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The Relics of Saint John Paul II:

History, Function, and Miracles



By Paul A. Brazinski

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History of Relics

On April 27, 2014 John Paul II was canonized in Vatican City by Pope Francis. His relics are venerated throughout the world.

What are relics?
Relics are the remains of holy and famous people in the Christian tradition. The veneration of these sacred objects originated in the ancient Greco-Roman tradition of celebrating heroes. During late antiquity, this practice assimilated into the practice of saintly veneration.

Why are relics venerated?
People venerate relics because it is believed that the closer one is to a relic, the more likely a miracle will happen to them. In order for a Christian to be canonized a Saint, one had to perform miracles during one's life or posthumously. For this reason, Saints are believed to maintain their holiness even after their death. Thus, people in the medieval and Byzantine periods would travel long distances, on a pilgrimage, in hopes of receiving a miraculous cure through an important relic.

What types of relics exist?
There are three main classifications of relics. The first type is called a primary relic, which is the physical remains of a holy person. Examples of primary relics include the body of Saint Peter in Vatican City or the head of John the Baptist. However, for some holy Christians, such as Jesus and Mary, primary relics do not exist because of their holy bodily Ascension or Assumption to Heaven. Thus, secondary and tertiary relics exist. Secondary relics are those remnants that were closely associated with a holy Christian, such as Jesus Christ's swaddling clothes in Chartres or Jesus' Crown of Thorns [replica below] in Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. Tertiary relics are those holy objects that have had physical contact with primary or secondary relics, such as reliquaries (containers for relics). Other tertiary relics include images of a saint that were blessed by the Vatican.







What types of reliquaries are there?
There are several types of reliquaries. Some reliquaries resemble the relic that they hold. For instance, [above right] the reliquary of St. Quentin at Essen Cathedral in Germany resembles the relic of the saint's arm within. Similarly, there are reliquaries in the shape of a foot and other body parts. Another popular reliquary shape is the casket [above left]. These reliquaries look like small houses to us, but to their medieval audience they resembled tombs or churches. Medieval artisans wanted their reliquaries to be as incorruptible and pure as the relics they held. Thus, medieval artisans created reliquaries with valuable materials and ornate decorations, such as gold, silver, and gems. No expense was spared, as even the insides of reliquaries were usually lined with silk.

Were saintly body parts separated?
Yes, because the remnants of saints were so precious in the medieval period, their body parts and remains were often separated. Therefore, there are stories of several heads of John the Baptist that traveled the medieval world.

Did people fight over relics and reliquaries?
Yes, there were many relic thefts throughout medieval Europe. In fact, relic thefts still happen in the modern period. Some scholars even argue that one of the motivations for the western Latins to sack Constantinople in 1204 was to seize the Byzantine relics and reliquaries, which are now found in Europe.

Relics of Saint John Paul II





What about Saint John Paul II's relics?
John Paul II has several relics. His main primary relic is his body, which is buried in his tomb in the Crypt of Saint Peter's Basilica in Vatican City, where most Popes are buried. Other famous primary relics of Saint John Paul II include the four vials of his blood that were collected after his death. One of these relics is housed in the Saint John Paul II National Shrine in Washington, D.C. The American vial went on tour in the US during the summer of 2014. The white cassocks Saint John Paul II wore are examples of secondary relics. The Saint John Paul II National Shrine also has a piece of the precious cloth from the cassock he wore during the attempted assassination on his life.It is a primary relic, since it has the pope's blood stain.

How did we get vials of Saint John Paul II's blood?
John Paul II's blood was collected primarily in 1981 and 2005. In 1981, John Paul II was shot while touring the crowd of pilgrims in Vatican Square. For medical reasons, blood was drawn from him during his 1981 hospital stay. After his death on April 2, 2005, a few more vials of blood were drawn from him while in the hospital. Bishop Stanislaw Dziwisz of Krakow (later Archbishop and Cardinal) was at John Paul II's bedside when he died. Some of Saint John Paul II's blood has been gifted to churches throughout the world. For example, in 2011 Cardinal Dziwisz gifted a vial to the Church of San Pietro della Lenca to commemorate John Paul II's connection to the site.

Where are the relics of Saint John Paul II in the US?
The majority of Saint John Paul II's relics in the US are at the Saint John Paul II National Shrine in Washington, D.C. Cardinal Donald Wuerl gave a square piece of the blood-stained cassock that Pope John Paul II wore on the day of his attempted assassination. On October 5, 2011, Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz presented a vial of Pope John Paul II's blood to Supreme Knight (Knights of Columbus) Carl Anderson for the Shrine.

Does the Shrine have secondary relics of Saint John Paul II?
Yes, the Shrine has several secondary relics. Their exhibit, called "Be Not Afraid," houses several liturgical vestments that he used or wore, such as a pastoral staff, cassock, cape, shoes, and the papal mitre that he wore during his March 2000 Jubilee pilgrimage to the Holy Land. They also have items that were given to Pope John Paul II, such as a Buddha statue that the Dali Lama gifted to him on September 28, 1982. And finally, the Shrine has secondary relics from his early life, which include his skis and a pair of his tennis shoes.



Can I get a relic of Saint John Paul II?
Relics of saints, especially primary and secondary ones, are very hard to obtain. However, during the canonization process, relics are often freely given to promote the candidate for sainthood. For example, in February 2007, Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz of Krakow freely handed out small pieces of the white papal cassocks. Blessed prayer cards of Saint John Paul II are tertiary relics and can still be acquired easily at his major shrines.

Can I visit the relics of Saint John Paul II?
Yes you can. The closest relics of Saint John Paul II "the Great" in the United States are at the Saint John Paul II National Shrine in Washington, D.C. The relics are easily accessible to the public and Saint John Paul II will gladly hear all prayer requests.

Interesting Facts about Ancient Relics

- In the 8th century AD, Charlemagne decreed that all Christian altars have a relic. However, relics were not easy to come by. Therefore, a black market of relics arose in the medieval period. Famous thieves such as Deusadona would go into the local catacombs or Christian graveyards at night and exhume the bodies illegally. Then, these corrupt merchants would take the relics to other cities or villages, hoping to make a profit. This unfortunately, led to many unique stories in history, such as the several (at least 4) alleged heads of John the Baptist that circulated in the medieval world.
- There are tales of pilgrims getting so close to primary relics that they often tried to bite off a part, such as a finger, to bring back to their hometown as a souvenir.
- Beyond the black market of relics, some Christians took it upon themselves to steal the holy objects if they were not being taken care of. For instance, in 828 A.D., Venetian merchants traveled to Alexandria on a regular business trip. At the time, Egypt was under Islamic rule, which meant that the holy site of Saint Mark the Evangelist was in "hostile territory." Thus, the wily Venetian merchants stole Saint Mark's body at night and hid him in a box labeled pork remains. In Islam, pork products are considered impure and are avoided [see below]. Thus, the Muslim customs officers did not check the box with the stolen relics. Immediately upon the arrival of Saint Mark the Evangelist's remains in Venice, Saint Theodore was replaced as the patron of the city. Venice's famous St. Mark's Basilica houses his relics.



Interesting Facts about John Paul II's Sainthood & Relics

- The Vatican received over 1,000 miracles attributed to John Paul II after his death. The first major miracle happened in 2005. Since 2001, Sister Marie Simon-Pierre suffered from Parkinson's disease, which also afflicted Pope John Paul II. After praying to the Pope for a cure, she was miraculously cured in 2005. The Vatican approved this miracle in 2011, saying that this cure was unexplainable except if by a miracle. Sister Marie Simon-Pierre's miracle made Pope John Paul II's beatification possible.

- A second major miracle included the healing of Floribeth Mora. Floribeth, a 50-year old Costa Rican women, suffered from a brain aneurysm. After praying for Pope John Paul II's intercession, she was healed miraculously. The miracle occurred while she was watching Pope John Paul II's beatification ceremony in 2011. During the ceremony, she heard a voice that said be not afraid and to get up, at which point she was cured. Vatican has also approved this miracle, as doctors confirmed that the aneurysm disappeared for no apparent reason.

- The theft of relics did not stop in the modern era. Saint John Paul II's sacred relics, particularly his vials of blood, were stolen on two separate occasions in 2012 and 2014 [see below]. Fortunately, the vials were miraculously recovered.

