

Relics

Overview

When you hear the word relics – one thinks of something old. Within the Catholic Church it is much more than this.

What is a Relic?

The word come from the Latin word *reliquiae* – meaning remains. In the strictest sense it refers to the material remains of canonized or beatified saints. In a wider sense it also refers to the things that may have been used during their lives – which could include objects which have touched their remains.



In the early church relics were developed about the same time that veneration of saints and martyrs became popular. These early theologians were careful to avoid worship of the relics and insisted on veneration. During the 16th century turmoil reformers opposed the veneration of relics but the Council of Trent (1545-63) reaffirmed this as a worthy practice. Vatican II also accepted the place of relics in the mysteries of the church.

The Catholic Catechism does not specifically mention relics but I believe they would fall under the subject of Sacramentals. See paragraphs 1667-1673. The code of Canon Law (1917) addresses relics and further distinguishes major relics as being a whole body, head, arm, hand, heart, tongue or any part of the body that suffered martyrdom.

When I was in Istanbul, Turkey some years ago I saw the reputed forearm of Saint John the Baptist in the room *Holy of Hollies* in a

museum. There are some special Saints such as Bernadette whose incorrupt (never decayed) body lies in the convent where she died in 1879. The tongue of Saint Anthony and the heart of Saint Vincent de Paul are other examples.

Categories of Relics

A **First Class Relic** is actually a part or piece of a canonized saint. Typically these are bone fragments or the True Cross and we find them typically imbedded in the altar in many Catholic Churches. In this regard it reminds us of the early Christians who were forced to conceal their worship and celebrated the Eucharist on the altars of martyred saints in the catacombs.

With regard to the True Cross these relics were discovered by Saint Helen during the 4th century in her quest to find holy objects of Jesus.

A **Second Class Relic** is one of those objects used or touched by a saint discussed above. They could include clothing, books or any or the ordinary items of their day.

A **Third Class Relic** is an object that has been brought into contact with a first class relic. In the picture shown here of Saint Padre Pio I scanned a holy card with his picture – who was a contemporary saint suffering with the stigmata of wounds of Jesus. Until his death the 5 wounds of the Passion of Jesus appeared on his body – which can be seen in the picture. . The black dot you see in the bottom of the picture is a drop of his blood which was touched to his blood covered glove.

What does it mean to Catholics?

Relics - like any sacramental are not magic - and we should accept them as special graces from God. They are manifestations of special miracles for the faithful.