

The honor we Catholics pay to relics is reasonable and lawful. Everything holy deserves veneration and respect. We honor the Bible, putting and keeping it in a respectable place, even though it is in itself mere paper. We honor a church building, even though it is made of wood or brick.

Honoring memorials and keepsakes of the great is a universal instinct and practice. What son or daughter will not treasure the earrings or the watch that mother used, even though it might be of a cheap make? Mother used it. Mother wore it. That is enough. If we Americans hold in veneration the sword of Washington and even the bed in which he slept, then surely it is permissible to pay homage and respect to the material things used by God's heroes.

The bodies of the saints were the temples of the Holy Spirit. They enshrined souls, which were on fire and alight with the love of God. Those bodies shared in their sacrifices and labors. Why should those bodies not share in the glory?

To see a relic of Saint Anthony, for instance, will bring to mind his heroic virtues and the wonders he has obtained from Almighty God. The sight of his relic will spur us to imitate his sanctity.

The Church, which Christ established, approves the honoring of relics. She even requires that in every altar stone there be contained the relics of two saints.

God Himself has approved the honoring of relics. We read proof of this in the Old Testament and in the New. For example, we read that the very shadow of Saint Peter healed the sick (Acts 5: 15). The linen cloths from the body of Saint Paul also healed (Acts 19: 12).

There are various ways of honoring relics:

A. By burning lamps or candles before them.

B. By building shrines and reliquaries for them.

C. By carrying those relics in procession.

D. By making pilgrimages to their shrines. The number of shrines, some world-famous and others only locally known is without number.

E. By making votive offerings in the form of objects offered in thanksgiving or in petition, like flowers, crutches, or similar worthy gifts.

The desire to honor the great, especially those great in holiness, is instinctive in the human heart. The teaching of the Church on relics is Biblical, sensible, and helpful. It goes without saying that one must not emphasize relic veneration to the exclusion or neglect of other devotions. The veneration of relics is a positive help in our service of God and our imitation of Christ and His saints.

#### **The Evangelization Station**

Hudson, Florida, USA

E-mail: [evangelization@earthlink.net](mailto:evangelization@earthlink.net)

[www.evangelizationstation.com](http://www.evangelizationstation.com)

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## **The Crucifix and Relics**

### **The Crucifix**

*“Truly he was the Son of God”* (Mt. 27:54).

The crucifix is the symbol of Christ, the Redeemer, “the sign of the Son of man in heaven” (Mt. 24:30).

Prior to the beginning of the fourth century, the cross was little used as a symbol of Christ. The cross was a stumbling block for the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. There was no need to parade before pagan eyes a symbol, which was to them terrible and degrading until its new significance was preached in order that it might be correctly understood. This Saint Paul did with unique distinction, characteristic of his zeal. The cross, the most inhuman of all punishments, was an unbelievably hideous thing to the pagan world. The ambassadors of the cross were the laughing-stock and “the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things” (1 Cor. 4:13).

But the shame of the cross became the symbol of triumph. Christ, “lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself” (Jn. 12:32). We see His sign everywhere, on churches, altars and tombs; on schools, convents and hospitals. Catholics represent Jesus Crucified. Protestants usually use a plain cross, without the corpus of Christ. It is a matter of emphasis. Catholics never want to forget the measure of His sacrifice, and Protestants emphasize His resurrection.

Everyone who thoughtfully looks at a crucifix will find himself asking the same questions:

“Is it true? Did it really happen?” The representation of our Lord upon the cross is one of the oldest and most widespread of the

sacramentals. In every type of material, in every form and color sculptors and painters have represented the death of the God-man. In every size and shape Catholics carry a crucifix, place it in their homes and schools and institutions. Never do we want to forget that Jesus died for all of us. Never do we want to forget that He went to the lengths of love by dying for us. The crucifix tells us three things: 1. Who suffered for us. 2. What He suffered for us. 3. Why He suffered for us.

Who is it hanging upon this cross? It is the all-good Son of God who became Man for our redemption. It is the Creator of all things suffering for the creature. It is Holiness Himself hanging there. It is Love Himself hanging there. That He was “truly the Son of God” is proven from the wonders that accompanied His death. Darkness covered the earth from the sixth to the ninth hour. It was not an ordinary eclipse of the sun, because the moon was then at the full, because such an eclipse can last eight minutes at the most, and because there is no record in astronomy of an eclipse that year. “And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many (Mt. 27:51-53). All these terrible happenings make us exclaim with the centurion, “Truly this was the Son of God!” (v. 54).

What did Christ suffer? His torments were so severe that the mere anticipation of them caused a sweat of blood. Our Lord suffered torture in every part of His body: He was scourged unmercifully. He was crowned with thorns. He was forced to carry His cross over a stony street. He was nailed through hands and feet. He suffered agonizing thirst. His mental

sufferings also were extreme: There was the sense of love rejected. There was ingratitude for His many favors and miracles. There was aching sympathy for His bereaved mother.

Why did Christ suffer? He suffered in order to deliver us from our sins, from our deep debt of punishment. He suffered to reconcile us to God and to reopen the gates of heaven. He suffered to make for us a satisfaction full and complete and most acceptable to God. He suffered to leave us an example of every virtue. To save man from the state of sin it was not absolutely necessary that God should demand such suffering. Christ could have saved us by a mere act of His all-powerful will. But He endured those terrible tortures to show us how precious we were to Him, and to give us a divine example, which we could imitate.

All these thoughts we read in every crucifix. No wonder we treasure the Figure on the cross. No wonder we place it everywhere to remind us continually of the things it teaches: We place it above our altar to remind us that the holy sacrifice of the cross is repeated thereon. We place it in our homes and bedrooms to remind us to live continually in the light of its lessons. We hang the crucifix in our classrooms and buildings of mercy to show that all we undertake is done in and for Him who died on it. We place it in our sickrooms and in the hands of our dying to remind us of the patience and forbearance of Christ crucified. We carry it on our persons that we may carry out what it signifies. We hang it on our Rosaries, we etch it on our books and doorways, we reach up and place it on the steeples of our churches. We place it everywhere in order that everywhere we might remember its life-giving lessons. Make the most of this sacramental. Ask yourself, “Is it true? Did it really happen?” Then also ask yourself: “What does it mean?” “Who is that hanging there?” “Why did He suffer so?” Your crucifix will

answer those questions for you, and bring you with the answers a more abundant spiritual life.

## Relics

A few years before her going home to the Lord, Mother Teresa of Calcutta visited one of her many convents for the Sisters of Charity, this one in Norristown, PA. It seems that during her visit, she was in need of a haircut and asked one of the sisters if she would be kind enough to accommodate. After the haircut and when Mother Teresa had left the room, every precious strand of her hair regardless of size, was collected and saved. In this incident we see the veneration, which her fellow Sisters of Charity have for their founder.

The practice of venerating relics is both reasonable and profitable.

What are relics? In the strict sense relics are the bodies or parts of the bodies of the saints, which are preserved and honored in order to remind us of their virtues and their holy lives. Relics include things belonging to the saints and things, which the saints used, like books, rosaries, religious habits or other pieces of clothing. We also consider as relics things, which have touched the bodies of God's heroes, and the instruments used to torture them or put them to death.

It is most important to make clear that we Catholics do not honor these material objects for their own sakes, as having any particular value in themselves; least of all are we to associate any magical powers to them. We do honor relics, however, as relating to those holy individuals whom we venerate. Relics are somewhat like souvenirs of sanctity, memorials of some remarkable member of the Church, reminders of real people who really served God in a heroic way.