, it always connects the person with the saint, and therefore God.

Since the beginning, the Church has upheld the practice of venerating relics. This veneration is not offering adoration or worship which is due only to God. Veneration is the honoring, cherishing, respecting, and devotion of heart given to the saints. Veneration is an expression of our friendship and love for the saints – our brothers and sisters in heaven. This veneration flows from our admiration of the saint's holy life and their life with God in heaven. Sometimes this veneration has been abused and exaggerated. The Church has guarded against these abuses.

Various pious practices have developed in order to show appropriate veneration to a relic and the saint. Relics are placed in sacred and artistic vessels called reliquaries. The faithful often make pilgrimage to the shrine of a relic. Or, the relic travels to different places in order to allow for veneration. The faithful spend time of prayer in the presence of the relic. They may meditate upon the holy life of the saint, ask the saint's intercession, or offer thanks for favors received. Many times the faithful may be allowed to touch the reliquary or receive a blessing from the relic. Finally, a holy card or cloth touched to the relic becomes a new third class relic that can be taken home for future veneration. These should be treated with respect and remind the person of their moment with the saint's relic.