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Relics for Sale

Thomas Serafin wants to stop the online auction of sacred objects

By Jeff Sypeck

There's a story Thomas Serafin enjoys: During the Middle Ages, a traveling monk hoping to purchase a saint's relic for his monastery found little success and returned home disappointed. Luckily, he soon encountered a merchant who offered to sell him the skull of John the Baptist. The monk was dumbfounded. Hadn't he just seen the skull of St. John in a church during a recent visit to France? "That was the skull of St. John when he was a *child*," explained the merchant. "This is his skull when he was an adult."



To Serafin, a professional photographer and founder of the International Crusade for Holy Relics (ICHR) in Los Angeles, this little parable, one of his favorites, is a reminder that some things never change. Serafin is on a mission to identify sellers of saints' relics and convince them of the error of their ways, or shut them down. But he's not roaming the lonely cloisters or muddy market squares of Europe. Instead, Serafin keeps a suspicious eye on the Internet's highly successful auction houses, which have revived the market for earthly remains of saints — and sparked a conflict between an ancient religious tradition and the free-market ideals of the Internet. And he's aided by some 200 ICHR members — primarily Roman Catholics but also members of the Russian Orthodox, Byzantine Catholic, and Anglican Churches.

Relics challenge our sensibilities in a skeptical age, but the modern world hardly lacks grotesque secular equivalents. Think of screaming fans flailing to catch Elvis Presley's sweat-drenched hankie or Michael Jackson coveting the bones of the Elephant Man. Saints' relics are venerated in a decidedly more solemn tradition as reminders of Christian virtue, and miracles are believed to occur in their presence. First-class relics — pieces of a saint's bone or flesh — are the most sacred. Second-class relics — objects a holy

person wore or owned — are also highly valued. (Items that have touched other relics are known as third-class relics and can be found in many church gift shops.)

Although relic veneration is as old as Christianity, abuse and fraud connected with relics peaked during the Middle Ages, prompting Chaucer to include a memorably despicable character in his *Canterbury Tales* — the corrupt preacher who hawks pigs' bones to gullible peasants. Later, an abiding interest in relics starkly separated Catholics from Protestants, and John Calvin railed venomously against them as evidence of corruption. In the 16th century, dozens of nails were said to be relics of Christ's Crucifixion, more bones of Peter and Paul existed than either saint ever could have packed into his body, and John the Baptist kept rearing his many problematic heads.

Canon law strictly forbids the sale of first-class relics. But even though the law was reaffirmed as recently as 1983, to some Catholics, relics are unpleasant reminders of medieval superstitions and stereotypes. "I don't know anything at all about relics," sniffed one priest and canon lawyer in Washington. "I don't know anyone around here who would, either." In a modern Church grappling with pressing social issues, it's even more rare to find anyone willing to blow the cobwebs of archaism off the concept of simony — the sin of selling spiritual items and religious offices, named for New Testament heretic Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24).

But electronic simony is on the rise. Just ask Serafin, who sells his luridly titled report on the subject, "nEw JUDA\$: Electronic Simony Exposed," on the ICHR Web site (www.ichrusa.com). The report documents the organization's clashes with some of the online auction community's inveterate relic dealers. Like most Internet-based correspondence, the e-mail ranges from righteous and determined to petulant and crude.

But Serafin has a little fun with his adversaries, too. In the documents he releases, he mischievously replaces his foes' names with "SIMON," a cheeky jab with damning connotations. Some of the e-mails reproduced in "nEw JUDA\$" even bear witness to the justifications of relic-selling Religious: One nun — Serafin dubs her "SIMONITA" — accurately points out that the Church allows the sale of relics as long as it's clear that the container is for sale and the relic is a "gift." "It's a fine and Jesuitical quibble," she writes, "but if it's good enough for the Church, it's good enough for me!"

The ICHR has clearly dealt with a few sleazy hucksters. Last September, one of its most unrepentant opponents tried to sell "the air breathed by Jesus" on eBay, an online auction site. Serafin and his members were aghast, but the audacious auction was an obvious attempt to get a few cheap yuks and horrify ICHR's serious-minded crusaders.

Not all online relic sellers resemble some slick Chaucerian caricature. Many are like the devout Catholic woman from China who simply wanted to get rid of a relic, unaware that her religion forbade its sale. "She thought owning it was spooky," Serafin explains.

Others consider themselves religious and confidently assert their own interpretations of right and wrong.

“I am a Catholic, but I do not blindly follow their dogmas,” says Daniel Lopez Gonzalez of Puerto Rico, who recently sold “an old relic of the True Cross” on eBay for \$1,100. Gonzalez says that he buys far more relics for his own personal veneration than he ever sells, arguing there’s little difference between buying a relic from him and obtaining one legitimately from a Religious Order in exchange for a donation. “Whichever way you want to say it,” he says, “a donation or contribution to the Church — any amount of money given in exchange for a relic — is a sale.”

“I have never sold a relic, just the reliquary,” explains another dealer carefully. “The relic is always a gift.” He points out that organizations like the ICHR are not officially sanctioned by the Church, and calls them “a bunch of renegades [who] just want to acquire relics for free.”

Serafin and the ICHR “rescue” many relics by buying them, which isn’t prohibited under canon law. But other options are severely limited. Whether laws pertaining to the sale of human remains apply to tiny chips of bone and flesh is still an open question, and legal remedies for relic theft are nearly nonexistent. In 1998, a Romanian thief who swiped a relic and other religious items from a French church was nabbed in Newark, New Jersey, and charged with a decidedly mundane crime: filing a false customs report. Fraud laws may cover the problem of fake relics — but with deep and abiding faith riding on the answer, what prosecutor or judge would dare confirm or deny the authenticity of saints’ bones, or of a chip of wood supposedly from the manger of the Infant Jesus?

At times, Serafin and the ICHR have persuaded online auction houses to close down some sales of first-class relics. Serafin has kind words for the staff of Amazon Auctions, where, he says, some staffers have even learned to recognize Latin phrases like *ex ossibus*, “from the bones of.” “We don’t have a policy that specifically prohibits the sale of first-class relics,” explains Amazon Auctions spokeswoman Lizzie Allen, “but in the past we have removed relics that were reported to us. Also, human body parts are prohibited, therefore first-class relics will be prohibited in most cases.”

Members of ICHR have also discussed the matter with lawyers for eBay. Although there’s never a guarantee that a relic will be removed, “we do take it on a case-by-case basis,” says eBay spokesman Kevin Pursglove. “If a user brings a complaint to our attention and we can determine that a relic includes human remains, it may be removed.” But as of early February, eBay was still a veritable online charnel house of holy bones — from figures like St. Valentine, widely known outside the Catholic world, to the lesser known St. Alphonsus Liguori.

Ronald Green, director of the Institute for the Study of Applied and Professional Ethics at Dartmouth College, suggests that a viable business can only do so much to assuage the concerns of its religious customers. “At issue here, of course, is basic freedom of commerce,” Green says, “and the rights of individuals to sell items whose sale others religiously object to. Surely we don’t want to cater to every religious objection to the sale of things. Should we forbid the sale of meat because Jains object to the killing of animals? Alcohol because some groups oppose its use?” But Green concedes that online auction houses should be willing to work with offended religious customers if enough complaints suggest a serious problem.

It's unlikely that Catholics will unite in their outrage over relic selling anytime soon. The archdioceses of Washington and Los Angeles did not respond to calls about online relic sales, and it took a call to the Vatican to find a Church official who would discuss the subject. Monsignor Robert Sarno of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, the Vatican office that gathers evidence for canonizations and works to preserve relics, was appalled to learn that simple containers with small relics were selling on eBay for hundreds of dollars. "I'm disappointed that businesses would have such high disregard for people's religion," he said from his office in Rome. "These are sacred objects."

Sarno suggests that the Church's official involvement might only make the problem worse, and he commends the laypeople who are waging an unpopular crusade. But, he concludes with a sigh, "I guess most people don't care."

Anecdotal evidence suggests that an indifferent clergy may be pumping both supply and demand for relics. Michael, an art dealer from Germany who sells relics online, says he knows of a cardinal who regularly browses antiques shops to stock his personal collection.

A relic, Serafin explains, isn't just a dead piece of bone or flesh, but a reminder of the link between heaven and earth. "I think that's something most people can understand."

Indeed, interest in the saints themselves doesn't appear to be waning. In 1999, the relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, a French nun who died in 1897, attracted crowds in the tens of thousands when they were displayed in American churches and shrines. And Pope John Paul II may soon make St. Isidore of Seville, a seventh-century archbishop who compiled an early encyclopedia, the patron saint of the Internet.

Although the actual remains of saints are an unpopular subject, Serafin allows himself an optimistic laugh, remembering what a sympathetic priest recently told him. "If I can hang on around 300 years," he says, with no doubt in his voice, "they'll be back in fashion."

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