

## Relics—Christian Souvenirs

Wisdom 18:6-9  
Psalm 33  
Heb 11:1-2, 8-12, 17-19  
Luke 12:35-40

It is only natural for us to surround ourselves with reminders of people whom we love. We fill our homes, offices, cars, wallets and purses with images of the people who are important in our lives—the parents, brothers, sisters, children, and friends whom we love. As Catholics, we do the very same thing with the men and women of faith who have gone before us in salvation history and whom we admire and love. Saint John Vianney explained this practice, writing—

When one loves anyone, it is a great happiness to have something of theirs as a souvenir. If we love our Mother, the Blessed Virgin, we should make it both our duty and privilege to have one of her pictures or statues in our home, which from time to time will remind us of her.

-On the furniture of a Christian home, St. John Vianney

Such reminders—Christian souvenirs, so to speak—remind us of the saints and reveal our love and admiration for them. This is why there are statues, icons, and paintings of the saints in Catholic churches. It is also the reason why we find *relics*<sup>1</sup> in many Catholic Church altars.

The practice of imbedding relics in church altars is rooted in the early Church. Christians who were persecuted for their faith were forced to celebrate Communion in secret, and it was held often in the catacombs over the tombs of the martyrs.

-Kerry Roller, an article on relics for our parish

As the early Christians celebrated the Eucharist over the tombs of the martyrs, they were reminded that their freedom to worship came with a cost. Some Christians died in order that we might be able to celebrate the Eucharist. Other Christians lived their lives in such a way as to ensure that we would have examples of faith to follow.

Up until the 1970s, most altars contained relics. Christ the King Catholic Church was built in 1972 and its altar did not contain any relics until recently. Last year, a parishioner, who wishes to remain anonymous, donated some relics to our parish so that we could have relics in our altar.

In a beautiful copper niche carefully carved into the granite altar and facing the icon, there are three relics from the Holy Family: a piece of the crib of Christ, a piece of cloth from the Blessed Virgin's cloak, and a piece of St. Joseph's staff. They are housed inside a very small reliquary with a glass front, so it is easy to see the tiny fragments and their aged Latin descriptions. The entire reliquary, which is a small, locket-like case that contains the relics, is about the size of a quarter. Even though the relics are tiny, they are overwhelmingly impressive and awe-inspiring.

-Kerry Roller, an article on relics for our parish

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<sup>1</sup> A religious relic is an object associated with either Christ or one of the saints.

We are truly blessed to have these amazing relics in our altar! I doubt that there are many, if any, Catholic Church altars in the United States with these relics. And I can say with even greater certainty that there is no Catholic Church in the U.S. that has them *displayed* as beautifully as we do. Usually, relics are imbedded into the top of the altar. In this way, the relics cannot be seen. However, three men from our parish worked really hard to ensure that our relics would not only have a new home in our altar, but would be able to be seen.

Joe Heiss, Tony Toth, and Sam Meyers worked for weeks determining how to embed the relics into our altar in a permanent and beautiful way. They succeeded and far surpassed my expectations! After Mass, I invite all of you to come into the sanctuary and view their beautiful craftsmanship and the beautiful relics!

I realize that the main two questions most of you have right now are—1) why are the relics imbedded on the *backside* of the altar, and 2) how do we know the relics are authentic? The first question is the easiest to answer—the altar is an extremely important focal point in a sanctuary. By placing the relics where we did, it maintains the integrity of the altar and does not make the relics appear more important than the altar where we are celebrating the Eucharist.

How do we know that the relics are authentic and, therefore, worthy of veneration? Once again, I want to share with you some of the wonderful writing that Kerry Roller did for our parish regarding the new relics. She writes—

When relics are authenticated by the Catholic Church, they are secured within the reliquary using a wax seal that has a red thread running through it. The seal ensures that the relics have not been tampered with after being authenticated. Any attempt to remove the thread and access the relics will destroy the seal. During the process of fitting the relics into their new home in the altar at Christ the King, the back of the reliquary was removed and the seal was found to be intact. According to the accompanying paperwork, the relics were authenticated on June 16, 1977 by Nicolaus Ferrante,<sup>2</sup> Postulator General for the Redemptorist Order. Within the Catholic Church, a postulator's job is to promote the cause of a holy person to be beatified or canonized as a saint. The postulator who authenticates the relics uses his signet ring to imprint the coat of arms of his religious order into the wax. Since Ferrante was a member of the Redemptorist Order, the seal on our relics clearly shows the Redemptorist coat of arms imprinted in the wax, further substantiating the authenticity.

The authenticity of some relics can also be supported by a carefully documented chain of custody, but that is very rare. As is the case with many privately held relics, the relics donated to Christ the King can only be traced back for a couple of generations.

Ultimately, there is no way to *perfectly* authenticate any relic. But, in reality, the authenticity of particular relics is not as important as how the relics remind us of the example of the saints and increase our love and faith in Jesus Christ.

Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.

-Hebrews 11:1

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<sup>2</sup> During the time of Ferrante, there were a number of fake relics that were produced. Here is an excerpt from a website regarding these fakes-- From the fascinating [For All the Saints](#) website: *Many of these dubious relics originally came with forged authenticating documents, which were actually altered Xerox photocopies of documents issued by the office of Nicolaus Ferrante, Postulator General of the Redemptorists.... Our ministry has examined hundreds of Ferrante relics over the last few years and we have found very few confirmed fake relics. The majority of those were produced/sold by one single dealer in Argentina who specialized in nothing but fakes. His "Ferrantes" in no way resembled any genuine Ferrantes and could not be mistaken for them. Father Ferrante had unprecedented access to the relics of the Vicariate of Rome and was a prodigious producer of relics. We feel the rumors of fake Ferrante relics has been blown way out of proportion to actuality.*