

THE GUARDIAN

Newsletter of the International Crusade for Holy Relics, USA

Relics and Simony **Thomas J. Serafin**

The arrival of the electronic Internet medium has created a pathway to the "Middle Ages". The trade routes of Europe were defined by the travel of pilgrims to the sights of veneration; from the Holy City of Jerusalem to Santiago de Compostela. Trade and culture defined by the bones of the Saints. Now, the Internet superhighway takes the relic to be sold and resold for mere profit to the four corners of the world, void of any spirituality. What was once a well-guarded and lucrative underground trade has now come to prominence worldwide through the internet super-highway. Individuals with bogus names and secret identities have replaced shady merchants of earlier days. High tech sophisticated Internet providers (ISP) have replaced the dark alleys and meeting places. A trade that was once subject to local demographics can now spread worldwide in a microsecond.

Online auction houses have created (albeit unknowingly), a platform for individuals to sell the remains of our great saints. The sale of religious relics and artifacts has spawned a neo-middle ages market place. The advent of the Internet auction houses has created platforms that replace the dark alleys and crowded market places from a thousand years ago. This has been a major concern of all members of the ICHR as well as sympathetic individuals who are shocked at the "Middle Ages" mentality and

are equally outraged at this callous profiteering.

It was in late 1998 that relics began to appear on an Internet auction house. E-mails from concerned Catholics, Christians, and non-Christians started appearing on a daily basis at the office of the International Crusade for Holy Relics in the United States (ICHRUSA). The officers of the auction house were notified and educated as to the violations regarding the sale of relics in to the Code of Canon Law. Additionally, relic sellers were contacted directly when possible, educated as Canon Law, and made aware of the offensive nature of this practice. An archive was created to record all relic sales and correspondence between the ICHRUSA, seller, buyer, auction house (internet), and concerned individuals. It did not take long for a second Internet auction house to appear and provide another platform for the unscrupulous to earn their 30 pieces of silver.

The demand for relics and bid offers have increased dramatically, highlighted by the tour of St. Therese's relics. Relics with questionable authenticity, and which could possibly be fraudulent or stolen, have surfaced. To add to the marketing frenzy, sellers have auctioned the same relic on multiple websites, as well as participated in shill bidding.

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Bringing the Holy to Hollywood **Chris Winkelmann**

Hollywood is used to celebrity spectacles, but from September 21-24, there was an event of a different sort in Tinseltown. On that sunny weekend, the 2006 Feast of San Gennaro was held, and the "star of the show" was its patron, St. Januarius.

The Feast of San Gennaro is an annual Italian-American family festival sponsored by the San Gennaro Foundation. This organization was founded by talk show host Jimmy Kimmel and producer Douglas De Luca, along with a prominent group of Italian American men and women, with the goal of having a positive impact on the community by offering a high-quality, safe and fun family event, celebrating Italian-American heritage and culture. The Hollywood festival, held behind the set of the Jimmy Kimmel Live studio, was based on those of other cities, including New York's, which has taken place in Little Italy for the last 79 years. The a



Mr. Serafin with the relic.

celebration included bands and entertainment, food and drink vendors, rides and games, and an Italian movie festival.

What made the 2006 Hollywood Feast of San Gennaro different than its four prior ones, and perhaps others around the country, was the presence of a first-class (bone) relic of St. Januarius. This ex ossibus relic, contained in a beautiful reliquary, was loaned from the private collection of Tom Serafin. It was given pride of place, displayed for private veneration in a tent next to the main stage,

St. Januarius, was an early fourth century bishop of Benevento (near modern-day Naples.) He was martyred during the persecutions of Emperor Diocletian. He is

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Q & A Readers' and Internet Visitors' Questions Answered

QUESTION:

Is the title of venerable still given as a stage in the canonization process? The title does not seem to be used much today.

ANSWER:

The title of "Venerable" has been suppressed. However, there are still a few venerables around, whose causes have not progressed since the suppression of the title; they basically now properly have the title of "Servant of God", e.g. "Servant of God Fr. Michael Mc Givney."

QUESTION:

I recently saw a relic that was a piece of cloth (white) and the labeling stated: "Cloth that served the Saint" It looked like the typical 3rd class relic but then again, I'm not sure. "that SERVED the saint" may mean as a napkin, as a handkerchief etc. Any assistance will really be appreciated.

ANSWER:

"Cloth that served" a saint or servant of God is a term frequently found on holy card relics. It indicates a second-class relic since it was actually USED by the holy person--even if only momentar-

ily--rather than touched to their relics (which is a third-class relic). This term is frequently used for handkerchiefs, bandages, sheets, pillowcases, or other such cloth items. I have found it most often used for Servants of God from France or Quebec. "Tissu ayant servi" is the phrase in French.

QUESTION:

I have a photo signed by a priest who is a Servant of God. I usually considered this just that: a photo signed by a holy person. I would not think that it is a relic.

ANSWER:

I certainly think that handwriting of the Saints/ Blessed should be considered, effectively, as a relic. Rarely are such letters or writings preserved in reliquaries; they are usually kept in museum cases or simply framed and displayed in the holy person's rooms or "museum," if one exists. The exception that I know of is a handwritten blessing with the signature of St. Francis of Assisi, which is kept in a beautiful reliquary. This is probably because there are so few personal "possessions" of the Saint -- and it is a prayer/ blessing, after all.



The "miracle of the blood."

(*"Hollywood"*, Continued from page 1) most well-known for the "miracle of the blood". Several times a year, including his September 19th feastday, small vials containing a dried red powder, reputed to be the saints' blood, are placed near a reliquary containing his skull. The red powder then liquifies. This seemingly miraculous occurrence has been reported at least since 1389. (For a more extensive biography of the saint and in-depth examination of the miracle, please see the article

on St. Januarius in the old Catholic Encyclopedia, available online at <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08295a.htm>.)

Additionally, the relic was prominently featured in the festival's procession, reverently carried by Mr. Serafin. The attendees processed from the studio lot on Highland Avenue, bearing the reliquary past the tourist attractions of Sunset and Hollywood Boulevards. The procession was preceded by a Los Angeles Police Department honor guard. The fire department provided two firetrucks with their ladders extended over the street, from which was hung a giant San Gennaro banner. Ac



The relic of St. Januarius in procession.

According to the organizers this is the first time that Catholics have processed through the streets of Hollywood with a saint's relic. Directly after the procession a festival Mass was celebrated.

While Mr. Serafin was generally pleased with the event--especially the opportunity to bring an example of holiness into the symbolic center of secular culture--he was somewhat disappointed "that a greater and more reverent atmosphere wasn't available. I was not very comfortable with the relic out in a carnival environment."

Religious 'Crusader' Takes on eBay

by Brian Murphy, Associated Press, 11/23/06

Hardly an hour goes by without Thomas Serafin or one of his cyber-sleuths checking what eBay has to offer.

They're not hunting for bargains and never place a bid. Their interest is bone shards, bits of wizened flesh and a contemporary twist on the sacred and the profane: How the ancient trade in the most coveted religious relics has moved into the global flea market of online bidding.

"You can find bone fragments supposedly from St. Augustine being hawked on the Internet along with trinkets and antiques. There is something very wrong here," said Serafin, a professional photographer and Catholic activist based in Los Angeles, who has led an expanding campaign since the late 1990s to block the online sale of objects purported to contain the remains of Christian saints.

Last month, Serafin's group, the International Crusade for Holy Relics, opened a new front that's truly worthy of a David and Goliath metaphor: a call to boycott eBay.

It seeks to pressure the world's largest online auction site to close alleged loopholes used to bypass its ban on allowing bids for human remains.

Hani Durzy, spokesman for eBay, said the San Jose, Calif.-based company is "very willing to reopen talks" with Serafin's group about its concerns after discussions broke off about a year ago.

"As far as the boycott, well, we've really seen no impact to speak of," said Durzy. "We don't know if it's even still in place."

But Serafin said the symbolism is what's important.

"Yes, it's just a blip on the screen," he said. "But we want to make a point. They are taking the same position as Judas. They are selling out the church."

Interest in religious patrimony of all types - from icons to stained glass - has soared in recent years, along with the blockbuster novel "The Da Vinci Code," the Christian-themed "Left Behind" series and major museum exhibits devoted to art and spirituality. At the same time, a flood of ecclesiastical items has entered mainstream antiquarian markets from once-flourishing churches that were closed because of shrinking congregations or population shifts away from older city neighborhoods.

But the sale of so-called "first-class relics" - bone, flesh, hair, nails and fragments of other body parts - remains a murky subculture, one that's increasingly shifting from the back rooms of dealers' shops to the Web's worldwide mall.

Dozens of religious items are on eBay at any time. Most are

ordinary objects such as icons, medals or prayer cards. But Serafin believes the strongest interest is for the first-class relics, which he says has accounted for up to 40 percent of the eBay relic listings at times.

"This is where the real action is," he said. "This is where our fight is."

Serafin describes his motivation as part consciousness-raiser and part consumer crusader.

He calls the sale of such relics deeply offensive to believers in their sanctity.

Then there is the caveat emptor - or "let the buyer beware" - factor. Clear documentation on a first-class relic is extremely rare and fraud is as old as faith - as noted more than 600 years ago in a scene from "The Canterbury Tales" in which pigs' bones and a pillow case are part of a cache of dubious religious relics brought from Rome.

Some recent offerings on eBay include "the air" that Christ breathed, the wing of the Holy Spirit and "the hand" of St. Stephen.

Serafin also says the rules - both canon and eBay's - are on his side.

Most churches with centuries-old traditions in the display and veneration of relics, including the Roman Catholic and Orthodox, prohibit the sale of objects believed to hold body parts.

The extensive list of eBay's banned items include Nazi paraphernalia, firearms and ammunition and "human parts and remains."

Durzy said eBay has more than 2,000 people assigned to cull prohibited items, but noted that blanket enforcement is a challenge with up to 7 million new items going up for bid every day.

Sellers don't make it any easier.

Many now make a point of saying that the reliquary, or container, is for sale and the actual relic is a "gift." There are even conflicting linguistic signals. On Monday, a seller posted a relic of St. Eymard, a 19th century French priest, that was described as "ex ossibus," Latin for "from the bones." But the fuller text says the relic "does not contain any human parts."

Attempts by The Associated Press to reach the seller - and several other relic dealers on eBay - via e-mail contact information were unsuccessful.

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The goal of the International Crusade for Holy Relics is to create an opportunity for the education and public veneration of the remains of the saints. By this method, the faithful and curious alike have the occasion to become aware of the lives and legends of the saints, their life struggles, their trials and tribulations, and the holy perseverance that was the pathway to Heaven. This ministry can keep the saints alive in the hearts and minds of the faithful while catechizing and evangelizing the faithful and curious are like.

It is our goal to return the remains of our Christian saints to the lofty station they so rightly deserve. We have combined a vast relic treasury and a desire to connect Heaven to Earth through education and veneration. This historic endeavor is the first time in history that a traveling exhibit of religious relics and catechism program has been assembled for the glory of God, the Communion of Saints, and the faithful.

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"We just want the same rules that apply to guns, Nazi items or the bones of American Indians," said Serafin, whose group is a loose association of about 200 members around the world ranging from a Russian Orthodox archbishop to Catholic priests and lay people.

Across the time zones, they try to keep a round-the-clock vigil on eBay for any suspicious relics. They fire off e-mails to eBay and the seller - who is often known only by an online nickname and e-mail address - asking for the item to be withdrawn.

But it's a cumbersome process.

In late October, Serafin's group protested what they considered an "ex ossibus" relic of the 19th century St. John Vianney, the patron saint of parish priests. The sale went ahead, starting at \$25. Twenty-seven bids later, an anonymous buyer picked it up for \$565, plus \$12 shipping.

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("Relics and Simony", Continued from page 1)

The remains of the saints have become, "the kidnapped", the money collected from the auction, "the ransom". The new Judas has found a way to betray the faith of the masses and increase his thirty pieces of silver via the auction block. The Internet auction houses have become the new "field of blood." By the habitual refusal to resolve the practice and ban the sale of relics they have reinforced their complicity in this sacrilegious act. We cannot simply put our tradition and historical artifacts on the auction block to the highest bidder. Does Christ himself witness us moving rapidly toward the same scenario as the moneychangers in the Temple?

There was an eternal consequence for Judas as a result of his betrayal. If a person is uninformed as to doctrine and dogma that is correctable, but in today's society there is no such thing as invincible ignorance to a person who uses the information super highway to sell a sacramental.

These relics; the majority 1st class, are the body remains of holy individuals who have fought the battles that Satan had put upon them, and they now wear the crown. These relics deserve to remain dignified, not sold as novelties! The relic merchant cares nothing for the lives of the individual saint(s), their sufferings and trials, the spiritual implications! He is simply out to take advantage of a person's sense of tradition, devotion, passion, and lifestyle that he will never understand, let alone achieve. Let us not forget his driving motivation: money.

Relic sellers use a moronic argument that they are not selling the relic, only the locket; the relic is supposedly a gift. It is bad enough that they are sacrilegiously desecrating a sacrament of the Christian church, but to add insult to injury they de-emphasize the contents of the locket by openly admitting that to them, "the relic is of no value". And that is, in fact, what they are doing: destroying the religious, cultural, and historic value of the relic.

St. Francis of Assisi once said; "Start by doing what's necessary; then do what's possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible." This outrageous "second middle ages" electronic crisis must be dealt with. We Christians of all denominations must not and cannot allow this to continue.
