

International Crusade for Holy Relics

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What is a Relic?

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Relics - the word includes the bodies of departed saints, fragments of their bodies, articles or portions of articles which they have used, such as clothes, vestments, rosaries, and the like. The Church also venerates relics of Christ and His Blessed Mother. Such are the holy nails, lance, spear, fragments of the True Cross, the girdle, veil, etc., of the Blessed Virgin. The devotion to relics, solemnly approved by the Council of Trent (sess. xxv. DC Invoc. Sanct.) rests on two great principles of Catholic belief.

There are three classes of relics:

1st class, 2nd class, and 3rd class.

[1st class] The bodies of saintly persons or any of their integrant parts, such as limbs, ashes and bones.

[2nd class] Objects that have come in physical contact with living Saints and are thereby sanctified (for instance, the instruments wherewith a martyr has been tortured, the chains by which he was bound, the clothes he wore, objects he used).

[3rd class] Bits of cloth touched to an actual 1st or 2nd class relic.

Sacred relics are precious mementoes that help us remember those, whose relics they are, the saints of God, the Holy Martyrs who shed their blood in witness to the truth of their faith, and whose blessed souls now enjoy the vision of God and shall one day return to resume those sacred remains and impart to them the same life and glory they now possess.

The document that accompanies a relic is often times referred to as the authentic. On the document, there is a variety of useful and necessary information. This document is a public acclamation as to the authenticity of the relic itself, of which a high-ranking ecclesiastic has signed his name. Typed or hand written into the blank areas are the name and the abbreviation of the cause of their sainthood and the individuals station in religious life, as well as any distinction of honor that the Church might have placed on them posthumously. There is also a description of the relic itself, and a description of the locket or reliquary that it is placed in. On the bottom of the authentic is the date of issuance, the seal of the office, registrar number and the signature of the Authenticator. The purpose of the document is to declare the relics authenticity thereby allowing it to be publicly venerated.

Underneath the back cover of the relic locket there is a seal of red wax. The relic itself is held in place in the locket by threads that cross over it. The threads are fed through the walls of the locket on opposing sides and it is sealed shut with a wax seal bearing the insignia of issuing religious authority and their orders initials. This seal and its locking procedure (threads and seal) should never be broken or cut. It protects the integrity and validity of the authentication.

Catholics believe that God is sometimes pleased to honor the relics of the saints by making them instruments of healing and other miracles, and by bestowing spiritual graces on those who, with pure hearts, keep and honor them. For this principle the Fathers (e.g. Cyril of Jerusalem, "Catech." xviii, PG, xxxiii. 1036) appeal to the Old Testament, which relates the resurrection of a dead body, which touched the bones of Eliseus (4 Kings xiii. 21), and the New, which tells us that the sick were healed by towels, which had touched the living body of St. Paul (Acts xix. 12; cf. v. 15).

Abuses have occurred in all ages with regard to relics. In 1215, Canon 62 of the Fourth Lateran Council inserted in the "Corpus Juris," forbade relics to be sold or to be exposed outside of their cases or shrines, and prohibited the public veneration of new relics till their authenticity had been approved by the Pope (Mansi, "Concil." tom. xxii. 1049-50; see also Fleury, "H.E." livr. lxxvii. 54). The Council of Trent (sess. xxv. De Invoc. Sanct.) renews these prohibitions and requires bishops to decide on the authenticity of new relics after careful consultation with theologians or, if necessary, with the metropolitan and other bishops of the province assembled in council.

In 1563 at the opening of session XXV of the Council of Trent, the subject of Relics and Sacred Images was discussed.

Council of Trent, 1545-1563 (#984)

"The Holy Synod commands all bishops and others who hold the office of teaching and its administration, that in accordance with the usage of the Catholic and Apostolic Church, received from primeval times of the Christian religion, and with the consensus of opinion of the holy Fathers and the decrees of the sacred Councils, they above all diligently instruct the faithful on the intercession and invocation of the saints, the veneration of relics . . ." "That the holy bodies of the saints and also of the martyrs and of others living with Christ, who were the living *"members of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit"* (cf. I Cor. 3:16; 6:19; II Cor. 6:16), which are to be awakened by Him to eternal life and to be glorified, are to be venerated by the faithful, through which many benefits are bestowed by God on men, so that those who affirm that veneration and honor are not due to the relics of the saints, or that these and other memorials are honored by the faithful without profit, and that these places dedicated to the memory of the saints for the purpose of obtaining their help are visited in vain, let these be altogether condemned, just as the Church has for a long time condemned and now condemns again." (#985, *ibid.*)