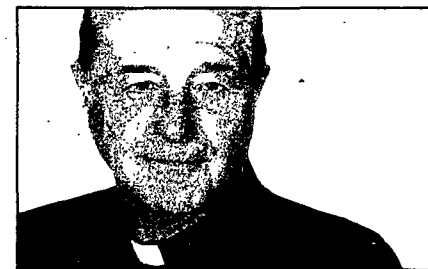


Veneration of relics is ages old



Father John Dietzen

Bridging Gaps

Q. What are relics? How are they obtained? And who determines what is done with them?

At times, even after they are buried, parts of the bodies of saints are sent to other locations to be kept or honored. In the past few years an apparent relic (leg bone, it was said) of St. Therese of Lisieux traveled to several cities in the United States, including a city near my home.

Surely bodies are not made to be in separate parts. Can you enlighten us? (Iowa)

A. The veneration of relics is one of those areas of Christian belief and practice which in themselves can be solidly founded theologically and spiritually. Experience proves, however, that this devotion has an almost built-in temptation for misunderstanding and abuse.

Veneration of the bodies of martyrs and other saints goes back to the beginning of Christianity. Sometimes the blood of martyrs was collected on a cloth to be kept by the community as a reminder of that person's fidelity and courage in professing faith in Christ.

By the 800s and 900s, problems began to surface. Possession of relics of certain saints became a source of prestige for monasteries and churches. When St. Thomas Aquinas died in 1274, for example, in the Cistercian monastery of Fossa Nuova, it is reported that the monks there decapitated his body to be sure of keeping his remains away from the Dominican friars, of which Thomas was a member.

The tug of war between Cistercians and Dominicans for his body continued for decades after his death.

Buying and selling, even stealing, bodies or parts of bodies of saints was common. Transferring relics gradually turned into an international business. To this day, Catholic law explicitly forbids "alienation" or permanent transfer of major relics from one place to another without the pope's permission (Canon 1190).

It is not surprising then that this bizarre dealing with bodies of saints should be reflected in popular piety of the Middle Ages and beyond. Veneration of relics gave rise to all manner of feasts, shrines and pilgrimages.

Possession of relics even became a sign of affluence and power. In 1393, at a royal feast, French King Charles VI distributed to guests ribs of his venerated ancestor St. Louis.

Some opposition to these practices was always heard, but even popes eventually became nearly powerless to do anything about them. Mishandling of relics, and their sale, eventually became one of the abuses in the church attacked by leaders of the Protestant Reformation.

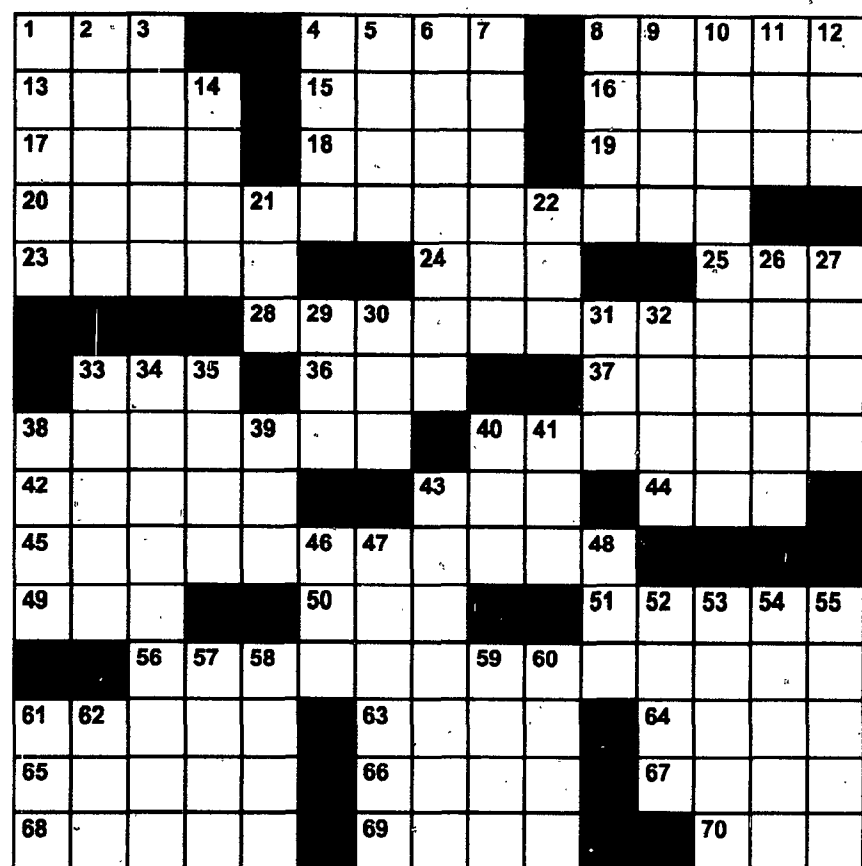
In 1563 the Council of Trent offered three reasons for venerating the bodies of the saints. They were, and are, members of the body of Christ; they were temples of the Holy Spirit; and they are destined to be raised and glorified by the Spirit (Session XXV).

These motives are still valid, but experience understandably causes the church to be careful lest this less central aspect of Catholic devotion again grow out of proportion.

Apart from the canon mentioned above and conditions for placing relics in altars, veneration of relics is not even mentioned in the present Code of Canon Law. This may be due as much to the decline in enthusiasm for this sort of devotion as to any other reason.

Current norms for indulgences do not include any prayers or actions relating to relics of the saints. Honoring such relics can be a way of praising the goodness of God and seeking our own growth in holiness. It is necessary, and not always easy, to preserve that focus.

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Catholic Crossword

ACROSS

- 1 Turner of slave revolt
4 Singer Paul
8 "It's as _____ as it is wide."
13 Draft board designation
15 Snakes
16 Sort through
17 Sarah and Rebecca
18 They come before the bloom
19 Seraph or cherub
20 The Lord God, as in Revelation
23 Prevent
24 Anger
25 "_____ there be light ..." (Gn 1:3)
28 Roman emperor who declared Christianity to be legal
33 Gov't regulatory agency
36 Gov't medical agency
37 Barbarians converted by St. Patrick
38 Isaiah or Jeremiah
40 Something you shouldn't cut
42 To perfume the altar
43 Corrode
44 Diocese
45 Rome has this over all other bishoprics
49 Biblical body of water

(with 10D)

- 50 Media mogul Turner
51 "But you, O Lord, _____ forever ..." (Ps 102:13)
56 One of Paul's epistles
61 "_____ for your sins by good deeds ..." (Dt 4:24)
63 Jubilee
64 Golf equipment
65 Repairs
66 Laborer
67 Perry's creator
68 "_____ are they who have not seen and believe." (Jn 20:29)
69 Certain letters
70 Draft board letters

DOWN

- 1 Abraham was one of these
2 Lizard
3 Put to the test
4 Jesus' name for God
5 Part of speech
6 Jewish prayer
7 Distribute
8 English hillside
9 One of the things the father gave to the Prodigal Son
10 See 49A
11 Grog
12 Eastern state's previ-

ous abbreviation

- 14 Tennis great
21 Curve
22 _____ culpa
26 _____ nous
27 Hardy heroine
29 "I believe in _____ God ..."
30 Insect egg
31 Business co.
32 Bills
33 French religious
34 Carried out solo
35 Church section
38 Pesticides (abbr.)
39 Pen
40 Swindle
41 Army sch
43 "My love is like a red _____"
46 Communications corp.
47 Required
48 "Take and _____" (Mt 26:26)
52 Chomp
53 Canals
54 Contests
55 Road swings
57 Means partner
58 "You shall not put the Lord, your God, to the _____." (Mt 4:7)
59 Sound
60 They're found in the ground
61 Del. to a foreign nation
62 _____ Aviv

Answers on page 9 (No. 32)