



Can I buy a relic?

Sharon Ward Photography

Dear Father Kerper: Now and then good people do illegal or immoral things because they've never been told they are wrong. I bought a relic of Saint Therese online. After, I felt funny, so I did some research and read Canon 1190 in the *Code of Canon Law* which states: "It is absolutely forbidden to sell sacred relics." Did I do something wrong?

Thank you for your question. This canon does not explicitly ban the purchase of relics, except for the purpose of reselling them for profit. Nor does it prevent "ransoming" relics to save them from desecration or to return them to a proper place for veneration.

Your on-line purchase of a relic of Saint Therese is a "borderline" case. On one hand, you surely had a good intention, namely a desire to enhance your devotion to Saint Therese and, through her intercession, your devotion to Christ. On the other hand, by obtaining the relic through a commercial transaction, you have inadvertently helped to sustain a "relic market." After all, markets require sellers and buyers to interact. If the buyers of sacred objects disappeared, then the market would soon dry up.

The mere citation of the canonical ban is not enough. More important, we must understand what relics are and why the Church uses, venerates, and protects them.

What Are Relics

"Relic" comes from the Latin word *reliquum*, which means "something left behind" or "residue." In the broad sense, it means any object left behind by a person or group, such as

clothing, jewelry, hair, eyeglasses, arrowheads, coins, and so on. Flea markets and thrift shops abound with relics.

Within the Church, "relic" has a fixed and specific meaning. Traditionally, relics fall into three categories.

First class relics are pieces of a saint's actual corpse. Canon 1190.2 mentions "relics of great significance." These include completely intact bodies and complete body parts such as an intact head, tongue, arm, and so on. These are quite rare. The more common first class relics are bones or small chips of bone inserted into a small capsule. Also the coagulated blood of saints falls into the first class.

Second class relics are "non-bodily" items directly associated with particular saints. This category includes clothing, vestments, hand-written letters, chalices, rings, and so on.

Third class relics are small pieces of cloth that have been touched to a first class relic. They differ fundamentally from the other two classes in that they have never had direct contact with the living saint. In most cases these relics are freely attached to holy cards.

The Theology Behind Relics

At first glance the keeping and public veneration of relics, usually by kissing them, seems puzzling, even creepy. It is indeed shocking to walk into Saint Peter's Church in Drogheda, Ireland, and suddenly see the severed head of Saint Oliver Plunkett staring from a gothic spire. So, why do we keep these "things" around?

Two key teachings undergird this ancient Catholic practice: belief in bodily resurrection of the dead and the communion of saints.

Believing as we do that every dead human being will be raised "in the flesh" at the end of time, we accord great

◀ The first class relics of Saint Maria Goretti were recently displayed at Immaculate Conception Parish in Nashua. More than 4,000 people came to venerate and pray for the saints intercessions.

respect and honor to all human remains, even of non-saints and non-believers, because they have originated in God and have eternal value. We share this view with faithful adherents to Judaism and Islam, the other “Abrahamic” religions that tenaciously hold to bodily resurrection.

In the early Church, this very strong belief in the sacredness of bodily remains, which were seen as “sleeping” and awaiting resurrection, gave rise to the custom of celebrating the Eucharist on or near the tombs of martyrs.

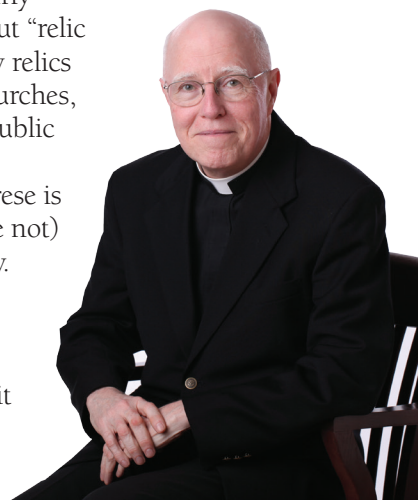
This close proximity to entombed corpses beautifully affirmed the mysterious solidarity among the Risen Christ on the altar, the dead saint beneath the altar, and the people at Mass. Likewise, this practice manifested the Church’s belief in the communion of saints, the intertwining of Christ with all baptized people, both living and dead.

As the Church expanded throughout the world and the tombs of martyrs obviously became scarce, Christians found a solution: altar stones! They simply removed bones from saintly corpses, broke them into small pieces, embedded them in rectangular stones, and inserted them into altars. When you see the priest kiss the altar at the beginning and end of Mass, he is usually kissing a first class relic of a saint, thereby imitating the old custom of celebrating Mass on a tomb.

Now that you know the Church’s “theology of relics,” you can better understand the strict canonical ban on their sale and commercial exchange. We cannot sell what we do not own. And since God alone “owns” the saints, their bodily remains should never be treated as commodities to be sold on the market or even collected like mugs, model cars, Beanie babies, and other “collectibles.”

In 1994, the Church clearly expressed her position about “relic collecting.” Since then, new relics have been given only to churches, oratories, and shrines for public veneration, not private use.

If your relic of Saint Therese is indeed authentic (many are not) remember its sacred quality. Treasure it, and for safety’s sake, consider entrusting it to a parish so that others can venerate it – and keep it away from eBay! ■



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