

Relics

What is the place of relics in a contemporary Australian context? What are we actually doing when we speak of venerating the relics of a saint? Even more so, is it possible to reconcile the practice of venerating material objects that have merely come into contact with the tomb or reliquary of a saint or martyr?

I suspect that many of us have not really thought all that much about relics, given that Australia is almost completely bereft of the shrines and basilicas that dot the European landscape. Perhaps some of us have experienced in our travels the arm of this saint, the tongue of another, the heart of a third, and not really been sure what to make of it. Perhaps you have been in a situation where you have felt a slight unease in the midst of a jubilant crowd of people at a shrine or in the presence of a relic. Or simply attempted to pray in the presence of a saint, such as at the tomb of St Francis in Assisi, only to be swamped by busloads of gawking tourists, where even the praying pilgrim becomes part of the tourist's photographic experience. On the other hand, we have perhaps heard the stories of lava flows being diverted by the presence of a relic [eg. Mt Etna in Sicily]...

What is the boundary between true belief and superstition? What is the correct response for a Catholic? How should we understand the place of relics, and what might we make of the visit of the relics of St Therese during 2002?

Let us begin with a simple definition of a relic: *"Relics are the material remains of a saint or holy person after their death, as well as objects sanctified by contact with their body."*

Of course in the present (religious) context, this is how we undoubtedly understand what a relic is. Yet, relics can also be quite secular. Perhaps you have been on pilgrimage to the Bradman Museum in Bowral and stood in silent awe before numerous items that belonged to the great man, or wandered across the Oval, where his mortal remains have been recently scattered. Maybe you have an autograph or some item that belonged to some famous composer, philosopher or movie star. Each of these provide some kind of link to the (dead) person; somehow, the person is made present through contact with these material items. The value that I derive from a family heirloom lies in my memories and feelings for the now deceased person who left me the item. Although religious relics are usually associated with Catholics (in the main), even an evangelical Christian will treasure a letter written by Luther or Calvin, as a reminder of a holy person.

There are two basic kinds of relics: Real (or first-class) relics include the skin and bones, clothing, instruments used for the imprisonment or passion of a martyr; representative (second-class) relics are objects placed in contact with the saint's body, grave or reliquary.

A survey of the history of relics

The veneration of the dead has been a common practice amongst almost all peoples in human history. Anthropologists indicate that every grave is a clear sign of the presence of humans, for only humans bury their dead.

Jewish fear of contamination by idolatrous practices suppressed the desire to have human representations or any kind of material attachments; thus apart from a few isolated instances (that we shall touch on later), there is little justification given in the Old Testament for the cult of relics. Despite this abhorrence for relics, the early Church recognised the miraculous powers associated with objects belonging to the Apostles.

During the Roman persecutions, the veneration of the relics of martyrs spread quickly, although it was not accompanied by a liturgy until the 3rd century. The remains of St Polycarp (d. 156/7) were honoured in consideration of his holiness as "a disciple and imitator of Christ." The faithful gathered each year on the anniversary of his martyrdom, to celebrate his memory at his grave, although there is no record of the celebration of the Eucharist at the tombs of martyrs before the early 4th century. After the peace of Constantine, churches were built over the graves of the martyrs, beginning with the basilica of St Peter on Vatican hill.

In the course of the 4th and 5th centuries, the veneration of the relics of martyrs grew as a liturgical cult, receiving theological justification through recourse to the doctrine of the mystical body of Christ. The development was not without its critics, claiming that the cult of relics was nothing more than idolatrous adoration. Defenders of the cult, including St Jerome, St Augustine and St Ambrose in the West, and Saints Basil and John Chrysostom in the East, responded to the criticism by referring to the existing distinction between the cult of *latría* (worship) – reserved for God alone – and of *douλία* (veneration). The evident holiness of the martyrs and other saints means that their bodies were sanctified on earth. Not just their ‘souls’ became holy: as people (body and soul) they are sanctified. The excellence of the lives that they lived renders their relics precious. Furthermore, their relics are a reminder that these saints should serve as an example and model for each of us. Glory is to be given to God alone, but since the miracles that God chooses to manifest through the instrumentality of the relics gives witness to the power of God, it is right to venerate the relics. Over the course of the next few centuries, various abuses begin to occur: tombs are raided and bodies and bones are dismembered so that relics could be harvested and dispersed.

At the Council of Nicea II (AD 787) there were those who sought such a pure religion that they were totally against any representation of Christ or the saints in images, and they also rejected relics. St John Damascene (d. 749) responded to the crisis of Iconoclasm by teaching that God gave the relics of the saints to the Church as a means of salvation and it was necessary to honour them as a representation of the saints; thus, the honour due to relics was an extension of the honour due to God. Homage or respect is not really paid to an inanimate object, but to the holy person, and indeed the veneration of a holy person, is itself honour paid to God. However, in the East, the cult of icons tended to become more important than that of relics, and relics faded into the background.

In the West, the cult of relics continued to grow. In newly ‘converted’ lands, church leaders attempted to substitute pagan rituals and idolatry with the cult of relics. New churches and monasteries coveted the relics of the early martyrs to strengthen the faith and stability of their foundations. Whole bodies and other relics were often transferred with little thought to record keeping, with the result that there was often great confusion and no clear possibility of identifying any of the bones with any certainty. Commerce in relics reached a new height during the crusades: as cities were sacked, relics were sent back to enrich the churches of Europe. To counter this, the Council of Lyons (1274) prohibited the veneration of new relics without the approbation of the pope.

In the late medieval period, the bodies of ‘saints’ were no longer buried, but were exposed to be seen and touched; they were placed into sumptuous reliquaries and placed above or behind the altar. New altars were always dedicated with relics in them. Pilgrimages to the shrines of famous saints became widespread, most notably that of St Jacques in Santiago de Compostela, in Spain. Processions of relics through city streets gave rise to new festivals and feasts, which further enhance the cult of saints and relics.

St. Thomas Aquinas, emphasises the vivid sense of the human element involved (in the cult of relics). Although, in themselves, the relics have no sanctifying power, they are sensible signs of the saints who now have a direct relationship with God.

Summa Theologica, (3a, 25.6) Whether any kind of worship is due to the relics of the saints? ***I answer that***, As Augustine says (De Civ. Dei i, 13): “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.” It is clear from this that he who has a certain affection for anyone, venerates whatever of his is left after his death, not only his body and the parts thereof, but even external things, such as his clothes, and such like. Now it is manifest that we should show honour to the saints of God, as being members of Christ, the children and friends of God, and our intercessors. Wherefore in memory of them we ought to honour any relics of theirs in a fitting manner: principally their bodies, which were temples, and organs of the Holy Spirit dwelling and operating in them, and are destined to be likened to the body of Christ by the glory of the Resurrection. Hence God Himself fittingly honours such relics by working miracles at their presence.

To summarise St Thomas: he begins by making a comparison (from Augustine) with secular relics; if we have affection for anyone, naturally we venerate their bodies and things associated with them.

In answer to the Question: why should we honour the saints, Thomas makes four points:

1. They are members of Christ;
2. They are children of God;
3. They are friends of God;
4. They are our intercessors.

Since their bodies were temples of the holy Spirit, it is right to honour them, for they are destined to be like the body of Christ in the glory of the resurrection. Finally, even God honours relics, which is shown by the fact he works miracles through them.

The teaching of the Church on relics and Sacred Images

The Council of Nicaea II (787) – Session VII

“The more frequently [sacred images] are seen in representational art, the more are those who see them drawn to remember and long for those who serve as models, and to pay these images the tribute of salutation and respectful veneration. Certainly this is not the full adoration in accordance with our faith, which is properly paid only to the divine nature, but it resembles that given to the figure of the honoured and life-giving cross, and also to the holy books of the gospels and to other sacred cult objects. ... Indeed, the honour paid to an image traverses it, reaching the model; and he who venerates the image, venerates the person represented in that image.”

Norman Tanner (eT) *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, volume 1. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 136*.

The council also decreed that all venerable churches should have the relics of the holy martyrs installed if they don't already (accompanied by the usual prayers). *Ibid*, 145*

Fourth Lateran Council (1215) – Canon 62

Addresses various abuses of relics, false relics and exaggerations: Ancient relics are not to be sold; newly discovered relics must be approved by the authority of the Roman Pontiff. *Ibid*, 263*-264*

Council of Trent (Session 25: 3-4 Dec 1563)

This decree establishes the three principle reasons justifying the cult of relics of the saints. The bodies of the saints are:

- temples of the holy Spirit;
- members of the body of Christ; and
- are destined for a final resurrection.

Tanner, *ibid*, (vol. 2) p774*-776*.

Second Vatican Council

While the council does not treat directly of the question of the place of relics, apart from reasserting, in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (4 Dec 1963), the traditional place of honour given to the saints and their relics in the Church: “It is traditional to honour the saints in the Church and to hold their authentic relics and pictures in veneration. The feasts of the saints proclaim what are in fact the wonders of Christ in those who serve him, and they provide for believers models that can properly be imitated.” No. 111, [Tanner, *ibid*, p839*]

The main teaching of the Council on relics is provided in the deepening of the Cult of Saints, treated in *Lumen gentium*, in the context of the eschatological nature of the pilgrim church and her union with the Church of heaven. The saints intercede for us in virtue of the mysterious communion between the pilgrim church on earth and the Church triumphant, in heaven. The saints are striking examples for us, of conformity to the mystery of Christ and are powerful examples and incentives for holiness. When the church celebrates the cult of the saints, the primary celebration is the triumph of the mystery of Christ in their lives.

48. The Church, to which we are all called in Christ Jesus, and in which we acquire sanctity through the grace of God, will attain its full perfection only in the glory of heaven, when there will come the time of the restoration of all things. At that time the human race as well as the entire world, which is intimately related to man and attains to its end through him, will be perfectly re-established in Christ.

... Already the final age of the world has come upon us and the renovation of the world is irrevocably decreed and is already anticipated in some kind of a real way; for the Church already on this earth is signed with a sanctity which is real although imperfect. However, until there shall be new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells, the pilgrim Church in her sacraments and institutions, which pertain to this present time, has the appearance of this world which is passing and she herself dwells among creatures who groan and travail in pain until now and await the revelation of the children of God.

49. Until the Lord shall come in His majesty, and all the angels with Him and death being destroyed, all things are subject to Him, some of His disciples are exiles on earth, some having died are purified, and others are in glory beholding "clearly God Himself triune and one, as He is"; but all in various ways and degrees are in communion in the same charity of God and neighbour and all sing the same hymn of glory to our God. ... Therefore the union of the wayfarers with the brethren who have gone to sleep in the peace of Christ is not in the least weakened or interrupted, but on the contrary, according to the perpetual faith of the Church, is strengthened by communication of spiritual goods. For by reason of the fact that those in heaven are more closely united with Christ, they establish the whole Church more firmly in holiness, lend nobility to the worship which the Church offers to God here on earth and in many ways contribute to its greater edification. For after they have been received into their heavenly home and are present to the Lord, through Him and with Him and in Him they do not cease to intercede with the Father for us, showing forth the merits which they won on earth through the one Mediator between God and man, serving God in all things and filling up in their flesh those things which are lacking of the sufferings of Christ for His Body which is the Church. (*Lumen gentium*, 48-49)

The place of relics

The relics of saints are only very poor and fragile signs of what their bodies used to be. In the presence of relics, we can more easily evoke their human condition: it is with their bodies that the saints acted, thought, prayed, worked, and suffered.

From these poor signs, his power to save is revealed and displayed. To be convinced of this, we have only to read the volumes recounting the favours and cures obtained in contact with Therese's relics, as well as the abundant mail that arrives in Lisieux every day.

What is more, the cult of the relics of the saints signifies that we are looking forward to the Resurrection. God, who has given us a body made from so little, is powerful enough to fashion for us a glorified body. Our mortal remains are like a deposit for our glorified body. Relics are the sign of this dual truth. It is for this reason that in our churches they are sealed in the altar stone, where the real presence of the Resurrected Christ is made manifest in each Eucharist, and where we anticipate in faith the mystery of our own resurrection.

But do we really need relics?

If we are to understand the veneration of relics, and put to rest any unease associated with their veneration we need to get behind the practice of the Church in its Councils and liturgy to more profound reasons. Ultimately the use of relics can be understood only in a double context. Relics have had divine approbation and they reflect the incarnational nature of our Christian religion. The issue of God's approval emerges from the fact that there have been at all times miracles and especially healings associated with the relics of the saints. Already in the New Testament we find that handkerchiefs and other garments, which had touched the flesh of St. Paul at Ephesus, cured diseases (see *Acts* 19:12). In the Old Testament miracles had been worked through the mantle of Elijah and the bones of Elisha (see *2 Kings* 2:14; 13:21).

Granted then that God has been pleased in this way to work wonders in biblical times and up to the present, we might still ask, why? Here we touch the deepest reality of our religion. God respects the human nature that he created: we are both spiritual and material. Even God's salvation of humanity from sin was by way of Incarnation: God became man in Jesus Christ. In the Christian religion we move from what is visible to what is invisible. Jesus tells us that if we see and know him, we also see and know the Father (see *John* 14:6-9). God comes to us through signs

and symbols: the sacraments are tangible and visible – such as water, bread, wine, oil, imposition of hands – but through them we come into divine life. God comes to us in our very bodyliness.

Relics are one way in which God helps us in our bodily humanity to rise to spiritual realities. Through relics we can feel close to a holy person. We have a deeper awareness of their life and mission, of their presence in the Communion of Saints. Religion can never be purely intellectual; it must rather touch us at different levels of our being. Relics are clearly not as important as the sacraments. And like the sacraments, relics can be abused. We cannot stop at the holy relics of the saints, but we must reach further into God's plans.

Welcoming the relics of Thérèse

The correct veneration of relics looks beyond what is visible and material to God's love at work in the saint, to the inspiration of the saint's life and to God's good pleasure in confirming the virtue of the saint by signs and cures.

It will only be if we allow Thérèse to lead us to Jesus and to Mary that the visit of her relics will be of any value to ourselves. But if we can use the occasion to embrace her spiritual doctrine, then indeed we can expect great miracles of grace and healing as her sacred reliquary travels around our country. Relics in the end must point beyond themselves to God, and any veneration or honour given to them is honour to God who has crowned the saints with glory, and who wishes to bless us through our love for, and appreciation of, his special friends.

In summary

Relics are a way of making some contact with another. A picture or personal belongings of a parent is a way of remembering them. And such recall is not just a thought; it has an element of feelings. Something comes over us at times when we look at such a picture or memento. The relics of the saints in some way make them closer. It is a kind of bridge between them and us: we venerate the saints, who in turn intercede for us.

Of course relics might be reduced to superstition and magic. But the surest protection against such abuse is prayer: praising or thanking God for the saints; asking their intercession; expressing our sinfulness or need. The other important thought about relics is surely the imitation of the saints. God is most pleased when we try to love others as the saints did, when we worship God with something of the love shown by his holy ones.

Relics are an imperfect but valuable way of remembering and of making contact with the unseen world. But through them we can share our hopes and desires with those in glory. The ultimate meaning of relics is to be sought in the beautiful dogma of the **Communion of Saints**: we are united in the goodness and love of all God's gifts and all his holy people.

To complement the above, this is a summary of what Fr Greg said in the final session.

Relics are sacramentals. Sacramentals are material things, through which we can be moved to love God. All of creation can point us to the holy, to Jesus. All of creation is there for me; in principle, it is something that can bring me closer to the love of Jesus Christ.

Everything has a certain place (nature, people, the Word of God, sacraments, ...) The saints show us a different (and often very new) aspect of Jesus Christ – they reveal to us, through their experience and physicality, something about God (love, beauty, truth...)

If an image (a holy card or picture) can bring us into the presence of a saint, how much more power do their bodies (or something that has been touched to their relics) have?

Even the very town of Assisi is sacramental - it speaks to us of St Francis.

Relics are symbolic [ie, sacramental] of what the saint lived, believed, and loved.

Just because there is a danger of misuse, this doesn't mean we can't use it (eg, scripture is misused; sacraments are misused; creation is abused)

People who go and spend time in the presence of the relics of St Therese, will meet her, get to know her, learn to love her, and thereby, learn to love Jesus Christ more.

The Holy Father, John Paul II has proposed Therese as a model for us for the twenty-first century.

Her relics are sacramental of the person Therese; she in turn is sacramental of God.

We need to have an openness to the relics, to what God might want to achieve through them.