

4 Sale: Bones of the Saints

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There's always strange stuff for sale on eBay—does anybody really need elk antlers?—but some of the strangest is in a category called "Collectibles: Christianity," subcategory "Relics." Relics, to put it crassly, are souvenirs of a holy life: a snippet of cassock, a shred of a shroud—anything that once belonged to or came in contact with a saint. To many Christians, especially Roman Catholics, relics are sacred objects of veneration. They have healing powers; they remind believers of God's promise that in his kingdom, everything broken will become whole again. Some of the relics thought to have the most power are bits of saints' flesh, bone and hair, which have been authenticated by the church. To put it *very* crassly, these are tiny, antique body parts, usually in pretty little frames. Relics this precious are not intended to be owned by individuals but worshiped by the whole Christian community.

On eBay last week you could buy strands of hair, allegedly from the head of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, the patron saint of the Air Force. Bids started at \$40. Or you could buy what looks like a fragment of bone supposedly from Saint Philomena, a 13-year-old Christian girl who, according to legend, was flogged, drowned and finally beheaded for her refusal to marry the Roman Emperor Diocletian. Bidding started at \$49.99. Or, if you wanted to splurge, you could purchase a "splendid, rare, antique" reliquary containing bone fragments of six different saints from a dealer in Belgium. Starting price: \$625. All these items appear to violate eBay's policies prohibiting the sale of human remains. If they're real they also violate the Roman Catholic canon, which states that "it is absolutely forbidden to sell sacred relics."

To skeptics and curiosity seekers, the gray market in relics is perhaps nothing more than an excellent if slightly ghoulish example of the cultural dissonances that can occur when religious impulses clash with capitalistic ones. To the Catholic faithful, however, it is an abomination. Tom Serafin is the manager of a photography studio in Los Angeles, a Catholic layperson who has made it his lifelong mission to badger eBay into removing holy relics from its site. Last month he called for yet another boycott of eBay. "As a dad and a Catholic, I just wonder where the heck is the accountability?" he says. "We have a team of 2,000 people working around the clock to identify and remove prohibited items," responds an eBay spokeswoman via e-mail. "With nearly 7 million new items being listed every day ... we may not immediately identify infringing items, but if concerned individuals bring them to our attention we will

promptly take action." On his Web site, Serafin keeps a list of objects he believes violate eBay's policies.

Serafin sees it as his job to protect the world's holy relics from profiteering entrepreneurs. To that end, he collects relics himself, which he procures not with cash but through relentless letter writing, begging and the promise of safe haven. After 17 years, he has collected 1,200 relics, which he keeps in two large safes in his house and sometimes takes on tour. Later this month he is taking his prized possessions, eight relics from the Passion (including what he believes to be a piece of the True Cross and a shard from the crown of thorns), to Manila, where the archbishop is expecting 1.5 million people to come venerate them.

The sale of relics on eBay may just be another small sign of our society's lust for material satisfaction, but the ire it provokes is deep and old. Is it really possible to purchase a piece of God's grace and mystery with a credit card? Or are such gifts given by God alone? These are the questions that prompted Luther to nail his memo to the church door in 1517; it is certainly too much to expect the folks at eBay to have to answer them.

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