



Ask, Father James:

What do Relics Mean to Catholic Believers Today?

Relics have long enjoyed a privileged place in the Christian tradition. The spirituality of wanting to touch a relic flows from the experience of the woman with the issue of haemorrhages who upon touching the hem of Christ's garment was healed (Mark 5:25–29). Today, almost all Catholic churches contain relics, either embedded in their altar marble stone or in the walls of the church building or contained in a reliquary stored in a vault in the sanctuary. The early church engaged in the veneration of relics, through the veneration of the relics of the apostles and other holy saints/people who were close to Jesus started to gain veneration.

By the end of the fourth century, relics have become popular. Saint Helena (c. 250- 330), mother of the emperor Constantine (306-370) in about AD 326-328 led a team of excavators to the discovery of the True Cross - the cross upon which Christ was crucified. Tradition has it that in the late fourth century, Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, went to Jerusalem and found the cross on which Jesus had been crucified. Ever since the St. Helena discovery, people sought authentic relics from important and prestigious saints, mainly martyrs whose bodies lay in eastern cities such as Constantinople and Jerusalem. These relics are acquired at various times and from various sources. Today, Christians of all denominations, whether they believed in relics or not have become drawn to visiting the concrete holy sites where tradition says Jesus lived; feeling themselves to be in the presence of the holy. These tourists visiting Jerusalem are offered a range of sacred souvenirs apparently gathered from various sites with biblical significance, ranging from water from the river Jordan, oil from the Garden of Gethsemane, soil from Calvary or rocks from the site of the Holy Sepulchre, all associated with Christ's life and teachings.

Relics usually constituted bodily remains such as bones, teeth or hair or items owned, used or touched by a saint and are held in Reliquaries. These saints' relics are collected from the Catacombs and are literally split into tiny pieces and distributed to the faithful. These Relics served as the bridge between the ethereal realm and the physical world: They are tangible reminders of the presence of the holy. Relics convey different capacities for remembering the past and people venerate relics to participate in divine presence. Till date, Christians continue to pray with and before relics and asks for healing or miraculous favours, with the faith that the bone of a saint may serve as a portal to the divine. They touch their foreheads with them, peck kisses at them, swipe fingers against altar marble stones, touch the wood or reliquary glass in which they are contained, as they say prayers in search of aid, protection, cures, and comfort. Dioceses even now sponsor relics for diocesan pilgrimages. These objects are imbued with devotional significance, and are instruments of divine power and physical links to sacred individuals and events. However,

Pope John Paul II canonization of numerous saints brought a resurgence and the veneration of relics in our time. Along with each saint came new relics. Testimonies of people recounting miracles that happened in the presence of relics played a part in the mass flock to relic pilgrimages. Non Catholics have criticised us saying that relics are spurious and they laugh at its supposed absurdities, claiming that the Catholic Church was caught up in antiquity that should have been swept out of the way and destroyed. While we reject these criticisms, Catholics are reminded that we venerate relics and we do not worship them. The Vatican officials have cautioned Catholics against the concept of "magical powers" of the cloth or bone fragments relics, asking Catholics to only venerate authenticated relics.

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