



In his homily on the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Father Lewon said that [first-class] relics of all the Saints have existed except for Mary. I understand that St Paul's has a collection of relics of the Saints. What are relics, and where did St Paul's collection come from?

“Relics” comes from the Latin word *reliquiae* which means “remains,” and in Catholic teaching there are three types. First-class relics are instruments of Our Lord's passion and the material remains of a Saint after his/her death. Second-class relics are objects that were used by a Saint (clothing, prayer book, manuscript written by him/her, etc.). Third-class relics are objects with some other, less direct, connection with a Saint. The most important relic is the True Cross – or fragments of it – which St Helena, the 71-year old mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, believed she had discovered during her excavations at the site of Calvary in A.D. 326, a belief which modern scientific analysis of it does not contradict!

St Paul's collection, all first-class relics, consists of a fragment of the True Cross and small fragments of bone of seventy-one Saints, including:

St Benedict	St Scholastica (sister of St Benedict)
St Francis de Sales	St Thomas Aquinas
St John of God	St Teresa of Avila
St Frances of Rome	St Vincent Ferrar
St Anselm	St Catherine of Siena
St Bede the Venerable	St Philip Neri
St Boniface	St Anthony of Padua
St Ignatius Loyola	St Bonaventure
St John Vianney	St Clare of Assisi
St Bernard of Cluny	St Louis of France
St Augustine of Hippo	St Elizabeth of Hungary
St Margaret of Scotland	St Francis Xavier
St Ambrose	St Thomas à Becket
St Elizabeth Ann Seton	St John Neumann

Each of these is certified as authentic – with an impressive individually signed and sealed Latin document – by the Vatican Relic Office, the official Curial department which receives, authenticates, keeps, and distributes first-class relics.

Honoring the relics of holy persons is a practice found in all the major world religions. In the Judaic-Christian tradition the Old Testament teaches the importance of first-class relics (II Kings 2.14; II Kings 13.21), and the New Testament teaches the value of second-class relics (Acts 19.12). This veneration of remains quite naturally became more important to the Early Christian Church with the wholesale persecution and murder of Christians by the pagan Roman authorities beginning in A.D. 64, and the custom developed of celebrating the Eucharist over the tombs of martyrs on the anniversary of their martyrdom.

All the early Fathers of the Church (i.e. theologians, including St Augustine, St Ambrose, St Jerome, St Gregory of Nyssa, St John Chrysostom, St Gregory Nazianzus) taught the importance of honoring the relics of the Saints. In addition to its binding Dogma on Icons, the Second Council of Nicea (the Seventh and last Ecumenical Council of the undivided Catholic Church which met in A.D. 787) declared that no church without first-class relics at the Altar should be consecrated. In the Middle Ages it became the custom in the West to bury relics of Saints under the Altar or to seal them in a “sepulchre” in the top of the stone Altar when it was consecrated by the Bishop.

Psychologically, the tradition of honoring the remains of the Saints is very much the same as the practice of visiting burial places to honor a nation’s secular heroes, such as the tomb of George Washington at Mount Vernon VA, Abraham Lincoln’s tomb in Springfield IL, Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt’s graves in Hyde Park NY, the tombs of the Unknown Soldiers in Arlington National Cemetery, or the grave of Winston Churchill in Bladon Parish churchyard in Oxfordshire, England. By visiting their remains we feel a tangible link with these persons who have been so important in the history of our country.

The theological and spiritual basis for honoring the relics of the Saints was articulated by St Jerome, St Augustine of Hippo, and St Thomas Aquinas who taught that, while the bodies of all Baptised persons should be honored as the creation of God, the remains of these Christians in particular should be venerated because they were the temple of the Holy Spirit of persons of great sanctity, persons who are important examples and intercessors for the whole Church on earth in all ages.

This is theologically integral to the Doctrine of the Communion of Saints, the Church’s teaching that all members of the Catholic Church – in the Church Militant, in the Church Expectant, and in the Church Triumphant – are truly, actively connected through the Sacraments, through prayer, and through praise (“...we praise you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven...”). The relics of the Saints give us a tangible link to those in Heaven who “encourage us by their examples, aid us by their prayers, and strengthen us by their fellowship.”

No Christian has ever been required by the Church to use relics in his/her spiritual life. A very sound (and quite Anglican and Benedictine) contemporary approach, however, was articulated by the Vicar General of the Diocese of Rome who said, “Relics should be handled intelligently, without abuses. They are signs which can be useful to spread devotion to holy men and women all over the world. [When they are used, relics] must be accompanied by official papers warranting their validity and authenticity.”

St Paul’s collection of relics was acquired from the Vatican Relic Office by Father Craig Johnson during the years he was Rector of St Helena’s Parish, Burr Ridge IL (1972-1982). When he left parish work he placed the collection in the Priest’s Sacristy of St Paul’s, with the relics of four of the Saints always on the Blessed Sacrament Altar and the relic of the True Cross in a special locked stand just to the left of that Altar. In June 1998 Father Johnson turned over custody of the collection to Father Fraser, along with the Vatican certificates of authenticity, with the understanding that they are to remain at St Paul’s as long as Father Fraser is the Rector. When Father Fraser leaves the Parish he is to determine who then is to have custody of this sacred collection.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us.
All Holy Men and Women pray for us.*