

A Look at Relics

The Relic Room at Our Lady of the Angel's Motherhouse is a tiny, narrow, hall-like room. There is shelving on one side, the relic windows on the other and a small passage between the two, leaving barely enough room for this every-growing body to get through. I never would have guessed that incorporating some thirty new relics into our established collection would mean spending the greater part of seven days in that small area. Thus, my acquaintance with relics began.

As a convert to Catholicism in the early 80's, I had never even heard the word "relic" until well after my conversion. When I did first hear of relics I remember feeling the whole idea was a bit ghoulish. Was someone putting me on? Were they really speaking of dead people's bones? I must admit, I was taken aback. After seven days in the Relic Room, however, I have come to know something of relics.



The use of relics is ancient and did not originate with Christianity. Relics are cherished in many religious traditions. Relics of the Buddha and other great Buddhist teachers will be coming to the Theosophical Society in August of this year, one stop on a seven-year world tour. These relics of the cremated masters contain bone and tiny pearl-like beads, called ringsel, which are believed to emit spiritual power.

There are accounts in the bible of miracles occurring through the bones or clothing of saintly people. There is the story in Second Kings of a man being brought back to life as soon as he touched the bones of Elisha. The Book of Acts (19: 11-12) records, "And God did extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were carried away from his body to the sick, and diseases left them and the evil spirits came out of them."

The veneration of relics in the Christian tradition can be traced back to the earliest centuries of Christianity. In 156 A.D., St. Polycarp was burnt at the stake. In the written accounts of his martyrdom by the people of Smyrna, the following is recorded; "We took up his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and laid them in a suitable

place, where the Lord will permit us to gather ourselves together, as we are able, in gladness and joy and to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom." (Reference from the Catholic Encyclopedia).

What is worthy of contemplation is the whole mystery of matter and the way the Spirit may chose to use matter, including you and me, to impart blessing and grace. The sacraments use matter as a vehicle of bringing grace to people at life-changing times in their lives. Similarly, relics of Saints may impart grace.

I was touched by the way people responded to the presence of relics as I walked down the hall with them. Some would question, "Who do you have there?" They wanted to touch or kiss the relic of a particular saint as if greeting an old friend. There was tenderness and genuiness in these acts of affection. It made me think of the mystery of our presence to one another and the simple grace we impart to one another just by being near.

I came to appreciate a mystical presence as I worked with the relics. I would rearrange a series of windows on one day, only to find all the relics at the bottom of the windows the following day. Sr. Audrey Marie can testify to this. We finished labeling each of the more than 140 relics one day, and found all the labels had all fallen by the next morning.

Even the identification of the relic was difficult. There I was, day after day, in the crowded, tiny space, with a window out on a shelf, magnifier in hand, trying to read the name of the person to whom the relic belonged. I discovered the names were in Latin or Italian, neither a language I have mastered. Sr. Audrey Marie saved me, at this point, with her knowledge of both Latin and Italian, along with her knowledge of the saints.

My favorite Relic Room story is the day I was working on a particular window, taking it down to redo, when suddenly there was a face peering right in at me! It was the face of Karen Ortman, vice president at Marianjoy Rehab Hospital. She was touring two guests through the Motherhouse. I cannot be certain, but it sure did look like Karen jumped a bit when she saw me appear in the window. I can't imagine what she told her guests.

One could argue the real saints in the Relic Room are the ones who are brought back to this room for their final farewell to the community. Their lives have touched and changed us. We are who we are because of their love, their commitment, and their holy presence with us.

You are invited to view the relics. A new register has been created so relics can be identified by window and alphabetically by relic.

