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Relics for Sale

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The International Crusade for Holy Relics hopes to shut down online sales of holy relics.

With the popularity of online auctions like eBay, even splinters of the bones of St. John the Baptist and the earthly remains of other saints are up for quick sale on the Internet. These holy relics are venerated as sacred reminders of Christian virtue, and Catholic Canon law forbids their sale. That's why Thomas Serafin has founded the International Crusade for Holy Relics, an organization comprised of Roman Catholics, and members of the Russian Orthodox, Byzantine and Anglican churches. Serafin says that some of the "relics" for sale are actually fakes, but he and other ICHR members want to make sure to "rescue" the real relics by buying them.

Serafin says that prior to the Internet there had been virtually no trafficking of relics for the last 500 years. He attributes the recent increase in the marketing of relics to pure greed and the ease with which a seller can reach millions of potential customers online. Serafin says in addition to violating Canon law, Internet dealers are charging inflated prices for the relics. That's why Serafin and the 200 other members of the ICHR are on a mission.

Holy relics, which can include the fragments of saints' bodies, pieces of clothing or rosaries, serve as mementos of the individual saint. They have been used by the Catholic, Byzantine, Orthodox and Anglican churches throughout history and are used on altars for high mass. Monsignor Francis Weber, Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese Archivist, says fake relics are easy to identify because genuine relics generally possess official seals and documentation. Still, Serafin says counterfeiters have been brazen with their fake relics. One individual recently tried to sell lockets that he claimed contained air breathed by Jesus Christ himself.

Serafin says that the ICHR is most concerned about the traffic in first-class relics, ones that contain the bone, flesh or hair of a saint. When one is located, the ICHR sends eBay and the sellers and buyers a formal letter stating that the practice of selling holy relics is against Canon Law. Then they try to recover the relic by bidding on it. Kevin Pursglove, an eBay spokesperson, says unless an individual can point out that the selling of an item is a violation of law, it's permissible to sell it on eBay. He adds, however, that eBay does not allow human remains to be sold on the site.

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The ICHR restores relic collections that belong to churches and Archdiocesan archives, and collects relics for the organization. Serafin is currently establishing the Relic Foundation, which will purchase relics, preserve them and put them in a traveling exhibit. His first exhibit opens October 24th at the Forest Lawn Museum in Los Angeles and will be the first U.S. exhibition of a large collection of relics since the 1940s.

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LINKS

This story aired on *The Osgood File* on the CBS Radio Network.

WCBS Newsradio 880 in New York City features an archive of transcripts of stories broadcast on *The Osgood File*.

The International Crusade for Holy Relics (ICHR) Web site offers information on the group's history and recent activities.

The Los Angeles Catholic Archdiocese

The Orthodox Christian Information Center has published an article on the proper veneration of holy relics.

The Shrine of the Holy Relics Web site offers information and links to many Catholic churches that contain relic collections.

New Advent has published a historical overview and discussion of Catholic doctrines relating to holy relics.

Fordham University offers a discussion of the Medieval origins of holy relics.

The Forest Lawn Museum hosts an exhibition of ICHR holy relics in October 2001.

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