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An article about the work of Saints Alive, an apostolate dedicated to the preservation and public veneration of authentically documented relics of the saints.

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Keeping in Touch with the Saints

Relics are often a forgotten sacramental. But Tom Serafin is doing his best to change that through the work of Saints Alive, an apostolate dedicated to the preservation and public veneration of authentically documented relics of the saints.

Based in Temple City, Calif., Saints Alive has a large collection of relics of individual saints, as well as relics of Our Lord and the Blessed Virgin. Serafin exhibits the collection in churches, retreat houses and religious communities, sometimes combining the exhibit with a day of recollection. The group, which comprises both lay people and Religious, hopes to help keep the saints alive in the hearts and minds of the faithful with its work.

In 1996, Saints Alive helped restore the collection of relics in the Los Angeles Archdiocesan Archival Center. They designed custom reliquaries, mounted and framed relics, and cataloged the complete collection, which is now on permanent public display. In early 1998, Serafin co- founded the International Crusade for Holy Relics, a pious organization of

individuals and groups, both religious and secular, whose members use their own station in life to honor the lives, legends and the remains of the saints.

Serafin said that relics should not be considered as wonder-working talismans or good-luck charms. They are evidence of a world unseen, of the saints in heaven and of the continuity of Christian people of all times — a physical reminder of the Communion of Saints.

The word relic comes from the Latin *reliquiae*, meaning "the remains." Since early Christian times, the word has been used to refer to the bones of the saints or to their possessions.

"Real," or first-class, relics refer to a part of a saint's body, such as a fragment of bone, hair, blood or ash. Other relics, sometimes designated as second-class, are items worn or used by the saint.

"Representative" relics are items that have been placed in contact with the body or grave of a saint by

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the piety of the faithful. Items such as rosaries and medals touched to a saint's relic and prayer cards containing a tiny piece of cloth that has been touched to a relic are often distributed to the faithful by promoters of a cause.

The tradition of representative relics dates back to the fourth century, when objects touched to the bodies of the martyrs were known as *brandea*, and were enclosed in little cases worn about the necks of the faithful. The task of documenting the authenticity of relics is reserved to the Holy See, and those authorized by it to grant the certification.

Saints Alive has one of the largest collections of relics in the United States, with more than 800 documented relics. (Other large collections are found at St. Anthony's Chapel in Pittsburgh, Pa., and at the Shrine of the Holy Relics at Maria Stein, Ohio.) The Saints Alive collection includes such unique relics as a hair of St. Francis of Assisi, a vertebra of St. Joan Delanoue and the cap of St. Ubald of Gubbio.

A checkered history

Veneration of the relics of Jesus, Mary and the saints dates to the beginnings of Christianity. During the Roman persecutions, Christians often had to flee for their lives, but frequently refused to leave their relics behind. In the Acts of St. Polycarp, written about A.D. 156, the saint's remains are described as being "more precious to us than the costliest diamonds, and which we esteem more highly than gold." The relics offered the early Christians hope of victory over pain, persecution and even death itself.

St. Ambrose relates how a blind man was restored to sight when the newly discovered bodies of Sts. Gervase and Protase were taken to the basilica. He added, "You know — nay, you have seen with your own eyes — how many were delivered from demons and a great number were cured of diseases when they touched the garments of the saints; how there was a repetition of the miracles of the early days when, in consequence of the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, abundant grace was showered down upon the earth." True veneration of relics causes the Christian to draw ever closer to Our Lord.

St. Augustine said, "We have not erected an altar to the martyr Stephen; but with the relics of the martyr Stephen, we have erected an altar to God." St. Jerome defended the cult of relics with an appeal to Scripture, ecclesiastical tradition and the miracles worked by God through the relics of the saint.

Beautiful reliquaries and churches were built to house relics. Small relics were placed in bishops' pectoral crosses and rings, and indulgences were offered for the practice of kissing them. Oaths were sworn on relics, and crusades were launched to rescue them from desecration.

Even today, collections of relics in museums and cathedrals throughout Europe draw large crowds. For the past 400 years, in memory of the first Masses held near the burial sites of the martyrs in the catacombs, relics were required to be placed in the *mensa*, a small space cut in the altar stone of the permanent altars of all Catholic churches.

Under the new rules quietly published in mid-1994, this requirement was deleted. It is recommended that relics be placed under, not in, the altar, and that they be large enough to be recognizable as parts of a human body.

The new rules did not affect the variety of practices followed by the Eastern Catholic rites, and the Vatican norms still allow for distribution of relics for use in the Byzantine rite's *antimension*, an altar cloth into which an envelope of relics are sewn.

The history of relics is checkered. At the time of the Crusades, many relics were brought to Europe from the Holy Land. Although some were genuine, many were fakes. During the 11th and 12th centuries, the sale of relics became a booming business. Superstitious practices that evolved around some relics, as well as the counterfeiting and sale of relics, were the basis of some of the complaints against the Church during the Reformation.

Church law deals stringently with these abuses. Relics are forbidden to be sold, and to fake a relic is to incur automatic excommunication. Part of the mission of the Saints Alive apostolate is continuing education and explanation of true veneration of the relics.

The 'true' cross?

Skeptics often remark that if all the purported relics of the True Cross of Christ were put together, one could rebuild Noah's ark. Serafin counters with the research of Rohault de Fleury, who in 1870 attempted to catalog all the relics of the cross, including those that were said to have existed but were lost. According to his figures, all the fragments glued together would not have made up more than a third of an average Roman cross.

Pope John Paul II tells us that the "saints have always been the source and origin of renewal in the most difficult moments in the Church's history" in *Christifideles Laici* ("The Christian Faithful Laity"). The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us: "The religious sense of the Christian people has always found expression in various forms of piety surrounding the Church's sacramental life such as the veneration of relics" (1674) and points out that these practices, when carefully clarified in the light of faith can enrich Christian life.

Serafin's apostolate started almost by accident when he attempted to acquire a relic of one of his favorite saints, St. Alphonsus Liguori. He began researching the subject of relics and developed a great appreciation for the importance of this sacramental. Eventually, he acquired a substantial collection of relics and, realizing that he should share them, began exhibiting them in churches and giving talks about their history, significance and veneration. Now he organizes days of recollection along with other featured speakers in conjunction with the exhibits.

Serafin pointed out that veneration of the relics draws people closer to the saints. At displays of the relics, he said, older Catholics are happy to see these forgotten treasures. Children, who rarely know anything about relics, become excited when they see these physical reminders of the saints, and often bring their parents and friends to the displays.

Serafin, a professional photographer in Los Angeles, spends much of his free time on the apostolate's work. In addition to visiting churches, displaying the relics and giving talks, he has used his photography skills to put together a beautiful color brochure. He has completed the text of a booklet about relics and hopes to publish it this year. He also actively campaigns to rescue relics from places where they are not appreciated, and to convince the owners of these treasures to treat them with more respect.

More than one religious group has asked his help in making their relics presentable for display. As the founder and director of Saints Alive, Serafin is particularly pleased to have been given an apostolic blessing from Pope John Paul II for his work. He also treasures the beautiful letter of encouragement he received in 1995 from Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Ball writes from Houston, Texas. Saints Alive and the International Crusade for Holy Relics can be reached at P.O. Box 0471, Temple City, CA, 91780, or by sending e-mail to him at saintsalive@earthlink.net. The apostolate has a Web site at <http://home.earthlink.net/~saintsalive>.

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