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Relics

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in their altars, Father McNamara usually is. Some were arbitrarily received, some were particularly requested.

For instance, at St. Thomas the Apostle Church in Irondequoit, where the priest lives, the altar contains relics of the Uganda martyrs. The altar, with the relics, was dedicated during racial strife in the Rochester area and the 22 martyrs had just been canonized in October 1964, he said. Most of the relics are probably ashes, he said, because 13 of the 22 youths were burned to death.

Rochester diocesan parishes have continued to place relics in their altars, thanks to Father McNamara, even as elsewhere the practice apparently has dropped off.

At St. Mark Church, Greece, for example, relics of St. Mark the Evangelist and St. Cecilia were sealed in the altar at an Aug. 21, 1993, dedication.

On June 27, 1993, relics of St. Jude Thaddeus, the Apostle; St. Lucy of Syracuse, a martyr; St. Pius X, pope; St. John Nepomucene Neumann; and St. Anthony of Padua were sealed into the altar at St. Jude the Apostle Church, Gates.

At St. Anne, relics of the martyrs St. Caecilia and St. Eutropius were taken from the top of the altar and placed beneath a refashioned altar, along with the added relics of the martyrs of Korea on Sept. 16, 1995. A significant number of Koreans belong to the parish.

St. Patrick's Church, Elmira, received relics of St. Oliver Plunket, archbishop of Armagh; St. Pius X; and St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, in a May 6, 1987, dedication.

Grounded in tradition

"We don't educate people enough about these things," Father McNamara said, adding he wasn't sure what the relics mean to parishioners. "It's a noble tradition that goes back to that Scripture text. I think it should be encouraged. It brings the saints closer to us. It's the presence of a saint."

Revelation 6:9 indicates the church practiced such a tradition in earlier times.

In the New Testament passage the author sees a vision in which a Lamb (Christ) breaks open the fifth seal of a scroll — a divine plan — and states, "I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered because of the witness they bore to the word of God."

The 1977 revised rite of dedication of a church and an altar states it is fitting to place relics beneath an altar, as it "renders the burial place of the martyrs glorious."

The practice can be traced to soon after Christ's death. Countless martyrs were buried in the secrecy of catacombs. According to the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Since the veneration of the dead was the only cult that could be practiced freely at Rome during times of persecution, the Christians assembled near the tombs to render homage to their dead."

Occasionally a liturgical celebration accompanied the assemblies.

Later, churches were built over the graves of martyrs. Eventually relics were required for altars in churches not built over such graves. For nearly the past 400 years permanent altars had to have relics placed in a small space cut into the altar top. But the 1983 Revised Code of Canon Law and revised dedication rite changed that, and in turn, are supported by new Vatican rules.

The Vatican in 1994 issued rules, only recently publicized, that relics be larger and more recognizable as parts of a body, and be placed *under* altars, rather than in the top surface.

"It seems they are trying to discourage them, but they aren't," Father McNamara commented. He noted that the revised Code of Canon Law states that the tradition of keeping martyrs' and other saints' relics under a fixed altar "is to be preserved."

However, the Vatican rules also mean that individuals no longer should be able to obtain relics for private veneration, at

least from the Rome Diocese and the Vatican's Apostolic Sacristy, nor can bishops obtain *small* particles for church altars. (Religious orders of particular saints and some dioceses also distribute relics, however, as do postulators promoting a cause for sainthood.)

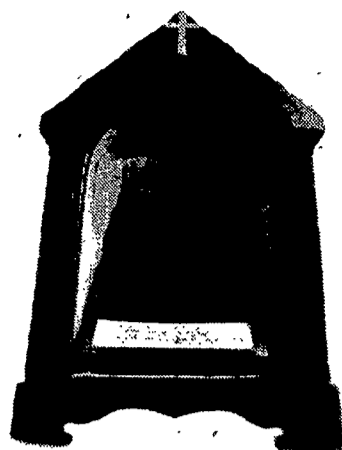
"They (relics) were being passed around like candy," noted Msgr. Piero Marini, papal master of liturgical ceremonies, in a 1996 Catholic News Service article on the revised Vatican relic regulations.

Father Peter Gumpel, former official of the Congregation for Sainthood Causes, was quoted in the article as saying the practice of martyrs' remains being part of an altar will disappear.

However, Father McNamara said he has not had any problem obtaining relics for area altars. And as more saints are canonized, he noted, larger relics will be available for altars.

On veneration

Over the centuries, church fathers have



Matthew Scott/Staff photographer
A piece of a stole worn by St. Charles Borromeo — is housed in a wooden reliquary at St. Charles Borromeo Church, Greece.

justified relic veneration, saying that people can see the saints in the relics, that relics are reminders of saints as models, that testimony exists of miracles God worked through relics and that relics are the remains of friends now close to God. Veneration developed somewhat alongside that of icons.

"Some would think because we don't center our attention on them (relics), we don't venerate them. They are part of our story, a wonderful part of our story," said Greg Dues, author of *Catholic Customs & Traditions*, revised in 1992.

"St. Anne may not be the center of my devotions," said Dues, a laicized priest and pastoral minister in the Diocese of Saginaw, Mich. "But if I belong to St. Anne Church, I have a different responsibility."

And while he has venerated relics of the founder of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, his former community, he said, "I wouldn't expect you in Rochester to have a deep devotion (to St. Gaspare)."

Noting the incarnational, sacramental

aspects of Catholic Christianity, Father Li-oi said, "We celebrate this divinity present among us with the ordinary elements of life. The church has always used elements of creation and artistic works as ways of experiencing God's presence: fire, water, bread, wine, paintings, architecture, music, incense, statues, votive candles and, yes, even relics."

"When any of these things become ends in themselves as objects of worship, then we start moving into the realm of superstition and magic."

"But these things also can open up an experience of God and allow us to grow in prayer, in our relationship with God."

Tony Brunette of Holy Ghost Church in Gates, who has a first-class relic of St. Francis of Assisi, said, "It's probably no different than when a parent saves the first tooth of their child after it falls out."

Of relics, he said, "It's having some part of them with us. I suppose some people find it strange."

While some Catholics own numerous relics, DeMity said, "I never really thought of having one myself. I thought they were too precious to keep."

"You could tell this to people and it might fall on deaf ears," DeMity added. "Unless you have the faith to believe, it won't mean much to people. But it sure does to us at St. Anne."

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