

RELICS: Memories and Contact

Fr Christopher O'Donnell O.Carm

There are relics and relics. Some are quite secular. We visit museums and see articles like the spectacles, the pen, the pipe or the chair of some writer, artist, patriot or scoundrel. We feel that seeing such belongings helps us to know the person better.

Memories and Feelings

One can go one better than a museum, and actually possess something belonging to a famous person. Hardly a week goes by without news about yet another auction of things which belonged to sporting or musical icons. Why do people pay really big money for such things: a Beetle guitar or shoes belonging to an operatic singer? Apart from owning something that is unique, the artefact is a reminder of the person.

When people suffer a burglary what pains them most is usually not the loss of something that, though costly, can be replaced, but the loss of items, often of little monetary worth, which are of enormous sentimental value. These can never be replaced: no money can buy Granny's First Communion medal or her wedding ring; Uncle Joe's watch may not have ticked for fifty years, but its theft can be deeply felt.

These secular relics are a link with somebody who is not present, often somebody dead. Their value lies in my memory and my feeling for the person. If I have no regard for a famous person or distant relative, I will not treasure his bicycle clips or her handbag.

Religious Relics

We find relics in all religions. They are reminders of holy people. Catholics and Eastern Christians are generally much more into relics than Protestants. But even Evangelical Christians will treasure in some way John Calvin's hat or a letter written by Martin Luther.

I can remember in the years before Vatican II special blessings with relics at the time of a parish mission, the daily blessing with the relic of St. Paul of the Cross at the Passionist Church of Mount Argus in Dublin. I can recall as a child being brought to various churches and being shown relics often on side altars. It was hard to know what to do. If the relic were kissable, then this would be in order. Failing that one could touch the glass surrounding it, or say a Hail Mary before passing on. My memory of relics in the years before the Council was that they were very important, that they were in some sense *good for you*, and they were given some token of respect.

After the Council interest in relics waned somewhat. But they were not eliminated in the reforms that followed. Indeed the new rite for the consecration of altars notes the important place of relics, especially those of the martyrs. The Eucharist is still celebrated on an altar containing relics of the saints, which recalls the most primitive celebrations of the feast of the saints, originally celebrated at their tombs.

Relics are of several kinds. So-called **first class** relics are the body or fragments of the body of a saint. **Second class** relics are of two kinds: they may be something worn or used by the saint; they may be objects, often a piece of cloth that has touched a first-class relic.

Veneration

A big issue in the 8th century and in the 16th at the Reformation was how images and relics were to be venerated. Only God can be adored. Other holy persons or things are given some honour because they belong to God. But God is sometimes pleased to bless his people through the images or relics of his holy ones. In scriptural times people were healed by the very shadow of Peter (cf. Acts 5:15) or the handkerchief or apron of St. Paul (cf. Acts 19:12).

Contact

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 can be reduced to some kind of magic. 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 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 holy people.

RELICS

by Fr. Raymond Zambelli

Rector of the Basilica of St. Therese of Lisieux and Coordinator of the pilgrimage of St. Therese's relics throughout the world

When Sister Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face died, she was buried in the town cemetery on October 4, 1897. She was even the first sister of the community to be buried in the plot bought by the Carmel after new laws were passed forbidding future burials within the monastery enclosure. With the passage of time and in light of the events since her death, we can say that this law was providential, because it allowed hundreds of thousands of pilgrims to come to her grave for twenty-five years. They would never have been able to do this if she had been buried within her convent. It was only in 1923, for her Beatification, that her mortal remains were brought back to the chapel of Carmel where they still are today. So when we speak of the relics of Thérèse, we have to go back to the origin of their veneration in the town cemetery. That is where everything began, even to the extent that I always say that the cradle of the pilgrimages in Lisieux was Thérèse's tomb. But wasn't it the same in Rome, in Compostela, and in so many other shrines of saints around the world?

Anthropologists have taught us that every grave is an indubitable sign of the presence of humans, for only humans bury their dead. The Church respects the custom of going to the grave to ponder and pray in the presence of the mortal remains of those whom we have known and loved. Each year, when millions of men and women of every culture and social background go to cemeteries, they ponder and pray before the reliqua, of the remains, of their loved ones. Of course we know that we do not really meet our loved ones there, but we are not pure spirits, and we need signs.

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.

Now these tenuous and often absurd signs are sometimes what God wants to use to manifest his Presence and show his Power and his Glory. For it is He who is acting through these signs. Here we are in another logic than that of the world. Saint Paul reminds the Corinthians of this when he says, "God chose those whom the world considers absurd to shame the wise; he singled out the weak of this world to shame the strong," (1 Cor 1, 27). But the same Apostle says, "For the folly of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1, 25).

To come back to the specific case of Thérèse, it is a fact that in the presence of and in contact with her poor mortal remains - like the debris of an unpetalled rose - God, who received so many signs of love from her through her humanity, is pleased in return to manifest his love through the remains of her humanity.

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. Who knows how many people keep in their wallet or in their personal effects a prayer card with the words "cloth touched to the relics of Saint Therese"? This really is another logic than that of the world, as is evidenced in Jesus' words, "I offer you praise, Father, because what you have hidden from the learned and clever you have revealed to the merest children" (Lk 10, 21).

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.

If there have been abuses in past centuries regarding the use and authenticity of relics, if the way of thinking for some of us is different from that of our ancestors, nevertheless the cult of relics still has its value in the Church. Celebrations around the meaning of relics still draw crowds, as we see in Lisieux and elsewhere.

At the end of this short reflection, allow me to mention someone whom I am very fond of: Blaise Pascal. This man, who was a brilliant thinker in so many areas and who was also an authentic mystic, has left us his thoughts on the subject of relics, which he venerated with infinite respect. He himself was overwhelmed when he witnessed the miraculous cure of his niece, who suffered from a lacrimal fistula and was instantly cured when she touched a relic of the Crown of Thorns. Moreover, this miracle was authenticated by the Church of

Paris. For that reason he wrote, "As God has made no family more happy, may he also see that none may be found more grateful." (*Pensées*, 922)

In a passage from his letters to the Roannez family, we find these words after he himself had received a relic as a gift: "it is a truth that the Holy Spirit rests invisibly in the relics of those who died in God's grace, until the day when he will visibly appear in the Resurrection, and that is what makes the relics of saints so worthy of veneration. For God never abandons his own, not even in the tomb, where their bodies, though dead in the eyes of men, are still alive before God, since sin no longer dwells in them, at least in its roots, for the fruits of sin are not there any longer. And this unfortunate root which is inseparable from the body in life means that it is not permissible to honour them during their lifetime, since their bodies are more worthy of being despised. It is for this reason that death is necessary, to mortify completely this unfortunate root, and this is what makes death desirable. But it serves me nothing to tell you what you know already; it would be better to say this to those of whom you speak, but they would not listen..." (Sept 1656)

In conclusion, as for our attitude toward all these signs, it seems to me that I see it admirably described by Pascal in this fragment of the *Pensées* (945): "We must combine the outward and the inward to obtain anything from God; in other words we must go down on our knees, pray with our lips, etc., so that the proud man who would not submit to God must now submit to his creature. If we expect help from this outward part we are being superstitious; if we refuse to combine it with the inward we are being arrogant."

Veneration of Relics

Adapted from an article by Fr Christopher O'Donnell O.Carm

The visit to Australia of the relics of St. Thérèse in the year 2002 can be seen as a pilgrimage in reverse. Normally people travel on pilgrimage to where a holy person is venerated. In the case of Thérèse we can see that in a sense she is coming to Australia, just as her relics have visited over a dozen countries since their first journey throughout France in 1994. The enthusiastic reception of the reliquary in so many countries is perhaps in marked contrast with the saint's own prediction her body would decay like any other. The three exhumations that took place revealed only bones, though signs and extraordinary manifestations were not, however, absent. The Carmelite habit in which she was buried was found not to have completely disintegrated at the first exhumation and a palm buried with her was in a state of perfect preservation. At the second exhumation the new habit was decayed, but a white silk ribbon was intact which bore the words: "I intend to spend my heaven doing good on earth. After my death, I shall make a shower of roses rain down."

Her burial was quite providential. It had long been customary for Carmelites to have a cemetery in their grounds. But a civil law had been passed shortly before Thérèse's death stipulating interment only in public graveyards. Thérèse's maternal uncle, Isidore Guerin, had bought a plot for the Carmelites, and soon people in their thousands were visiting her grave. Cures and spiritual favours began to be reported there very soon after her death. Her grave and these wonders certainly contributed substantially to her veneration, and hastened her beatification. It was part of what Pius XI would call, "the storm of glory".

Thérèse reaches beyond the grave

There are indications that Thérèse had some premonition about her future destiny, which is summed up in her well-known promise to spend her heaven doing good on earth. On at least two occasions during her final illness she indicated that things belonging to her, her nail-clippings and rose petals that she had loosened might be treasured later. We only have the account of her sister Pauline, Mother Agnes. We do not know how she said these things: did she smile? How seriously have we to take Agnes' comment that she spoke gravely? It is clear anyway that her sense of being able to send a shower of roses after her death was amply confirmed.

The visit of the saint's relics to Australia can be seen as a great grace. But it will have to be placed in an appropriate context. There is always the danger of superstition or magic where relics are involved. We can speak of these errors when power is ascribed to something beyond its natural capacities, such as to some words of a formula, to a rabbit's foot or a horseshoe. Relics have no virtue in themselves; their chequered history in the Church, however, shows both their dangers and their beauty.

Church teaching on relics

Three times in ecumenical councils there have had to be solemn pronouncements on the subject—and for quite different reasons. 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. Foremost to the defence of icons and relics had been St. John Damascene (d. ca. 749): and the Church, defending the legitimacy of icons and relics, drew on his teaching: 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. Four hundred years later there was a different problem. Now it was abuse of relics, false relics and exaggerations. At the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) the Church condemned such abuses, but defended the good use of relics. A similar time elapsed when at the Reformation the idea of relics was again attacked. This time the Council of Trent in 1563 defended the veneration of relics.

The Catholic position was therefore spelled out over a period of some eight hundred years, even though the use of relics goes back almost to the time of the Apostles. St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) following St. Augustine pointed out that it was natural that people should treasure what is associated with the dead, like a ring or the garment of a parent. He then developed four reasons already outlined in John Damascene which would later be taken up by Trent: the saints are members of Christ, they are children and friends of God and they are our intercessors. Therefore we want to draw close to them through their relics.

The place of relics

But do we really need relics, parts of the body of a saint such as bone, a hair (called a first class relic) or cloth that has been in contact with the saint's body (a second class relic)? If we have a lively faith in the Eucharist, do we need something infinitely inferior to the Body and Blood of the Lord? The origin of relics was largely associated with the Eucharist, which was celebrated at the burial place of holy people. In time the custom grew in the Church that Mass should be celebrated on the relics of the saints in the altar stone or wrapped in the corporal. Indeed, since Nicea II churches are not to be consecrated without relics, a point made again in Church law as recently as 1977 in the revised *Rite of Dedication of a Church*.

The Church is therefore comfortable with relics and the Eucharist being somehow coupled together. Indeed Mass begins with the priest kissing the altar—venerated as a symbol of Christ and his sacrifice, and in part the relics contained in it.

If, however, 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. As the Anglican scientist and theologian, John Polkinghorne recently wrote, we are not apprentice angels, but a kind of package deal of closely related mind and body. Whenever people forget this truth either by neglecting the spiritual or the material, they come into serious distortions of life itself.

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. Buddhism, the only other

major religion apart from Catholic Christianity to have a major place for relics, insists too that we must go beyond the relic. One of its traditions is that the Buddha himself told his followers not to concentrate on his bodily remains but on his teaching.

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. People will go to those churches that are to welcome the Thérésian reliquary. But it must not be magical. True veneration of Thérèse will involve people turning to God and allowing his love to enter their lives through her intercession.

Australia will be indeed privileged to receive the relics of Thérèse. But it must not be an isolated occasion of the day or evening in which her relics visit a town. It can only make sense if we focus on the message of Thérèse, so that her relics coming to Australia will indeed be part of her own missionary desire to make God known and loved.

Preparation for this timely visit will involve a deepened understanding of the saint's doctrine, in particular her teaching on God's merciful love, on the Little Way of spiritual childhood, which is a way of unending love. If the Church is to avail fully of this grace, priests and teachers will have to explain the teaching of this Doctor of the Church whose doctrine is at once simple and profound. 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.

*[Christopher O'Donnell O.Carm. is a Senior Lecturer at the Pontifical Milltown Institute, Dublin. His doctoral thesis from the Gregorian University, Rome was on St. Thomas Aquinas. Among his books are an encyclopædia on the Church, *Ecclesia* (1996) and *Love in the Heart of the Church: The Mission of Thérèse of Lisieux* (1997).]*

A Pilgrim Saint

'I would like to travel over the whole earth to preach your Name ... to preach the Gospel on all five continents.' - Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

Thérèse's wish has been fulfilled. Seven years ago the relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux began a 'pilgrimage of grace' that will eventually cover the four corners of the world.

The visit of the relics of St. Thérèse is a pilgrimage in reverse. Instead of pilgrims travelling to her Shrine in Lisieux she is coming to visit us. The reliquary contains a treasure far greater than the bones of the greatest saint of modern times. It is God's gift of grace to us, a sign of his presence among his people, a reminder of his merciful love and compassion. God speaks to us in sign and symbols. Jesus is the great sign of God's love and forgiveness. We need signs, something to see, to hear, to touch and feel close to. The saints glorify God in their bodies — poor, weak, and fragile as they were — and God now manifests his power and glory through them. In her body, Thérèse loved, prayed, rejoiced and suffered; and, in her body, she lived out her little way of trust and total surrender. Her remains are a sign through which she still tirelessly proclaims the gospel message of love, confidence and invincible hope.

"Of St. Thérèse of Lisieux it can be said with conviction that God chose her to reveal directly to the men and women of our time the central reality of the Gospel, that God is our Father and we are his children. This is the unique genius of St. Thérèse of Lisieux. Thanks to her the entire church has found once again the whole simplicity of freshness of the Gospel truth, which has its origin and source in the heart of Christ himself."

John Paul II - Lisieux 1980.