

# Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

## The Year of Saint Paul

### Part 7: Saint Paul and Relics<sup>1</sup>

Lisa Miller, a writer for Newsweek magazine, wrote an article last year entitled, “4 Sale: Bones of the Saints.”<sup>2</sup> In the article, she briefly explained the importance of religious relics, writing:

To many Christians, especially Roman Catholics, relics are sacred objects of veneration. They have healing powers; they remind believers of God's promise that in his kingdom, everything broken will become whole again. Some of the relics thought to have the most power are bits of saints' flesh, bone and hair, which have been authenticated by the church. To put it very crassly, these are tiny, antique body parts, usually in pretty little frames. Relics this precious are not intended to be owned by individuals but worshiped by the whole Christian community.<sup>3</sup>

Such veneration of relics can be traced back to the life of St. Paul. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read about how relics of St. Paul were venerated as avenues of healing and exorcism. Luke writes, “So extraordinary were the mighty deeds God accomplished at the hands of Paul that when face cloths or aprons that touched his skin were applied to the sick, their diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them” (Acts 19:11-12). These cloths and aprons that had been touched to the skin of St. Paul would be considered, by the Church's definition, “third class” relics.

There are three classes, or categories, of relics. A “first class” relic would be an object intimately connected to the life of Christ, such as His manger or cross, or the physical remains of a saint, such as a bone, hair, tooth, etc. A “second class” relic is an item worn by a saint, such as a religious habit or vestment, or an object frequently used by a saint, such as a Bible or rosary. A “third class” relic is essentially anything touched to a first class relic. According to these categories, the prayer cloths touched to St. Paul are third class relics. They were cherished as physical signs of Paul's intercession.

As we see from the story recounted in chapter nineteen of Acts, the veneration of relics is neither synonymous with worshipping human beings or objects, nor with ignoring the source of all blessings—God. Rather, the proper veneration of relics reverences the awesome power of God at work in many ways through many people for His glory and the furthering of His Kingdom. In the words of Saint Jerome, “We do not worship, we do not adore, for fear that we should bow down to the creature rather than to the creator, but we venerate the relics of the martyrs in order to better adore Him whose martyrs they are.”<sup>4</sup> The Council of Trent, in the sixteenth century, affirmed Jerome's sentiment, writing, “In the invocation of saints, the veneration of relics, and the sacred use of images, every superstition shall be removed and all filthy lucre abolished.”<sup>5</sup>

As we celebrate the life of St. Paul and remember the many ways that God has worked through him, including through his relics, may our hearts be full of gratitude for God's marvelous power at work in creation!

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<sup>1</sup> In honor of the “Year of Saint Paul,” this is part seven of a ten part series on his life and writings.

<sup>2</sup> The sale of relics is strictly forbidden by the Church as stated in the Code of Canon Law: §1190 §1 – “It is absolutely forbidden to sell sacred relics.”

<sup>3</sup> [http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/lisa\\_miller/2008/02/4\\_sale\\_bones\\_of\\_the\\_saints.html](http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/lisa_miller/2008/02/4_sale_bones_of_the_saints.html)

<sup>4</sup> Saint Jerome, *Ad Riparium*, i, P.L., XXII, 907

<sup>5</sup> Council of Trent, Session XXV