

Last week the People of St. Patrick received a relic (a bone chip of St. Patrick) from Fr. Kevin as his parting gift to the parish. Fr. Kevin received this relic in 1979 when he was Senior in High School, on a school trip to Italy. It got me wondering about relics - what they are and what is their Catholic significance. Check out this website for lots more information. <http://www.fisheaters.com/relics.html>

The relic is temporarily in the narthex display case in its own monstrance. Check it out. Tracy

Relics and the Incorruptibles

Exodus 13:19 "And Moses took Joseph's bones with him: because he had adjured the children of Israel, saying: God shall visit you, carry out my bones from hence with you."

4 Kings 13:20-21 "And Eliseus died, and they buried him. And the rovers from Moab came into the land the same year. And some that were burying a man, saw the rovers, and cast the body into the sepulchre of Eliseus. And when it had touched the bones of Eliseus, the man came to life and stood upon his feet."

Matthew 9:20-22 "And behold a woman who was troubled with an issue of blood twelve years, came behind him, and touched the hem of his garment. For she said within herself: If I shall touch only his garment, I shall be healed. But Jesus turning and seeing her, said: Be of good heart, daughter, thy faith hath made thee whole. And the woman was made whole from that hour."

It's funny to me how a culture that is filled with autograph hounds and those who clamor to be around those glittered with "star dust" can consider the Catholic veneration of relics as a joke. A lovely dish is just a lovely dish, but one owned by your great-grandmother is a treasure. Some stranger's pocketwatch is just a timepiece, but one given to you by your grandfather is something you'd literally mourn losing. We pay \$20,000 for a \$200 jacket worn by Jacqueline Kennedy, faint at Beatles concerts, engage in riotous behavior to get our hands on one of Elvis's scarves, but when a relic of St. Catherine is mentioned, people snicker.

As you can see, however, from the verses above, veneration of relics is strictly scriptural, and the earliest Christians saw things in the same way as the ancient Israelites and those in the New Testament accounts. St. Augustine (A.D. 354 - 430) wrote in City of God: If a father's coat or ring, or anything else of that kind, is so much more cherished by his children, as love for one's parents is greater, in no way are the bodies themselves to be despised, which are much more intimately and closely united to us than any garment; for they belong to man's very nature,

St. Jerome (ca. A.D. 340 - 420) clarified Catholic belief in his Ad Riparium: We do not adore, I will not say the relics of the martyrs, but either the sun or the moon or even the angels -- that is to say, with the worship of "latria"...But we honor the martyrs' relics, so that thereby we give honor to Him Whose [witness] they are: we honor the servants, that the honor shown to them may reflect on their Master... Consequently, by honoring the martyrs' relics we do not fall into the error of the Gentiles, who gave the worship of "latria" to dead men.

When considering relics, it is to be remembered that the body and soul are forever one, even when they seem to be separated by death. The body of the saved will be resurrected and glorified (the bodies of the damned will also be resurrected, for that matter). Forever is there a connection between the remains and the soul that has departed from them -- and the great souls whose remains are left to us have a power described well by St. John of Damascus (a.k.a. "John Damascene"), ca. A.D. 676 - 754/87, in his "Exposition of the Orthodox Faith": These [the bodies of the Saints] are made treasuries and pure habitations of God: For I will dwell in them, said God, and walk in them, and I will be their God. The divine Scripture likewise saith that the souls of the just are in God's hand and death cannot lay hold of them. For death is rather the sleep of the saints than their death. For they travailed in this life and shall to the end, and Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints. What then, is more precious than to be in the hand of God? For

God is Life and Light, and those who are in God's hand are in life and light.

Further, that God dwelt even in their bodies in spiritual wise, the Apostle tells us, saying, Know ye not that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit dwelling in you?, and The Lord is that Spirit, and If any one destroy the temple of God, him will God destroy. Surely, then, we must ascribe honour to the living temples of God, the living tabernacles of God. These while they lived stood with confidence before God.

The Master Christ made the remains of the saints to be fountains of salvation to us, pouring forth manifold blessings and abounding in oil of sweet fragrance: and let no one disbelieve this. For if water burst in the desert from the steep and solid rock at God's will and from the jaw-bone of an ass to quench Samson's thirst, is it incredible that fragrant oil should burst forth from the martyrs' remains? By no means, at least to those who know the power of God and the honour which He accords His saints.

In the law every one who toucheth a dead body was considered impure, but these are not dead. For from the time when He that is Himself life and the Author of life was reckoned among the dead, we do not call those dead who have fallen asleep in the hope of the resurrection and in faith on Him. For how could a dead body work miracles? How, therefore, are demons driven off by them, diseases dispelled, sick persons made well, the blind restored to sight, lepers purified, temptations and troubles overcome, and how does every good gift from the Father of lights come down through them to those who pray with sure faith? Also see the excerpt from Homilies on the Epistle to the Romans, by St. John Chrysostom(A.D. 347 - 407).

Classes of Relics

Relics in churches or chapels are usually kept in one of two places: in a cavity ("sepulchre") inside the Altar or in a "reliquary." Reliquaries have taken on a variety of shapes -- boxes, Noah's Arks, caskets, the shape of an arm, leg, head, etc.. -- and some are exquisite specimens of gold and silversmithing.

- 1st Class Relic:** a part of the Saint (bone, hair, etc.) and the instruments of Christ's passion
- 2nd Class Relic:** something owned by the Saint or instruments of torture used against a martyr
- 3rd Class Relic:** something that has been touched to a 1st or 2nd Class Relic. You can make your own 3rd Class relics by touching an object to a 1st or 2nd Class Relic, including the tomb of a Saint.

The Treatment of relics

Canon Law 1190

§1 It is absolutely wrong to sell sacred relics.

§2 Distinguished relics, and others which are held in great veneration by the people, may not validly be in any way alienated nor transferred on a permanent basis, without the permission of the Apostolic See.

While selling relics ("simony") is wrong, it is permissible to buy them if they will be marketed anyway and buying them would save them from desecration. This must be done only if the good that comes from buying the relic outweighs other uses the money spent could be used for -- and this should never be done at auction because bidding would only drive up the price, forcing others who simply want to rescue relics to pay more. This could also increase the likelihood of a market developing in the sale of relics.

Relics may be legitimately obtained from Church sources, i.e., the Vicariate in Rome, the religious Order of the Saint involved, the shrine of the Saint involved, etc. When this is done, a donation is usually expected to cover the cost of the metal container (theca) that contains the relic, but in any case, a profit cannot legitimately be made from the sale of relics by anyone.

Particular Relics

The article lists the locations of some of the major first class relics so that you'll know where to find them if you're blessed to make a pilgrimage to these locations. The sites house the greatest part of the given relic, but tinier pieces may be found throughout the world, especially in the Altars of Catholic churches.

Some of the Saints are marked as "incurrupt"; this refers to the phenomenon whereby some Saints' bodies do not corrupt after death. An example is St. Bernadette Soubirous, who saw Our Lady at Lourdes and who now lies in a glass coffin at her convent in Nevers, France. Though she died in A.D. 1879, she is as lovely as she ever was. Other examples are those of Blessed Imelda Lambertini, who died in ecstasy during her First Communion in A.D. 1333 at age 11 (I am uncertain how accurately the picture at right represents Imelda's state of preservation! This may be a wax figure); of St. Catherine Labouré, who had the vision of Our Lady which led to the minting of the [Miraculous Medal](#) and who died in A.D. 1876; of St. Maria Mazzarello, the first Salesian Sister, who died in A.D. 1881; and of St. John Vianney, Curé d'Ars, who died in A.D. 1859 (see pictures at right). There are many more.

This phenomenon of incorruptibility is often accompanied by a sweet fragrance, known as the "odor of sanctity," which has been described as being unlike any known perfume. Another related phenomenon is the flow of a healing liquid, called "oil of saints," which exudes from the Saint's body or tomb. In the case of some Saints who exude this "oil," the flow of liquid is periodic and not constant (the famous flow of "oil" from the relics of St. Walburga, who is not incorrupt, is periodic like this).

No one knows why some Saints are preserved from corruption while others aren't, and incorruptibility is never seen, in itself and by itself, as a proof of holiness. It is a good indicator of such when the deceased was known for his life of faith and virtue -- but it's a phenomenon that can be mimicked by science, by the effects of natural conditions, and by the demonic.

A final note on the phenomenon of incorruptibility: don't let anyone try to tell you that Pope John XXIII (d. 1963) is one of the "incurruptibles." While his body was found to be well-preserved when he was exhumed in January, 2001, there is no miracle because he was injected with formalin (a mixture of formaldehyde and methyl alcohol) and other preservatives by Dr. Gennaro Goglia -- i.e., [he was embalmed](#). Then he was sprayed with an anti-bacterial agent and placed in a three layer air-tight coffin which was itself put inside a marble sarcophagus -- all in optimal, dry conditions for preservation.

Though the Vatican denies any unnatural preservation in his case, one still hears some Catholics claim that Pope John XXIII is "incurrupt."