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Relics and the Tradition of the Church.

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We all have things that we treasure that link us to people or events of our past. Perhaps, it is an autograph of a President. Maybe it is a baseball card, a lock of hair, or a football ring from the 1978 championship. Whatever it is, everybody has relics of one kind or another. My Parish of St. Ann is only seven miles from Kearney, Missouri, where the famous outlaw, Jesse James, is buried. At one point, his tombstone had to be replaced because visitors were chipping off little pieces of it as a way or having a memento of Jesse. I am even told that when a tree near his grave was chopped down, people even wanted pieces of that! Many people want flags that have flown over either the White House or the Capital in Washington. So it seems to me that to want some kind of a tangible remembrance of the past, or even the present, for that matter is almost innate in human nature.

Since wanting such a link to the past is a very human thing, it seems odd to me that some both within the Church, any many who do not belong, either oppose the idea of relics and do not appear to understand the concept. From the very beginning, respect for the remains of our holy ones was of prime importance. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that after John the Baptist was beheaded, devout men buried his body.

In ancient Rome and in other places Holy Mass was celebrated over the tombs of those who had been martyred for the Catholic Faith. In time, many places were privileged to posses, the mortal remains of those who were now before the throne of God in Heaven. Since these bodies had once been Temples of the Holy Spirit, they needed to have respect and honor. Our devotion to the Saints is rooted in the Catholic understanding of the Communion of Saints: the union of the saints in Heaven, the souls in Purgatory, and the faithful on earth. Both the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council in the Decree on the Sacred Liturgy speak of the veneration of relics in the light of Catholic tradition. Although we do not give to the Saints the worship owed to God which we call Latria, we do give them special veneration which is called Dulia, or in the case of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Hyperdulia

Our devotion to the Saints is rooted in our desire to imitate the example of their lives and to experience their all-powerful intercession when we ask them for favors. To understand this idea of intercession, we have only to look at the miracle of the feast of Cana, as recorded in St. John's Gospel; they run out of wine, they go to Holy Mary, she in turn goes to her Divine Son. He responds by working the miracle of changing water into

wine. Notice that it is not our Blessed Lady who works the miracle but our Lord Himself at her request.

When a first or second-class relic is issued, it normally comes in a rounded locket form or is enclosed in a Crucifix, although some of the older authenticated relics sometimes are in very large reliquaries. The seal of the one issuing the relic is attached on the back by threads, usually of red color, and a special Document, called an "Authenticum" accompanies the relic. This also has the seal of the one issuing it. Ordinarily, the privilege of authentication is given by Bishops or by some Priest who has the special Faculty to do so. I have found that in most cases when a Priest issues a relic he has a high position in his religious order e.g. Postulator and has the power to give letters for a Blessed or Saint of that particular Community.

Therefore, when a Churchman issues a decree of authenticity, we usually give it a presumption of trust. Now I realize that some people always like to question the veracity of Ancient Relics, e.g. an early martyr. Again, in the seminary, we learned the following principle: if an Ancient Relic has been in continuous veneration, from antiquity, it may continue in such veneration. Certainly, when it comes to any Saint who has lived in modern times, we can have absolute historical certainty, as long as the one who authenticates and issues follows the proper procedures. For the Ancient Relics, we may not have infallible certainty, but ultimately; the Saint is honored in any case by our Veneration.

Often I go into Ray County to the East of here and look for my ancestors. One day I came across the grave of one of them, Ann Shaw, who died in 1858. My research at the Historical Society had indicated that the Cemetery had at one point fallen into a sad state. Tombstones sank and some had the bodies of their loved ones removed to other places. The cemetery was restored; tombstones, even bits and pieces of them were found, and lovingly placed in cement blocks to protect them. Others were raised. One of these was Ann's. Now was Ann still there? I do not know. Ultimately, it did not make any difference. I felt closeness to her as I looked at her stone. I even photographed it!

The same goes with Ancient Relics. We may not be infallibly certain, but they are a link to our beloved Saints, in some way. One day, when we are in the Kingdom of Heaven, after the final Resurrection, the Saints whose relics we have honored will come over to us and hopefully will say: "Thank you for honoring and protecting my remains. I returned the favor by being ever at your side. Now we will enjoy the Beatific Vision together forever!"