Bones of Contention

Body parts of the saints are no longer relics of the past

Colleen O'Connor

In San Francisco, the line stretched from the steps of the ornate Carmelite chapel all the way down the street and around the corner. For more than seven hours, it neither stopped nor shortened. Long past midnight, in the bone-chilling fog of the San Francisco night, the devout waited patiently.

Inside the chapel was a reliquary, a casket for holding sacred objects, that held some of the bones of St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the cloistered French nun who died of tuberculosis in 1897 at age 24 and is considered the most popular Catholic saint of the 20th century because of her humility and charity. The three-foot-long reliquary have been touring the world since the mid-90s, and they've drawn huge crowds everywhere they've appeared: France, Italy, Germany, Slovenia, Brazil, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Argentina. Her bones reached the United States last October, and they slowly worked their way westward, seemingly drawing ever longer lines of pilgrims in every city where they were displayed. When the U.S. tour finished in Hawaii on January 28, the relics were put on a plane headed for the Philippines.

The enormous numbers of people--more than 1 million in America alone--who have flocked to venerate St. Thérèse's bones are part of a worldwide resurgence of interest in saintly body parts and objects that touched them--after several decades, from the 60s through the 80s, in which they were out of religious fashion. The Internet, which has facilitated a thriving auction market for them, is one reason for the relic revival. Another, more palpable reason may be that increasing numbers of people these days, both religious and secular, see a connection between relics and their desire to transcend ordinary life and find meaning in death.

For example, Pennsylvania artist Anne Wolf makes her own relics that have a largely secular significance. "They're small sculptural objects that I call relics because they're like pieces of imaginary culture I'm creating," says Wolf, who is also an art professor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. "For me, it's about dealing with the idea of continuity in the face of impermanence, so that death becomes like a form of transformation instead of finality," she explains.

The San Francisco crowd that came to see St. Thérèse's relics was as diverse as the city's lifestyles. An African-American man with a shaved head and black leather jacket stood next to a gray-haired Caucasian nun in a navy blue habit. There were young Asian mothers with babies in strollers, hordes of teenagers, and elderly people in wheelchairs. During a Mass in the chapel, the priest, the Rev. Patrick Sugrue, who had been

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traveling with the relics through California and Nevada spoke of what had happened when the relics arrived at the El Carmelo Retreat House in Redlands, California, a few days before. A party tent had been erected to hold the 1,000 people who had been expected to visit the relics--but the number of pilgrims surged to 8,000 over the three-day period.

"Then I drove with the relics across the Mojave Desert to Las Vegas," he continued. "There were 2,000 people waiting at the first church, then another 5,000 venerated the relics at the next one. For me, it was an unforgettable experience."

The scene was similar when the relics of St. Thérèse arrived in Seattle after their San Francisco stop. People were packed shoulder to shoulder during the Mass, even in the aisles.

"The priest standing next to me said, 'This is like the Middle Ages,'" say psychotherapist Christie Cave, who stood in line in Seattle for a total of seven hours, first to get into the Mass and then to venerate the relics. "The church had the soaring lines of a Gothic cathedral, and the people were just cheek-and-jowl," says Cave. "The only difference from the Middle Ages was that some people got to sit down for Mass, when back then everyone would have been standing."

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Colleen O'Connor is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, and People magazine.

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In fact, in medieval Christianity, the cult of the relics--parts of saints' bodies, fragments of their clothing, and even objects that they had touched or had touched their corpses--was one of the most popular ways of venerating these holy men and women. People believed that "the saints in their glory...were not forgetful of those still struggling on earth: between them there was a fellowship or communion linking the living with the dead," wrote Newsweek religion writer Kenneth Woodward in his 1990 book, *Making Saints*. Early Christians prayed to the saints for everything from protection on long journeys to healings and other miracles. By the eighth century, venerating the saints was such an intrinsic part of Christian belief that a church council held in Nicea in present-day Turkey in 767 decreed that every church altar must contain a stone bearing the relics of a saint. By the 10th century, the cult of relics exploded. In the early days most saints were venerated only in their own localities, where their relics--usually parts of their buried bodies--were easily accessible. As the centuries passed, devotions to the more popular saints, and the ones who worked the most miracles, began spreading by word of mouth from their own regions to other parts of the Christian world.

"Then others wanted the saint, so they'd take pieces of the body and send them around," says R. Bruce Miller, director of the philosophy library at The Catholic University of America. "Soon they were sending off expeditions to steal relics."

Reliquary-riffling was only part of the story. Having the relics of a popular saint in one's possession was a medieval status symbol that signified political power and high social standing. For example, in 1392 King Charles IV of France handed out to his guests--as royal party favors, so to speak--pieces of the ribs of his holy ancestor, St. Louis. When St. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican friar, died in a Cistercian monastery in 1323, the monks there were said to have decapitated his body to make sure they got to keep at least part of his remains. This started a battle between the two orders that lasted for decades over which one was entitled claim it held St. Thomas's corpse.

Such abuses, together with a medieval proliferation of clearly fake relics, such as supposed thorns from Jesus' crown or drops of Mary's breast-milk, triggered a strong reaction against relics among the 16th-century Protestant Reformers, and so the cult of relics ended in Protestant countries. But in the Eastern Orthodox Church the cult of relics has never died, and it remained vibrant in the Roman Catholic Church up until the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s.

"The practice became less common after that," says Miller. "There was a shying away. Churches became much simpler inside. The statues

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disappeared and along them, the veneration of the relics."

But all that has changed of late. Just as in the Middle Ages, the development of new trading links to the Byzantine East opened up new markets relics, the Internet has opened up new markets relics at the turn of the millennium. At online auction sites there is a brisk--and somewhat dubious--trade in the objects, sometimes at astronomical prices.

"People will buy a relic at an online auction for $125, then turn around and sell it to some poor Catholic for $5,000," says Tom Serafin, a relics enthusiast who monitors what he calls "e-simony," or trafficking in relics through online auction houses. The item whose price was bid up to $5,000 was a wood fragment allegedly from Jesus' True Cross.

Less prestigious relics command less stratospheric prices: $76 for prayer card that has touched a relic of St. Thérèse, for example, or a reliquary containing effects of St. Catherine Labouré that goes on the block at eBay for $5.99 and is quickly bid up to $150.

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A less controversial manifestation of the current relics mania is the International Crusade for Holy Relics, which Serafin helped found a few years ago and which aims to revive the veneration of relics through exhibits and conferences. Its "Saints Alive!" website allows the devout to venerate a range of relics online, from the bones of St. Candidus, a 3rd-century martyr, to a vial containing the blood of St. Teresa of Avila, a Spanish mystic who died in 1582.

Meanwhile, at the San Francisco Craft and Folk Art Museum, an exhibit called "Reliquaries for America" features caskets designed by artists from a variety of cultural backgrounds: Japanese, European, Latin American, and African-American. There's even a weekend workshop in which parents and children learn how to make their own reliquaries.

The link between relics and one's personal life cycles has also occurred to anthropologist Margaret Mackenzie of the California College of Arts and Crafts. "It seems connected with this interest in death that I'm seeing," she says. "I joined a reading groups a few years ago that's working with Stephen Levine's book *A Year to Live*. Part of the practice is thinking about your own death, writing your epitaph and obituary, and visiting graveyards. It's thinking about death, which is being obliterated from mainstream consciousness."

In Seattle, for example, a woman in a "Year to Live" group focusing on preparation for death hand-crafted a reliquary to hold her ashes.

Since ancient days the veneration of relics has spoken to the human need for deep interconnection, the belief "that all human beings are radically connected over space, through time, and even beyond death," as Woodward writes in *Making Saints*. Whether sacred or secular in purpose, relics and reliquaries ultimately embody the human desire for transformation in life and death.

"People are longing for transcendence in their lives," says psychotherapist Cave, "They go to Native American ceremonies, they go to Nepal, they go to Chartres. But what they're looking for is the doorway to the divine in a palpable, experiential way."

And that may explain why people all over America flocked in such unprecedented numbers to pay homage the bones of St. Thérèse, the unassuming young nun who died more than a century ago. Says Cave: "In the Catholic Church, veneration of relics is that transcendent doorway.

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