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It's Not Mere Bones They Sell

International Crusade Fights E-Trade in Relics

By Charles A. Coulombe

While the internet has changed many things, it also has provided ever more of the same thing -- commerce. Whatever was sold through slower means in the past can be vended quickly on the web. So it is that the sale of holy things, called simony -- a very ancient thing -- has returned with a vengeance.

Among the items for sale in the great cyber-bazaar are relics of the saints -- not just second-class relics, like bits of clothes, but first-class relics as well -- actual bones. But if the Internet has introduced a problem, it has also become the vehicle of a solution, in the International Crusade for the Holy Relics, headed by Glendale resident Tom Serafin.

Organized four years ago as an apostolate to spread the traditional Catholic devotion to relics -- a devotion much neglected in the years since Vatican II -- much of the International Crusade's time is now devoted to watching for, and attempting to stop, the sale of relics on the internet.

Typical of the e-letters Serafin and his colleagues send out to relic salesmen is one, dated January 25, 2001, in which he notes that, "over the past two years," there has been an "increased theft of relics from places of worship," and an "increasing concern over the authenticity of numerous relics being dispensed in the United States bearing a particular signature." Sellers, says the letter, often use "an argument that they are not selling the relic, only the locket," the relic being, "supposedly, a gift. It is bad enough that they are sacrilegiously desecrating a sacrament of the Christian church," the letter continues, "but to add insult to injury they de-emphasize the contents of the locket by openly admitting that to them, 'the relic is

of no value'. Remove the relic and you have in most cases a \$15 locket (called a 'teca')."

The vendor addressed in the letter did not realize what he was selling, and replied: "Thank you for your email. My store does not sell any first class relics, nor will it ever sell them in the future. I merely sell antique religious items. I originally collected antique religious items myself. Through the course of collecting I noticed a total disregard for these old items. Antique shops frowned upon these items and put them in old boxes and shoved them under the counter to collect dust until they are eventually thrown away. Many very genuine people like to collect and respect these old items and literally save them from the dumpsters. I only give them the means of obtaining them. Relics are a very different story. Actual pieces of the saints that were filled with the Holy Spirit should remain within the Church who insures their respect and safety."

But the vendor was still not aware of all that she had. Serafin replied: "You have [relics] in the crosses (two) that I personally saw on your website. I've copied the pages for reference." Once informed, the vendor, who mentioned she was Catholic, replied: "All the relics from my website have been removed. I do not wish to contribute to the reckless buying/selling of relics."

While this particular encounter had a happy ending, many vendors are not so cooperative. Moreover, many relics are sold via auctions on amazon.com or e-bay. "We monitor the net," said Serafin, "and we try to persuade the companies to cancel relic auctions. We've contacted law enforcement agencies, because selling body parts -- which relics count as -- over the net is illegal. But they tell us that the net is like the Wild West, and there is just no way to enforce the laws. So we keep working."

One notorious vendor of relics on the web attempted to counterattack, claiming that "the diocese isn't recognizing" the International Crusade. "I know that they [Serafin's group] can't afford my relics; they don't want to buy them anyway, they want them for free. This is their whole concept, to get them for nothing for their self-indulgence,

not to rescue anything." But despite his threat to go to the attorney general and the cardinal, the dealer eventually gave up because Crusade members continually e-mailed e-bay, who hosted the dealer's auctions, and reminded them of their own rules against allowing the sale of body parts on their site.

Where do the relics for sale come from? "Catholics let them go to relic sellers," said Serafin. Many come from France, Spain, and Italy, from religious houses, from churches -- almost all of this is approved of by some cleric or other. Every relic should be in the hands of Catholics who'll give it due veneration. I have written Rome on several occasions, but never received a reply. I can see if someone *has* to sell the reliquary for monetary reasons -- but then, you should just remove the relic."

But if Serafin's and the International Crusade's efforts have gone unnoticed by the Holy See, other high-ranking Catholics have recognized their often successful work. On March 25, 1999, Dom Duarte Pio, Duke of Braganza and heir to the Portuguese throne, made Serafin a Knight of the Portuguese Order of Our Lady of the Conception of Vila Vicosa. The duke is also a member of the International Crusade. Branches of the International Crusade have sprung up overseas, including one in Fatima. Through their efforts, thousands of relics have been returned to veneration, and thousands more removed from sale.

How did Serafin's work with relics begin? "About ten years ago, I started reading a lot of St. Alphonsus Liguori," said Serafin. "I liked him because there's no gray in his writings -- it's black and white. Anyway, I wanted a relic of him. All the Redemptorists I wrote to said that it was impossible to get one; I soon learned that relics weren't being venerated either! I decided that I should start recovering relics and returning them to veneration. A decade later, I have over 1200. I met a number of like-minded people, and we formed the International Crusade four years ago."

In regard to the sale of other Church goods, like vestments and sacred vessels, Serafin brought up the \$25

million Doheny Collection of sacred vessels and vestments left to the archdiocese, which Roger Cardinal Mahony sold in the mid-80s to various buyers for \$9 million. "One Sunday, after Mass at St. Andrew's in Pasadena," said Serafin, "I walked about two blocks up and found an antique store filled with 17th and 18th century vestments from the collection. I asked the owner what people were buying them for, and he said, 'oh, all sorts of things. Hallowe'en costumes, slip-covers, that sort of thing.' I saw what turned out to be a 19th century French chalice veil draped over the arm of a sofa. It had red wine stains, so I bought it, in case they were from the Precious Blood. But at least there were no relics sold there!"

Serafin and the ICHR continue their work, and are always looking for more associates. Contact them at: International Crusade for Holy Relics-ICHRusa, Chevalier Thomas J. Serafin, V.V., P.O.Box 21301, Los Angeles, CA. 90021; <http://www.ichrusa.com/>; <http://home.earthlink.net/~saintsalive/>

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