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FROM THE NEW ZEALAND LISTENER ARCHIVE: COLUMNISTS

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Holy moly!

by Noel O'Hare

Catholics' obsession with saintly body parts and personal effects is leading to Internet relic trafficking.

In the flurry of excitement over the general election, you may have missed the arrival of St Thérèse of Lisieux – or, more precisely, what's left of her. St Thérèse, a Carmelite nun, died 108 years ago, but in the past decade or so her body parts have travelled to the US, Canada, Ireland, Iraq, Australia, France, Italy, Germany, Slovenia, Brazil, Russia, Kazakhstan and Argentina. On September 18, she touched down on New Zealand soil and her ornately carved reliquary, a casket about the size of a decent plasma-screen TV, was transported around the country in a Thérèsemobile, a specially fitted Ford Econovan (now up for sale, minus the saintly relics, of course).

The relics tour brought a touch of the medieval to 21st-century New Zealand, and raises questions about how out of touch Catholicism has become in the modern world. With the veneration of body parts and personal effects of the saintly, we're back in the Middle Ages, where relics were thought to have been linked to all kinds of miracles, and many were of dubious origin. The hottest and holiest relics are those associated with Christ and his Virgin Mother. But since both are believed to have ascended bodily into heaven, it didn't leave much scope for counterfeiting. However, Marian relics have included the Virgin's Milk, and it's claimed that Christ's foreskin, "the Holy Prepuce", (and his baby teeth) had been preserved. During the Middle Ages, there were no fewer than 15 foreskins of Jesus being venerated in churches across Europe. In the 17th century, Catholic theologian Leo Allatius speculated that the Holy Foreskin had ascended into heaven with Jesus and might have become the (then recently discovered) rings of Saturn.

The Catholic Church has three classifications for relics. Items associated with Christ's life or the body parts of a saint are rated as first-class relics. A saint's socks, shirt or prayer book are considered second-class relics. Third-class relics are divided into two subcategories: cloth that touched the dead body of a saint and cloth that was brought to the shrine of a saint.

The selling of first- and second-class relics, known as the sin of simony, was banned by Pope Julius II in the 1500s, but it's e-simony that's the worry now – trafficking in relics, authentic or otherwise, in Internet web auctions. American photographer Thomas J Serafin set up the International Crusade for Holy Relics to identify relic traffickers and shut them down. "People will buy a relic at an online auction for \$125, then turn around and sell it to some poor Catholic for \$5000," he has said. Among the relics being offered on eBay, as I write, is a 19th-century reliquary containing relics of the Holy Blood and Holy Cross (current bid for \$US59.99). Even in the 1500s, Erasmus estimated that there were enough relics of the Holy Cross to build a large ship.

Serafin collects relics, which he displays on his website: the tooth of St Joseph of

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Arimathea; bandage from the heart wound of Blessed Padre Pio; flesh of St Anne, mother of the Blessed Virgin Mary; and so on. His collection contains over 1200 relics. Authenticity is not paramount. "Whether a piece of garment is the actual garment is not the point," he says. "It's whether you can maintain your faith through mementoes."

It's not only the body parts of saints that are coveted. In 1969, American urologist John Kingsley Lattimer paid \$38,000 for Napoleon's penis at auction. In the 1980s, Michael Jackson wanted to buy the remains of the Elephant Man for \$1 million. Relics of Elvis Presley are always hot, although you won't get much for the sweat-stained clothing that he made a habit of throwing into the crowds at his concerts. A tooth saved by a dentist who worked on the King is available for around \$100,000. Other pieces of Elvis up for sale include a wart, a toenail and hair clippings. Einstein's brain, kept in a jar for 40 years, was never auctioned, but it's said that his eyeballs, given by the pathologist to Henry Abrams, Einstein's eye doctor, are in a safe deposit box in New York. They are frequently rumoured to be poised for the auction block.

Given the popularity of Hollywood makeovers, surgeons may be looking to supplement their retirement income by quietly preserving stars' excess body parts. What am I bid for Barbra Streisand's bunion? Do I hear \$10,000 for Al Pacino's eyelid?

