



SILENT HOMILIES

The Dust They Would Not Leave

*Relics, and why the Church keeps
what death did not finish*





SILENT HOMILIES

LITTLE TREASURES

The Dust They Would Not Leave

Relics, and why the Church keeps what death did not finish

Before You Begin

Many Catholics have seen one without really knowing what they were looking at: a tiny piece of bone or cloth inside a small metal case, with a Latin name, red thread and a wax seal on the back.

Why does the Catholic Church keep things like this?

The word relic comes from the Latin for something left behind. A relic is not a second saint. It is what remains of a person the Church believes lived and died in Christ. Early Christians gathered the bones of martyrs because they would not treat a brother's body as rubbish. Later centuries made boxes for those bones, then smaller boxes, then papers to say which box was which. The ornaments grew. The habit itself is older than the ornaments.

This little book is not a catalogue of famous skulls. It walks through the first gatherings after a martyrdom, the pages of Scripture that already knew God could work through matter, the popular three classes of relic and the quieter official language of 2017, the cloths lowered onto tombs when Rome would not let a body be cut, the altar that still likes a relic beneath its stone, the thefts of the Middle Ages, and the rules that exist because love of the dead can go wrong.

The Church does not worship bone. She refuses to say that a saint is only an idea. That refusal has a physical address. Sometimes the address is a small oval case on a folded cloth.

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Chapter 1

Why Catholics keep relics

A relic is a physical remainder of a saint, or of something closely connected with that saint.

Catholics keep relics because they believe two things at once. First, the saint is alive with God. Second, the saint's body mattered. It was the place where that person prayed, suffered, loved and died. Christians also believe that this body will rise. Keeping a fragment is not an attempt to trap the saint in a box. It is a way of remembering that holiness happened in flesh, not only in ideas.

Worship belongs to God alone. The Church uses an old distinction here. Adoration is given to God. Veneration is the honour given to the saints and to what belonged to them. A Catholic who kneels near a relic is not supposed to be praying to a bone. He is honouring a friend of God and asking that friend to pray.

The practice is much older than many people realise. We have a Christian account from the second century describing believers gathering the bones of a martyr and keeping them with honour. Churches later grew around important tombs. Pilgrims travelled to them. Cloths were lowered onto graves when a body could not be moved. In time the Church also learned that this love could be abused. Certificates, seals and laws exist because devotion, left unwatched, can become a market.

Trent said this in the sixteenth century. The Congregation for the Causes of Saints said it again in 2017. Relics may not be displayed for public veneration without a certificate. They may not be sold. They are to be honoured with a religious spirit, avoiding superstition and illicit trade. A Church that repeats a warning for that long is not running a souvenir stall. She is trying to keep a tenderness from becoming a business.

If you have walked past a reliquary and felt only awkwardness, the awkwardness is not proof that the custom is foolish. It may only mean that nobody explained it.

A Reflection

We sometimes want religious things because we trust God. We sometimes want them because we want something we can control.

A medal, a relic, holy water, a prayer card: any of these can help faith. Any of them can also be treated as a tool that is supposed to force God to give us what we have already decided we need.

I should ask which of those two desires is more familiar to me. The object is not the problem. The problem begins when I stop praying and start managing.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, teach us to honour the saints without superstition, and to remember that all grace comes from you. Amen.

Chapter 2

The bones of St Polycarp

Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna, on the west coast of what is now Turkey. He died a martyr, most likely in the middle of the second century. The Christian community there wrote an account of his death and sent it to another church. That letter is one of the earliest Christian martyrdom stories we still have.

The letter says that after Polycarp was killed, some people did not want the Christians to have his body. They feared, the writer says, that the Christians would start worshipping him instead of Christ. The body was burned. Then the Christians gathered what remained.

They described his bones as more precious than jewels and finer than gold. They laid them in a suitable place. They intended to gather there on the anniversary of his death, to remember those who had already died for Christ and to prepare those who might have to do the same.

That is already the later Catholic habit in a short form. The body of a martyr is not rubbish. The community keeps it. The community returns to it. The honour is given to a person who belonged to Christ, not to a fragment that has power of its own.

The letter is also careful in another way. The fear that Christians would worship the martyr is named and refused. The Church has had to keep repeating that refusal. Honour is not adoration. The distinction was already needed in Smyrna.

Polycarp matters for this book because he shows that relic devotion did not begin in a medieval souvenir shop. It began with friends who would not leave a bishop's remains in the ash of an arena.

A Reflection

Modern culture can treat the body strangely. We spend enormous effort improving it while we are young. Then we often become uncomfortable with ageing, sickness, disability, death and the dead body itself.

Early Christians gathered the bones of a martyr rather than treating them as waste.

What does my reaction to an old, sick or dead body reveal about whether I really believe the body matters to God? If I only honour bodies that are still useful or still beautiful, I have not yet learned what those Christians in Smyrna already knew.

A short prayer

God our Father, strengthen our faith in the resurrection of the body. Help us to treat the bodies of the living and the dead with dignity. Amen.

Chapter 3

Relics in the Bible

Scripture does not contain a later Catholic manual of relics. It does contain scenes in which God works through physical contact with holy people and with objects connected to them.

In the Second Book of Kings, a dead man is thrown into the grave of the prophet Elisha. When the body touches Elisha's bones, the man comes back to life. The power is not described as Elisha's private magic. It is God acting through what remains of his prophet.

In Acts, people carry the sick into the streets so that Peter's shadow might fall on them. Later, cloths that had touched Paul are taken to the sick, and they recover. Again the New Testament does not treat the cloth as a god. It treats the living God as free to work through matter connected with his servants.

These passages do not automatically prove every later Catholic custom. They do something more modest and more useful. They show that the Bible does not treat physical contact with holy persons or objects as automatically superstitious. God may choose to act through matter. The power belongs to God.

That matters because Catholic Christianity is built on the same conviction in a larger form. God became flesh. Jesus had a real body. He died bodily. He rose bodily. Christians believe in the resurrection of the body. The bodies of the saints were temples of the Holy Spirit. A Church that believes those things will not find it strange to keep a fragment of a saint with honour.

A spirituality that wants to stay safely inside the mind will always find relics awkward. The Incarnation has already made that kind of spirituality too small.

A Reflection

Catholic Christianity is full of physical things: water, oil, bread, wine, ashes, palms, hands, bodies.

We can sometimes want a faith that remains inside thoughts and feelings, where nothing can stain us and nothing can be misunderstood.

Am I comfortable with a God who works through matter? If I am not, relics will always look like a problem. The problem may not be the relic. It may be that I want a less bodily gospel than the one the Church received.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you took flesh and you rose in the body. Teach us not to be ashamed of the material world you have already entered. Amen.

Chapter 4

First, second and third class

Catholics still commonly speak of three classes of relic.

A first-class relic is part of the saint's body: bone, hair, blood, or another fragment. Objects directly connected with Christ's Passion, such as a relic of the True Cross, are often spoken of in the same breath.

A second-class relic is something the saint used or wore: a garment, a book, a rosary, a prison chain.

A third-class relic is an object that has been touched to a first-class or second-class relic. Many of the small cloths people bring home from shrines belong to this group, if they have in fact touched an authenticated relic.

Those three words are popular and useful. They are not the language of the 2017 Vatican instruction *Relics in the Church: Authenticity and Preservation*. That document speaks instead of significant relics and non-significant relics.

Significant relics are the body of a Blessed or a Saint, notable parts of that body, or the whole of the ashes if the body was cremated. Bishops and the Congregation for the Causes of Saints keep a special watch over these. They are to be kept in sealed urns, in safe and respectful places.

Non-significant relics are small fragments of the body, and objects that came into direct contact with the person. They should be kept in sealed cases if possible. They are still to be honoured with a religious spirit, without superstition and without trade.

The old three-class language has not been banned. It remains the language most Catholics know. The official instruction simply uses a different pair of words because its concern is custody, authenticity and public veneration, not a school-book classification.

A relic of a Servant of God or a Venerable — someone whose cause has begun, but who has not yet been beatified — is treated with even more reserve. Public veneration of relics belongs to those the Church has already named Blessed or Saint.

A Reflection

We live among forwards, screenshots, viral stories and claims without sources.

The Church says that even devotion needs verification. A certificate is not a lack of faith. It is a refusal to let longing invent its own facts.

How quickly do I believe a religious story because I want it to be true? That question is not only about relics. It is about the way I read, share and repeat.

A short prayer

*Lord, give us a love of the truth that is as strong as our love of holy stories.
Keep us from passing on what we have not checked. Amen.*

Chapter 5

The small case, the thread and the seal

What many people have actually seen is a theca: a small round or oval metal case, often the size of a coin or a little larger.

Inside there is usually a fragment of bone or cloth, a tiny paper label with a Latin name, and sometimes a red silk thread. On the back there is often a wax seal. A paper certificate may travel with the case.

Each part has a job. The case protects the fragment and keeps it from being lost or handled carelessly. The label names the saint, often in an abbreviated Latin form. The thread and the seal show that the case has not been opened since it was authenticated. If the seal is broken, the chain of custody is broken with it.

The certificate is issued by an ecclesiastical authority — often a postulator of a cause, a religious superior, a bishop, or an official of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints. It normally names the saint, describes the relic, and states that it is authentic. The 2017 instruction is plain: relics of Blesseds and Saints may not be displayed for the veneration of the faithful without such a certificate.

Canon law forbids the sale of sacred relics. Significant relics may not be validly alienated without the permission of the Apostolic See. Buying a relic “to rescue it” from an auction site is a grey area that easily becomes the market the law is trying to prevent. A reliquary sold with a relic inside is often the same problem under a prettier name.

If a parish finds a case with a broken seal, no papers, or a doubtful name, the honest response is not to invent a story. It is to keep the object respectfully, stop public veneration, and ask the diocese what should be done. Dull paperwork, in this matter, is a form of reverence.

A Reflection

We live in an age that loves the feeling of authenticity more than the work of checking.

A wax seal on the back of a theca looks unimpressive. It is also a small act of honesty. Someone was willing to put a name and a date to the claim.

I should ask how often I repeat a story because it moves me, and how often I wait until I know whether it is true. Faith and careful checking are not enemies.

A short prayer

*Lord, bless the quiet work of those who keep records, seals and names.
Teach us that reverence includes accuracy. Amen.*

Chapter 6

The cloths they lowered onto tombs

For a long time Roman Christians were reluctant to disturb the bodies of the apostles and martyrs. The graves of Peter and Paul were not treated as quarries.

When other churches asked for relics, Rome often sent a different kind of gift. A cloth, called a brandeum, was placed in a small box near the tomb. After it had lain there, it was taken up and sent to the church that had asked. Gregory the Great, writing at the end of the sixth century, said that such a cloth could be placed with reverence in a church to be dedicated, and that God worked through it as if the body itself had been brought.

The Empress Constantina once asked Gregory for the head of St Paul, or some other part of his body, for a church she was building in the imperial palace. Gregory refused. He said it was not the Roman custom to touch the bodies. He offered instead a cloth that had been near the tomb, and later a fragment filed from the chains said to have bound the apostle. He also told her stories of men who had died after treating those tombs too casually. Whether every detail of those stories can be checked is another question. The policy is clear. Rome would honour the request without sawing the apostle.

Contact relics of this kind help explain the later popular idea of a third-class relic. The instinct is old: if I cannot take the body, I will take something that has been near the body. The power, if God gives it, is still God's.

People still bring home a cloth, a card or a medal from a shrine. That is not automatically superstition. It becomes superstition when the object is treated as a guarantee, or when a shrine's own rules about touching tombs are ignored.

A Reflection

People like to bring something home from an important place: a shell, a ticket, a photograph, a stone.

The old Roman cloths belonged to the same human instinct. The question is what I actually want from a pilgrimage or a holy place.

Do I want a souvenir that proves I was there? Or a memory that changes the way I pray after I return? The object cannot answer that. I can.

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, if we bring anything home from a holy place, let it remind us to pray, not to collect. Amen.

Chapter 7

Why relics are placed under altars

Christians began gathering for prayer near the graves of martyrs. Some later churches were built over those tombs. The tombs of Peter and Paul in Rome became major pilgrimage sites. The connection was simple. The Eucharist is the sacrifice of Christ. The martyr is someone who has already shared that sacrifice in blood. To celebrate near the martyr's body was to remember both.

Over time relics were placed in or under altars even when the whole tomb was not there. Revelation 6, where the souls of the martyrs are seen under the altar, gave the custom a biblical image, though the first reason was historical rather than a single verse.

The present General Instruction of the Roman Missal is modest. The practice of placing relics of saints, even those who were not martyrs, under the altar to be dedicated is fittingly retained. Care must be taken that the relics are authentic. The rite of dedication adds further caution. Relics should be of a size that can be recognised as parts of a human body. Tiny unidentifiable fragments are not enough. It is better to dedicate an altar without relics than to place doubtful ones beneath it. Relics are to be placed under the table of the altar, not set into the mensa as they often were in older altar stones.

Relics are therefore recommended, not required, for every altar. A church without them is still a church.

In the Christian East a related custom survives in the antimimension: a consecrated cloth, often with relics sewn into it, without which the Eucharist is not normally celebrated. The details differ. The old connection remains. The table of the Lord and the memory of the martyrs still belong together.

A Reflection

A parish can easily think its history began when we arrived.

Relics under an altar, when they are there at all, are a reminder that the Church existed before us and will continue after us.

Do I treat my parish as something that belongs to my generation, my group, my priest, my preferences? Or do I know that I received it from people I will never meet?

A short prayer

Lord, thank you for the Church we inherited and did not invent. Teach us to receive our parish as a gift, not as property. Amen.

Chapter 8

When relics move

Translation, in this old sense, means the formal moving of relics from one place to another.

Cities and churches wanted the presence of a famous saint. Pilgrims followed. Offerings followed the pilgrims. A translation could be an act of honour. It could also be an act of prestige.

In 828 Venetian merchants brought to Venice what they believed to be the body of St Mark, taken from Alexandria. Later Venetian art and story said the body was hidden under pork so that Muslim officials would not search the cargo. That tale belongs to Venetian tradition. It should be told as tradition, not as a checked shipping record. What is certain is that Venice built its identity around the apostle's shrine.

In 1087 sailors from Bari took what they believed to be the body of St Nicholas from Myra, in Asia Minor, during a time of unrest. Bari still keeps the shrine. The city gained a saint. Myra lost one.

St Catherine of Siena died in Rome in 1380. Most of her body remains there, at Santa Maria sopra Minerva. Her head was later taken to Siena, her own city, and is still venerated in the basilica of San Domenico. The division still startles visitors. For medieval Christians it was a way of sharing a saint between the city of her death and the city of her life.

The Church now regulates such movements tightly. Significant relics are not treated as cargo a town may claim because it wants the honour. The 2017 instruction requires consent from the Congregation for the Causes of Saints for recognitions, translations and alienations of this kind. Love of a saint is not the same as possession of a saint.

A Reflection

We like to possess things that give our place importance.

Cities once competed for saints. We do something similar in smaller ways: my parish, my movement, my favourite priest, my saint, my tradition.

When does love become possession? The question is worth asking before I decide that God wants my group to have what another group already loves.

A short prayer

Lord, you give the saints to the whole Church. Keep us from treating them as trophies of our own place. Amen.

Chapter 9

When relics were stolen

Medieval writers had a name for a certain kind of story: *furta sacra*, holy thefts.

A monastery or a city wanted a famous relic. Someone took it. Afterwards a story explained that the saint had appeared in a dream and asked to be moved, or that miracles on the journey proved the saint's consent. The theft became a translation. The new shrine became a place of pilgrimage.

Patrick Geary and other historians have shown how common these stories were in the early Middle Ages. They were not always crude robbery dressed up after the fact. Sometimes they were a strange mixture of devotion, local pride, fear that a neglected saint wanted a better home, and the simple usefulness of a famous body.

The Church did not issue a general blessing on theft. Bishops and councils also tried to regulate possession and movement. The later law became much stricter. What the stories show is not that “the medieval Church approved stealing relics.” They show that human beings are very good at finding holy reasons for things they already want.

One honest way to read those tales is to notice the hunger underneath them. People wanted the saint near them. They wanted prayer, protection, identity, visitors. The hunger was not all bad. The method often was.

Today the same hunger can appear without a midnight cart. A parish wants the relic that will make it special. A collector wants the case that will complete a set. A website offers “authenticated” fragments with a price. The old temptation has new packaging.

A Reflection

Human beings are remarkably good at finding holy reasons for things they already want.

A medieval house wanted a famous relic and sometimes produced a story explaining why the saint agreed to move.

When I already want something, how quickly do I start hearing God agreeing with me? The question is not only medieval. It is ordinary, and it is uncomfortable.

A short prayer

Lord, purify our desires. Do not let us baptise our plans and then call the result your will. Amen.

Chapter 10

Incorrupt saints and St Januarius

Some saints are called incorrupt. The word is used when a body, or part of a body, appears unusually preserved long after death.

The word covers more than one thing. Sometimes there is natural preservation in certain soils or tombs. Sometimes there was embalming. Sometimes later generations added wax, silk, silver masks or reconstructed faces so that pilgrims would see a person rather than a ruin. Sometimes only part of the body is well preserved. The Church does not treat incorruption as proof of sainthood. Holiness is recognised by a life and, where the process requires it, by miracles. An intact face is not a canonisation.

St Bernadette of Lourdes and St Catherine Labouré are often named in this company. Their bodies have been examined more than once. What pilgrims see is not always the body exactly as it was first found. Honesty here is not a lack of devotion. Exaggeration is.

St Januarius, bishop and martyr, is honoured in Naples. A vial kept in the cathedral contains a dark substance believed to be his blood. Several times a year, traditionally in May, September and December, the substance is brought out. On many of those days it becomes liquid. Neapolitans have long treated the event as a sign of the city's wellbeing. The Church permits the devotion. She does not require anyone to treat the liquefaction as a formally defined miracle, and she does not treat a dry year as a dogma about the city's future.

Spectacular relics attract cameras. Most saints left ordinary remains. Most holy lives never produced a spectacle. That quieter majority is the Church's usual pattern.

A Reflection

We are attracted to spectacular religion: miracles, incorrupt bodies, unusual signs.

Most saints left ordinary remains. Most holy lives never produced a spectacle.

Do I need something extraordinary before I take holiness seriously? If I do, I will miss the people nearest me, whose faithfulness will never be filmed.

A short prayer

Lord, teach us to recognise holiness in ordinary remains and ordinary days. Keep us from needing a spectacle before we believe you are at work. Amen.

Chapter 11

What Trent and the Vatican still say

The Council of Trent spoke about relics because the sixteenth century had two loud voices on the subject. One mocked the whole custom. The other had sometimes turned it into superstition and profit.

Trent refused both simplifications. It taught that the bodies of the saints, which were living members of Christ and temples of the Holy Spirit, are to be honoured by the faithful. It also ordered bishops to be careful. Superstition, drunken celebrations, false relics and the making of money from sacred things were to be stopped.

That double sentence is still the Catholic position. Relics are honoured. Relics are regulated.

The 2017 instruction *Relics in the Church: Authenticity and Preservation* applies the same instinct to modern procedures. It deals with canonical recognition of remains, the taking of fragments, the making of relic cases, translations, pilgrimages of relics, and alienation. It insists on certificates for public veneration. It keeps significant relics under special watch. It repeats that relics are not to be sold.

The Church protects devotion by giving it rules. That can sound cold to people who think sincerity is enough. Trent had already seen what sincerity does when it is left alone with a famous bone and a crowd.

A parish that owns an authenticated relic should keep the papers with the case, know the saint's name and story, display the relic reverently if it is shown at all, and refuse to treat it as a curiosity or a fundraiser. A parish that owns an unauthenticated fragment should not invent a feast day for it.

A Reflection

Modern people often think regulation kills sincerity.

Sometimes rules protect what we love from becoming distorted. A good intention does not make every practice safe.

Where do I resist correction simply because my intention was good? That resistance can look like zeal. It can also be a way of refusing to be taught.

A short prayer

Lord, give your Church wisdom to honour the saints and courage to correct abuses. Give me the humility to be corrected when my devotion has gone wrong. Amen.

Chapter 12

What a relic is not — and how to live with one

A relic is not a sacrament. The sacraments are Christ's own signs, entrusted to the Church. A relic is a memorial of a holy life.

A relic is not magic. It does not contain the saint's soul. The saint is with God. The fragment remains on earth.

A relic does not guarantee a miracle. God may work through it. God is not obliged to.

A relic does not replace prayer to God. Asking a saint to pray is part of Catholic faith. Treating the case as a machine is not.

A relic does not need to produce a supernatural event in order to be meaningful. Memory, gratitude and the hope of resurrection are already enough.

Authenticity matters. A nameless chip in a pretty box is not a teaching aid. It is a puzzle. The Church would rather have no public relic than a doubtful one set out as if it were certain.

If a parish has an authentic relic, the practical duties are simple. Keep the documentation. Know whose relic it is. Teach the saint's story. Display the relic reverently where that is appropriate. Do not sell it. Seek diocesan advice if custody or authenticity becomes uncertain.

Do not encourage people to manufacture relics casually. Touching a cloth to a tomb may be allowed at some shrines and forbidden at others. Follow the shrine's own rules. A souvenir taken against the keeper's will is not a third-class relic. It is a taken thing.

The person whose fragment lies in the case has a name. Learn the name. Without the story, the case is only an object.

A Reflection

A relic without the saint's story becomes a curiosity.

The same is true of people. We can know "the woman in the third pew," "the old man next door," "the cleaner," "the migrant family," without knowing a name or a story.

The Church keeps relics because people are not interchangeable. Whose name near me have I never bothered to learn?

A short prayer

Lord Jesus, you call each of us by name. Teach us to honour the saints by name, and the living people around us in the same way. Amen.

A last word

A relic matters because it belonged to a real person. That person lived in Christ. The body mattered. The saint is now with God. Christians believe the body will rise.

The Church keeps these fragments because she will not say that holiness is only an idea, and because she will not say that death has the final word.

Honour the relic. Do not worship it. Learn the name. Keep the papers. Tell the story. Then let the small case do the quiet work it was meant to do: remind us that God worked in a human life, and that this life is not over.

A prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you rose from the dead and you will raise our bodies too. Thank you for the saints whose lives you made holy in flesh and blood. Teach us to honour what they left behind without superstition, and to love the living people around us with the same care. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us. All holy men and women, pray for us. Amen.

A word of thanks

These pages are free to read.

If they have helped you understand why the Church keeps relics, you are welcome to support the work that makes Silent Homilies possible. Please do so only if you wish, and only if you can.

Thank you for reading this far.

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