

It has been a long-standing tradition of the Catholic Church to place a relic from one of the saints in a niche carved out of the top of the altar. In the early Church, Mass was literally celebrated underground in the catacombs of Rome where the martyrs and saints were buried. In the early fourth century, Saint Augustine and Saint Jerome wrote about the distinctions and degrees of worship and reverence given to God, the Blessed Mother and the saints and angels. Later in the thirteenth century, Saint Thomas Aquinas further detailed the distinctions in his *Summa Theologiae*. The Greek term *latría* refers to worship with a sacrificial character and refers to the worship given alone to God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Greek term *dulia* refers to the reverence with a non-sacrificial character given to the Blessed Mother, saints and angels. Hyperdulia is a heightened degree of *dulia* and refers to the special honor given to the Blessed Mother due to her special role in salvation history as the bearer of Jesus, Son of God.

As the Church eventually survived the more dramatic persecutions and Masses were celebrated more freely and openly, it was custom to take small piece of a bone, piece of hair or nail from a saint or martyr, put it in a special container or reliquary and then place the reliquary in an altar at the various churches spread throughout the world. This was a way of commemorating their honor and making their memory present as the holy sacrifice of the Mass was offered. For a further reflection, see the article below.

Here at Our Lady of Guadalupe it will interest you to know that in a niche at the back of the main altar of the church, below the surface, are:

- A first class relic of Saint John Neumann, fourth Bishop of Philadelphia;
- A first class relic from each of the following North American Martyrs: Saint John de Brebeuf, Saint Gabriel Lalemant and Saint Charles Garnier;
- A first class relic of Saint Catherine of Siena;
- A first class relic of Saint Joseph of Cupertino

In a niche at the altar in the chapel are:

- Another first class relic of Saint John Neumann;
- A first class relic of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, founder of the Sisters of Charity;
- A first class relic of Saint Gaspare del Bufalo, founder of the Missionaries of the Most Precious Blood;
- A first class relic of Saint Maria Goretti, virgin and martyr;
- A first class relic of Saint Francis of Assisi;

In the Ambry of the Baptistery:

- A first class relic of Saint John the Baptist

In the Youth Ministry Room at the PLC:

- A second class relic from Pietro Giorgio Frassati

* Certificates of Authentication are on file at the Parish Office for these relics.

It may also interest you to know that at the main shrine to Our Lady of Guadalupe, behind the dedication plaque, the following mementos have been placed:

- A blessed rose scented rosary from the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico;
 - A small stone from the Hill of Tepeyac where the Blessed Mother appeared to Saint Juan Diego, in Guadalupe Mexico;
 - A Miraculous Medal blessed by Mother Teresa and given to Monsignor Gentili after a Mass he celebrated for her and her Sisters in Rome in 1994;
 - A small medallion with holy water from Our Lady of Knock in Ireland, a small bottle of holy water from the Jordon River, Israel (traditional spot where Jesus was Baptized by Saint John the Baptist);
 - A small bottle of holy water from Lourdes, France (traditional spot where our Blessed Mother appeared to Saint Bernadette).
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Church Teaching on Relics

- REV. CHARLES MANGAN

Some people think the Catholic Church abandoned her teaching on relics after Vatican II. However, a quick glance at the Code of Canon Law, published by authority of Pope John Paul II in 1983, reveals that the Church very much considers sacred relics important and significant in the life of the Church (cf. canons 1281-89). Just what are relics and what meaning do they have for disciples of Jesus Christ?



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The word relic comes from the Latin *relinquo*, literally meaning I leave, or I abandon. A relic is a piece of the body of a saint, an item owned or used by the saint, or an object which has been touched to the tomb of a saint. Traditionally, a piece of the body of a saint especially that of a martyr, may be with the permission of the local ecclesiastical authority used in solemn processions recalling the specific holy person.

It may seem strange that Christianity, which so adheres to the belief in the resurrected body after the final judgment, should attach veneration to body parts of the faithful departed. However, as Dom Bernardo Cignitti, O.S.B., once wrote, in a religion as spiritually centered as Christianity, the remains of certain dead are surrounded with special care and veneration. This is because the mortal remains of the deceased are associated in some manner with the holiness of their souls, which await reunion with their bodies in the resurrection.

Venerable history

The veneration of sacred relics has a long history in the Church. It is commonly held that the first account of such veneration stretches back to the martyrdom of St. Polycarp, bishop and martyr, who was killed by being burned at the stake in the amphitheater at Smyrna around the year 155 A.D. One such reference, which comes from the Office of Readings assigned to the memorial of St. Polycarp (February 23) in the Liturgy of the Hours, states: When the pyre was ready, Polycarp took off all his clothes and loosened his undergarment. He made an effort also to remove his shoes, though he had been unaccustomed to this, for the faithful always vied with each other in their haste to touch his body. Even before his martyrdom, he had received every mark of honor in tribute to his holiness of life.

The Fathers of the Church take up the theme of the reverence paid to the sacred relics as early as the fourth and fifth centuries. By the 1100s, relics were being venerated in churches and shrines, which attracted numerous pilgrims.

As time went on, the clothing and personal effects of holy men and women and boys and girls of the Lord were also enshrined. Abbot Cignitti observed: This was because of the widespread belief, beyond measure in the centuries of the early Middle Ages that the wonder-working power of the saint was to be found not only in the entire body but also in every part of it and in objects that had been in contact with his person.

After the death of Emperor Constantine (fourth century), cases of wood, ivory, and various metals containing relics were deposited in altars at the time of their dedication or buried near the tombs of the dead or even worn around the neck. It is well known that altars at the time of their consecration by the bishop were to have inserted a relic of a saint, preferably a martyr, which was kissed by the priest as he began to offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. It is still earnestly recommended that every altar possess a relic of one of the saints.

First-class doctrine

There are three classes of sacred relics. The first-class is a part of the saint's body. (It is this type, which is placed in an altar stone.) The second-class is a piece of the saint's clothing or something used by the saint, while the third-class is an object, which has been touched to a first-class relic.

Isn't the veneration of relics optional for Catholics? Must the Catholic faithful really esteem the bodies of the saints? Once and for all, the Council of Trent (16th century) responded to the claims of the reformers that both the veneration of the saints and their relics is contrary to Sacred Scripture. The Council taught: Also the holy bodies of the holy martyrs and of the others who dwell with Christ . . . are to be honored by the faithful.

Several scriptural passages support the veneration of relics. For example, the Israelites took Joseph's bones when they departed Egypt (Ex. 13:19). The bones of Elisha came in contact with a dead person who then was raised to life (2 Kings 13:21). The same Elisha took the mantle of Elijah and fashioned a miracle with it (2 Kings 2:13). The Christians of Ephesus, by using handkerchiefs and cloths touched to St. Paul's skin, effected the healing of the sick (Acts 19:12).

Communion of saints

To venerate the relics of the saints is a profession of belief in several doctrines of the Catholic faith: (1) the belief in everlasting life for those who have obediently witnessed to Christ and His Holy Gospel here on earth; (2) the truth of the resurrection of the body for all persons on the last day; (3) the doctrine of the splendor of the human body and the respect which all should show toward the bodies of both the living and the deceased; (4) the belief in the special intercessory power which the saints enjoy in heaven because of their intimate relationship with Christ the King; and (5) the truth of our closeness to the saints because of our connection in the communion of saints we as members of the Church militant or pilgrim Church, they as members of the Church triumphant.

The relics of the saints and their veneration is just another in the long line of treasures which Jesus Christ has given to His chaste bride, the Church. These relics summon us to appreciate more profoundly not only the heroic men and women, boys and girls who have served the Master so selflessly and generously, but also especially the love and mercy of the Almighty who called these His followers to the bliss of unending life in His eternal kingdom.

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